

## The Triumph of Individuality in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*

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The American novel since the Second World War is a fiction that moulded itself to postatomic ideas and responses and reached out to become something new. It is more than a body of work in chronological sequence. This is an era of American Modernism characterized by abstract expression in all the art form. In all its diversity, postwar novel has striven to defamiliarise the familiar, to make the reader reinvent the world. Reading of American fiction is, also, a reading of the culture from which the materials of the novels and the themes that the writers chose were derived. "By culture", Frederick R. Karl says, "I mean not only literature or the arts, but the social, political and economic institution that help define a society" (Foreword XII). The present day writers have to respond to so many unyielding, rapidly altering and irresolvable conflicts. Yet, he boldly pursues the paradoxes of the American experiences, trying to reconcile the irresolvable, unwilling to be defeated by the presence of so much diversity.

Norman Mailer was the American heronovelist who saves the meaning of America by seeing through the evil of technology, corporate and military power. In his novels he challenges those who would turn her into a "dowager" and exploits the moral psychology which challenges the Americans.

This paper is an attempt to explain how the individuality of characters' triumphs over the external pressure. Mailer explores the conflict between the individual will and established power in *The Naked and the Dead*, which focuses on a fourteen men infantry platoon that leads the invasions of a Japaneseheld island in the Philippines during World War II. Writing in an unsentimental narrative voice, Mailer discourages sympathy for any one character, focusing ambiguously on a likable liberal commander who is violently betrayed by an immoral and ambitious sergeant. As in most great realistic novels, themes and meanings in *The Naked and the Dead* arise out of clear characterization and structural techniques. In assessing General Cummings' claim that history can be determined by the biography of great men such as himself who will bend armies to their will, readers must have recourse to the author's careful delineation of human character in the passages relating the lives of the platoon members, where the shaping of personality is as much a matter of circumstances and the unforeseen timing of events as it is of deliberate calculation.

*The Naked and the Dead* has come to take up the form of an epic on the American way of life. This novel in four parts describes the capture of a small island in the South Pacific from the Japanese during World War II. The plot of the novel is constructed around an atmosphere of World War II. The locale of the novel is Anopopei, a Japanese-held island in the Pacific.

The novel concentrates on the invasion of Anopopei as a way of exploring the social and political history of the United States, which has been thrown into intense relief by the country's participation in World War II. The novel is a relief map that depicts the contour lines between ethnic group and the different shadings of opinion among soldiers from various parts of the nation. Class conflicts and the gap between officers and enlisted men are explored. Each principal character is depicted in detail and Mailer analyzes them individually rather than a collective fighting force.

The writer gives a faithful record of his characters' dialects that provides elaborate physical and geological data (including a map of Anopopei) and envisages in an intricate bifurcated narrative which scrutinizes both the strategy and the actual fighting of the war. As a result, the reader is able to view the war on several levels in nearly simultaneous fashion without even losing track of either its characters or its themes. In the midst of the war front narrative, the novel flashes back to the characters' pasts to trace the path that have led them to the war. The characters' past are traced in the midst of invasion plans and the maneuvers of Sergeant Croft's platoon. At the same time, General Cummings and his subordinate, Lieutenant Hearn, argue about the causes of war, the nature of history and of the postwar world. By devising such a complex narrative technique, he avoids too much detail or excessive philosophizing and is successful in avoiding these problems by maintaining suspense by shifting rapidly between character and situations, never quite finishes each scene so that the reader wants to know more, and this keeps his novel moving forward on all fronts.

Mailer's central subject is the relationship between the individual will and a world that attempts to overwhelm and extinguish it. Intimately connected with this spiritual warfare is the subject of power, particularly political power and the individual's need to resist the encroaching forces of totalitarianism. Mailer's early fiction clearly warns that modern man is in danger of losing his dignity, his freedom, and his sense of self before the enormous power of politics and society. These concerns are apparent in this novel. *The Naked and the Dead* elaborates this shocking perception of the individual who exemplifies and perpetuates what is wrong with the society he inhabits. In this novel, Mailer equates the army with the society and thereby explores the fragmented nature of that society, which has militated against social development, revolutionary or otherwise. In

so doing, Mailer demonstrates his own loss of faith in the individual's ability to impose himself relatively, perhaps redemptive on the oppressive condition of the postwar world. As Frank D. Connell remarks:

Mailer gives us a figure who is distinctively the intellectual of the PostWorld War II era, whom the chaos, the sundering explosion, which destroys memory and tradition, is primal, the first fact of his experience. His quest for reunification, then, for a saving image of community, will be a quest performed on a shifting, treacherous landscapewhich is the landscape of the mind grown aware of the fictiveness of its own deepest, most immediate impulses and beliefs. If all historyand no historybelongs to him, this is to say that history itself has become style, but style in a moral and political vacuum. (pp.82)

The use of the "Time Machine" episodes delineates the lives of the men. The subtle delineation equates the structure of society with the army. America is thus portrayed as a place of social privilege and racial discrimination which is exploitive and destructive as the military organization that represents it. Mailer presents the individual as either submitting to these repressive forces or attempting to maintain some spiritual independence. The fates of Hearn and to some degree, Red Valsen a steinbeckian hobo and labourer, who struggles to preserve his private vision, indicate that defiance is fruitless. Both men are destroyed, while Cummings and Croft, in their ruthless drive to power, prevail and triumph. Mailer recounts his tale in a tone of complete objectivity, his authorial voice remaining detached and disinterested. Considering the moral dimensions of history, this lack of anger or indignation in disorienting, and the effect is strengthened by Mailer's unsympathetic treatment of Hearn and the vibrant images of Cummings and Croft, who seem to fascinate him. Clearly Cummings' egoism repels Mailer but it also attracts him, for in this island he perceives the individualistic impulse to reshape and recreate an environment and in so doing, to form a new reality. Cummings thus possesses a kind of romantic aura as a dream like projection of the active response to life which Mailer advocates in principle, if not in Cummings' specific terms. Croft, too, seeks channels in which he could funnel his powerful drives. Both men see evil force and their apprehension of it provides them energy and a decisive manner that the weaker, idealistic characters lack. Mailer doesn't exalt Cummings and Croft at the expense of Hearn. Eventually while climbing up the Mount Anaka he is left with a feeling of despair that, Croft kept looking at the mountain. Croft kept looking with a feeling of despair that at the mountain, he had lost it, had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself, of himself and much more, of life, everything. At another point, Mailer sums up that Croft hated weakness and he loved practically nothing. There was a crude unformed vision in his soul but he was rarely

conscious of it. This man has energy but not form. The liberal philosophy of a Hearn is rejected as insufficient to the challenges of modern history. He lacks the energy and daring of Croft and Cummings. Concluding the novel with Major Dalleson, a mediocre bureaucrat, enjoying the monotony of office details, Mailer instead pulls back from taking a definite position on the struggle he has chronicled. He has not yet imagined a hero with whose violence he can unabashedly identify himself.

The real war scenes in this gigantic war novel, one feels, is not the conflict of Japanese and American troops on a trivial island, but the perennial warfare of political and personal styles of identity, of dullness with vitality, of prejudice with vision, of the existentially naked with the imaginatively dead. The war, indeed, both as historical, political fact and as metaphor, is seen throughout the novel primarily as a precipitating image for his underlying critical conflict.

For Mailer, the human equation is more unyieldingly moralistic. In *The Naked and the Dead* there is something almost medieval in the ferocity with which his characters, at their crucial moments of confrontation, are judged, both by themselves and by their creator, and frozen, at the moment of judgment into the postures of their heroism or cowardice. Mailer's characters are all trapped within a testing and judging present, the present of the "naked moment" which will admit the possibility of the past only as a preparation for it and the possibility of a future only as the infinite repetition of its hieratic form. In *The Naked and the Dead* this highly individual quality of Mailer's world achieves its most perfectly articulated expression: a wedding of vision and story, form and substance.

*The Naked and the Dead* is a series of individual existential confrontations on the part of the members of the invading army. On another, equally important level the book is a magisterially complete and convincing picture of men living and acting in the mass. It is a story of military invasion which is unequalled, in recent memory, in its power to convey the impression of a truly large scale movement of human beings. The very shape of Anopopei, in this respect is one of the most brilliant and paradoxically "unrealistic" inventions of the novel. The island is shaped to fit a text book case of invasion tactics, designed by the author to clarify perfectly the classical military problems of entering hostile territory, supplying one's forces of extensive maneuvers against an entrenched enemy, and finally breaking down the enemy's resistance and occupying the territory.

On the existential level of personal confrontation the book is a series of instants of revelatory nakedness, on the political level it is the large scale "plot" of the invasion and occupation of the schematic island of Anopopei. On both levels, the situation of war serves primarily to refine

and clarify, through panic and urgency, the underlying qualities of everyday, peacetime personality and politics. The insight that civilized life, whatever its ordinary daylight assurances be always to the enlightened imagination, involved in a state of total war between the visionary naked and the visionary dead.

In *The Naked and the Dead* itself, Mailer rises to something like an explicit awareness of his Homeric inversion in the curious sections entitled "The Time Machine". For each of the major characters, there is a time machine segment, usually coming directly before or directly after his existential moment of nakedness. This is an impressionistic; sometimes streamofconsciousness tableau of the character's peacetime life, his background, his passions, and his signal failure and signal triumphs. Frank. D. McConnell observes:

Formally, the time machine device is a rather close borrowing from the "Camera Eye" segments of John Dos Passos's great trilogy of World War I and its aftermath, USA. But the device is also distinctively "Maileresque", it serves again in the medieval fashion of allegorizing, to deepen and consolidate the implications of what a character discovers about him or fails to discover in his moment of nakedness. The political satire of Dos Passos's camera eye, that is, overlaid and transformed by Mailer's own obsession with the radically personal, passionate bases of politics. (pp. 71)

Mailer's effort in *The Naked and the Dead* is to fabricate a myth of the war which will include at once the physical, historical details of the pacific campaign, the political and economic origins and consequences of that war and the private, phenomenological, and sometimes mistrial discoveries which that eternal warfare can generate. As an attempt to unify a public with a private vision of America, the timemachine inter chapters are used.

In *The Naked and the Dead*, war is the most schematic, allegorical of human activities. This is strikingly borne out in the ranks assigned to the three men who most explicitly define the spiritual metaphysical limits of the novel's vision. Cummings, the general is in absolute control of the invasion of Anopopei, and therefore in control of the lives of everyone else in the book. He is the first and perhaps the most disturbing of those self conscious, naturally intelligent, horrifyingly soulless capitalists and controllers who are the permanent features of the Mailer landscape. Cummings is an evil man, and his evil consists, more than in anything else, in the dance of power and death, all the while knowing it to be a crime against the very sources of the human spirit.

At the bleak ending of the novel, it becomes a time machine not into the past, but opening into the future, post war life of the American psyche. In both the trivial and profound ways, the theme of individuality

triumphs in *The Naked and the Dead*. What is most striking is the way the variety of human nature is affirmed. War is unpredictable and the shape of history (America's future) cannot be as easily forecast as Cummings supposes. Yet the novel does not simply discredit him as a philosopher of history, for the weaknesses of characters such as Hearn suggest how much damage fascist ideas have done to a country that is not prepared to resist authoritarianism, militarily and intellectually.

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