

History as Masculine Violence in *Oswald's Tale**

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[Abstract]

Quite contrary to the general criticism of viewing *Oswald's Tale* as a successful historiographic novel, this paper aims to show that the text is actually a failed attempt in narrating history. Criticizing the postmodern notion of history as unnarratable or unrepresentable, Mailer argues in *Oswald's Tale* that this notion promotes historical absurdity that, in his view, undermines political commitment as well as social criticism. In spite of his initial aim to restore historical causality by turning the unrepresentable to the representable, however, *Oswald's Tale* ironically ends up undermining historical knowledge that he wants to uphold. History that Mailer offers in the text is a highly privatized version, in which the power of history as a public discourse is not only reduced to but distorted as a battle between masculine hyper-individuals. This paper examines how the private impulse embedded in *Oswald's Tale* functions to cancel out the idea of historical knowledge, resulting that violence comes to replace history completely.

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I. Introduction

David Cowart calls the JFK Assassination “the first postmodern historical event . . . [that] changed America, put an end to its innocent conviction of invincibility, gave birth to the culture of paranoia” (95). Although it is debatable whether the incident marks the beginning of American paranoid culture, which has a long history even before the incident, his remark is correct in terms that the assassination has come to signal the postmodern unrepresentability of history. It has directed attention to the nature of historical representation, in which realistic approaches give way to the notion of historical knowledge that “in the wake of the Kennedy assassination becomes either indecipherable or unnarratable” (O’Donnell 65).

In *Oswald's Tale*, Norman Mailer attempts to criticize and even subvert the notion of historical unrepresentability. Arguing that the idea promotes a sense of historical absurdity, the author aims to reclaim a proper kind of historical causality by transforming the incident into a ‘representable’ narrative. For that, he chooses tragedy over irony as a mode of narrating the assassination. According to him, the death of JFK “is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd” (198), and this tragic version of history can provide a healthy antidote to the sense of absurdity in understanding history: “Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity. Such is the vested interest that adheres to perceiving Oswald as a tragic and infuriating hero” (607). Instead of irony that makes history contingent and thus “absurd,” Mailer tries to underline its tragic dimension by which Oswald’s killing of Kennedy comes

to regain logical meaning and reasonable causes.

Mailer's effort to restore a proper sense of historicity by harnessing historical representation leads, however, to problems as much as answers. Quite against his initial aim to promote objective truth and historical causality, *Oswald's Tale* ends up relying heavily on the author's literary imagination rather than historical facts. More importantly, Mailer's version of JFK assassination reduces history into a highly privatized version, in which individual ability dictates the course of a nation's history. By interpreting Oswald as a politically revolutionary figure resembling the author's signature concept of a 'hipster' hero, Mailer sanctions an individualized form of political narrative out of Oswald's life. In doing so, Mailer's history turns into an embattled space between masculine hero and another masculine anti-hero, in which male violence comes to replace history completely.

This paper aims to show that, however laudable it is in intention, Mailer's attempt to 'rescue history' from postmodern unrepresentability results in undermining the credibility of history that he wants to revive. With the belief that history is—and should be—a meaning-producing process, he constructs Oswald as a tragic anti-hero whose political intention makes the incident comprehensible. However, this act jeopardizes the status of historical truth because creating heroic Oswald is possible only through severing it from real details of the assassination. At another level, the private impulse embedded in Mailer's Oswald is also detrimental to history, for it functions to cancel out the power of history as a public discourse. This paper begins with exploring how the author's desire for historical representability becomes thwarted in *Oswald's Tale*, and then will examine the problem of imagining the masculine individual as a replacement of historical knowledge.

II. FROM HISTORY TO IMAGINATION: CONSTRUCTING A HEROIC INDIVIDUAL AT THE EXPENSE OF HISTORICITY

Harold Bloom finds Mailer's talent as an author in his ability to "[break] down the distinction between fiction and journalism" (480). The majorities of Mailer's oeuvres are, indeed, what he terms "non-fiction novels," in which historical events are used as a platform for literary imagination. Along the same line with many postmodern historiographic novelists, Mailer argues that history and literature share the same kind of significance-making process and thus "all history becomes a novel" (Lennon 93). *Armies of the Night* is arguably the best example of blurring the boundary between literature and journalism, as its subtitle "History as a Novel, the Novel as History" aptly shows. By frequently switching between the author's subjective perspective and a more traditional documentation of history, Mailer reveals how relevant historical writing is to literary narrativization.

On the other hand, however, the boundary between fiction and journalism is maintained as much as contested in Mailer's other non-fiction novels. *Marilyn* is largely written in a journalistic manner of valorizing facts over fiction, and the author's voice is painstakingly erased in *The Executioner's Song* so as to guarantee the neutrality of interviews and documents on a real-time convicted killer Gary Gilmore. Seen in this light, Mailer's non-fiction novels convey not only his well-known skepticism toward objective historical knowledge but also latent desire for it: that is, while some works address the instability of distinction between facts and fiction and pursue multiple truths, other works reveal the longing for historical truth that he wants to deliver through the lens of journalistic objectivity.

Oswald's Tale has a somewhat peculiar status among Mailer's non-fiction novels. Whereas previous ones take a relatively clear stance on either pursuing historical objectivity or deconstructing it, *Oswald's Tale* shows a radical transition from one to the other within one text. It begins with a strictly journalistic manner of recording facts and interviews in an attempt to grasp what really happened in Oswald's past. This attempt was accelerated with the news that the KGB was to release classified files in 1993, which contains surveillance logs on Oswald's two-year stay in the USSR between 1959 and 1961. With the high hope that those files could finally settle the long-debated controversy whether Oswald was a Russian spy ordered to kill the President or a mentally unstable loner, Mailer spent six months in Russia perusing the files and interviewing dozens of Russians acquainted with Oswald. The newness of the Russian materials is certainly an exciting factor because, for him, they have credibility that American materials have lost. He claims that American testimonies on the JFK Assassination have been so thoroughly commodified, quoted and counter-quoted to the extent that they are "hardly trustworthy" by now, whereas the untapped Russian counterpart can be "an asset ... [that] proves a liability in America" (351).

Mailer's investment in the Russian files is certainly grounded on his belief in restoring historical meaning to the JFK assassination. He assesses that the official verdict by the Warren Commission, according to which Oswald is a deranged lone killer, only engenders historical absurdity. If the course of national history changes so randomly and abruptly by an obscure individual like Oswald, then it testifies to the fact that history is nothing but coincidental, ironical, and meaningless; therefore, "America is cursed with absurdity. There was no logic to the event and no sense of balance in the universe" (606). For Mailer, the Russian project is a breakthrough by which historical contingency finally gives way to an explanation with clear logic.

Claiming that “[i]f Oswald remains intact as an important if dark protagonist, one has served a purpose: the burden of a prodigious American obsession has been lessened, and the air cleared of an [*sic*] historic scourge – absurdity” (606), the author uses Russian investigation as a platform to shed a new light on Oswald’s individuality and bring forth a new historical meaning in place of “an historic scourge.”

But the Russian project engenders problems more than answers for Mailer. Contrary to his initial hope, the KGB files do not contain significant truths. They do not, in fact, offer any new insights about Oswald at all. Exclusive surveillances and wiretapping on Oswald leads to insignificant mundane activities, such as boarding the bus, buying 200 grams of vanilla cookies, and fighting with his wife over house chores. If the KGB files fail to construct Oswald as an important political figure, then the interviews by Mailer sap the author’s anticipation to grasp Oswald’s real character. Mailer spends more than three-hundred pages of *Oswald’s Tale* on those interviews, trying to deliver whole stories without distorting any detail. As a result, the materials are truly overwhelming: readers get to know the whole life-story of each and every individual who once knew Oswald.¹ In spite of the vast volume and meticulous details that Mark Lawson dubs as “the Mailer Commission,” the interviews create an enormous discrepancy regarding Oswald’s character. He is “a frightened boy” and “a reliable man” at the same time, “very superficial” yet “deep” in intellectual terms, and “most domesticated husband” yet also a wife abuser. Even the two KGB agents in charge of surveillance give mutually incompatible testimonies on Oswald (133). If the KGB files reveal too little about Oswald’s political intention, then Mailer’s interviews contain too much and often conflicting information to construct a coherent character.

Interestingly enough, one can find an uncanny similarity between Mailer’s situation and that of Nicholas Branch in DeLillo’s *Libra*, arguably the most famous

novel depicting the JFK assassination. Trapped in inundating information, Branch cannot decide with confidence who killed Kennedy. Likewise, Mailer struggles with the same difficulty to comprehend Oswald's past in spite of – or, precisely because of – an enormous amount of information he collects. In both cases, the plethora of information does not lead to historical revelation but rather defers it. It is always premature to draw a conclusion for Branch, so he desperately seeks for more information. Similarly, the Russian project and its sheer volume of information is nothing but premature for Mailer, which forces him to extend his investigation to American materials he despised before: “It is obvious that whatever we have learned about Oswald in Russia is not enough to answer our basic question. For that we will have to follow his adventures in America” (315).

As objective historical truth is rigorously pursued yet never quite reached, Mailer mulls over the dilemma he faces as such: it is “painful to relinquish one’s hope for a narrative, to admit that [a historical investigation] may not lead to the exposure of facts so much as the epistemology of facts. ... Of course, that will never be enough . . . the habit will persist to look for a new narrative” (178). As Mailer attempts to search for “a new narrative” in representing history, a few crucial shifts take place between Volume I (the Russian investigation) and Volume II (the American counterpart). Whereas he makes his voice minimal, if any, in Volume I, he begins to rely exclusively on his own perspective and speculation in Volume II. Accordingly, the pronoun referring to the narrator changes from “we” (indication of the collaborative nature with co-interviewers and a translator) to “I” or “the author,” further signaling the author’s presence in the American part. This transition is neatly captured in a small inter-chapter between the two Volumes. Here, Mailer acknowledges for the first time the significance of his subjective perspective over the primacy of facts that prevailed the Russian segment:

[*Oswald's Tale* has] a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. Technically, this book fits into the latter category – it is most certainly not fiction. ... Still, it is a peculiar form of non-fiction, since not only interviews, documents, and letters are employed, but speculations as well. *The author's musings become some of the operative instruments. ... That is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud – especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instrument, which in this case are the facts.* (353; emphasis added)

As is explained here, the renewed significance of the author's voice exactly corresponds to his growing skepticism on the narrative power that factual evidences exert. He repeatedly argues in Volume II that “[e]vidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery,” and warns the reader that “one does not (and should not) respect evidence with the religious intensity that others bring to it” (775). To be sure, there are moments in Volume I when Mailer questions the authority of facts that he collects. He not only suspects “disinformation” of interviewees who are willing not to know truths in fear of involving the KGB, but he also worries about the unreliability of information threatening the integrity of narrative structure.² There seems, however, a crucial difference in Mailer's attitude toward historical truth. The overriding question of the Russian project is whether one has access to truth that is *out there* – that is, whether historical truth is revealed through proper investigation or concealed by false testimonies. Meanwhile, the primary concern of the American segment shifts to a considerable extent to the nature of historical truth itself: instead of differentiating ‘good’ facts from ‘bad’ ones, Mailer claims that it is “a fact that there are no facts – only the mode of our approach to what we call facts” (516).

Faced with a situation in which historical representation is no longer sustainable through objective knowledge and it is thus imperative to find “a new narrative,” Mailer turns to the only alternative left for him – literary imagination. Defining

himself as “a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page” (352), the author asserts that his job in Volume II is not an investigator collecting evidence but an interpreter re-textualizing texts. With the change in author’s role, so does the focus of investigation on Oswald’s character shift from facts to speculations. There are many instances in Volume II where Oswald’s character functions as a decisive factor in reconstructing the past. For instance, in an episode of Oswald’s possible involvement with the Japanese Communists, the author sees the allegation plausible only because it seems to correspond to Oswald’s character: “It is *his character rather than hard evidence* which enables us to assume that he did play at the edges of [Japanese] espionage” (401; emphasis added). Similarly, he argues Oswald should be a true assassin of JFK because “the real question is not whether Oswald had the skills to bring off the deed [to shoot Kennedy] but whether he had *the soul* of a killer” (778; emphasis added), the latter being “more important to the author than trying to discover the truth” (606). The determining logic of historical understanding is inverted here: whereas it is factual evidences that regulate Oswald’s character in Volume I, it is his character and psyche that come to determine the veracity of facts in Volume II.

One might argue that the change from historical validation to speculative interpretation in *Oswald's Tale* is another example of Mailer’s postmodern historiographic writing manifested in *Armies of the Night*. But the difference between the two texts seems obvious. The departure from journalism to fiction in the former marks a point of failure in narrativization. In other words, the “new narrative” it offers is rather a makeshift alternative, emerging only when the author’s desire for historical representability is thwarted at the end of Volume I. Another difference arises from the role that the literary form plays in *Oswald's Tale*. One might argue that the matter of literary form in the text seems not so much an end as a means

-serving for literary content. Unlike other historiographic writings in which narrative form is a pivotal element in demonstrating history as narrative, *Oswald's Tale* utilizes it rather as a means to articulate literary content – that is, to posit Oswald as a compelling agency of history and thus to bring out historical causality.

The desire to create a male individual as a politically significant figure is nothing new in Mailer's oeuvres. As Michiko Kakutani aptly observes, *Oswald's Tale* “serves a dark mirror of the themes he has addressed throughout his 47-year long career” (10). Mailer's Oswald is only a recent manifestation of the author's existential heroism that he has persistently pursued since his 1957 article “The White Negro.” We will briefly examine this article first as a predecessor of *Oswald's Tale*, before turning to the author's sanction of masculine violence in the latter. In Mailer's view, the contemporary consensus culture has so deeply penetrated into the American psyche, and genuinely dissentive social criticism in turn must take an extreme form as well. “Hipster,” a model of social rebellion that Mailer proposes in “The White Negro,” represents extremity in many senses: he embodies an extreme form of marginality as a social outlaw, embraces racial hybridization as a shock therapy to the time, and above all, uses masculine violence to attack the status quo. The most conspicuous feature of hipster is his outlaw status. By polarizing him against “squares” complying with white middle-class values, Mailer endows on a socially marginalized figure a privileged position for social change: hipster is essentially “a philosophical psychopath, a man interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying the suppositions on which his inner universe is constructed” (343).

The notion of social criticism that hipster embodies finds its voice in the language of rugged masculinity. Conforming to social rules testifies to “the weaker more feminine part of your nature,” which is equivalent to being “sexually crippled ... by

the Superego of the society” (351, 349). Meanwhile, an “apocalyptic orgasm” (352) is possible to hipster determined to liberate himself from social order (thus “apocalyptic”) and, by doing so, he gains sexual potency (thus “orgasm”). By dubbing society as feminine, Mailer identifies the dissentive impulse of non-conformity with a wish to reclaim one’s masculinity. Mailer is, needless to say, not the first writer who underscores the immediate relation between non-conformity and masculinity. As Andreas Huyssen argues in “Mass Culture as Woman,” the feminizing power of early twentieth-century society was often contrasted to the masculine impulse of modernists trying to dissociate themselves from the conformed mass.³ Yet, what makes “The White Negro” distinguishable from other theories of masculine autonomy is the author’s upfront endorsement of violence:

Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth. (355)

Violence is, for Mailer, a form of an initiating ritual that is essential for hipster to experience the remaking of the self. As the search for autonomous selfhood overlaps with authentic masculinity, violence as a necessary means to achieve non-conformity acquires richly sexual connotations. Only through violence, he argues, the hipster becomes “sexually alive” with “experiences of elation and exhaustion” (349), engaging with “the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm” (341). In short, “The White negro” is a perfect example of positing the masculine individual as a nodal point of social change, in

which masculine violence is the most effective way of expressing political critique against the ‘feminizing’ conformity of society.

The attempt to posit masculine individualism as a viable form of social dissensus continues in Volume II of *Oswald's Tale*. Mailer remarks that Oswald was “five years ahead of his time” (506), revealing his desire to put Oswald within the ongoing tradition of non-conforming American hipsters such as hippies and Beatniks in late 1960s. The common ground that Oswald shares with hipster is his belief in autonomous individualism – that is, an individual who, untainted by social conformity, is powerful enough to change the course of history. He tries to “fashion a new kind of existence” both for himself and the world (551), by embracing the notion of heroic individualism and trying to emulate “the great individual” in history (552). His identification with heroic individuals culminates in his well-known admiration for Hitler; often quoting from *Mein Kampf*, he argues that Hitler’s idea of self-ascendancy has become “the granite foundation of all my acts” (457). Oswald’s admiration for Hitler is certainly a complicated problem for Mailer. On one hand, his desire to become a heroic individual is a crucial element to the narrative of *Oswald's tale*, for it reinforces the author’s attempt to create Oswald as an individual agency for historical change. Asserting that “[w]hat is never taken seriously enough in Oswald is the force of his confidence that he has the makings of a great leader” (555), Mailer argues that Oswald’s sense of historical self-importance makes him “a putative Hitler” (491). On the other hand, the connection between the two can be risky for an obvious reason. It can undermine the sympathetic and understandable dimension of Oswald that the author desperately tries to construct. Mailer thus tries to recast Oswald, purely out of his own speculation, as a person with individual charisma but not a dictator: he apologetically claims that Oswald “would hate concepts of race and historically destined folk. Hitler’s success, however, was another

matter – it probably lit a candle in the dungeon of Oswald's immense hopes for himself" (459).

The author's attempt to refashion Oswald into a heroic individual takes a strictly gendered form. It was the Warren Commission Report that first introduced Oswald's manhood – or, the lack thereof – into the discourse of JFK assassination. Whereas the suggestion is somewhat anecdotal and insignificant in the Report (Knight, 57), Mailer reconstructs Oswald's life exclusively under the light of authentic masculinity. In *Oswald's Tale*, the author identifies masculinity with a virtue that one has to earn. It is "an achievement, not a gift of gender," which has to be pursued "through brave acts, the honoring of one's private code, and through fierce attachment to one's finest habit" (369). Under the assumption, Mailer speculates that the pressure to acquire a proper manhood must have been urgent to Oswald, who in his early years was often perceived as lacking the virtue:

[G]iven the oppressive psychological climate of the Fifties [1950s], we have to entertain the possibility that one of the major obsession in Oswald's life was manhood, attaining his manhood. If he was in part homosexual, then the force of such a preoccupation would have doubled and trebled. (379)

As is already well documented, Mailer's idea of authentic masculinity often implicates heterosexuality. Although his view of homosexuality as a source of evil – notably in his early career in such novels as *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore* – has considerably mellowed over the time, he still regards it in *Oswald's Tale* as a premature phase before reaching into heterosexual maturity. His speculation on Oswald's state of mind that "I am not yet a man and I must become one" sets the overall tone very well (379). While homosexuality brings out the "weaker part of the self" (381), heterosexual experiences can enhance Oswald's sense of the self. For

instance, noticing the sudden change in Oswald's bearing to be more aggressive and confident during the Russian period, the author guesses that it must have been a heterosexual intercourse – probably for the first time – that he had with a woman around that time.

Describing Oswald's alleged homosexuality is the part where Mailer deploys his literary imagination more than in any other part of the text. Readers repeatedly come across with phrases like “it is far from wholly improbable” or “since our hypothesis is not anchored [by proofs], let us levitate even higher” (455). The most intriguing speculation comes from a mysterious death of a fellow Marine close to Oswald. Considering the places of gun wounds, the author makes a bold suggestion that someone – i.e., Oswald – was forced to kneel and perform sexual acts before shooting the compatriot. As Peter Knight correctly points out, Mailer's re-creation of Oswald as homosexual functions to fill the narrative gaps: it explains not only the Marine's mysterious death, but Oswald's whereabouts during the crucial period before assassination and the large amount of money he somehow comes up with. In short, Mailer's imagination regarding Oswald's homosexuality transforms the coincidental into the determined, in which the puzzling death of a Marine turns into a causal narrative of Oswald's sexual struggle to become so-called ‘a real man.’

Given that autonomous individuality for Mailer is earned through sexual prowess and potency against ‘feminizing’ elements, it is hardly surprising to see that he regards masculine violence as a necessary step for making Oswald's individualism complete. At one level, violence is a channel through which one can reclaim the masculine self. The idea is repeatedly insinuated throughout the text with the image of guns. Not owning a gun is, Mailer claims, like “getting ready to make love without knowing if your phallus is in accord” (493). As a somewhat cliched symbol of phallus, a gun comes to signify one's effort to preserve manhood. In examining

how Oswald manages not to get confiscated of his gun when visiting the Russian Embassy in Mexico, Mailer proposes that it might be because of “the Mexican logic of the *cantinas*,” according to which “to deprive a man of his gun ... was equal to emasculation” (640).

In addition to promoting masculinity, Oswald’s violence is also a means in his own fashion to amend the political problems that cannot be solved otherwise. Asserting that Oswald’s violence is a necessary evil functioning to ameliorate social defects, Mailer recasts the assassination in the light of political response on Oswald’s part to the cancer that he detects in American society. As the author explains:

The world was in crisis and the social need was to create conditions for recognizing that there had to be a new kind of society. Otherwise, [the American society] was going to reduce people to the point where they lost all will to create a better world. An explosion at the heart of the American establishment’s complacency would be exactly the shock therapy needed to awaken the world. ... Kennedy had the ability to give hope to the American ethos ... he was too good. *In the profoundest sense, [Oswald] located the tumor – it was that Kennedy was too good.* (781; emphasis added)

He diagnoses Kennedy as part of cancer – “the tumor” – that the nation suffers from: that is, Kennedy was so good a leader that he somehow preempted people from realizing the need for a fundamental social change. Armed with the somewhat unorthodox perspective on Kennedy, Mailer completely recreates Oswald’s violence as an effort, if distorted, to shock the public out of its complacency under Kennedy: the assassination was, according to the author, “a cry of wrath that rises from a skewed heart maddened by its own vision of injustice” (198).

With the final form of violence, Mailer puts Oswald on the same status with Kennedy. The latter embodies the highest political position as the ‘Father’ of the

nation, thereby representing phallic power of the time. The author claims that the assassination is a culminating point for Oswald to complete the notion of great individual. By “kill[ing] the king,” he finally acquires the status equal to the king, and the assassination is thus “an event staged between himself and his vision of a great and thunderous stroke that would lift him at once from the mediocre to the immortal” (678-79). It is not difficult to detect at this point that history in *Oswald's Tale* turns into a battle between two heroic males. The author's attempt to give history a proper kind of causality leads to the belief that a giant like Kennedy is – and should be – taken down by another anti-hero “not without size” (607), and this belief in turn transforms the incident into a conflict between two hipster heroes: Kennedy is “an outlaw sheriff” (Nielson, 33) who is shot down by another hipster outlaw with clear perspective on social ills in mind.

The problems that Mailer's notion of history entails seem quite obvious. The biggest and most immediate problem is that it personalizes history. As is explained in the previous paragraph, Mailer's history becomes an embattled conflict between hero and anti-hero, in which an individual becomes the sole agency determining the course of history. Another related problem arises from the notion of history as violence. As the power of autonomous individual is romanticized, so does the notion of violence in *Oswald's Tale*. Violence is considered in the text as a genuine oppositional impulse against the social, in such a way that it is not only a means to reassert one's sense of masculine power, but also an expression of social revolution in a militant way. Sally Bachner notes that violence comes to replace history in many post-war American political literary works: in her own words, “violence *is* history” (404). This is exactly the case with *Oswald's Tale* as well. The author's attempt to gain true historical knowledge is completed by sanctioning Oswald's act of killing, and in doing so, violence turns Oswald into the very locus of historical

change. In short, violence represents the moment of history-making in *Oswald's Tale*, in which it functions as a primary – and only, it should be added – vehicle to reveal historical truth to readers.

III. Conclusion

In imagining male violence as a compelling force of history, Mailer equates the moment of Oswald's violence with the manifestation of the Emersonian individualism.

Oswald may never have read Emerson, but the following passage from “Heroism” gives us luminous insight into what had to be Oswald's opinion of himself as he sat on the sixth floor waiting for the Kennedy motorcade – he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable:

Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agent. [Heroism is] scornful of petty calculations and scornful of being scorned. ... [Heroism] works in contradiction to the voice of mankind and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and good. Heroism is obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character. (783; brackets in original)

The author's intention seems clear enough here. By defining Oswald's violence as a typical manifestation of Emersonian Individualism, he reevaluates male violence as an intrinsic part of the national ideal. It represents “the most heroic deed of which he

was capable,” a moment when violence overlaps neatly with the completion of rugged individualism. By translating Oswald’s violence as an individual struggle for autonomous selfhood, Mailer tries to rearrange the nature of JFK assassination from “the first postmodern example of unrepresentability” to the representable “American tragedy” in contemporary U.S.: “Who among us can say that he is in no way related to our own dream? If it had not been for Theodore Dreiser and his last great work [*The American Tragedy*], one would like to have used “An American Tragedy” as the title for this journey through Oswald’s beleaguered life” (791). Seen in this light, one might conclude that *Oswald’s Tale* replaces historical knowledge only with a national myth. Realizing that reclaiming historical truth about the assassination in an objective way, Mailer ends up discarding history in favor of a literary imagination of the heroic Emersonian individual, which offers to readers nothing but a tired version of age-old national mythology.

ENDNOTES

1. For instance, the book begins with a story of Valya Prusakov, whose childhood was smeared with poverty and oppression by the Nazis. Readers get to know who she is and how she is relate to Oswald thirty pages after the story begins. Similarly, Mailer and Lawrence Schiller, a co-interviewer, painstakingly pursue lives of not only Oswald’s friends and co-workers, but also Marina Oswald’s ex-boyfriends, cousins, and the cousin’s spouses, et *cetera*, as a way to understand Oswald’s character better.
2. The author not only suspects “disinformation” of interviewees who are willingly not to know truths in fear of being involved with the KGB, but he also

worries about the unreliability of information that threatens the integrity of narrative structure, as is shown in his careful and meticulous evaluations of Marina's lie about her virginity before marrying Oswald or Yuri's claim of having an affair with Marina.

3. Huyssen explains the gender-based binary distinction between high and mass cultures as such: "[T]he political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively gendered mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities" (47). One of the fundamental driving forces behind modernism is to negate and free from the feminized mass culture, which has "always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project" (47).

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국문초록

『오스왈드 이야기』에 나타난 남성적 폭력으로서의 역사

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비평사적인 측면에서 볼 때 노만 메일러의 『오스왈드 이야기』는 역사 메타픽션의 정치사회적 가치를 보여주는 대표적인 미국 소설로 평가되어 왔다. 그러나 이와 같은 일반적인 비평의 흐름과 달리, 본 논문은 이 소설이 역사성을 다루는 방식과 관점에 있어 오히려 역사 메타픽션이 가지는 비판적 가능성을 제한한다는 사실에 주목한다. 『오스왈드 이야기』를 통해 메일러가 비판하려는 가장 핵심적인 대상은 ‘재현 불가능한 역사’라는 20세기 후반의 포스트모던적 개념으로, 그는 이 개념이 역사의 부조리함을 보여주는 것에 지나지 않으며 따라서 재현 불가능한 역사를 인과관계가 분명한 역사성으로 대체해야 할 필요성을 역설한다. 그러나 이와 같은 작가의 노력은 역설적이게도 그가 소설에서 가장 큰 목표로 삼는 ‘사회비판적 통로로서의 역사의 가치’를 오히려 해체하는 결과로 이어진다. 『오스왈드 이야기』를 통해 메일러가 그려내는 미국의 역사는 국가 전체가 공유하는 집단적인 역사로서의 존 에프 케네디(JFK) 암살을 극도의 남성성을 지닌 두 남성간의 개인적인 대결의 서사로 대체하며, 그 과정에서 역사에 내포된 공적 담론으로서의 가치는 지나치게 사유화된 역사로 변질된다. 이 논문은 『오스왈드 이야기』에 나타난 개인화된 역사가 어떤 방식으로 역사적 지식을 해체하는지를 중점적으로 논하는 동시에, 이 과정에서 폭력이 역사를 완전히 대체하게 되는 과정을 구체적으로 살펴볼 것이다.

주제어: 『오스월드 이야기』, JFK 암살사건, 남성적 폭력, 포스트모던 역사기록, 노만 메일러

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