

THE WISE BLOOD
OF NORMAN MAILER:
AN INTERPRETATION AND DEFENSE
OF *WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?*

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AMONG THE IMPERCEPTIVE AND RAUCOUS commentaries on Mailer's novels, this remark by Anatole Broyard stands out as refreshingly clear: "the rock he throws usually has a message tied to it" (4). In the case of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, the rock has been given much more attention than the message because it hit us at the wrong time and in an extraordinarily sensitive spot.

When the novel appeared in 1967 we were freshly engaged in a frightening confrontation between what we perceived as the primitive savagery of an undeveloped nation and the sophisticated savagery of our so-called developed one. We were simply too busy analyzing our moral integrity to pay heed to a warning that we had collectively embarked on a bizarre "bear hunt."

Most of us who read the novel at the time of its publication were properly stunned by the impact; but few of us, if any, fully comprehended the tragic implications hidden within. Perhaps at the time it was most convenient not to understand this darkest of Mailer's satiric allegories.

In retrospect, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Mailer is worth the extra thought it takes to interpret his writing. This is particularly true in the case of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* because its fundamental point is hidden beneath an obvious and simplistic plot. Even the most casual reader can immediately spot the parallel between our military adventure in Vietnam and the hunting trip of Mailer's characters. And it is even easier to presume

Mailer is blaming our presence in Southeast Asia on our collective heart of the hunter. But this is seeing only the reflection on the surface of the well. The actual waters run much much deeper.

Before our descent into these depths, however, it will pay us to take a quick look at the basic story. Two Texas teenagers, D.J. and Tex, fly to Alaska's frigid Brook's Range with D.J.'s father, Rusty, and two "yes men."

Rusty is a corporate executive, ruling a vast conglomerate based on the manufacture of plastic cigarette filters. He is ultra-aggressive, bullying, pompous, territorial, and boastful. His code of conduct is comparable to that of an alpha male in a baboon troop.

He brings along the two "yes men"—called "medium asses" in the book—to act as witnesses when he slaughters a bear. His only motive for the hunt is to ensure that he is respected and feared as a sexually superior and merciless leader. In order to impress his prowess upon his peers, he must bring back a "grizzer." Concepts like "sporting chance" and "grace under pressure" have no meaning to him. He operates on a grossly animalistic level, considering ruthlessness and sexual domination as supreme virtues.

In D.J.'s words, "He sings the song of the swine" (*Advertisements* 34). And in Mailer's estimation, Rusty is analogous to the American corporate mind which would seek out a Vietnam to attack in order to release an explosive, repressed sexuality and reaffirm its status as pack leader of the world.¹ In Rusty—and the American corporate mind—Mailer sees the worst kind of genetic tyranny and conditioning by tribal mores.

His son, D.J. (self proclaimed "disk jockey to the world") stands in great contrast to the uncompromising animal values embraced by Rusty. Sixteen at the beginning of the hunt, his mind has been so riddled and scrambled by the constant electronic chatter of modem media that he can only think in a non-stop breathless stream of obscene monologue.

As he is telling the story, we are bombarded by a curious, often annoying, adolescent style and a series of naive boasts. (This may be the one most disturbing aspect of an otherwise well-conceived satire.) In certain ways he does resemble his father: sneering boastfulness, shallow sexuality, arrogance, domineering stance. But he differs in a drastic way that forever separates the two from each other. D.J. knows the anxiety of self-awareness. As he puts it, he is a victim of "Herr Dread" (122).² His intimacy with his own rationality produces a free-floating fear which plagues him constantly, nibbling at his confidence like a rat trapped within his chest. In his own words, D.J.

“sees through to the stinking root of things” and “can watch his own ass being created....” (35).

He neither admires nor loves his father, feeling instead a horror when he looks into Rusty’s eyes. There he sees “voids, man, and gleams of yellow fire....” (37). Students of Mailer will quickly recognize D.J. as the personification of “The White Negro.” He is a hipster, a sensitive psychopath who operates only in the present, with no precedents, no preconceptions.

Mailer had used this theme before. Virtually all of his fiction up till and including *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is centered on this one fixed idea:

If the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, 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. (304)

D.J. is so different from his father primarily because he grew up in a super-accelerated society where no sooner is one standard established than it is destroyed and superseded by another. No value system lasts for more than a few months before it must be dismantled and replaced. To infinitely compound matters, he must exist in a society that is literally held hostage by its own government, with the subsequent threat of impending annihilation.

To exist as a free individual in such a society means waging eternal war against the rigid conformity imposed by the state and corporate bosses. D.J., if he is to retain his personal integrity, has to face American life as a “white Negro,” forever on the edge of life, tottering as it were on the brink of Nietzsche’s abyss.³ Though this interpretation of D.J. might be debatable, Mailer himself hints at such a relationship between D.J. and the existential hipster. Many times D.J. interrupts his monologue to suggest that he is not really a “Texas Wasp,” but rather a “black-ass cripple Spade and sending from Harlem” (224).

This singular literary device not only accentuates the existential state of D.J., it implies that American youth as personified by D.J. is hopelessly divided in half, with two separate and distinct personalities. In this sense especially, D.J. becomes a valid microcosm of the macrocosmic youth rebellion of the 1960s, where even the most bitter protester was torn between love

of country and love of individual freedom. We who have survived long enough to peer into the twenty-first century can still relate. We love the country but hate the scene.

We have spent so much space on D.J. with good reason. He represents more than the divided youth of high-technology America in the 1960s. Indeed, he represents more than Mailer's embattled existential hero. He represents as well the inescapable Catch-22 of modern times: divorcing one's self from society means loss of security. But being part of society means loss of freedom, because society is still ruled by the dictates of other people or of Nature. You're either in lock-step with humanity or you're all alone. One means a loss of self; the other means to live in perpetual anxious isolation.

It is only with Mailer's maturing mind that we find a third possibility—that the individual can be free without alienating himself from human society. This freedom comes with the understanding that humanity is not necessarily in the dictates of Nature. Mankind can choose between good and evil. (Hence the importance of democracy.) Mailer's variance from the existentialism of the post war French intellectuals is profound. Man is not alone in the Universe. Morals are not moot. Good and Evil not only exist in the eternal moment, they suggest the existence of a not allegorical God and Devil!

This astonishing conclusion can be seen in Mailer's 2007 novel *The Castle in the Forest* (New York: Random House, 2007) and his nonfiction interview about God with his authorized biographer Dr. Michael Lennon, appropriately entitled *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (New York: Random House, 2007). We have to pay attention because Norman Mailer's genius cannot be denied.

But there is no such realization seen in Mailer's 1968 novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* In it, protagonist D.J. gives up his freedom of choice by acquiescing to the "wisdom of the blood."⁴ By submitting to the dictates of Nature (that is, "instinct"), D.J. loses all control of the hunt, to say nothing of his life. He learns nothing from his encounter with "that Cannibal Emperor of Nature's Psyche" (200). And having learned nothing, he is subsequently doomed perforce to confronting life with the animalistic shallowness of his father. In the end, he lacks the courage to be free and voluntarily gives his will over to instinct.

Returning to the basic story, Rusty and D.J. arrive at the Brooks Range with the two "medium asses" and Tex Hyde, D.J.'s best friend. They are met

by a half-breed Indian guide named Big Luke and his assistant Ollie. Big Luke warns them that the exposure to modern technology has driven the big grizzlies mad; now they are doubly wily and dangerous.

None of the American group is particularly impressed by this. They are equipped with rifles powerful enough to down rhinoceros. (This of course refers to the overmatching of American weapons against those of the North Vietnamese.) And predictably, the large animals encountered are mown down without the slightest chance given to the animal. A helicopter is used to frighten them to a spot where hunters lay in wait. The slaughter is described without sentiment from Mailer; but it is obvious enough that the Americans brought with them some virulent, malignant evil. The savagery of Nature seems real only as it festers within the armored hearts of men.

This intentional parody of Hemingway's claim that killing a big animal was somehow noble is one of the most vital messages Mailer gives us. As we experience the mindless slaughter, we are aware only of the cold insensibility of the killers. The animals—wolves, caribou, bear—show agonizing emotion as they die, peering at their executors through fading yellow eyes. But the emotion we are told wells up in the hunters is just the smug satisfaction of proving one's sexual supremacy in the presence of one's friends.

A wolf is killed and its blood becomes the beverage of ritual as the two boys and guide drink it from a cup. Oh well, they tried. The magic does not work and they remain alienated by both Nature and humanity. Thus another wolf killed with neither ceremony nor feeling, not even a pretense. A majestic caribou is shot off of a ridge and the hunters are angry because the necessity of gutting it spoils their killing spree for the rest of the day.

The next day, with the use of the helicopter (a "Cop Turd" in D.J.'s lingo), a bear couple is spotted, male and female. Both are riddled with massive bullets from every rifle. Big Luke grants the credit of the kill to Tex and "one of the medium asses." The female has twelve slugs in her. D.J. is pleased to see her covered with "her last shit." But Rusty is hardly pleased. He is furious and panicky. He will look and feel ridiculous if a "medium ass" brings home a kill and he does not.

The next day Rusty and D.J. go hunting without the others. They track down a huge grizzly and D.J. shoots it twice. The bear has enough anger and energy left to charge the terrified D.J., stopping only ten yards away. The teenager has "faced death and acted with great courage, again parodying Hemingway. But he does not experience a "cold moment in time." For him

the moment is all too hot. He trembles and sweats, having stepped “into dark and smelling pig shit” We realize that D.J. has defecated in his pants. It was not nobility that enabled him to face the charging bear. It was sheer panic. D.J. had frozen.

But this is a small revelation compared to the next. When the grizzly proves to be alive and escapes into the forest, the father and son have to follow it. Neither would go if they had been alone; together they are shamed into pursuing the wounded bear. They find it where it lies dying and helpless. As D.J. approaches, Rusty nervously and cowardly lags behind. He is all too willing to allow his son the dubious pleasure of confronting the unknown.

But if Rusty is ultimately a coward he is nevertheless a determined one. Rusty not only has his honor at stake; he has invested over six thousand dollars! When D.J. is only a few yards away, Rusty lifts his rifle and places a sad and pointless round between the dead bear’s eyes. There is one last spasmodic paroxysm, “legs thrashing, brain exploding from new galvanizing and overloadings of massive damage report, and one last heuuuuuuuuu, all forgiveness gone.” (156). Back at the camp of Big Luke, D.J. has to admit that Rusty indeed placed the last shot. Rusty is silent for a few moments, perhaps embarrassed, but then says, “Yeah, I guess it’s mine, but one of its sweet legs belongs to D.J.” (157).

In the early 1960s, Vietnam was still seen as a technologically primitive country that would fall like a wild animal under the vastly superior weapons of the United States. The corporate mind of America presumed itself intellectually and morally so far above the Vietnamese that the war was not even considered a real war, but only a minor “police action,” which was undertaken ostentatiously for the good of civilized mankind. Mailer’s bizarre bear hunt took this red-herring justification of the fathers, turned it inside out, and revealed that it was red from the bloodiest kind of deceptions.

The result of such probing insight is the realization of an exquisite irony. While the corporate minded fathers spoke of civilization and technology, their true motives lay in the coarsest kind of savagery: animal instinct. Just as Rusty must slaughter a grizzly to reaffirm his dominancy among his “tribal” peers, so must corporate America reaffirm its dominancy among its global peers. And just as Rusty intentionally sacrifices the honor of his son to maintain his dominancy, so the corporate state willingly sacrifices its young citizens for the same bestial purpose.

In the end, Mailer implies and perhaps confesses that there is nothing civilized about violence. The roots of murder and warfare are imbedded in the soil of our animal ancestry. As long as we justify our blood lust and hunger for sexual dominance, we are not civilized men, but baboons and hyenas and wolves—at the best, monkeys.⁵

Rusty and his group do not find savagery and slaughter in the “wilds” of Alaska. Rather, they bring savagery and slaughter with them. They do not absorb some natural energy that forces them to live on “bestial” terms with a cruel Nature. Rather, they bring with them a distinctly human violence, a cultivated horror of human hubris and an inability to empathize with living creatures.

If *Why Are We in Vietnam?* ended at this point, the allegory would stand as beautifully elegant and simple. But Mailer, unlike his predecessor Ernest Hemingway, has always preferred to elaborate upon his elaborations. Having made his two fundamental points, he continues to extend his allegorical bear hunt into more mysterious, even occult, areas.

Feeling poisoned and contaminated by his father’s betrayal, D.J. sets out with Tex to confront Nature without weapons. They leave early in the morning without telling the others of their intentions. Alone and unarmed they experience a humbling fear, a shocking revelation of their own nakedness. When the earlier hunting party had spotted a wolf, the animal had been quickly shot and its blood drunk. When the unarmed boys spot a wolf, they are paralyzed with fright.

In the Freudian sense, they have been emasculated and incapable of violence without their huge guns. They’ve lost their erection for life. But in a more mundane sense, without their technological superiority, they sink even lower than the animals they disdain. A bear is heard in the brush and the boys climb a tree. They sense their loss of power over Nature without their big guns because “this mother nature is as big and dangerous and mysterious as a beautiful castrating cunt when she’s on the edge between murder and love” (197).⁶ (Mailer’s distrust and downright hatred of technology comes through—his point is clarified perhaps more than is necessary.)

Here we have a clue into the disturbing and unhealthy attitude toward animals (that is, “Nature”), shown by not only the boys but Rusty and his group as they personify the attitude of their country. Though the boys, when alone in the forest, experience a fear of a “red in tooth and claw” Nature, they

experience neither understanding nor compassion for its purity and beauty. As from the beginning, the animals are only a means to easing inner tensions through violence. In fact, both boys regret not being armed in order to kill while they are “loving” Nature. Mailer seems to suggest that what hunters experience through Nature is not love at all, but rather a tremendously satisfying justification of one’s instinctive and overwhelming need for violence.

This would partially explain the apparent contradiction occurring in the subsequent episode. When night comes, D.J. and Tex form camp and try to sleep. As D.J. lays next to his friend, he is immersed in the grandeur and majesty of the night time mountain forest. In his own words, D.J. “could have wept for a secret was near, some mystery in the secret of things, of trees and forest all in dominion to one another” (211). At last he seems to be understanding the wild!

Up until this moment Mailer’s novel has been written in an obsessive stream of obscene language and electronic-media jargon. The description of the night, however, is delivered in a reverent, almost corny, passage of classical Nature writing worthy of a Thoreau or Wordsworth.

But the similarity to other books about Nature ends abruptly, changing into a strange and ominous parody. As D.J. experiences the “secret” drawing nearer, he simultaneously feels a sexual desire for Tex. This odd dealing with latent homosexuality at first seems to destroy the sense of serenity Mailer has so painstakingly described.

At first glance, he seems to have thrown in an innocuous homosexual scene just to meet some politically correct requisite. But on second glance, this sexuality comes into focus as a natural force within D.J.—and by inference, all the sons of the American State. As might be expected, it is a violent sexual urge and D.J. considers the dominancy he would prove over Tex if he forced his friend into a role of subservient sexual partner. He is refrained from action only by the fear of failure to dominate. By now, it should be obvious that Mailer equates sex and violence as forever spliced in the American mind. They are two branches with the same root mired in the psychology of the beast.

Up until this very moment, there seems to have been hope for D.J. He has seen through the hypocrisy of his father, rejected the Darwinian biological imperatives of his country, proven his personal courage in the face of death, and found a type of grace in Nature.

But with the welling up of his violent and sexual “urges” comes the end of hope for D.J. He never grasps the full meaning of his experiences. Instead of recognizing that he is tyrannized by his own “wise blood” (or “urges”), he mistakenly assumes that he is receiving messages from a God of the cosmos. Instead of understanding that his violence is something to be overcome, he accepts it as not only natural but *divine*. He comes within a hair of finding the true meaning of his experience, only to misinterpret the entire lesson. D.J. finally finds God, but instead of psalms, he hears the command, “Go out and kill—fulfill my will, go and kill” (219). God is not there for him—only the Beast.

And for that reason, all the violence and domineering sex in him seems to be justified and affirmed. Like the Nazi gunners with *Gott mit uns* inscribed on their belts, D.J. believes that God is “on his side” so long as he follows his natural impulses, even if it means constant fighting and killing if necessary to remain on top of the human herd and get what he wants in the sexual and material sense.

In this sad way, D.J. becomes his own father, with the same sad hypocrisies and the same sad justifications. The book ends with D.J. and Tex waiting to go to war in a fever of happy anticipation. Their last words are “Vietnam, hot dam.”⁷

Why Are We in Vietnam? is Mailer’s most profoundly pessimistic book. Mankind as allegory fails to realize that he has a choice to lift himself above the brutishness of raw Nature. Instead, he allows himself to be a subject of Nature, thus becoming just another brute. He fails to discern good from evil. He fails to understand that he—personifying mankind—is becoming a force as powerful as God and the Devil because he can choose.

This was Mailer’s maturing perception of a “good” God and an “evil” Devil in the late sixties. Perhaps the root of this belief can be found in this statement in *Advertisements for Myself*, from an essay written a few years earlier:

God’s destiny is flesh and blood with ours, and so, far from conceiving of a God who sits in judgment and allows souls, lost souls, to leave purgatory and be reborn again, there is the greater agony of God at the mercy of man’s fate, God determined by man’s efforts, man who has a free will.... (91)⁸

This conception is precisely the one presented in Mailer's 1968 bear hunt and his 2007 portrait of Adolf Hitler as a boy. God, Man, and Nature are not one, not made up of the same substance. Man is neither the consciousness nor the conscience of God. Mankind is a third determining force in the Universe.

Mankind can and must realize itself as a determining factor in the development of life. Curiously, all of Mailer's literary work, except *The Naked and the Dead* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, emphasizes the moral responsibility of the individual to fight the suffocating restrictions of society, especially when society is dominated by the laws of Nature, not man. This more than anything illustrates Mailer's abhorrence of American interference in Vietnam. "We did it to prove we are the meanest, biggest, baddest dog on the block," he seems to be saying. We were allowing our natural instincts to rule our actions. Thus, Mailer is not concerned with the destruction of another country so much as he is concerned with our self-destruction.⁹

If his allegory holds true throughout the novel, we must conclude that America as a society failed to will itself more sophisticated than the beasts in the woods when it sent its army to Vietnam. America failed to choose attainment of universal justice and compassion. In Mailer's terminology, especially now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must conclude that our attempted bullying of Vietnam was nothing less than demonic, as it represented the antithesis of divine.

NOTES

1. This metaphor is further expounded in Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* (New York: Little Brown, 1971), in which the author suggests that the American expedition to the moon was analogous to an ejaculation of spermatozoa towards the waiting egg cell.
2. Though Mailer refers to his personal concept of dread, he apparently obtained his basic idea of "Herr Dread" from Søren Kierkegaard's dark philosophical classic, *The Concept of Dread*. It is this awareness of spiritual emptiness which separates D.J. from his father.
3. My use of Nietzsche's abyss here refers to the anxiety associated with endless falling as conceived by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Boni and Liveright, no date), Chapter IV, aphorism 146: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."
4. It is interesting to compare D.J.'s decision to obey his instinctive impulses to Emil Sinclair's decision to accept the "wisdom of the blood" in Herman Hesse's classic *Demian*. Though both Enoch of *Wise Blood* and D.J. of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* ultimately become

less than human by accepting their instinctive “wisdom,” Emil Sinclair becomes more than human.

5. It is possible that Mailer was heavily influenced by the anthropological theories popularized by the late Robert Ardrey in his 1965 best seller *African Genesis* (New York: Dell, 1961), in which it was postulated that mankind evolved from “killer apes.”
6. It is significant that Mailer uses the word “castrating” in reference to “mother” Nature. Without his rifle, D.J. is no longer dominant over Nature, and thereby sexually impotent.
7. Compare this to the last line of Mailer’s 1948 war novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, which exclaims, “Hot dog!” A good argument could be drawn that the two books convey the same message: naturalistic forces so overwhelm the individual that willed action is futile and pointless.
8. Norman Mailer, “A Public Notice on *Waiting for Godot*,” essay in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Putnam, 1959) 289.
9. This quotation from *Cannibals and Christians* may help clarify Mailer’s position: “[T]he only explanation I can find for the war in Vietnam is that we are sinking into the swamps of a plague and the massacre of strange people seems to relieve this plague. If one were to take the patients in a hospital, give them guns and let them shoot on pedestrians down from hospital windows you may be sure you would find a few miraculous cures” (91).

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