

ON THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT

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I AM SIX YEARS OLDER THAN NORMAN MAILER when he wrote *The Armies of the Night*. In 1968, its year of publication, I was 10. I come to this book therefore from a position perhaps somewhat different from my colleagues here: I come to it looking for an insight into the origins of my own political consciousness. I think I am not alone in this—in fact, I’m one of a number of writers who, over the past five years or so have published novels attempting, precisely, to understand what it meant to live in the politics of the sixties and how that relates to who we are today.

It is a good way to approach this novel. Its historical insight is razor sharp. Take Mailer’s description of the fabled New Left, who they were, where they came from. His remarkable frame of reference extends from the thirties to the late sixties; from the fine distinction between Leninists and Trotskyists to a real experience of marijuana and Benzedrine. And therefore his ability to show us how the New Left grew from the foundering of American radicalism of the thirties in a set of disputatious, incompatible, but nearly identical modes of political thought. Mailer describes for us the tangle of “Communist, Trotskyist, Splinter Marxist, Union Organizer, or plain Social Democrat,” and how these groups finally “succeeded in smashing the bones of their own movement into the hundred final slivers of American Marxism, miniscule radical sects complete each with their own special martyred genius of a Marxicologist.” He gives us access to the great disappointed hope of the Labor Movement, in which “Communists and Trotskyites, Splinterites, and Reutherites [ultimately came to] sit closer to the Mafia than to Marx.” This, precisely, is the context, most usually forgotten among people of my age, from which emerged the New Left.

And who were they? Mailer describes “A generation of college students ... who were finally indifferent to the blockhouse polemics of the past, and the

real nature of the Soviet. It was the real injustice in America which attracted their attention—poverty, civil rights, an end to censorship” (120).

It is a genealogy of the New Left that, if we wish to understand who we are as Liberals and Radicals in America today, we need to master in its details. And it’s a description all the more poignant when you reflect that these hopeful words about the New Left were written in 1967, just a couple years before the New Left was to begin the process of self destruction that, I would submit to you, still casts its pall over the American Left today, its shadow of hopelessness, of pessimism and the sense that political engagement is, at heart, impossible. I refer of course to that moment in 1969, just two years later, when Weatherman took over SDS and put an end to the possibility of real, radical social transformation in America—a possibility that, I’ll argue, still disappoints us today.

But to treat this book as simply an explanation of an historical period is a horrible simplification, and it’s perhaps most especially relevant to me, given my experience as a novelist attempting to capture this time, that the heart of this book is a meditation on the competing claims of three forms of knowing the past—the journalistic, the historical, and the novelistic. That Mailer comes down so clearly on the side of the novelistic is of course in no doubt, and the merits of this complex argument have been, and will be, better explored by my colleagues than I am able.

But I would like to make one observation: that the finest writing of this book—of this beautifully written book—seems to me to come not in the first half of the book in which Mailer describes his actual experience, nor in the historical or journalistic analysis—although both of those are very fine—but, precisely, in Mailer’s descriptions of those parts of the March on the Pentagon which he did *not* experience; that is, the final forty or so pages in which he tells of confrontations between protesters and soldiers that occurred during the night while Mailer was in jail. So he’s not just writing about an event he didn’t see; he’s writing about people from another generation whom he didn’t know. Let’s just listen to one little quotation:

Night was on. The demonstrators were entering the last few hours of their march on the Pentagon. They were tired, exceptionally tired, they felt vulnerable—their aggression, their ability even to defend themselves now used up by endless calls over the hours for more adrenaline; yes, the mood was pacifistic,

almost saintly, but very weak. In the night, they were all close to each other. Quietly They were waiting. The walls of the Pentagon bulked large. (309)

We're seeing, here, a great American writer at the height of his powers. And my question is, what does it mean that in a novel, or a history, of which the greatest part is composed of eyewitness material, that its most beautiful, most convincing description is of something that Mailer never actually saw? That is a complicated question, but it is one that has been most convincingly addressed, in my view, by W.G. Sebald in his monumental essay about the allied bombing of Germany during World War II, *The Natural History of Destruction*. In it, if I may simplify somewhat, Sebald suggests that the truth or falsehood of a description of historical event is not to be judged by the number of facts or witnesses but by the integrity and poetry of the language of description. By this standard, *The Armies of the Night* makes a huge and durable case for the supremacy of the novelist's empathetic imagination over, the "mere recitation of facts."

So for me and, I think, my peers in the effort to use fiction to understand the past, this rich and multilayered document serves, forty years after its publication, not only as a work of art, and not only as a deeply relevant meditation of history and fiction, and not only as a map of our political past and an explanation of our political consciousness, but also as a guide to *what it means for a novelist to write well about history*; what kind of language is adequate to the task.

That is not to understate the importance, however, of the historical accuracy, and prescience, of this book, and I'd like to leave you with one example of this.

I refer to Mailer's description of some of the groups participating in the March on the Pentagon in 1967, approximately half of which were religious. He notes the presence of the "American Friends Service Committee, Inter-University Christian Movement, Catholic Peace Fellowship, Jewish Peace Fellowship, Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

This struck me very forcibly because a couple years ago, researching for a novel, I went down to the single act of political protest that one can count on finding in America; that is, the School of the America's Protest in Fort Benning, Georgia, which is led each year by Father Roy Bourgeois, the radical Jesuit priest, and which attracts some 15,000 people each November. There

I saw a protest largely composed of groups like Just Faith at the Church of the Transfiguration, The Catholic Workers League, Marymount, The Incarnate Word Sisters, Shepherd Progressive Action Committee.

Of course there were secular groups too, and there may even have been a contingent from the new, nascent SDS, which was founded recently at my own University campus in New York. But I think it safe to say that there is not a single political organization represented in the coalition that marched on the Pentagon in 1967 which can be found, today, in Fort Benning, Georgia, and it remains true that the durable continuity between these two protests is the backbone of religious activists who continue to hold vigil, today—as they did here in Washington in 1967—against the brutal violence our country inflicts upon the rest of the world.

The depressing conclusion that this fact leads me to is that since Norman Mailer marched on the Pentagon in 1967, succeeding administrations have remained as indifferent to dissent in America as they were when Mr. Mailer wrote *The Armies of the Night* and today in Fort Benning, as 40 years ago at the Pentagon, political protest in America remains, at heart, a matter of faith.

This paper was presented on October 19, 2007 at Georgetown University. The conference was the “40th anniversary conference on The March on the Pentagon/The Armies of the Night.”

WORK CITED

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night*. New York: NAL, 1968.