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CHAPTER TWENTY

ROJACK REVISITED AS NIGHTMARE AVATAR OF I, JOHN, YOUR BROTHER (REV. 1:9)

KEVIN LEWIS

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice,
as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last;
and what thou seest, write in a book ... (Rev. 1:10, 11)

On 15 November 1963 Mailer had written to Eichi Yamanishi of his "function" as a writer-celebrity, that it had now shifted from "some sort of mysterious leader of the Beat Generation, a sort of psychic guerilla leader, in fact, to something quite other." In like elusive manner, over a year later on 25 March 1965 Mailer wrote to Jason Epstein, of his controversial fiction, *An American Dream* (1965), that his flamboyant hero, Stephen Rojack, is "neither mad nor sane," and further, that for Rojack, "everything takes place between a fever and a dream."¹

Drawing a connection between these two observations, we may conjecture that Mailer threw up to us in his alter-ego Rojack a shamanistic figure neither mad nor sane but "something quite other," that is, something he was not quite willing to articulate or, possibly, not even quite able, under the heightened pressure of composition for serial publication in *Esquire* month by month in 1964, to understand himself.

My thesis: this "something quite other" is in fact a playful, postmodernist imagining, between a fever and a dream—or beyond—of a mock-divine narrative revelation formally echoing that received by "John" the writer of *Revelation*, the concluding book of the Christian Bible, the great "apocalypse" of the Christian tradition. Whether intended or inadvertent is not an issue.

Rojack receives, not passively but pro-actively to be sure (with certain mischief aforethought and with violence akin to that evoked in *Matthew* 11:12²), a privileged, gifted state of consciousness that Mailer evokes in romanticized, pop-psychological terms. As an assimilated, sophisticated Jew with presumably no particular religious interest in confessional Christianity, Mailer nevertheless

awards to Rojack a prolonged pitch of alternative consciousness of a kind that consorts with those claimed by followers of “Spirit-filled,” Pentecostal Christianities, as well as by the writer of *Revelation*. Mailer offers us an instrumental, alter-ego Rojack possessed by a state of seeing, as it were, “in the Spirit” (*Rev* 1:10), with trans-human penetration into the manifold of experience. Not until the last sentence of the novel does Rojack return to “something like sane again.”³

Though limited, of course, this operational state is presented as “trans-human” enough to protect him from considerable bodily harm risked and from the worldly justice that would ensnare any other man who behaves as does Rojack. The cartoon-like character of his illuminated consciousness—in an ironic postmodern turn—is an extended joke that is not entirely a joke. It embodies a proposal that we take the “revelation” imparted the more seriously for its transmission darkly through the glass of an outrageous dream nightmare, via a symbolism perhaps comic in its extremity. In Mailer’s jaded, hyper self-conscious, urban culture for which the outwardly serious had putatively become ridiculous (as for himself, as well), the serious could only be played *through* the ridiculous for those with ears tuned to hear it.

I

I offer a reading of *An American Dream* which highlights its character as an irreverent but traditionalist and not entirely self-serving vision of apocalypse. The claim, in short, is that *An American Dream* is a actually great American apocalypse in a rich tradition which descends from Wigglesworth and Edwards to the Wests (Benjamin and, later, Nathanael), to Dickinson and Julia Ward Howe, to Faulkner, Frost, Pynchon, Baraka, Lindsay, Falwell, Coppola, and Peretti, to mention a few, plus of course the science fiction writers and the rock musicians. No other national literary tradition exhibits the sustained attraction to apocalyptic vision that we observe in the American tradition. And this novel is certainly one of the most striking utterances in the descent of a characteristically American species of literature. To grow tired of or disgusted at Mailer’s foolishness (his misogyny and egotism) in this exuberant riff on the archetypal Western narrative apocalypse is one thing: a matter of taste. (It may also be to miss its postmodern cunning.) But to grow tired of American apocalypses, whether in 2006 or at any other time, is to grow tired of America and the eponymous American Dream with which these apocalypses have been linked by critics such as R.W.B. Lewis, Lois Zamora, and Sacvan Bercovitch.⁴

To substantiate such a claim about American Apocalypse, as to trace the history of the “American Dream” itself, would require another essay if not a book. Here it suffices to observe that from the very beginning of our common

life together as a new people formed by a new national myth the exotic flower of the "apocalyptic imagination" has been so consistently cultivated and so often harvested. As a people we have imagined numerous apocalypses under various symbolisms and in various narrative configurations (and seem on course to imagine many more).⁵ One can argue that Americans are historically, socio-culturally constructed for apocalyptic vision. On the evidence from literature, the other arts, and religion, the habit of apocalypse is a distinctive feature of our traditional identity as a people. *An American Dream's* clairvoyant, traditional narrative apocalyptic character is precisely what marks it as a work expressive of a singular anxiety embedded in our common American consciousness: an unacknowledged but nagging fear that merciless history inevitably, later if not sooner, will end the "great experiment of the Republic" – the "American Dream."

II

But readers seem perversely oblivious to the place of Stephen Rojack's testimony in this tradition of American apocalypses and apocalyptic vision.

A generation of critics of literature in America, bearing new critical strategies and a generous politics of inclusiveness, has brought us a new and fruitful awareness of the diversity of imaginations responding to the many different American "realities." We are the richer for this enterprise. But the success of this critical enterprise has eclipsed one of the older critical paths or programs in particular: that of tracing modes of biblical influence upon the historical American literary imagination. From the early colonial period, so readers were taught, the inherited Protestant socio-cultural structure of consciousness supplied by the narrative vision of the English Bible determined or at least could and would be detected in the forms and content of our developing native literature. But very different sorts of criticism – call them post-Protestant-ethos-liberated – now make responses to a different, carnivalesque sort of America. Hence the danger now that we will ignore or simply not be able to recognize occasional important instances of lingering biblical influence where it appears in creative, untraditional ways that challenge our critical sophistication of the moment. We are at risk of simply ignoring the continuing biblical influence upon those important occasional works of recent American literature in which these elements are brought to new life.

That the American cultural post-biblical inheritance still being reflected in some newer fictions in new ways in a time of ferment such as ours may be temporarily be overlooked is obvious, especially considering that this inheritance, as Amos Wilder once observed incisively, has been want to find expression in increasingly subtle ways, inasmuch as, for several generations, it

has dropped underground to flow like a stream invisible on the surface of our literature.⁶ Just as obvious, at least to those who would look without prejudice into the Western literary imagination generally, is that we must not relinquish our grasp of long held native cultural habits of mind and imagination, attenuated as these older habits may have become. Rather we should renew our sensitivity to their effects when encountered afresh in recent works. It impoverishes criticism to deny in certain present writers or their works strategic use of vision deeded from the past even when those elements may lie half-concealed by other effects more easily (or more expediently) explicated. More than ever, I propose, we need sharpened sensitivity to those recent and contemporary works in which biblical vision from the past has been imported into the present to supply, for instance, structuring narrative pattern, as though in retrieval of a not quite outworn lens through which to gain needed focus on an intractable experience of the present. In our rush to enlarge the sense of multicultural "America" increasingly reflected in the breathtaking richness of twentieth-century imaginative writing, we must not ignore the continuing renewal and reinvention of the historical biblical vision in the worlds imagined by those occasional American writers who, consciously or, indeed perhaps unconsciously, in their work seem still to give the impression of illustrating in new ways William Blake's Romantic insistence that indeed "The Bible is the Great Code of Art."

The puzzlement coupled with shock, anger, and the most qualified of praise mainly for its exuberance of linguistic accomplishment registered by reviewers at the time of this novel's publication has been matched now by forty years of virtual refusal to take its substantive statement seriously.⁷ Indeed, both the immediate and the subsequent treatment of this American rogue "classic" supplies strong evidence that criticism in recent years has been content to ignore the still powerful current of Biblicism flowing underground, as it were, through the literary imagination responding to the American reality, even in this late time of secularization, skepticism, and cultural pluralism. But more surprising is that literary scholars who in recent years have prided themselves on their sensitivity to postmodern ironies and the presentation of highly serious utterances in works of self-reflexive gaming and joking have apparently wanted to refuse any credit to Mailer in *An American Dream* even for having attempted, under the cover of what may seem a self-undercutting gesture of self-advertisement, a statement in the visionary biblical mode worth attending to.

To be sure, the politics of Mailer's alter-ego hero, Stephen Rojack, anti-feminist, anti-black power, and macho-conservative, goes a long way to explain the neglect of this novel and the unfairly low estimate of Mailer as a writer issued by critics whose esthetic standards are influenced by liberal politics and civilized values generally. Throughout his career it has pleased Mailer to accentuate and dramatize pariah-like reactionary views, as though consciously

to provoke and then to manipulate the ire of doctrinaire liberals in the intellectual establishment. Even so, it remains a surprising fact that no scholar-critic to date has succeeded in penetrating the surface of *An American Dream* to find that, notwithstanding its uninhibited language which is anything but religious in the traditional sense, this fanciful work, this latter-day American "romance" produced by a consummate if deceptively subtle ironist, in its central theme and formal structure is the closest thing we have in post-World War II American literature to a "classic," traditional (or "traditionalist") apocalypse in the mode imported to these shores by the Puritans. And we mean by "traditional" not slavish adherence to the recycled contents of the biblical apocalypse but adaptation of traditional apocalyptic form and vision brilliantly to the altered possibilities afforded if not require of writers by the cultural *zeitgeist* of the volatile sixties.

In passing and in brief, we should indeed note the political contextual dimension of the Western cultural apocalyptic tradition as expressed not only in traditional religious contexts but lately in non-traditional and "secular" contexts. Prominent among uses to which apocalyptic visions have been put by historical communities is that of signaling the need for and justifying by religious or "prophetic" authority revolutionary movements. Historically, where reform of existing oppressive orders has appeared futile, apocalyptic visions have expressed desperate, needful hope for release. This was the case for early Christians suffering under intractable rule by the Roman Empire. (In the text of *Revelation*, for example, we meet the oppressive requirement of conformity to the cult of Emperor worship, and allusion to the infamous persecution of Christians by Nero, the original "Beast" evoked in *13:1-3*). Apocalypses and apocalyptic prophecy have occasionally been wielded by military movements to justify attempts at violent overthrow of tyranny, as, for example in mid-seventeenth-century England. Apocalypse, that is, has functioned historically as a blueprint for revolution, making this species of traditionalist utterance attractive to Mailer and other writers in the sixties.

III

But how is Rojack presented as an "I, John" figure?

The earliest apocalypses all feature an other-worldly "angel" interpreter of a privileged vision to a human recipient, who is often an ancestor authority-figure whose name is used pseudonymously, as John Collins tells us.⁸ The figure of the angel indicates that the revelation is not intelligible without supernatural aid. And the human recipient figure must have a reputation which commands respect in the community for which the utterance is intended. The claim made by early supporters of *Revelation's* inclusion in the biblical canon, that its author is the

same John credited with authoring the fourth gospel, is a case in point. So we expect that modern apocalypses, under whatever disguises presented by modern writers in order to accommodate the modern intellectual climate, may offer some transformation of these devices (angel guide coupled with authority figure recipient of vision) in conscious or unconscious obedience to the inherited pattern. Rojack, by virtue of his fast-track climb to status as a New York television personality, and politician-celebrity, with the added cachet of academic appointments and scholarly pretensions, is Mailer's version of a multi-credentialed, tribal authority figure. In lieu of an angel, Rojack in the first chapter takes counsel from the full moon, "Luna," "that platinum lady with her silver light" (12). But moon madness, lunacy, is not credible enough for a sophisticated modern reader. Rojack must work up his own access to clairvoyant magical consciousness through macho, do-it-yourself means. To achieve "street cred" he must work himself into an altered state to become his own privileged guide to the mysteries concealed from others less daring and less deserving.

Imagined identification with "I, John" is not without precedent. Prominent in the historical reception of *Revelation*, especially among artists in the Western tradition recruited to render scenes from this book, is the expressed desire to identify with John the writer. Again and again we find Western artists drawn to the image of "I, John" himself, often with pen and book in hand, often looking upward as though to hear or, of course, to "see" the privileged vision being communicated to him. How does it feel to be "in the Spirit," singled out from among others for divine revelation? The question seems implicit on these canvasses. For several centuries of pictorial imaging of scenes from the biblical apocalypse, the figure of this "John" caught up "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day, receiving his privileged vision from an angel has attracted numerous artists. The Romantic identification of the artist himself with this canonical visionary was prepared by many generations of pre-Romantic illustrators working in tapestry, manuscript illumination, and graphics, as well as paint. Especially interesting is the influence of the post Renaissance (fifteenth to nineteenth century) project of humanizing "I, John." We might consult, for example, representations in the work of Memling, Bosch, Durer, Titian, Velazquez, and then West and Dore. The altered state of consciousness "John" claims for himself has intrigued numerous artists, as though they were probing the possibility that similar privileged visionary experience might be available to other historical artistic temperaments (to themselves!), and most especially to those who seek to recapture or to re-invent for their own adventuring purposes the biblical vision of the End.⁹

Mailer's hero and alter-ego, Stephen Rojack, contrives to bring upon himself a modern equivalent of such privileged Spirit-possession in the first chapter

when he drops himself, figuratively, onto the “primal landscape” of his psyche, likening the descent to an adventurous, therapeutic fall into madness. (Mailer in the notorious essay in sociopathology, “The White Negro” [1957], occasioned by attendance at the obscenity trial over Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1956, had recommended a religious-like cleansing, through drugs, sex, and infantilized, regressive violence, of the poisons introduced into Americans generally by 1950s conformity and “bad faith.” In *An American Dream* he sends Rojack on such a voyage of cleansing, clarifying discovery.) This madness, his thirty-six-hour lunacy in which the full moon is a conspicuous collaborator – functions in the narrative as a kind of trance enabling illuminated vision. (Narrative apocalypses are not uncommonly set in worlds which though apparently familiar are worlds in which time can be unaccountably fractured or foreshortened or in some sense intensified.) Existentially sickened, shedding the “sense of being alive and here on earth” (14), Rojack finds the courage to murder his wife. The accomplishment of this distasteful crime propels him symbolically further, “through the door” and “as far into myself as I had ever been and universes wheeled in a dream” (31). After this, anything is possible for Rojack the self-appointed shaman and one-man SWAT team. After this, immediately he seeks out his wife’s maid and minder, Ruta, for a sleazy but explicitly Manichean contest of vaginal-anal sex: “a raid on the Devil and a trip back to the Lord” (45), at the consummation of which, coming “as if I’d been flung across the room” (46), Rojack immediately receives a surreal but implicitly authorizing vision of “a huge city in the desert, in some desert, was it a place on the moon? For the colors had the unreal pastel of a plastic and the main street was flaming with light at five A.M. A million light bulbs lit the scene” (46).

This is the first of several more trance-like visions of a distorted parody of the heavenly city of *Revelation* which recur in the narrative, presaging his post-apocalypse arrival and decompression in the chill of an air-conditioned hotel room in Las Vegas. Powers of penetrating perception into the darkening soul of America are granted to Rojack by virtue of his descent into this cartoon madness. And what he discovers, at grandiose, flaunted risk to his life, and on behalf of America, the sickness of whose civilization he would diagnose (doing shaman duty), driven by madness into the recesses of his psyche, is the archaic, archetypal pattern of apocalypse.

Up from the deepest layers of the interior self, released by madness, come the images of cosmic disorder which sprinkle the narrative. Rojack investigates the deteriorating condition of his society by conducting the investigation upon himself, the reality focused through the lens of his instrumental madness. He encounters in himself precisely what Wilder finds expressed in traditional apocalypses derived from the ancient model, namely, a “loss of ‘world,’ ... [the]

erosion of structures, psychic and cultural,” together with “deeply buried hierophanies of the group.”¹⁰ Rojack’s vision of the shimmering city, coming as it does from out of the blue in the narrative, may indeed be summoned up from the pre-cultural, pre-personal deepest material of the psyche, that is, from a buried depository of racial archetypes in a primal self which exists only as a member of a group and not yet as a self-conscious individual.

To the sophisticated reader, Rojack’s crazed journey into the American heart of darkness is of course preposterous. But from the perspective of the student of apocalypses ancient and modern, Rojack’s excursion jibes with what Wilder helps us to find in an authentic genre apocalypse – validating it as such – and precisely because Mailer’s reckless but cunning extravagance of language and plot is consistent with the excavated, buried source of Rojack’s excited consciousness through which the narrative is filtered.

IV

But then what of the parallel between Mailer’s frenzied narrative and that of a traditional, genre apocalypse – that of *Revelation* itself?

When we make allowances for relatively slight differences of description and schematization proposed by the most recent biblical scholars who have studied the ancient origins and the traditional interpretation of apocalyptic materials in the religious communities of the West, one can arrive at a fair working notion for the purpose of critically appraising Mailer’s fictional apocalypse. John Collins is our most helpful guide to terminology applicable to the earliest instances of the genre, while Amos Wilder remains the most knowledgeable and provocative investigator of the historical-cultural connections between scriptural and latter-day secularized literary apocalyptic utterances.

Following Collins, we will hold to a distinction between “apocalypse” as an historical literary genre (of which there have been different types or varieties) and “apocalyptic” referring to the constitutive character of apocalypses as “involving a transcendent eschatology that looks for retribution beyond the bounds of history” while made up “not of one or more distinctive themes but by a distinctive combination of elements, all of which are also found elsewhere” (Collins, 9). The use of “apocalyptic” as a noun, Collins reminds us, has been abandoned by recent scholarship, on grounds that its former use to mean a particular world view or myth no longer seems appropriate in light of “what we find in actual apocalypses” (Collins, 2). Nor, we might add, does its former use prove any more appropriate in describing latter-day, often secularized apocalypses produced under pluralistic cultural conditions.

Where Collins focuses upon the Jewish, Christian, and apocryphal

apocalypses of the late ancient world, identifying them as a species subsuming a wide variety of individual instances, Wilder focuses more exclusively upon the immense subsequent cultural and religious influence effectively conferred upon the biblical apocalypse by its inclusion in the canon of scripture. Where Collins, for his purposes, formulates a genre definition of apocalypse, derived from research in the disparate materials of the ancient world, Wilder offers a strategic definition derived primarily from the text of *Revelation* but also from those successors in the genre which bear the mark of its particular influence upon their narrative structure. Precisely because Wilder focuses upon the particular apocalypse instituted in the Christian bible and hence as a shaping force within the religious imagination of the West, his strategic definition is of the greatest help in forging an approach to serve our purpose of establishing the fundamentally apocalyptic character of *An American Dream*.

The text of *Revelation* notoriously resists attempts by scholars to establish its structural unity. Overwhelmed as it is by the obligation of conveying a privileged eschatological vision wherein the very categories of time and space are finally abolished and a supplanting new order of reality only tentatively described, the visionary communication which is *Revelation* does not submit to the conventional specifications of a unified work of literary art. One can point to parallels with the structure of the vision of *Ezekiel*, one can note that the twenty-two chapters allude to the twenty-two characters in the Hebrew alphabet (echoing the primitive fascination with numerological symbolism throughout), one can take account of thematic elements manipulated in ways similar to those found in some but not all of the precedent Jewish apocalypses of the period, but in the end one must conclude that this is a text which does not conform to the canons of literary order and elegance established within the cultured communities of the Hellenistic world. Confronted with this situation, the biblical scholar usually identifies the structure of the text with the seemingly unpatterned sequence of narrative elements. Amos Wilder's has not been the only scholarly attempt to discriminate and generalize the most significant elements of a basic plot discernable in the text. Others have done likewise, producing a variety of results, reflecting their respective points of view and purposes. But the formula plot abstracted from the text by Wilder, influenced as it is by his familiarity with the line of apocalypses descending from the biblical ancestor that have appeared subsequently down through the centuries and into our own, best serves our purpose. Following Wilder, we propose a generic pattern by which to identify continuities of inherited apocalyptic eschatology in modern writers, whether exposed or disguised, whether traditionally religious or secularized and transformed.

Hence, in adopting Wilder's useful formula, we shall mean here by the generic "apocalypse" a vision, usually presented in narrative form, containing

several if not all of five core elements (remembering Collins's caution that an apocalypse is not constituted strictly by the presence of a certain distinctive theme or themes, but rather by a distinctive combination of themes). By this measure, a genuine apocalypse will be found weaving together in a visionary narrative some combination of (1) anticipating wondrous signs and portents, (2) a sense of the old order of things growing hopelessly worse, (3) an imminent or actual critical disaster, accompanied by some sort of (4) decisive moral judgment, through which the hopeless old order is overturned and the course of recounted events absolutely altered, and, finally, (5) the reconstitution of human life in a new order or frame of reality only partially imagined (Wilder, 1971. 450ff). Implicit, of course, is the overarching theme which Collins observes in all the different ancient apocalypses, namely, the assertion of a transcendent eschatology that looks for retribution, or perhaps restitution, beyond the bounds of history. (We will note this below in citing Rojack the professor's thesis enunciated on page 159 in the text.) In employing a very general sort of language shorn of traditional symbols, Wilder's formula for apocalypse provides a tool for use by literary scholars attending to works produced by imaginations which, though formed in some part by the common biblical culture of the West or its traces, as M.L. Abrams puts it, have been "transformed and secularized" by Romantic and post-Romantic cultures of modernity.¹¹

V

To mark the similarity of Mailer's plot to the five-part formula pattern of the genre apocalypse inherited from the ancient world, we will note first Mailer's vivid descriptions of ominous bad smells. The stench coming off and out of characters in this novel is not only sickening, it is frightening. Odors seem both to illuminate and to energize Rojack, confirming his sense that a war in heaven is being waged, with no holds barred, the effects of which are to be felt all around him, and that the forces of evil may be enjoying the upper hand. Figurative references to hurricanes overhead (25, 162) and trains speeding out of control in the night (99, 131), like the reference to the Beast loosed to prowl the streets of Manhattan (261) reinforce this sense of an Armageddon playing itself out under the deceptive surface of American life and in Rojack who has invited it into himself.

Two striking metaphors for the quickening slide of America into decay and corruption for which there can be no earthly remedy are notable, one at the beginning of the story and one at the end. These are unmistakable apocalyptic signs. The first is a bravura piece of Mailerian excess. Rojack is drunk on a balcony ten floors up a high-rise, sparring in post-cocktail party conversation with his host and beginning to suffer what he portentously calls "psychic

bombardment of the will to live” (9). Suddenly losing confidence in his ability to read the situation, in the middle of the conversation, as he tells it,

I stood up ... and simply heaved my cakes, all the gin-and-tonics, anchovy paste, and last six belts of bourbon zip over his balcony and down in a burning cascade of glob and glottle, a thundering herd of love’s poisoned hoofs (11).

Mailer does a reprise of this choice moment later when Rojack rushes to the men’s room in the after-hours Village club where his new love-interest Cherry sings, where, again drunk, he vomits

with all the gusto of a horse on a gallop, cruds, violations, the rot and gas of compromise, the stink of old fears, mildew of discipline, all the biles of habit and horrors of pretense (101).

By shamanistic substitution and sacrifice our hero is throwing up for an America sickened beyond help of prescription medicine. Here, in what he describes as the “heart of the puke,” he feels “like some gathering wind which drew sickness from the lungs and livers of others and passed them through me up and out into the water.” After this, splashing tap water on his face, he does so “carefully, once again carefully, as if I were washing a new face” (101). Here, as elsewhere, we touch the theme of a needed new birth following a cleansing cataclysm.

The other metaphor, found in the Epilogue chapter but glimpsed prophetically in a foreshortened reference at least once earlier in the story, appears in an autopsy room in a town in southern Missouri. Putting behind him in New York his skirmishes with the various forces of magic, dread, and death, Rojack has driven west, eventually to reach Las Vegas, but first to be shown by an old army doctor friend an autopsy performed upon a victim of cancer. The cadaver is Mailer’s concluding metaphor for America, and the disease which produced it represents the madness of a civilization based on grim Protestant rectitude and denial, a madness curbed by discipline but impossible to vanquish, a madness which, through our denial of it, becomes the cause of cancer in the first instance (as the return of the repressed), and the instrument of the gods’ revenge in the second. Here is still another image of apocalyptic portent. As the dissecting knife cuts into the belly,

A sound hissed, the whistle of still another ghost released, psssssssss went this long sound like an auto tire in the instant before it blows, eighty miles an hour, and rubber allover the highway. Then the smell came up ... (266),

A smell “so extreme it called for the bite of one’s jaws not to retch up out of one’s own cavity” (265).

As for the central panel in Wilder’s five-part formula, the theme of terminal

disaster in *An American Dream* remains vividly imminent and threatening but never actualized, at least on the cosmic stage. In a sense, Rojack has averted or postponed it, on behalf of America, by his heroic willingness to invite the Manichean struggle for the universe into himself as he conducts his thirty-six-hour lunatic/shamanistic harrowing of hell, leading to his heroic personal triumph at the end. But the threat of an impinging disaster on an unimaginable scale is felt throughout Rojack's *mano a mano* with evil and fear. The frenetic emotional setting of the story, tied to Rojack's sense of this impending catastrophe, is played for exaggerated effects throughout. It is precisely this apocalyptic fear and trembling, in spite of its appearance under caricature which, perhaps more than any other element in the narrative, works simultaneously to validate the novel as an authentic apocalypse even as it would seem to lampoon the genre. Here we see Mailer the dialectician turning the subversive Post-Modernist self-consciousness to his advantage as a market-minded writer by framing his serious apocalyptic vision ironically with the commercial absurd, consciously or—does it matter?—unconsciously. Indeed, perhaps in the heightened self-consciousness of our time, the absurd may be one of the more appropriate vehicles for the serious. Of course not every reader will “read” a serious message so conveyed. With *An American Dream*, not many have. Comically preposterous though the narrative may be, it nonetheless provides that in which Earl Rovit, echoing Wilder, insists a genuine apocalypse consists, namely, “a blueprint that bleeds ... a cosmological case history transcribed under the brooding auspices of pity and terror.”¹² If the distracted reader should miss the numerous indications of this impending disaster urgently apprehended in Mailer's choice of language, that is, if we miss what he shows us, we cannot miss what he tells us directly, quoting from Rojack the professor's prize-winning lecture entitled “On the Primitive View of Mystery”:

In contrast to the civilized view which elevates man above the animals, the primitive had an instinctive belief that he was subservient to the primal pact between the beasts of the jungle and the beast of mystery.

To the savage, dread was the natural result of any invasion of the supernatural; if man wished to steal the secrets of the gods, it was only to be supposed that the gods would defend themselves and destroy whichever man came to close. By this logic, civilization is the successful if imperfect theft of some cluster of these secrets, and the price we have paid is to accelerate our private sense of some enormous if not quite definable disaster which awaits us (159).

Rojack implicitly pushes the doomsday clock back, as it were, by undergoing personally on our behalf something like the Last Judgment which figures as the fourth element in the classic plot formula of apocalypse. He submits himself as existentialist shaman-warrior to a decisive confrontation with Satan's agent, Barney Kelly. Kelly is a cartoon descendent of Horatio Alger's

plucky young men and, of course, of Jay Gatsby as his strong predecessor fictional hero of American enterprise-capitalism. But in Mailer's late reading of this figure, Kelly has bought his power by selling himself to everybody including Satan. He smells like "a big foul cat" (217) and "the turpentine of a witch's curse" (217). He "has the charm to capture anything alive if he liked it" (220), and in their climactic confrontation Kelly's body gives off "the radiation of a fire" as he invites Rojack to an apocalyptic sexual orgy (254). Rojack gets a whiff of sulfurous air when he travels the elevator shaft to Barney's lair in the Waldorf, where his long-held vision of Hell "in its first moment" (206) becomes reality, and where the umbrella with which Kelly prods him as he walks the parapet of the balcony high above the street, displaying his courage, believing in God, becomes a snake. Rojack thoroughly understands Kelly's power, looks deeply and dangerously into the wicked temptations offered, and triumphantly beats him with the symbolic derring-do of his risky walk balancing upon the parapet. Rojack as warrior for the Lord, St. Michael redivivus, achieves victory. His existentialist, pugilistic courage is judged and found sufficient. Rojack channels a cosmic Last Judgment, in the process transforming (and secularizing) transcendent authority in the personal.

But what then of the fifth element, the panel in which we take comfort from what Wilder calls "the phase of miraculous 19 renovation and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation?" (Wilder, 1971, 451) Wilder insists that "the catastrophic imagination alone is not genuinely apocalyptic ... the full apocalyptic scenario should include salvation as well as judgment, the new age as well as the old" (Wilder, 1971, 452). The apocalyptic imagination expressed under the cultural conditions of secularized modernity, as we know, notoriously fails this element essential to the ancient progenitors. Does Mailer fail it, too?

On this point Mailer appears tentative but promising. Where Rojack's unfaithful wife Deborah, Barney's daughter and a dabbler in dark magic, fits the role envisioned for the Whore of Babylon, her polar opposite, the southern girl, Cherry, compromised as she is by association with Barney and Shago Martin, the black entertainer, remains for Rojack a palpably redemptive figure. The wings of an imagined bird of blessing, of a secularized dove of a Holy Spirit, flutter overhead on two separate occasions when they meet for episodes of genuine intimacy and good sex (128, 163f). In the polar structure of apocalyptic imagery, Cherry counters Deborah in something like the way the woman clothed with the sun, threatened by the Dragon in the twelfth chapter of *Revelation*, counters the Whore. Though Cherry is hardly the favored virgin mother of the Christ child, it is perhaps not blasphemous, in view of modern skepticism over the Virgin birth, to link her tenuously in Mailer's scheme to that Mary with whose name hers rhymes, and all the more since she dies in a

consuming, purifying fire coincidentally as Rojack is achieving his triumph on the parapet. She represents at least the possibility of a redemptive, interceding female principle. And her significance in this fable is such that, when he reaches Las Vegas and walks out into the desert at night, Rojack is able to talk with her in heaven from a visionary phone booth (269)—as the final gift given in the waning moments of his altered state. If in the biblical myth the eschatological city of the New Jerusalem is alternatively to be imaged as a bride (*Rev.* 21:2), at least a partial echo of that double image of city-woman can be found in Cherry, symbol of the redemptive woman with whom marriage might have brought Rojack's flailings to the sort of "end" represented in the notoriously trans-historical state, "they lived happily ever after."

But then one final grace note. A little like the blessed Huck Finn lighting out for the territory, while *unlike* Nick Carraway at the close of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* retreating to the stolid moral safety of his Midwest, Rojack in the morning, now "something like sane again" (270), starts out on "the long trip to Guatemala and Yucatan." In the terms of our story, we recall, the implication of this concluding sentence is positive and hopeful. At the close of the novel, the thesis bearing professor of existential psychology is starting out along a path into the heart of an earlier American civilization. There he is heading presumably to research what may have been a more viable, civilization-securing "primal pact" drawn up between the beasts of the jungle and the beast of mystery. There, before time runs out on America, he may discover an existential basis for the reconstructing of at least a temporary earthly equivalent of the "new heaven and new earth." Coming as it does on the heels of considerable apocalyptic fatalism throughout the novel, this expression of implied hope for the efficacy of a solution found within history to the ills of civilization strikes a jarring note. Of course, here the tribute of inter-textual allusion is being paid one final time to the great precedent classic Mailer is "rewriting," *The Great Gatsby*, and in particular to the millennial dreams of the Dutch sailors evoked in the famous concluding paragraph of Fitzgerald's novel. And so I do not think that this upbeat note so lightly sounded and virtually thrown away on the last page dilutes Mailer's overriding commitment to the traditional apocalyptic obsession with retribution (or restitution) *beyond* history.

Thus can it be shown that a novel produced by a writer of celebrity who has attracted thousands of pages of critical assessment over the years has circulated for a quarter of a century while the palpable influence of the biblical vision upon its form and content has apparently escaped notice. And the sixties was our "apocalyptic" decade! That Mailer is Jewish and in no other of his works makes such dramatic formal allusion to a portion of the biblical myth does not tell against the case I have brought above. Neither would it matter were we to discover that the "influence" discerned was totally unconscious in Mailer as he

wrote his chapters for *Esquire* and revised his complete text for publication. The point is that the biblical apocalypse is not only echoed but reinvented for a secularized readership in this novel, and that literary scholars have ignored it.

Several questions may arise at this point, but to conclude I wish to address just one in particular. On one hand, the apocalyptic dimension of *An American Dream* was so obvious from the start that no one could have missed it, and perhaps no reader did or does; but on the other, its apparent derivation from the biblical myth was either totally missed or found to be totally uninteresting—why?

The analogy is inexact and problematic, but it may help to view the long tradition of apocalypses leading up to and then including the great number of them produced by Americans as in some sense *organic*. From this perspective, interest focuses upon the historical phases through which literary forms and genres can be said to have evolved as their uses and meanings have shifted with changing times. Alastair Fowler has called this “the life and death of literary forms” over time, and for argument sake he has distinguished three phases of generic development. This analogy may shed light on the character of certain of our contemporary apocalypses—it may help us decide how seriously we are to regard them, appearing problematically as they do, under the aspect of anachronism in the post-Modern culture of heightened skepticism and self-consciousness. Generally, it may help us to judge with more sensitivity the mixture of purposes which account for problematic modern and contemporary uses of traditional imaginative structures, in parody and pastiche, for example. In the first phase of generic development, according to Fowler, in brief, a complex of literary material is assembled gradually until a new formal genre type emerges. In the second phase the form is used, developed, and adapted. In the third phase, we find what Fowler calls “secondary uses” in contexts much changed from those in which the genre emerged where, for example, irony might govern presentation and meaning.¹³

It is doubtful whether the apocalyptic tradition, viewed for the sake of argument as one great multi-media genre with an organic life of its own, may now have evolved everywhere into something like Fowler's third phase, or whether such a genre apocalypse, loosely defined, will now necessarily appear only under the terms of this or that “secondary use.” No one, certainly not members of literalist evangelical communities, will seriously propose that we should now read any and all apocalypses with tongue in cheek, as though the effectiveness of their unique sort of symbolism and of their visionary message, with the passage of time, has finally suffered the sort of death by process of erosion that Nietzsche's prophet attributed to God. And yet something like this state of affairs must be partly true, however, insofar as traditional religious vision has everywhere suffered erosion in the territories, now modernized, where traditional Christianities have shaped culture. We encounter this

diminished sort of “secondary use” of apocalyptic themes most obviously, for example, in the inauthentic product of the cynical, powerful empires of mass-marketed popular music which shapes as it manipulates our homogenized popular culture. In this sector of American culture apocalypse is routinely trivialized into callow, mock-surrealistic nonsense and drained of any real sense of trans-historical retribution or restitution.

But the reading of *An American Dream* offered above may suggest that, in a modern if not post-modern culture some of whose deepest roots are undeniably biblical such as ours, other more sophisticated, more troubled, and more interesting secondary uses of apocalypse can and will be developed. If apocalypse sounds a desperate cry of the heart in spiritual agony, as Wilder and Rovit maintain, and if the work of the heart remains essentially unchanged in all the ages of man, how in an age of crushing self-consciousness and suspicion save dialectically through self-caricature is apocalyptic vision to find adequate expression? Mailer himself may be unique, but his predicament and his, I think, manifest instinct is not uncommon: how to combine the internalized cultural skepticism of our time with impetus to prophetic utterance in which one gropes through new symbolisms for a means of appealing in desperation to the numinous, unknowable transcendent. Mailer may take the path of outrage, absurd exaggeration, and pandering romance. Other American apocalypses of the secondary stage of genre evolution have found and will find still different routes.

What is interesting from the perspective of religion as well as of literature is the conflicting double-mindedness and double vision accommodated in this unified fictional utterance of Mailer's. My reading of *An American Dream* would seem to assert a proposition concerning the uses of the absurd (and the inadequacy of the literal and the solemn): without the flexible embrace of doubleness in *all* things, the most unsettling irony of all, we may now, in these late, skeptical times, never proceed to the state of relation to the infinite through faith for which Paul Ricoeur has given us the descriptive term, the “second naivete.”¹⁴ The literary imagination in its gift (and with its means) for yoking opposites and containing self-conflict may have more to teach the religious imagination than champions of either would normally admit, least of all critics for whom the biblical elements in Mailer-Rojack's decadent “I, John” apocalypse hold no apparent interest – as for whom likewise the epistemological maneuvers of restless religious “belief” in modern philosophical theological writing seem to hold no real interest.

However consciously intended, Mailer's neglected text works most powerfully by speaking through disguise sympathetically to the reader's religious imagination. It speaks to the imbedded, haunting, archetypal native imagination of apocalypse which in recent years has found widespread if

uncreative, rigid expression among the legions of solemn evangelical Christians. Inadvertently to stop our ears to surfacings in contemporary literature (and film) of such a powerful archetypal narrative as the one consolidated in the biblical apocalypse, is to become deaf to the mythic Word at play with many guises in the broad cultural imagination in which we all participate.

Notes

¹ *The Letters of Norman Mailer on "An American Dream," 1963-1969*, ed. J. Michael Lennon. Limited edition (Shavertown, PA: Sligo Press, 2004).

² Matthew 11:12 (King James/"Authorized" version): "...the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force."

³ Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* originally appeared, chapter by chapter, in successive issues of *Esquire* magazine, beginning in January 1964 and concluding in October of that year. It was published in its entirety, following revision, in a 1965 Dell edition. My page citations below refer to the text of the subsequent Dial Press edition; p. 270.

⁴ R.W.B. Lewis, in "Days of Wrath and Laughter," *Trials of the Word* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965) makes pertinent note of the "savagely comical apocalypse" in American fictions of the 1960s. Cf. also Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Biblical basis of the American Myth," *The Bible in American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles B. Gunn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 219-229; and Lois P. Zamora, "The Myth of Apocalypse and the American Literary Imagination," *The Apocalyptic Vision in America*, ed. Zamora (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Univ. Press, 1982.), 97-138.

⁵ Other cultural traditions of the West do not share with America this pronounced native attraction to end-of-the-world scenarios in the traditional biblical mold, that is, as I go on to describe, to the metaphor of shattering catastrophe coupled with last judgment, and to the possibility of human life restored but in a radically changed, and for that reason ultimately unimaginable new order of existence. The theme is certainly to be found elsewhere -- in the Italian, German, and Flemish painters, for example, and in the visionary poet-artist, William Blake (though hardly anywhere else in English literature, save in the seventeenth-century Puritans and D.H. Lawrence). But the evidence shows that apocalypse has played a far greater role in the life of the imagination in America than elsewhere in the West. There are simply many more instances of this sort of vision in the American cultural tradition, from the popular, white Protestant sectarian use of apocalypse as a crude instrument of evangelism, to its many reappearances in film, fiction, drama, and music from the ostensibly secular culture, and to public policy discussion circles of the past fifty years. Although she does not go so far as to link it with some later stage of cultural possession by the biblical myth, Susan Sontag, in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989), 87, sees us as a people who cherish a pronounced "imaginative complicity with disaster."

⁶ Amos Wilder, *Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition: A Study in the Relation of Christianity to Culture* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 194.

⁷ There have been exceptions. Richard Poirier was particularly insightful when noting that Rojack is a splendid example of Mailer's heroes and heroines who function,

individually, as “a kind of battleground where external forces which inhabit the soul or the psyche war for possession” (*Norman Mailer*. New York: Viking, 1972), 130. Robert Solotaroff, in *Down Mailer’s Way* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), 137, 155), also noted the cosmic dualism in the novel when he observed that “a Manichean system” informs the narrative, and went on to describe Rojack’s excited state of mind as “lunacy in the ancient sense; ... the moon has inspired him with holy madness, with the ability to apprehend pure truth.” And Jean Radford, in *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 101, was perhaps helpful in identifying Rojack as “a pilgrim descendent of characters in Bunyan and Dante.”

⁸ John T. Collins. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 4.

⁹ See Kevin Lewis, “John on Patmos and the Painters,” *Arts: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 5:3 (Summer 1993), 18-23.

¹⁰ Amos Wilder, “The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalypse,” *Interpretation* 25 (1971), 436-453. 440f.

¹¹ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971).

¹² Earl Rovit. “On the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination.” *The American Scholar* 87 (1968), 453-468. 463.

¹³ Alastair Fowler. “The Life and Death of Literary Forms.” *New Literary History* 2 (1971), 199-216.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil*, tr. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), suggested this figure for that state of religious mind or faith achieved by intentionally (and successfully) working through the skepticisms of the day to a re-grounded peace of mind and an authentic personal faith.