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### EMOTIVE AMBIVALENCE IN NORMAN MAILER'S AN AMERICAN DREAM

In his widely known study of allegory as a symbolic mode, Angus Fletcher discusses three types of ambivalence, thematically labelled as philosophic ambivalence, theological dualism and emotive ambivalence. In the first two types the ambivalence occurs between two opposite notions. Traditionally, the antagonisms "exist" in opposite persons and opposite sets of circumstances; thus a certain symmetry can be observed which emphasizes the overall pattern of allegorical *Battle*.<sup>1</sup>

The principle of symmetry can also be observed in the case of emotive ambivalence. The polar antagonisms are thrown into, as Fletcher puts it, "a mixture of diametrically opposed feelings" and this ambivalence is related to the concept of taboo<sup>2</sup>. To Fletcher, all moral fables are concerned with taboos in that they claim that some objects are sinful and some are sacred. As Fletcher well recognizes, this may seem a mere moral dualism at first, but when the religious meaning of "sacred" is considered, paradoxically, "sacred" means both good and evil. Bronisław Malinowski discusses the ambivalence of taboo in the example of two items: *bwoyna* and *gaga* (seemingly: good and evil)<sup>3</sup>. Both words are used in a wide range of circumstances and their true meanings depend entirely on the context in which they are used. For example, *gaga* may refer to incest (a repulsive act) or it may refer to adultery with the chief's wife (an act which is both dangerous and attractive). Depending on the context, *gaga* may mean "morally not to be forgiven and erasable only through suicide"<sup>4</sup>, or against the law, against the custom, or "obscene", "unpleasant", "ugly", "disgusting", "disgraceful", "dangerous", "dangerously brave", "dangerous and thus attractive". Respectively, *bwoyna* means "tasty", "pleasant", "seductive", "attractive because villainous", or "morally recommended because of inherent difficulties". Depending on the situational or emotional context, any action based on temptation can be expressed by means of either *gaga* or *bwoyna*. The ambivalent nature of taboo is also evident in Freud's definition:

... the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us, sacred, consecrated; but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean. The opposite for taboo is designated in Polynesian by the word *noa* and signifies something ordinary and generally

accessible. Thus, something like the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. Our combination of "holy dread" would often express the meaning of taboo<sup>5</sup>.

Paradox is at the heart of every moral fable. On the one hand, temptation (thus, the assertion that evil is desirable) is the most preferred theme; on the other, the prohibitions the hero faces are, as Fletcher puts it, "absolute imperatives"<sup>6</sup>.

Not only does Fletcher relate moral allegory to the concept of taboo, he further draws the outline of the psychoanalytic analogue for allegory<sup>7</sup>, which is the compulsive syndrome. Fletcher discusses it in reference to the five areas that have constituted his concern as regards the workings of allegory as a symbolic mode. Having accounted for all the inadequacies of Freudian concepts, Fletcher recognizes that they can be applied very well in the description of symbolic action. The psychoanalytic analogue can be well used in the discussion of Mailer's *An American Dream* which necessitates a further psychoanalytic clarification of the five areas mentioned above. They are: agency, action, imagery, causality and theme.

Fletcher characterizes agency as "obsessional anxiety". The typical allegorical agent as a daemon finds a correlate in the theory of compulsive behavior. In common parlance, the mind is "possessed" all of a sudden by some idea over which it has no control and which continues to haunt it. The experience is repeated over and over again. R. W. White gives examples of some minor obsessions, e. g. the compulsion of handwashing or the compulsion to return home each time one has just left to make sure the gasburner has been turned off, etc<sup>8</sup>. This is how Fletcher summarizes the compulsive behavior of the protagonist:

Above all, the agency suggested by the analogue with compulsion neurosis will be an agency of psychic possession. As if he became a daemon, the compulsive character (it is apparent we are not talking about the author here) becomes singled down to a narrow one-track function – a kind of narrowing that is both the strength and the weakness of the compulsive, since on the one hand it enables him to work hard and long at single, difficult tasks, but on the other may prevent him from discovering flexible paths, new short cuts<sup>9</sup>.

In Fletcher's framework action employs compulsive rituals which lead to "straightening, arranging, recording, and filing"<sup>10</sup>, and the form may involve either "symmetrical grouping of items" or "ritualistic grouping of items". Transformed into a symbolic mode it will make use of either Battle (based on the principle of symmetry) or Progress (based on the principle of ritual).

Imagery is based on the principle of "idee fixe"; the same narrowing process is at work. The obsession becomes accompanied by "some remote item of imagery". The impulse to kill a beloved person is attached to some object which may be indirectly associated with this person. Fletcher uses terms: "encapsulation" or "isolation" after Freud:

Thinking in compulsive categories represents a caricature by logical thinking: logical thinking too, is based on a kind of isolation. But the logical isolation serves the purpose of objectivity, the compulsive isolation that of defence ... Isolation, it has been mentioned, is related to the ancient taboo of touching. Numerous compulsive

systems regulate the modes in which objects should be or must not be touched ... "clean" things must not communicate with "dirty" ones ... Isolation frequently separates constituents of a whole from one another, where the noncompulsive person would only be aware of the whole and not of the constituents. Compulsion neurotics, therefore, frequently experience sums instead of unities, and many compulsive character traits are best designated as "inhibition in the experiencing of gestalten"<sup>11</sup>.

Causality involves magical practices. It is to be clearly observed in the allegorical use of oracles which make use of the „mixture of logic and magic". Fletcher quotes Fenichel's view that the high intelligence of compulsion neurotics, on the one hand, shows paradoxically archaic features and is full of magic and superstition, and on the other:

Patients consult oracles, make bets with God, fear the magical effect of the words of others, act as if they believe in ghosts, demons, and especially in a very malicious sage, and yet otherwise are intelligent persons, completely aware of the absurdity of these ideas<sup>12</sup>.

Theme, the last constituent of allegory as a symbolic mode is based on the ambivalence in "antithetical primal words"<sup>13</sup>. As has been said, the notion of taboo implies the duality of meanings. A tabooed object will be desirable and repulsive at the same time. Money as an object of desire offers the best illustration; the very idea of the desirability of „stinking" money.

Finally, Fletcher quotes Henry Murray's definition of a moral conflict to support his notion of emotive ambivalence:

Moral conflict, if radical and stubborn, results in a division, an inflexible dualism, in all branches of feeling and thought, which so influences the sufferer's apperceptions, that every significant object becomes ambivalent to him, that is, it both attracts and repels him, being composed, as he sees it, of two contrary elements, one good and evil, which cannot be reconciled or blended. He discovers in due time a radical defect in every person who has appealed to him and begins hating what he has loved, though unconsciously he continues loving the object of hate. Thus, no whole-hearted embracement of anyone is possible, and the constructive tendency toward synthesis and integration is perpetually obstructed<sup>14</sup>.

This has explicated briefly the theoretical outline of emotive ambivalence in reference to the psychoanalytic analogue which is compulsive behavior. What will follow is the discussion of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* under the five working headings: agency, action, imagery, causality and theme.

#### AGENCY

The protagonist of the novel is Stephen Richard Rojack, an existentialist professor, a T.V. star, a war hero with a Distinguished Service Cross and a former congressman. The action of the book begins conventionally enough, "I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress"<sup>15</sup>. Rojack remembers Jack Kennedy in reference to a double date they had when Rojack "seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz". (9). The girl was Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly:

...of the Caughlins first, English-Irish bankers, financiers and priests; the Mangaravidis, a Sicilian issue from the Bourbons and the Hapsburgs; Kelly's family was just Kelly; but he had made a million two hundred times. So there was a vision of treasure, far-off blood and fear (9).

Any American success story might open in a similar way. But to turn a page, two pages, is to find Rojack making confessions about his fascination with death. To a certain extent, Rojack is Mailer's "hipster" – the American existentialist:

...the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as l'univers concentrationnaire, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry), if the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self<sup>6</sup>.

Rojack's first encounter with death had been in the army, and Rojack, like every intelligent soldier, understood that under such circumstances as war killing is so close to dying that there is no room for fear:

I could ... feel danger withdraw from me like an angel, withdraw like a retreating wave over a quiet sea, sinking quietly into the sand (11).

There is no fear or dread, and when he kills the first three Germans, the "it", as he labels the helping force, throws grenades, but with the fourth German the "it" deserts Rojack because he looks into the eyes of this German:

...it was all in his eyes, he had ... eyes of blue, so perfectly blue and mad they go all the way in deep into celestial vaults of sky, eyes which go back all the way to God ... and I faltered before that state ... (12).

This is the first time Rojack looks down the "abyss". He stops killing when he realizes that the potential eternity of this particular life depends on his actions, and this is probably when he comes to understand, as Mailer expressed it elsewhere, that "death is a creation more dangerous than life"<sup>17</sup>. Rojack begins a new life, the life, to use a paradox, which mingles with death. This special fascination, the mixture of dread and desire which is at the center of every tabooed object accompanies Rojack through lifetime.

Rojack recognizes two kinds of death: suicidal death and death by murder, the difference between the two being that "murder offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unsexual" (15), while "there is little which is sexual about suicide" (15). First, he experiments with the latter type; at a party he is standing on the balcony under a full moon contemplating suicide. He has a long inward conversation with Luna that invites him to "come now ... now is your moment. What joy in the flight" (19). His both feet over the balustrade, the formal part of Rojack's brain says, "You can't die yet, you haven't done your work" (19). So, he goes on to do his work – which is the murder of his wife. Figuratively, the act of murder means, for Rojack, entering into heaven. These are his sensations:

But I had a view of ~~what~~ on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of tropical dusk ... I was trying to stop, but pulse packed behind pulso in a pressure up to thunder head; some blackbiled lust, some desire to go ahead not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection ... I could still feel murdering in her throat, and crack I choked her harder, and crack I choked her again, and crack I gave her payment – never halt now – and crack the door flew open and the wire tore in her throat, and I was through the door ... I was floating (35–36).

The masterful rhythm of this passage parallels a later description which has a direct sexual context, but of this will be more later. In passing it should be mentioned, however, that for all the unfavourable criticism this book has met it must be praised for its stylistic efforts – what Richard Chase calls “a profound poetry of disorder”<sup>18</sup>. Having accomplished the murder, the possibility of which has haunted him for quite a time (Rojack admits that living with his wife has always made him feel “murderous”), the deed leaves him sane for some time.

Most criticism of *An American Dream* seems to take for granted that Rojack had to murder his wife, whatever the reason, and the analyses of the book usually begin from the point following the crime. Solotaroff gives autobiographic reasons (not motivation, just an explanation of the transfer from Mailer’s life to the printed page) but his explanation leaves the reader very confused<sup>19</sup>. The year Mailer started writing *An American Dream* he married his fourth wife, Beverly Bentley, having divorced his third wife, Ledy Jane, in the same year. To Solotaroff, “Lady Jane... remarkably resembles Deborah Cauglin Mangaravidi Kelly; whom Rojack does not stab but strangles to death”<sup>20</sup>. Neither does he stab Lady Jane; he does stab his second wife, who would have hardly offered a model for Deborah Kelly. Mailer dominated his second wife totally:

...manipulated her until she was almost a living projection of his Hip dares. “...Norman finally got his Frankenstein monster”, several people have said of that union, and possibly, on that soul-sock and arctic November morn in 1960, he tried to do what Dr Frankenstein felt compelled to do out on his own icy verge: destroy his own creature<sup>21</sup>.

The situation is definitely reverse in the novel since Deborah is the emasculating figure, in both the spiritual and physical sense. Like Miss Ratched from Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, she is the forerunner of the masculine ladies of Berger’s *The Regiment of Women*. Rojack realizes how meaningless he is without her, how he needs her connections and he brings himself to hate her for this. A significant fact in the novel is that Rojack’s next beloved lady will be a night club singer.

Deborah is evidently a tabooed object; she evokes both love and hate;

...my hatered was a cage which wired my love... I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut (23).

Deborah’s death comes as the result of a fight. She is a big and strong woman, and if not for the half-bottle of rum she had drunk and the unexpectedness of the aggression, she might have won. During this fight she is behaving like an equal partner to Rojack; “One of her hands fluttered up to my shoulder and tapped it gently. Like a gladiator admitting

defeat" (35). In the past Rojack had often felt that, in the end, it could be Deborah who would murder him:

...some whisper of ominous calm, the heavy air one breathes in the hour before a hurricane, now came to rest between us. I was afraid of her. She was not incapable of murdering me. There are killers one is ready to welcome, I suppose. They offer a clean death and free passage to one's soul. The moon had spoken to me as just such an assassin. But Deborah promised bad burial (31).

Not once is Deborah referred to as the Devil's daughter. This is why death by her hand equals the submission of one's soul to the Devil, and this is what Rojack fears most.

As has been said before, the murder leaves Rojack sane for some time. He gathers all his energy to command courage, and the first step is to oppose the police. One thing should be made clear at this point. Rojack does not fear the consequences of his crime in terms of punishment, in terms of law. What he fears is that he may admit the crime out of cowardice to face life after he has escaped the law.

Solotaroff claims that Cherry Melanie is Rojack's Beatrice, the great promise of his life-after-the-crime. Rojack hopes he has fallen in love with her. He desperately wants to be in love, to be loved and to become a father. He cries out:

God... let me love that girl, and become a father, and try to be a good man, and do some decent work. Yes, God... do not make me go back and back to the charnel house of the moon (153).

Rojack will not be able to entertain these Square feelings for long. It is very significant at precisely which point Rojack feels murderous again and when death once more takes possession of him. Cherry has just confessed that the "Big Guy" who had secured her life for some time in the past was Oswald Barney Kelly, Deborah's father. Rojack's sensation is that of not belonging to himself:

...of being owned at my center by Deborah – that emotion which had come on me not five minutes before I killed her – now came back. I felt murder. It frightened me. The possibility that what I felt, when we made love, was a sensation which belonged to me alone left me murderous. For how did one distinguish love from the art of the Devil? (166).

Rojack's fight with Shago Martin, his deliberated trip to Harlem and the walk on the parapet in Waldorf Towers, – all these constitute the borderline along which the test of courage and Rojack's suicidal inclinations meet:

Just as a man in dying might have a moment when he passes into the mantle of some great cloud, and helpless, full of fear, knows nonetheless that he is in death already and so can wait for it, so my force ceased, and again I felt death come up like the shadow which is waiting as one slips past the first sentinels of consciousness into the islands of sleep. "All right", I thought, "I guess I am ready to die" (239).

But again, as when about 30 hours earlier he had considered the possibility of Deborah murdering him before he murdered her, a possibility which he found ultimately evil, now he will not accept the death Kelly wants to inflict upon him. If Deborah was the Devil's daughter, then Kelly is the Devil.

As has been demonstrated, Rojack's preoccupation with death is the illustration of "obsessional anxiety" which characterizes the agency in a novel where the allegorical

paradigm is emotive ambivalence.

#### ACTION

Two basic organizing principles have been quoted under this item: Battle and Progress. The Progress is frequently formulated in the form of Quest; a view held by some critics of *An American Dream*. The quest Solotaroff discusses in reference to this novel is the quest for authenticity<sup>22</sup>. To Newman, the Grail is caricatured to symbolize evil<sup>23</sup>. And, finally, Wagenheim sees the progress Rojack undergoes in terms of the journey from Square-land to Hip-land<sup>24</sup>; a point which requires further clarification. There has previously been provided a definition for the "existential hipster". The definition comes from Mailer's "The White Negro", and Wagenheim's discussion of *An American Dream* is largely based on the analogy to this essay. To Wagenheim, Stephen Rojack is "a Square who would be Hip"<sup>25</sup>. Wagenheim admits that Rojack never arrives at the Hip-land, and discovers the inadequacy of absolute alternatives: Hip or Square.

Putting aside all the Square characteristics which make up Rojack's own success story, Rojack's starting point to become a Hip is excellent. He is a mystic (the other extreme being: atheist), and his mysticism is the result of his despair in Kierkegaard's understanding of the notion:

First comes despair over the earthly,... then despair over oneself about the eternal. Then comes defiance, which really is despair by the aid of the eternal, the despairing abuse of the eternal in the self to the point of being despairingly determined to be oneself... The despair which is the passageway to faith is also by the aid of the eternal: by the aid of the eternal the self has courage to lose itself in order to gain itself<sup>26</sup>

Thus Rojack chooses to live with death in the "enormous present"<sup>27</sup>. Rojack is aware of his frustrations and knows how to abandon them. The end will justify his means, and "what made him feel good became therefore The Good"<sup>28</sup>. There is a variety of dreams that the Hip may cherish and his "feeling good" rests utterly on his ability to satisfy them. He may dream of an orgy and of love, or he may desire to murder and to create. However, to the Mailer hero love means:

Not love as the search of a mate, but love as the search of an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one that preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy – he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him<sup>29</sup>.

Rojack has been extremely successful as far as Hip-dreams are concerned: there is the murder of Deborah, orgy with Ruta, love and creation with Cherry. And yet the satisfaction is very superficial, and Rojack does not become a happy hipster. The reason for this is that the Battle being fought inside Rojack's consciousness remains unresolved until the end of the novel.

The principle of symmetry is clearly observed in *An American Dream*. The ambivalence is between life and death, and this particular ambivalence is, as will be shown, related to the concept of taboo. Death has been juxtaposed with life but, in fact, the two notions are the variations of one theme. Life is creation but Rojack will be brought to understand that creation is evil. Judging from Kelly's confessions in Waldorf Towers on the eve of his daughter's funeral, Deborah is the "fruit" of calculation, just as Kelly's

motives in marrying Leonora Mangaravidi Caughlins were to get a "circuit of connections" (224):

On a given night, in an absolute eczema of flesh, whipping myself up with the fancy I was giving a poke to some poor flunky, I drilled my salt into her, I took a dive deep down into a vow. I said in my mind; "Satan, if it takes your pitch-fork up my gut, let me blast a child into this bitch!" And something happened, no sulphur, no brimstone, but Leonora and I met way down there in some bog, some place awful, and I felt something take hold in her. Some sick breath came right back of her pious little mouth. "What the hell have you done?" she screamed at me, which was the only time Leonora ever swore. That was it. Deborah was conceived" (225).

As if consequently with this act, Deborah will be hated by her mother, loved perversely by her father and murdered by her husband. The theme of incest is evident in this novel and Solotaroff goes even further to suggest that Deborah's daughter, Deirdre was conceived by Kelly. This view does find indirect evidence in the book. Deirdre is an unhappy bat-like (her mother's simile) girl, and her account of an argument with Deborah is probably the evidence supporting Solotaroff's view. Deborah calls Deirdre a bat:

Oh, Steve, I said to her, "If I'm a bat, you're Dracula's wife", which was fantastic to say because I wasn't talking about you at all, it was Grandfather, and Mummy knew I meant him. Well, then she became very silent, and began to cry. I'd never seen her cry. She said our blood was all filled with vampires and saints (201).

Having murdered Deborah, Rojack needs sex to inspire him as to his next move. He goes to Ruta, his wife's maid, and performs two-way sexual intercourse ("regular" and perverted) with her. The Battle within Rojack is nowhere more visible than in this Manichean description of his activities:

So that was how I finally made love to her, a minute for one, a minute for the other, a raid on the Devil and a trip back to the Lord... (48).

The latter place is referred to as the "deserted warehouse... empty tomb". However, metaphors change as he goes on:

It was no graveyard now, no warehouse, no, more like a chapel now, a modest decent palace, but its walls were snug, its odor was green, there was a sweetness in the chapel, a muted reverential sweetness in those walls of stone (48).

There is, no doubt, some promise of re-birth in the "greenness" of this description. Yet, later Mailer continues Rojack's sensations: "That is what prison will be like for you..." (48). In spite of his inner voice which commands him to "Stay here!" he, "...could feel the Devil's meal beneath, its fires were lifting through the floor, and I waited for the warmth to reach inside" (49). When Rojack is to make (metaphorically, of course) the decision between life and death, he chooses death.

The elaborate apparatus evoking smells, sights, and moods is in conjunction with the thematic presentation. Deborah is presented as a big beautiful woman, "...a huge mass of black hair and striking green eyes sufficiently arrogant and upon occasion sufficiently amused to belong to a queen.... large Irish nose and a wide mouth that took many shapes, but her complexion was her claim to beauty, for her skin was creamwhite and her cheeks were colored with a fine rose, centuries of Irish mist had produced this



complexion" (25). Yet, the rose on her cheeks can extend to produce ugly mottling ("raw as a rash") of red on her throat when she gets infuriated. What is hideous in Rojack's account of Deborah is her smell, "A powerful odor of rot and musk and something much more violent came from her. It was like the scent of the carnivore in a zoo. This last odor was fearful – it had been the breath of burning rubber" (34).

Rojack's appreciation of Ruta is divided, just as the very act is. She is a girl possessing cosmopolitan habits in the art of love-making. With her Rojack has a dream "...of Berlin nightclubs, ...of the habits of the Germans, the French, the English... the Italians, the Spanish... All the tars and scents were blending into the one full smell which always makes you begin..." (46). All these, we are made to believe, result in Rojack's pleasant sensations. But then he catches another smell which "speaks of" "...rocks and grease and the sewer-damp of wet stones in poor European alleys..." (46), and almost as a reaction to this smell, Rojack ventures a ride "on the Devil". It is interesting to note in passing, after Kazin, that Rojack's sensation of "plugging a Nazi" is the evidence of how much of a war novelist Mailer has remained in this novel<sup>30</sup>.

With Rojack's third woman in the course of this novel the imagery of sight and smell is altered. Upon spotting Cherry Melanie when he comes down to face the police, he senses, "...something better about this girl, ...there was a silvery cunning in her features. And a quiet remote little air" (62). There is something magnetic in Rojack's attraction to Cherry. The imagery is not utterly positive from beginning to end. Cherry is a beautiful blonde but there may be, every now and then, the association of fatigue or exhaustion in connection with her. She may, at times, symbolize the ultimate good or innocence, or, at other times, her face may be marked with all too painful experience. The kaleidoscope of faces all belonging to Cherry Melanie in sleep is illustrative of the quoted mixture of childlike beauty and the fatigue of experience:

She was sound asleep. Masks of greed and cruelty came into focus in her face, became intense, broke apart from their own force. A soft child's face unfolded beneath. One was watching a film which gathered into a minute that metamorphosis of the weeks when the hard envelope of a bud cracks away, and the flower opens. Then, abruptly, the flower wilted. A new bud, hard, all horn at the point, came through the dying leaves, a vulgar egomania passed through the hardness of its spike, sensual features thrusting at me through sleep, pitiless calculation of a female with velvet to sell, she drew cupidity out of her limbs, whore's lore, her expression steeped into a cream of past thieveries, swallowed on the edge of curdling, turned sour, a sour mask now of disappointments, bitcheries, mean selfpity, yes, the mask was harsh again; it came to its crust, cracked, and in her sleep a sweet blonde girl of seventeen smiled back at me, skin almost luminous, a golden child, pure Georgia peach, a cheer leader, sweet fruit, national creation (123-124).

Undoubtedly, Rojack's relationship with Cherry will mean the end to his obsession with death. Rojack plans to draw strength for life out of a conventional (Squarelike) relationship with a woman. Rojack's failure is complete when the life that has just been conceived in Cherry, LIFE for Rojack, is destroyed when Cherry gets killed. And it is implied at the close of the novel that Rojack will derive his life-force from the hope of his re-union with Cherry.

It has been demonstrated that the organizing principle governing the development of action in *An American Dream* is symmetry resulting in the ambivalence between life and death which has been related to the concept of taboo because the two notions are the variations of one theme. Life as the ultimate desire equals, for Rojack, creation, but the protagonist has been brought to discover that creation is evil.

#### IMAGERY

Evidently Rojack's fascination with the moon is his *idée fixe*. There exists the same taboo quality in the two extremes symbolized by the moon as has been observed in the case of life-death extremes in the consciousness of Stephen Rojack. The first time the action is focused on the significance of the full moon is when she accompanies Rojack on his first date with Deborah. Rojack also kills the three Germans and looks into the eyes of the fourth under the full moon. The significance of what the moon means to Rojack is clarified when he has a talk with the moon on the balcony of his friend's apartment. Luna tells him that he has lived out his life and that he is dead with it. Rojack cries out:

"Let me be not all dead..." I assure you I was sick in a way I had never been sick before... This illness now, huddling in the deck chair, was an extinction. I could feel what was good in me going away, going away perhaps forever, rising after all to the moon, my courage, my wit, ambition and hope. Nothing but sickness and dung remained in the sack of my torso. And the moon looked back, baleful in her radiance now (20).

For some time the image of the moon will return each time the consciousness of Stephen Rojack is torn between the two extremes, the moon always being on the side of evil. The moon is on the side of evil for example, when Rojack becomes intimate with Ruta. He is referring to the habitat of the Devil:

...nothing had been there to receive me. But I had a vision immediately after 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 in the scene (49).

The image of the moon recurs the first time Rojack stays with Cherry at her apartment. The sexual act is referred to as the dance on "a moonlit floor". But at this point Rojack admits no love for Cherry yet, he is aware Cherry does not love him either, "...only the act was tender" (121). The next time the moon image reappears is when Rojack looks to Cherry, with the love that he is beginning to feel for her, as a kind of savior and prays to God not to make him "go back and back again to the charnel house of the moon" (153); the metaphor is such because it was the moon where Rojack metaphorically buried the good: courage, ambition and hope. Finally, the moon is referred to in terms of evil during Rojack's intimate conversation with Kelly in Waldorf Towers. Rojack's suspicion, stimulated by his telephone chat with Gigot, Deborah's friend, about the relationship between Deborah and Kelly, is supported by Kelly's semi-confession and this is what Rojack thinks Kelly is offering:

...bring Ruta forth, three of us pitch and tear and squat and lick, swill and grovel on that Lucchese bed, fuck until our eyes were out, bury the ghost of Deborah, by gorging on her corpse for this has been the bed, yet, this Lucchese had been the bed

where he went out with Deborah to the tar pits of the moon. Now, he had a call to bury her raw (237).

Yet, the metaphors as regards the moon soon shift. Rojack is walking on the parapet, he has completed one round, and, as if in opposition to Deborah's "green eye", metaphorically again, persuading Rojack to jump, the moon offers release, "Go around the parapet again" (242). He never does because Kelly's hand is waiting to help him die, and Rojack will not accept this offer.

Rojack's final encounter with the moon is on the last page of the book. He is having his imaginary conversation with Cherry from a telephone booth and the lyricism of this ending is evident:

And in the moonlight, a voice came back, a lovely voice, and said, "Why, hello, hon, I thought you'd never call. It's kind of cool right now, and the girls are swell. Marilyn says to say hello. We get along which is odd, you know, because girls don't swing. But toodle-oo, old baby-boy, and keep the dice for free, the moon is out and she's a mother to me". Hung up and walked on back to the city of jewels, and thought before I left the spires, might go out to call her one more time. But in the morning. I was something like sane again, and packed the car, and started on the long trip to Guatemala and Yucatan (252).

Imagery in Mailer's novel is based on the principle of "idée fixe" and for Rojack it is the moon. It has been shown that there exists the same tabooed quality, as noted in the previous sections, in Rojack's appreciation of the moon.

#### CAUSALITY

As has been said, after Fletcher, causality involves magical practices. The text of *An American Dream* abounds in evidence. Tony Tanner quotes Mailer's complaint that modern psychic life does not partake of the supernatural, and he insists that it is psychologically healthy that a modern man learns to live with primitive dreads<sup>31</sup>. Rojack admits twice:

Yes, I had come to believe in grace and the lack of it, in the long finger of God and the swish of the Devil, I had come to give my scientific apprehension to the reality of witches (38),

and,

Yes, I had come to believe in spirits and demons, in devils, warlocks, omens, wizards and fiends, in incubi and succubi... (40).

Deborah is the source of this knowledge and has a strong belief in those spirits which, she claims, is part of her Irish heritage. She has a strong Catholic belief in Grace, and she finds Lust the opposite. When Rojack first confesses his parentage, Deborah is disappointed; half-Jewish and the other half Protestant – "Nothing really", she agrees and adds, eight years later, "They know nothing about grace" (37). Deborah is convinced that Rojack is gradually depriving her of her grace. She regains her hold of it for some time when she is pregnant and loses it forever after her miscarriage. This must, indeed, be the turning point in her life, and she realizes the power evil has over her. She confesses:

"I know that I am more good and more evil than anyone alive, but which was I born with, and what came into me?" "You shift allegiance from day to day". "No, I just

pretend to." She smiled. "I'm evil if truth be told. But I despise it, truly I do. It's just that evil has power" (40).

Solotaroff observes that the coat of arms of the Caughlins Mangaravidi Kellys (a naked child against a shield) symbolizes the sacrifice of Deborah to satanic powers. Not once in the novel is she referred to as the Devil's daughter, and Rojack believes in Deborah's diabolic powers. Once, after an argument with her, Rojack goes out and has to pay three traffic tickets in fifteen minutes. This is when Rojack imagines Deborah, "waiting alone in bed, waving her fingers languidly to spark the obedient diabolisms and traffic officers at her command" (27). When Rojack visits Deborah on the night of the murder, he is convinced she has been in touch with the moon and has been well-informed as to his balcony proceedings.

Diabolism is the family trait. Considering Kelly's confessions once again, he begins his anatomy of the diabolic and the magic quoting himself in an old argument based on the paradox that he gives large donations to the Church although he believes the Church is the agent of the Devil. When he was once questioned why he had done so, Kelly simply answered; "Well, for all we know, I am a solicitor for the Devil". He then proceeds to inform Rojack that the millions he has made were acquired with the help of magic. Consuelo Carruthers von Zegraide Trelawne, known to friends as Bess, was, in Kelly's words, "The queen of spooks" (227). She was distantly related to Leonora, Kelly's wife, and became Kelly's mistress. Kelly insists that she passed on him part of her diabolic powers:

My nose for the market turned infallible. Lying in bed I could feel the potential of a given stock as much as if I were bathing in the thought of a thousand key investors... And there were other spookeries. One time a bugger started to give me a hard time... As he was walking away, I said to myself, "Drop, you bugger," and he had epilepsy right at my door... (228).

Rojack becomes diabolically inspired himself following Kelly's confession. When he has made one round on the parapet, an inner voice tells him he must repeat the whole trip and that if he does not, Cherry will die. There has been too much strain on Rojack: Kelly tries to push him with Shago's umbrella, the wind makes it difficult for him to keep balance (after all, the point is to face death narrowly but not to die) and Rojack is utterly exhausted with the 32-hour-long dance with sex and crime and booze. And we are indeed tempted to believe that the moment Rojack jumps back on the terrace is the moment Cherry gets her last blow in the Village.

To recapitulate, causality involves magical practices, and for the protagonist of Mailer's novel it is the Kellys: father and daughter, who are the source of the knowledge of magic.

#### THEME

The attempt so far has been to explore the primary meaning of this dream-like (or nightmarish) action of *An American Dream*<sup>32</sup>. In order to approach the secondary meaning it is necessary to turn to the title of the novel for the key. The title is an equally tabooed aspect of this book.

Aldridge responds to Mailer's novel with the assumption that it is, "a burlesque

treatment of the obscene version of the American Dream that possesses the unconscious mind of America at the present time..."<sup>33</sup>. This interpretation does not account for the aspects of the genuine version of the American Dream that are: present in Mailer's novel. Solotaroff recognizes both:

We are not able to postulate the two dreams locked in a literal death struggle deep in the American psyche. One of them is indeed the Dream of Being, of preserving our purchase on eternity through the growth gained by self-reliance, courage, and what might be called creative discipline... The other vision is the Dream of Power, that pact with the Devil which is struck when we exchange reliance upon the self for reliance upon other things and other people. Since the goals of this dream are usually some combination of money, recognition, or power over others – the rewards which society has to offer – we can say that the effects of the Dream of Powers are more likely to be publicly evident than those of the Dream of Being...<sup>34</sup>.

**An American Dream** can be approached on three levels. The first level is the reportage where the concentration is in the way Mailer introduces his protagonist. He does this as a gossip columnist would do. Rojack is associated with "whole-power phenomenon" and "beautiful people phenomenon": success, handsomeness, political power, social prestige, etc. Then Mailer makes obvious how these two phenomena relate to the American Happening syndrome and thus the second level is the notion of the "American Dream". What, allegedly, do Americans dream about? What are the characteristics of a full-fledged American dream? Success is one of them; the belief that hard work will be rewarded and that there is the chance of being blessed by a good fairy turned a mighty protector. The pragmatic notion of being good (a parody of an Arthurian legend) is another characteristic; the belief that, if you are good enough, you can beat everything and end up with a reward. Then there is the dream of perfect crime. The Freudian belief that there is somebody whom you want to get rid of is an element of this dream. The crime must be perfect: little violence, no punishment. And money which is the prime element of the dream of success is another characteristic; the dream of breaking the bank at Monte Carlo or Las Vegas. Mailer possesses Dostoevsky's belief that most important is being able to recognize the one moment when the fortune has been won. And, last of all, Mailer makes use of Huck Finn's myth in his novel. Rojack, like Huck, lights up for new territories at the end of the novel and, like Huck, is involved in the struggle between what is organized and formal (society) and the pastoral (the individual: Huck, Rojack).

Finally, there is the third level on which **An American Dream** may be approached and this is the mystic level in the "American Dream", the metaphor. William James tells us that what America needs is a moral equivalent of war; an idea which is developed in Mailer's novel. War gives an opportunity to test a hero. One should not accept life as automatic and inevitable, Mailer says; it must be tested. In order to test life one must bring oneself to the point of death. As has been depicted, this affirmation was very essential to Rojack throughout the whole action of the novel.

Rojack is taking arms against his obsession, against his weaknesses. He admits his fear of Negroes which accounts for his sporadic trips to Harlem and his opposing

Shago Martin. Although the wasteland is the metaphor which occasionally inspires Mailer's *An American Dream*, Rojack, as Sergius O'Shaughnessy, Hoffman observes, stands at the opposite pole from T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock<sup>35</sup>. And although in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer expresses his belief in, "...mad middle-class children with their lobotomies from sin, their nihilistic embezzlement of all middle-class moral funds, their innocence, their lust for apocalypse, their unbelievable indifference to waste: twenty generations of buried hopes perhaps engraved in their chromosomes, and now conceivably burning like faggots in the secret inquisitional fires of LSD"<sup>36</sup>, the doctrine, which can be drawn from Mailer's story of the man who rode on a high wave of paranoia into the very bottom of depravity, is positive<sup>37</sup>.

There has been much unfavorable criticism of *An American Dream*, only some of which can be agreed with. Aldridge calls *An American Dream*, "an unpardonably ugly book" by conventional standards and "a profoundly silly book" in terms of its plot<sup>38</sup>. However, as Aldridge also recognizes, this book should not be approached in a literal way and Rojack should not be identified with Every American (such an interpretation would be offensive indeed). As Waldemeir recognizes, Mailer, like many other contemporary American novelists, does not "drag" us into the very bottom of "degradation, enervation, and defeat" just for the sake of "dragging" us or leaving us there. The doctrine which Waldemeir upholds generally, and which holds for *An American Dream* as well is worth quoting in full:

Simply stated it is the belief that somewhere, somehow, there exists a transcendent set of values which the individual can discover and achieve, if he suffers long and hard enough, and is very lucky in his search for them ... The values are at once personal and interal, universal and transcendent. The search begins and ends with the individual; it is he alone who must beat his way toward order, hoping only that he will know it when he finds it<sup>39</sup>.

The aim of this paper has been to discuss the applicability of the compulsive syndrome to symbolic action. This problem has been exemplified by Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*. The analysis has been carried out under the five working headings: agency, action, imagery, causality and theme.

By way of recapitulation, I will present the following characteristics of the emotive ambivalence in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*:

1. Agency as "obsessional anxiety" has been discussed in reference with Stephen Rojack's obsession with death of two kinds: death by murder and suicidal death.
2. The principle of symmetry governing the action of *An American Dream* has been shown to result in the ambivalence of life and death. This ambivalence has been related to the concept of taboo because the two notions are the variations of one theme.
3. Imagery based on the principle of "idée fixe" is shaped around Rojack's fascination with the moon.
4. Causality involving magical practices depends on the characterization of two figures, the Kellys: father and daughter, because they are the source of the knowledge of magic.

5. It has been observed that the theme of *An American Dream* has been an equally tabooed aspect of the novel, and in order to comprehend it clearly the title of the novel has been interpreted through the discussion of the ambivalence of the meaning of the "American Dream".

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory. The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970, pp. 151–160, for the discussion of the two fundamental patterns of allegorical writing: Progress and Battle. I have dealt with these two allegorical paradigms in reference to contemporary American novel in my doctoral dissertation: *The Dimensions of Allegory in the American Fable of the 1960's*, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, 1979.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- <sup>3</sup> Bronisław Malinowski, *Życie seksualne dzikich*, Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1957, p. 396.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Translations are my own.
- <sup>5</sup> Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 225
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279–303
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 296–297
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301
- <sup>15</sup> Norman Mailer, *An American Dream*, New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965, p. 9. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- <sup>16</sup> Norman Mailer, "The White Negro", in *American Literature Survey*, ed. by M. R. Stern and S. L. Gross, New York: The Viking Press Inc., 1975, p. 355
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Solotaroff, *Down Mailer's Way*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974, p.
- <sup>18</sup> Cit. after John W. Aldridge, *Time to Murder and Create. The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*, New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966, p. 161
- <sup>19</sup> Solotaroff, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–178
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127–128
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127
- <sup>23</sup> Paul B. Newman, "Mailer: The Jew as Existentialist", *North American Review* 2, 1965, pp. 48–55
- <sup>24</sup> Allan J. Wagenheim, "Square's Progress: An American Dream", *Critique* 10, 1967, pp. 45–69
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46
- <sup>26</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968, p. 201
- <sup>27</sup> Mailer, *op.cit.*, p. 316
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323
- <sup>30</sup> Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973, p. 155
- <sup>31</sup> Tony Tanner, "On Norman Mailer", *Partisan Review* 34, pp. 465–471
- <sup>32</sup> I am referring here to one of the two levels of meaning, the one that Bloom designates as "primary, or as a literal and figurative surface meaning". The other meaning, to Bloom, is "secondary, or ... a meaning of abstract significance; that is, one with penetrating moralistic or didactic intention. It should further be noted that the connotations of the secondary meaning depend for clarity and interpretation upon the

primary meaning". For this distinction cf. Edward Bloom, "The Allegorical Principle", *Journal of English Literary History* 18, 1951, p. 164

<sup>33</sup> Aldridge, op. cit., p. 161

<sup>34</sup> Solotaroff, op. cit., p. 141

<sup>35</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, "Norman Mailer and the Revolt of the Ego: Some Observations on Recent American Literature", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 1, 1960, p. 12

<sup>36</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, New York: New American Library, 1968, p. 47

<sup>37</sup> I am using the term "doctrine" after Elder Olson. It is the principle upon which contemporary allegorical fiction is organized. Olson describes it as follows:

The allegorical incident happens, not because it is necessary in the light of other events, but because a certain doctrinal subject must have a certain doctrinal predicate; its order in the action is determined not by the action as action, but by the action as doctrine.

For this cf. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 307

<sup>38</sup> Aldridge, op. cit., p. 161

<sup>39</sup> Joseph J. Waldemeir, "Quests without Faith" in *Recent American Fiction. Some Critical Views*, ed. by J. J. Waldemeir, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963, pp. 55-56

## AMBIWALENCJA EMOTYWNA W AMERICAN DREAM MAILER'A

### Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia powieść znanego pisarza amerykańskiego Normana Mailera *An American Dream* z punktu widzenia występującej w niej alegorii. Powieść Mailera zbudowana jest według alegorycznego wzoru "walki" (Battle) a jej tematyka zawiera "ambiwalencję emocjonalną" oraz koncepcję "tabu".

Ambiwalencja emocjonalna odniesiona została do psychoanalizy, a ściślej do tzw. "compulsive syndrome" i została prześledzona w powieści Mailera w pięciu aspektach: charakterystyce postaci, fabule, obrazowaniu, przyczynowości i temacie. Zwrócono uwagę na koncepcję "tabu" zawartą zarówno w charakterystyce protagonisty przejawiającą się w jego fascynacji śmiercią, która wywołuje u Rojacksa z jednej strony uczucie strachu, z drugiej pragnienia, jak i w fabule, co się przejawia osiągnięciem symetrii poprzez ambiwalencję życia i śmierci jako wariantów jednego tematu. Koncepcja "tabu" zawarta jest też w obrazowaniu tej powieści i przejawia się w obsesyjnym zafascynowaniu księżycem (idea fixe Rojacksa), który jest obiektem ambiwalentnym, bowiem towarzyszy protagoniście zarówno w jego wędrówkach po życie jak i po śmierć.