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Matt Pieknik, "Crude Thoughts & Fierce Forces: Matthew Barney's 'River of Fundament,'" *The American Reader*, April 22, 2014.

CRITICISM

Crude Thoughts & Fierce Forces: Matthew Barney's "River of Fundament"

By MATT PIEKNIK



Crude thoughts and fierce forces are my state.

—Norman Mailer, *Ancient Evenings*

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In his influential work *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler argued that American literature is incapable of dealing with sexuality, and is pathologically obsessed with death. Fiedler was concerned with foundational works of the so-called canon—Poe, Twain, Whitman—wherein he thought he located deeply repressed anxieties over women and sex, latently expressed in male homosocial adventures that occurred far from the domestic sphere or the proximity of women. Think of Huck Finn drifting down the Mississippi with Jim, or the crew of the Pequod ecstatically crushing globules of sperm oil in *Moby-Dick*. The story of American literature, in Fiedler's reading, is the story of castration anxiety. Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* represents a radical desublimation of the obsession with sex and death; in its unflinching presentation of the twin poles of mortality, what was previously obscene has shifted to center stage, to the stomach's chagrin.

Put crudely, Matthew Barney's new film is a titanic meditation on what it's like to be fucked. *River of Fundament* is a surly, anguished work about the failures of sex, as well as being doomed to death. And considered in formal and aesthetic terms, it is probably the artist's best work. It is also a mess.

In its first moments, Barney emerges from a stream of excrement that flows beneath Norman Mailer's apartment. Vested as the Entered Apprentice from *Cremaster 3* (the final film in Barney's five-part series, from 2002), the artist wanders through a meticulous reconstruction of the late writer's Brooklyn brownstone, and then into Mailer's bathroom, where he discovers a turd floating in the toilet. Without flinching, Barney picks it up and solemnly wraps it in gold leaf, which summons the spirit of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh, Usermare. Barney kneels before him and ceremoniously regards his gold-leaf-wrapped penis, before offering himself up to be sodomized by the spirit. Soon, as the discordant score swells, mercury semen dribbles onto the porcelain tiles and begins to pool. Barely ten minutes of the nearly six hour film have elapsed, but the image of Barney being inseminated by the dead firmly announces *Fundament's* unwavering focus on the entwinement of sex and death.

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This entwinement isn't news, precisely, though its graphic representation here is certainly remarkable, and sometimes unparalleled. Even adventurous connoisseurs of art film and pornography are likely to observe something unprecedented in *River of Fundament*, such as a woman mounting a car engine in a vain attempt to absorb a puddle of seminal mercury (one of several feats that not only recall but also one-up Bataille). And delivering on the vigorous excremental promise of its title, there has perhaps never been a major feature film so committed to coprophilia. Despite its unblinking glare at mortality and putrescence, however, the film is more striking for its transparent anxiety over sexuality, and the bluntly misogynist manner in which *Fundament* reproduces a fantasy of immortality conceived as a homosocial mythopoetic quest.

Fundament is loosely adapted from Mailer's most critically maligned novel, *Ancient Evenings*, a 700-page bid for immortality over which the author labored for more than a decade. At the time of its publication, he admitted to "working with the vanity that this was the nearest [he] was ever going to come to writing a great book." Its protagonist is Menenhetet, a magician, trickster, and servant to Ramses II (Usermare), who pursues a lengthy quest (roughly 200 years) and ultimately, an fruitful one, to achieve immortality via the magical act of fathering himself. While in the act of copulation, *Evenings* suggests, Menenhetet is able "to ride his heart right over the last ridge and breathe his last thought as he passed into the womb of the woman and thereby could begin a new life, a true continuation of himself; his body died, but not the memory of his life." The novel is notoriously scatological; characters constantly consume excrement and semen, and indulge not only in rampant anal sex but a range of other acts that would raise Sade's eyebrows. Mailer claimed that *Ancient Evenings* was his attempt to "create a new psychology, a new consciousness," since "the ancient Egyptians had a psychology that existed long before Freud." At this, *Ancient Evenings* often brilliantly succeeds, convincingly imagining not only an "ancient psychology," but sex before the modern invention of sexuality. Sexual acts, in Mailer's Egypt, do not coalesce into identities, nor are they occasions for experiencing shame.

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The film recasts Mailer himself as the story's central character, and his journey assumes a similar shape: like Menenhetet, he proceeds through three different reincarnations (portrayed by Mailer's actual son, John Buffalo Mailer, by avant-garde jazz drummer Milford Graves, and by Chief Dave Beautiful Bald Eagle); like Menenhetet, he thrice impregnates his granddaughter; and like Menenhetet, he undertakes a journey through the Land of the Dead on the path to reincarnation, which culminates in a swim across the river of shit that functions as the soul's final obstacle to reincarnation. These happenings unfold through two, alternating story lines: a wake and quasi-walpurgisnacht that takes place in Mailer's apartment, and a series of scenes filmed in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, that abstractly retell the myth of Osiris and Isis via triplicate reincarnations of an automobile, a story that Barney claims also represents the rise and fall of the American auto industry.

Though *Ancient Evenings* reigns as its primary source, *River of Fundament* is actually a sort of double-adaptation; in a recent interview with *The Paris Review*, Barney admits to having been influenced by Harold Bloom's review of the novel, which is decidedly dissenting in its praise for Mailer's uncompromising elaboration of his "private gnosticism." Bloom reads *Ancient Evenings* through his own theory of poetic influence, and persuasively suggests that the novel is an autobiographical work that poses Mailer, as Menenhetet, against his literary father Hemingway, as Usermare.

Mailer clearly idolized Papa Bear, modeling his lean writing style and hypermasculine persona on his literary pater, and self-consciously considered himself the heir of Hemingway's legacy. According to Bloom, Mailer hoped that *Ancient Evenings* would be his Great American Novel that would finally solidify his place within the pantheon of Great American Writers. But for Bloom, influence, while unavoidable, is a loser's game: the influence of one's predecessors both spurs the creative impulse and is a hindrance to it, for without sufficient "strength" it results in derivative work, lacking the originality necessary for posterity. Menenhetet's attempts at the immortality possessed by his Pharaoh, Usermare, are doomed from the outset—not only because he reveres him, but also because he has been sodomized by the king, an act that, according to the novel's terms, forecloses the possibility of true authority and everlasting life. Implicit in Bloom's reading is that Mailer's extraordinary reverence for *his* Pharaoh, Hemingway, is the obstacle that most threatens Mailer's own bid for posterity.

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Barney weaves Bloom's theory of influence into the fabric of *Fundament*. The critic's own macho theorization of "strong" versus "weak" poets duking it out for immortality is echoed in an anguished monologue by Paul Giamatti, who portrays the Pharaoh Ptah-nem-hotep, as he confesses to Norman I (John Buffalo Mailer, who is as certifiably bullish as his name suggests) his fears that he is a weak Pharaoh. More explicitly, Barney deploys an oddly Lynchian framing device. The film's very first images are of a bucolic wilderness and a rustic cabin, and a shotgun being loaded and fired by an unidentified individual. Five and a half hours later, the film finally returns to that cabin in wilderness, and reveals that it is full of photographs and paintings of Hemingway; it is the dream version of Papa's cabin in Ketchum, Idaho, where he committed suicide. Much belatedly, the viewer realizes that Barney has perhaps attempted a vitalist insinuation: that the soul of Hemingway, or that of the primordial father as such, had taken up residence in Mailer. And then, another turn of the screw: that *vis a vis* the mercurial insemination that opens *River of Fundament*, Barney, the megastar daddy of the contemporary art world, has adopted a spiritual father, and become a son to Norman Mailer.

Mailer never felt that *Ancient Evenings* was understood, or that it received the attention he felt it deserved, and one suspects that encouraging Barney to adapt it into a film was in part a self-interested effort to see his work reconsidered. It is a task that Barney executes with captivating virtuosity, and the ennobling and redeeming of Norman Mailer's novel, not to mention his life, are no doubt part of the work that *River of Fundament* sets out to accomplish. This, without particular subtlety: the fictionalized wake is the occasion for the gathered minds to discuss Mailer's legacy, both on and off the page. Multiple characters, led by Elaine Stritch, who serves as his eulogist, remark that "we" weren't ready for *Ancient Evenings* when it first appeared. "Now we are. Now we are," Stritch says, and intones from *Evenings*, a sort of holy book within the film.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom describes a phenomenon he terms *apophrades*, from the Greek term for the return of the dead to the houses of the living:

The later poet... already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to [his] precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship.... But the poem is now *beld* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work.

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To view *River of Fundament* in light of Barney's ongoing preoccupation with Mailer (*Cremaster 2*, in which the late author appeared, is inspired by Mailer's novel *The Executioner's Song*) is to notice a phenomenon not unlike *apophrades*. Barney, whose densely self-referential creations at their limit suggest a solitude bordering on solipsism, has created the work that not only channels Mailer's voice and conjures his ghost, but through his singular vision, has made the story of *Ancient Evenings* appear uncannily as the work of Matthew Barney, fitting as seamlessly as it does with his previous works. It also conjures the impossible idea that makes sense only within the shared world of Barney and Mailer: that the same spirit that passed between Hemingway and Mailer inhabits Barney. *River of Fundament* is often quite literally the occurrence of the artist evoking the writer so strongly that the former appears to be speaking through the latter. As a result, Mailer's novel, previously dead and buried, is reincarnated in a form far superior to the original, and now, as *River of Fundament*, possesses a new claim to posterity that previously eluded the novel.

If the obsession with paternity, vitality, and immortality seems, well, extravagantly phallic, we are of course talking about Matthew Barney, whose best-known work, *The Cremaster Cycle*, is named for the muscle by which the testes descend in the process of sexual differentiation. And the real Norman Mailer was a dude's dude, a self-declared enemy of the women's liberation movement and like Hemingway, a connoisseur (to borrow John Sutherland's phrasing) of "boxing, booze, and broads." Together, their pairing seems like a match made via secret handshake behind the closed doors of a "No Girls Allowed" club, or over the airpots of coffee at Iron John Meetup (the men's movement, a response to second-wave feminism, was coming into its own during the 70s and early 80s; *Ancient Evenings* appeared in 1983).

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Here's where *River of Fundament* feels subject to Fiedler's diagnosis: the film and its literary antecedent are both embarrassingly anxious about sexuality and femininity. *Fundament* is a fantasy about how men can take undertake asexual reproduction that will allow them to evade castration, in the form of death, and in the form of feminine *jouissance*. And insofar as women have any roles in Barney and Mailer's world, they are uncomfortably limited: as deceivers and tricksters (*Evenings'* Menenhetet is doomed by his wife's trickery), as mere wombs deprived even of a creative role in reproduction (for Mailer/Meni is self-creating and perpetuating), and occasionally reduced to singing about how much they enjoy being the sexual objects of men (note especially Isis' aria about the joy of being filled with Osiris' cum, and Maggie Gyllenhaal as Hathferti, privileged to be the chosen woman who will help Norman be reborn, ecstatically singing "fuck yes!" before her horrified, dead father, Usermare). In other words, though the film appears to be a repudiation of Fiedler's argument, brutally depicting copulation and putrescence as a robust declaration of fearlessness before either sex or death, what it actually presents is a hilariously puerile misunderstanding of how either actually works. In both cases, *Fundament* presumes that everyone enjoys the prospect of shit getting everywhere, much like the child who wrongly presumes that others enjoys their bodily processes as much as they do.

Ultimately, what makes *River of Fundament* offensive isn't the graphic sex, or nausea-inducing streams of excrement. The film's fascination with the aesthetics of putrescence, decay, and the limits of the body are surprisingly mesmerizing, and at times, overpowering. And I haven't even mentioned Jonathan Bepler's utterly excellent atonal score, performed with breathtaking virtuosity especially by the avant-garde vocalist Joan La Barbara. It is the film's ridiculously retrograde ideas about sexuality and women, which already felt out of place in 1983, and certainly do not deserve the contemporary reconsideration that Barney lends them. Barney has before been figured as the art-world counterpart to the commercial film director James Cameron, for the opulent, macho spectacles of capital that he creates. *River of Fundament* doesn't contradict this characterization, but rather, fleshes it out. Cameron's film *Avatar* was an asinine and ideologically reprehensible film, but was forgiven these faults because of its eye-popping 3D spectacle and technical virtuosity. Likewise, *River of Fundament*, despite its scatological devotions, is an undeniably beautiful film and a formidable work of art, and for this it will be praised and parsed, while its ideologically putrid core is forgiven.