

TRAGEDY, TRAUMA, AND THE
MODERN: THE AMERICAN CIVIL
WAR IN *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*
AND *ACROSS THE RIVER*
AND *INTO THE TREES*

To My Muse Stone

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THE GREAT CALAMITY OF THE US CIVIL WAR WAS THE IMPETUS for major changes in American fiction. This brother-against-brother engagement not only profoundly disrupted American society but also precipitated a dramatic alteration in the way serious novelists wrote about the experience of combat. This war between the states promulgated an American war novel tradition that remained essentially unchanged until the end of the Vietnam War. The advent of new and highly destructive war technologies outstripped military tactics, causing the dramatic increases in the number and severity of casualties and destruction. This conflict multiplied the tragic and traumatic consequences of modern war in a very short amount of time. Concomitantly, the use of the photographic camera on the battlefield brought the war's frightful arithmetic to the home front and helped change the literary expectations of a nation from romanticism to realism and naturalism and, later, modernism.

The American Civil War initiated what would become a deepening level of trauma throughout American culture that continued throughout the war-plagued Twentieth Century. As a consequence, developments in post-war

American literature made the realistic depiction of death and dying a widespread phenomenon. Modern American war fiction, which was written beginning in the immediate post-World War I period, is simply defined here as that depiction of the soldier's continuing and deepening sense of tragedy and trauma in a military that has become overly technologized and irrationally bureaucratized, an outgrowth of the modern condition. In a broad sense, therefore, the modern period began at the time where mathematics replaced metaphor and fact replaced romance and mythology.

There have been several major studies about the impact of the Civil War on American literature that influences this study here, such as Craig A. Warren's *Scars to Prove It: The Civil War Soldier & American Literature*, Michael W. Schaefer's *Just What War Is: The Civil War Writings of DeForest and Bierce*, Daniel Aaron's *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, and Thomas C. Leonard's *Above the Battle: War-Making in America from Appomattox to Versailles*. The most famous study is Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*. What is most evident in these studies is how the Civil War dramatically altered the course of American literature up to the modern period.

By the time Norman Mailer and Ernest Hemingway began writing their World War II novels, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), where they make allusions to the Civil War, the impact that this war had on American literary sensibilities was very well evident. While their allusions to the American Civil War may be relatively slight in these novels, the implications about what this particular conflict might mean are much more significant than what the number of their words in the text may indicate. In alluding to the Civil War, both Mailer and Hemingway, who continually demonstrated a broad and complex view of history throughout their careers, perpetuate the residual influence of this particular war, and the soldiers who fought, on American literature. Hemingway and Mailer, therefore, are important writers to study because while they have so much in common, they also have significant differences in both style and literary vision, especially in the way they allude to the Civil War and quite possibly in their distinct attitudes about this war and war in general.

The tragedy and trauma that the war initiated throughout American history has a simple cause: Not only does this war remain the most calamitous conflict in US history; the Civil War also was the first to involve common citizens as drafted soldiers on a massive scale. The Civil War created more

domestic grief than both World War I and World War II and all the other wars combined, and the impact of this experience was enough to make for a major turn or trope in American literature. Both Mailer and Hemingway understood this level of trauma. More important, both writers understood the Hegelian dialectical dimensions of how military history, and the psychological and micro-machinations of those in power, are manifested in the outcomes of their actions. For example, while the astronomical casualty rates during the spring and summer of 1864 were the direct results of the Richmond and Atlanta campaigns by Grant and Sherman and by Lee's and the Confederate's defense of them, the indirect causes resided in the psyche of the commanding generals and their resulting actions. In other words, Grant and Lee's personalities drove the war and the war's consequences drove the trauma.

In Hemingway's writing, his historical perspective of the Civil War is most pronounced. Throughout his life, Hemingway was a student of military history. Moreover, both his grandfathers were participants in the Civil War. His paternal great uncles George and Rodney and his grandfather Anson participated in the Civil War by joining various volunteer Illinois units, the Eighteenth Illinois Infantry and the Chicago Board of Trade regiment. Anson was the only Hemingway brother to survive the war (Nagel 8–9). Hemingway's maternal grandfather Hall also served in some capacity during the Civil War, but his experience does not seem to be as direct as Hemingway's had been. In Hemingway's library, he possessed several classics of Civil War history, including the Bruce Catton histories.

The Civil War is alluded to in *Across the River and into the Trees* specifically and primarily in the title, which comes from the dying last words of General Stonewall Jackson: "Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees" (Robertson 753). This title sets the melancholic tone for the whole novel. Colonel, formerly General, Richard Cantwell is spending his last few days on earth alive in the town he loves the most in life, Venice, immediately after World War II. While Jackson's are not the dying words of Cantwell, there is a symmetrical connection. Right before he dies from a final heart attack, Cantwell tells his driver, aptly named Jackson, "I am now going to get into the large back seat of this god-damned, over-sized luxurious automobile" (Hemingway 307). This very reductive, modern statement, lacking in the poetry of Stonewall Jackson's last words, is to be expected since even the book's title is itself a reductive paraphrase of the Civil War general's

famous last words. Eight decades after Jackson's death at Chancellorsville, the residue of his *ethos* informs Hemingway's 1950 novel. In fact, the novel's title has a noticeable epitaphic quality to it, primarily because it lacks the sense of inclusive camaraderie implied in "Let us cross" and, more importantly, the title lacks the essential verb "rest." The result of this modern paraphrase creates a strong sense of loneliness and despair. Rest is what Cantwell, the professional soldier, has needed the most in his later professional life, but, of course, a sense of rest seems still to be lacking even in his dying. This scarred up old soldier is going to die alone in the back seat of a Buick, an ignominious scene of abject modernity.

This contrast with Stonewall Jackson excruciatingly reveals the true timber of Richard Cantwell's ignominious fate. Jackson's biographer James I. Robertson, Jr., writes that

[d]eath removed [Jackson] from the scene at the apogee of a military fame enjoyed by no other Civil War figure. His passing at a high point in Confederate success was the ultimate offering for the Southern cause. Death at the hour of his most spectacular victory led to more poems of praise than did any other single event of the war. Jackson was the only officer to be pictured on Confederate currency, and his likeness graced the most expensive note issued in Richmond: a \$500 bill. (ix)

No such fame became of Cantwell, who led a gallant and purposeful life in the service of his army. Much of this contrast rests in the fact that Civil War veterans had been highly revered in American culture a half century before World War I and later World War II. Although veterans from World War II have been more celebrated than veterans from the First World War, neither of them have been as mythologized as much as the Civil War veterans from both sides of the conflict.

While Mailer did not have the familial or cultural connections to the Civil War, he was similarly aware of the war's historical importance in American culture. The Civil War is specially alluded to in *The Naked and the Dead* when Cummings reveals a public humiliation at West Point; he seemingly asks a question about Lee and Grant improperly. In this particular scene, Cummings is a maniacal rhetorician. In this case, Cummings is in the agonistic throes of a Socratic contest against his West Point instructor,

rhetorically dueling over who was the better commander Lee or Grant during the Civil War. In this scene, Cummings asks this richly loaded question:

Sir (he gets permission to speak), is it fair to say that Lee was the better general than Grant? I know that their tactics don't compare, but Grant had the knowledge of strategy. What good are tactics, sir, if the . . . larger mechanics of men and supplies are not developed properly, because the tactics are just the part of the whole? In this conception wasn't Grant the greatest man because he tried to take into account the intangibles. He wasn't much good at the buck-and-wing but he could think up the rest of the show. (The classroom roars.)

It has been a triple error. He has been contradictory, rebellious and facetious. (411–2)

Interestingly, everyone, including the narrator, thinks Cummings has made an error here, and he probably has in the eyes of these mere mortals, but actually, Cummings, who plays by the rules of the classical gods, has not. Cummings views war, almost literally, in fact, much like Dick Diver expressed in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, as a "love battle" (57). According to this thinking, all war was a battle fought between two men who were in love with themselves and what they do. To General Cummings, war or any visceral contest was always psychosexual. Underscoring this point is the very idealistic Lieutenant Hearn's discovery that Cummings is making battlefield decisions based almost directly on his rhetorical interactions with him—in reaction, actually, to Cummings's repressed homosexual desire for his lieutenant aide-de-camp. He is a man indeed who enjoys verbal combat. When he discovers this secret psychosexual truth, Hearn leaves his safe staff job for one directly on the front for which he is subsequently killed. For the general's part, his actions come from a combination of submerged homosexual desire and the sociopathic need to fulfill every impulse, even if they follow a complicated sublimation pattern and even if they cause serious causality rates. No matter the need or method, Hearn nevertheless uncovered a painful metaphysical lesson about warfare (at least according to Mailer's view of life): Every army needs a controlled killer in charge of its army, but with the advent of modern technological weapons, the tragic and traumatic consequences of these men are not only enormous but long lasting as well.

In their own unique way, the object of Cummings' verbal sparring, fellow West Pointers Lee and Grant, could also be seen as sociopathic killers on a large scale, despite Lee's and Grant's somewhat hagiological status. Although they are typically used as foils to each other, Lee and Grant are more accurately understood as two different faces on the same coin. Grant is the military organizational genius who understood the primary principle of military mathematics. He had twice as many men and ten times the resources as the enemy, and he knew how best to employ that math. Grant used blunt force trauma not only to pound the enemy into submission, to compound his mathematical advantage, but also to pound his own army into being a sharp fighting force. But Grant also needed to lose control of himself with alcohol and tobacco on occasion to function psychologically in the places that his genius took him. On the other side of the coin, Lee is the courtly and courteous well-bred Southerner, undermanned and eventually out-resourced. He was typically so controlled in what he did that he could tune out even the most disconcerting and devastating violence around him. Yet on one occasion, during the 1864 Battle of the Spotsylvania, he snapped, losing control of himself so profoundly that his soldiers had to grab his reins and shout "Lee to the rear" to keep him from charging headlong into a murderous pitched battle (United States 54–55). This tangible anger, from a man who was archetypically well-mannered, originated from his profound love for his fellow Southerners. His anger was nurtured by his realization that he was compelled to sacrifice his life and theirs for *the mythological Cause*. The deepest depths of this anger, however, can be framed by the first premise of Lee's warrior syllogism, his thesis, which was always to be the consummate aggressor in battle. Until the advent of Grant, who sacrificed his men for a modern government that had all the mathematical advantages, Lee had had no binary counterpart. Until that historical moment, Lee had been aggressive and victorious, and the large-scale sacrifices had been psychologically manageable.

During the spring and summer of 1864, Lee met not so much his match but his more dominant syllogistic twin, the other face of a catastrophic coin. In that moment, Lee knew what the ultimate conclusion had to be—the coin would flip. Grant's entry into the equation meant the end of the war and the fighting and the end of doing what Lee had always been called to do: attack. Remember: Lee was the man who said that is was a good thing war was so horrible because we would love it too much if it weren't (United States 34).

At the May, 1864, Battle of Spotsylvania, both sides of the Hegelian coin were cast. For Lee, the war had become too horrible, and the end was finally in sight. However, what truly altered Lee was the fact that he was, for the first time in his life, no longer the assertive thesis, the archetypal aggressor, the man constantly on the offense, in charge of himself and fate. With Grant, Lee had suddenly become the archetypal submissive antithesis; in effect, he had become emasculated but not unmanned. To be more precise, the mythological Lee was outmanned and out supplied and tragically, mathematically disadvantaged. Although Lee was bested, he did remain intact in the process, not diminished as much as altered. It does not take much knowledge of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to speculate what kind of dreams Lee was having at the time, and his biographer does state that he had begun having troubled sleep as well as physical deterioration, which was new for him.

This out-manning of the chivalric Lee by the transfigured hero in the guise of Grant is the moment that modernity profoundly took over in Western civilization warfare and eventually literature. Grant is still a hero, but one of a different shape and form than the traditional Lee. The rough, slouching Grant becomes the Yeatsian beast of modernity. However, Grant's archetype could only emerge when juxtaposed against the perfect foil—Lee. In the age of Grant, realism of course was the immediate literary reaction. With World War I, and the rise of modernist literature, the archetypal shift propagated by Grant vs. Lee was resolved. The modernist epic re-imaging through Pound and Eliot became the final solution. So by the time of World War II, with Mailer especially, Lee's classical sensibilities have been imaginatively subsumed by Grant's calculus for modern war.

The literary descendents of these historical figures, thus, logically reflect the strategies for emotionless mass destruction that allowed Grant to reunite the Union. Mailer's Cummings is a textbook case in point. More than any other member of his West Point class and his instructor, Cummings knew about all this war madness, even then as a cadet, about how the mind of great generals work, how they derive strategy and tactics out of their own psychological needs, and how the especially great soldiers pull battle plans out of their otherwise inexplicable genius, out of motives that could be called pure if they could ever be clearly understood. Important generals, like anyone else who makes history change, are not taught their changeling genius at places like the military academies, but that is where they discover their role models and that is where their combative, sociopathic personalities are

sharpened into fighting form. In Mailer's world, the motives and impulses of men who change history, whether they are an Army general, a presidential assassin, a serial killer, or Gary Gilmore, are never actually understood by the characters themselves or especially the readers; they are just acted upon. That is truly what makes them special: They are not afraid to act upon even their worst impulses. Thus, this one allusion from *The Naked and the Dead* does not distract from Mailer's text but rather illuminates more fully Cummings' character, which ultimately illustrates that in military organizations, the psychology of the individual commander directly affects the lives of the common soldier: The ones who pay the price from those who give the orders.

With all of this in mind, one can also clearly see how Hemingway's Cantwell represents the sacrificial soldier for a modern bureaucratic army, the transfigured Jackson, who dies at the moment of his greatest victory. While Jackson's death is heroic, Cantwell's is ignominious in that his greatest victory is not a military one, but merely a personal one. His is a modern, reductive victory over himself and the acceptance of his death. Cantwell is merely another soldier who has had to pay the price of modern warfare. On the other hand, Mailer's Cummings forms another face on the coin, but of a different type. He is the emotionless sacrificer—the general who has minted Grant's legacy into a modern, sociopathic coinage. As these two allusions to the American Civil War demonstrate, these two major writers of the Twentieth Century, whose legacies will remain influential throughout the Twenty-First century, understood the influence of this conflict on the American psyche. Mailer and Hemingway, both veterans of war themselves, viscerally understood this war's enormous costs created a trauma that permeates and promulgates the modern vernacular and literature, illuminating the point that the American Civil War, especially in the costs that it took to fight it, accelerated the dramatic shift to the modern sensibility.

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