AUTOMATONS AND THE ATOMIC ABYSS: NORMAN MAILER'S *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*

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PAUL BOYER POINTS OUT THAT IN MOST OF THE MAJOR AMERICAN NOVELS of the immediate post-Hiroshima years—Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*; Saul Bellow's *The Victim*; Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*—"the atomic bomb is notable by its absence" (246). Mailer's 1948 war novel adheres to the era's avoidance of the atomic bomb by focusing on acceptable socio-political issues, but differs from other war novels of the period through its preoccupation with the uncanny, defined by Freud in his seminal essay on the topic as a profound dread provoked "either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (639). Although the uncanny remains an often frustratingly broad topic, mostly because it is a concept "whose entire denotation is a connotation" (Cixous 528), most critics adhere to Freud's definition of the uncanny as something familiar made strange.[1] Intellectual uncertainty regarding the animate nature of what is inanimate and vice versa (as provoked by automatons or episodes of uncontrollable behavior), and the "return of the repressed" are all deemed capable of eliciting profound discomfort. Mailer's ostensibly realist text is complicated by its depiction of weird mechanical soldiers who are plagued with superstitions regarding death and filled with dread provoked by an oddly menacing environment. This conscious use of the uncanny illustrates popular postwar concerns

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connected with conformity and totalitarianism, but the real strangeness of *The Naked and the Dead* relies on its ability to reveal unconscious fears connected with Mailer's personal uncertainties regarding his writing and cultural unease about the atomic bomb.

The destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the annihilation of their civilian populations are never mentioned in novels such as Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* (1951) and James Gould Cozzens' *Guard of Honor* (1948), novels which purport to be about World War II but which exclude a fundamental part of the conflict. As Paul Brians points out, "nuclear war must be the most carefully avoided topic of general significance in the contemporary world" (17). Although the bomb provoked significant debate in the newspapers of 1945, there was a silence in serious literature revealing both the difficulty of representing mass death and how well that mass death was repressed.[2] Although nearly 100,000 feet of color film were filmed of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by Air Force film crews following the bombings, the entirety of this documentation was classified top secret because of the horror it revealed (Norris 184). The human toll of the atomic bomb was so repressed that in 1955 when the "Hiroshima Maidens" visited the United States in order to have corrective surgery for their radiation burns (a trip organized by a group of Americans), some people were so threatened by this reification of American atrocity that they wondered whether the organizers of the visit were Communist agents (Filreis).

The difficulties inherent in the representation of mass death were exacerbated in America during the late 1940s and early 1950s by increasing conformity and widespread consensus, especially regarding the military. Mailer points out that a period of Cold War is "obviously equal to greater censorship" and suggests that "[i]f good writers write novels which are conventionally obscene or exceptionally radical, you can be sure that they would have one hell of a time getting their books published" ("Intimate Interview" 23). Although he establishes a clear delineation between an artist who "follows his own nature" and commercial talents who "do what they are obliged to do, and say what they are obliged to say" ("Intimate Interview" 25), Mailer's desire for literary individualism coexisted with a strong desire for popular success, which countered his radicalism with a certain amount of accommodation to consensus. Despite the fact that *The Naked and the Dead* depicts the Pacific conflict against the Japanese, Mailer adheres to the era's avoidance of the bomb. When asked in an interview whether he believed

that people want to "look into the abyss," he replied, "No, I don't. I think it's very hard. I think people are petrified of it" ("An Interview with Norman Mailer" 45).

Mailer describes his first novel as "the book of a young engineer" written "mechanically" with the aid of a "sturdy" working plan utilizing extensive character dossiers and charts ("Art of Fiction" 13), thus emphasizing its consciously controlled construction. Yet while the text's comprehensive character studies and minute details regarding the hardships of military life contribute to a sense of its depiction of the gritty reality of war, the reality Mailer presents remained palatable enough to render the book a bestseller. One review highlights its canny way of appearing to leave "nothing to the imagination" while exposing "the blood, if not always the guts, of war" (Dempsey 6). During the 1950s, Mailer became aware of a division in his mind between a "conscious intelligence" engaged with political issues and an unconscious mind "much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis" ("Art of Fiction" 15). This fascination with unconscious material, unacknowledged at the time of writing *The Naked and the Dead*, explains the text's oscillation between familiar conventions of realism and a realism rendered uncannily strange. Although Mailer's narrative strategy is designed to resist unconscious preoccupations, it cannot entirely keep them at bay. As Mailer himself points out, writing is "a very *odd*, *spooky* activity" ("Irish Eyes" 142) and surging beneath the novel's conscious delineation of socio-political issues are darker unconscious themes connected to Mailer's haunting problem: the unbridgeable gap between his conscious and unconscious concerns.

The conscious theme of the novel can be summarized as power: "the power of man over man, the power of military force, the power of political thought and polemic, the inexorable power of events on the lives of men" (Jones 87). The platoon consists of one of almost every representative American type whose differences in class, politics, race and religion guarantee personal conflict. Mailer's characters behave in ways controlled by their socio-economic backgrounds, which aligns *The Naked and the Dead* with the naturalistic works of writers such as Stephen Crane and John Dos Passos, but as much as individual powerlessness over fate is a part of the naturalistic worldview, much of this concern springs from Cold War sociological issues that would eventually develop into the popular figure of the corporate-controlled "organization man" as outlined in William Whyte's non-fiction study *The*

Organization Man and fictionalized in popular novels such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Mailer's political interests see the novel exploring the potential for the forces fighting fascism to behave in similarly totalitarian ways. A review in the *New York Times* reveals how carefully Mailer handled this potentially subversive theme when it points out that "Mr. Mailer obviously doesn't like war, or the people who fight it," but concludes that he is attempting to show "that much of its unpleasantness comes from the nature of the participants" rather than from any implicit problem with the American military (Dempsey 6).

The nature of the war's participants in *The Naked and the Dead* connects the novel to issues deemed relevant to postwar American life. Mailer suggests,

> It was as if back in the late Forties and early Fifties a great many people unconsciously began to sense that they were getting further and further away from themselves. There was something funny in the scheme of things. The whole apparatus of the buildings about us, the things we read, the things we eat, the things we see for entertainment, the philosophies about us, the faiths—everything was making it harder and harder for someone to have a sense of identity. ("Norman Mailer Talks to Melvyn Bragg" 199–200)

Mailer's apprehension of something wrong in postwar life defies clear expression and his grammatical errors between the past and present tense reveal something of the troubling vagueness of this estrangement. Loss of individual identity is linked with an obscure dread, suggesting that the loss of self in an era of conformity registers as uncanny. Mailer's depiction of the subservience of the individual is far more worrying than other novels of the era concerned with the same theme, and his soldier automatons represent a disturbing manifestation of the loss of humanity.

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can evoke an uncanny feeling, doubt regarding the animate and the inanimate is one of the most potent, especially when this doubt "only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness" (Jentsch 11). Historically the machine was often seen as somehow demonic, an obscure threat disruptive of traditional social practice, but it is the machine's relationship to the human that renders it uncanny. Whereas

in "the premodern instance the machine is thought to mimic the organic movements of the body," in the modern instance "the machine becomes the model, and the body is disciplined to its mechanistic specifications" (Foster 51). In *The Naked and the Dead*, General Cummings decides that it is "a not entirely unproductive conceit to consider weapons as being something more than machines, as having personalities, perhaps, likenesses to the human" (568). Fittingly, he also suggests that soldiers are "closer to machines than humans" (569). Battle is thus transformed from the heroic clashes of history into "an organization of thousands of man-machines who dart with governing habits across a field, sweat like a radiator in the sun, shiver and become stiff like a piece of metal in the rain." The General's disturbing conclusion is "[w]e are not so discrete from the machine any longer, I detect it in my thinking" (569). Intellectual uncertainty between the human and the inhuman is not merely played out on a physical level in Mailer's novel but has infiltrated into the very deepest recesses of personal space. The machine is uncanny "because it assumes our human vitality and because we take on its deathly facticity" (Foster 51) and Mailer's soldiers cease to "think of themselves as individual men" becoming "merely envelopes" (Mailer, *Naked* 658).

The ability of mechanization to penetrate not just industry but impinge "upon the very center of the human psyche" (Giedion 41) has significant implications for the human experience of warfare. General Cummings is so estranged from the human that he lacks recognizable expressions and merely displays "a certain vacancy in his face" (Mailer, *Naked* 81). When this inhuman commander attempts to smile, the only result is that his face looks "numb." Yet this vacant cipher commands his troops with an absolute power they have little choice but to obey. Ordered out on patrol and lit up by the light of a flare, the soldiers become a mass of "black cutouts moving past a spotlight" (129), two-dimensional objects obeying orders "with no consciousness any longer of what they were doing" (131). Even in extreme situations they are unable to react as humans. When a Japanese soldier is caught in a rain of bullets, he remains standing with "no expression on his face; he looked vacant and surprised even as the bullets struck him in the chest" (153). Even the bodies of the dead are inhuman, with one swollen corpse resembling "a doll whose stuffing had broken forth" (211).

Mailer's insistence on unreality is a thematic preoccupation shared by uncanny texts, which Susan Bernstein points out frequently depict lapses of consciousness registered as experiences of dislocation and loss of control

(1125). Mailer's soldiers know "very little about what was happening in the campaign" and the days repeat themselves without incident until they are "no longer able to distinguish between things which had happened a few days before" (Mailer, *Naked* 252). This estrangement is compounded by their lack of agency within the military structure's repetitiveness. The soldiers "stand guard at night, awaken a half hour after dawn, eat breakfast, wash their mess kits, shave, and load onto trucks" which transport them to their duties. They "return at noon, go out again after chow, and work until late afternoon when they would come back for supper, take a bath perhaps in the stream just outside the bivouac, and then go to sleep soon after dark" (252). These minutely observed details of military life should intensify the fictional reality; instead, the obscurely felt doubts regarding the soldiers' human identities complicates the suspension of disbelief necessary in the reading contract. When the platoon is sent out on reconnaissance, they march in a "leaden stupor . . . without any thought of where they went, dully, stupidly." Any empathetic response to the plights of these men rendered mechanical by war imperatives is complicated by the description of the soldiers' heavy packs becoming "part of their bodies" (505–6). Although metaphorical, Mailer's strategy provokes obscure doubts regarding the status of the soldiers as "real" people, fictional ciphers or uncanny machines, and destabilizes reader response to a text that appears to be realist but which is also oddly unreal.

Mailer's army transforms human will, autonomy and labor into a series of estrangements experienced by dehumanized cogs and the strangeness of this fictional process is intensified by the process of fiction, which necessarily attempts to transform language into constructs perceived as human. The writer's power "to alter reality in other people's minds by the way we use words" remained an enigma for Mailer, who noted that "[d]ealing with words is a mysterious matter. It's very insubstantial because they're just little pieces of dark curly pigment on a white page" ("Norman Mailer" 161). This "mysterious matter" sees Mailer's text constantly veering between moments of verisimilitude and self-reflexivity, and is the reason for the novel's strange preoccupation with what Freud terms "the omnipotence of thoughts" (633). The ability to alter reality through language is even identified by Mailer as the mystery "that drove Hemingway insane" (Mailer, "Norman Mailer" 161). The soldiers' fears regarding the omnipotence of thoughts is clearly connected with Mailer's conscious theme of the loss of individuality,

but is also linked to Mailer's unconscious fears regarding his power as a writer and the threat posed to him by writing itself. Mailer explains how "a book takes on its own life in the writing" and suggests that the writer has "a certain responsibility" to a book which becomes like "a creature to you after a while" ("Art of Fiction" 26). The writer feels "a bit like a master who's got a fine animal" and Mailer admits to often feeling "a certain shame with what I've done with a novel." If Mailer feels guilty about his failure towards something raised by him "like a child" ("Art of Fiction" 26) then what kind of revenge might this ill-treated novel wreak on its author?

In his numerous interviews, Mailer returns time and time again to Hemingway, who represents not just a great writer but one undone by the perils of writing. The mystery identified as driving Hemingway mad poses a similar threat for Mailer, who describes craft—as opposed to "the natural mystique of the novel"—as a bulwark against "the terror of confronting a reality which might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss" ("Art of Fiction" 30). Reliance on craft is something Mailer attributes to mediocre writers yet he admits that "there was a time when I wanted very much to belong to the literary world. I wanted to be respected the way someone like Katherine Ann Porter used to be . . . As a master of the craft" ("Art of Fiction" 29). Mailer's fears about writing are thus twofold: on the one hand, he fears the mystery which he believes rendered Hemingway insane; on the other hand, he fears not belonging to the literary world of the masters of craft to whom writing poses a threat.

This discomfort with the powers of narrative plays out through the soldiers' superstitious fears regarding death. When Gallagher flippantly comments, "You're only gonna get your fuggin head blown off tomorrow," he is suddenly seized with "a cold shuddering anxiety as though he had blasphemed." As he hurriedly recites the Hail Mary, he has a vision of himself "lying on the beach with a bloody nub where his head should have been" (7). Similarly, when Martinez cannot stop repeating the phrase "'I don't care if I do die, do die,'" he is overwhelmed with certainty that "something terrible" (21) is about to happen. The awful "something" that constantly threatens the soldiers is annihilation by war and by language. Croft is convinced with "passionate certainty" (29) that Hennessey will die that very day; when this does indeed occur, Croft becomes privy to "vistas of such omnipotence that he was afraid to consider it directly" (40). Red also

correctly predicts, or conjures, Hennessey's death, and interprets it not as "large and devastating and meaningless" like the deaths of his other fallen comrades, but as a death which opens "a secret fear" because it seems "so ironic, so obvious, when he remembered the things Hennessey had said." Red finds himself at the edge of a "bottomless dread" (123) thinking about a death seemingly caused by his thoughts and Hennessey's words. When he remembers the moment he knew his friend would die, he experiences "a moment of awe and panic as if someone, *something,* had been watching over their shoulder that night and laughing. There was a pattern where there shouldn't be one" (39).

Death is the hidden secret that lies at the heart of the uncanny. Uncertainties regarding what is animate or inanimate, real or unreal, self or other, are uncanny not merely because of a discomforting blurring of boundaries, but because these liminal areas evoke the nothingness of unbeing. During Minetta's stay in hospital, his proximity to damaged bodies and corpses renders death "almost tangible" (363). Whereas death had once been unreal, "the way a man's face may sometimes seem unreal if he gazes at it too long in the mirror" (355), Minetta is faced with death's reality so viscerally that he becomes "afraid to breathe, as if the air were polluted" (363). He wonders, "How do they expect a guy to stay here, after some poor Joe died right next to you?" (365), a query reflecting not just the difficulty of repressing knowledge of death while in close proximity to it, but which also reveals a deeper fear regarding the menace posed to the living by the dead. When Gallagher receives news from America that his wife has died during childbirth, although he keeps repeating to himself "[s]he's dead, she's dead" (280), he is unable to really believe it. As if in confirmation of Gallagher's sense of his wife's continuing existence, the delays of the postal system result in her letters continuing to arrive. Understandably unnerved by these spectral communications, Gallagher is even more horrified by the arrival of the final letter since it is the true harbinger of Mary's death. Upon taking it to the beach to read, Gallagher experiences a "jolt of horror" (284) ostensibly inspired by the strange reptilian sheen of the giant kelp but which seems more likely to stem from his close encounter with death that takes place beside it. Gallagher controls his communion with the dead by insisting that is it the kelp that frightens him rather than his experience of a communication that seems to transcend the boundaries between the living and the dead.

Mailer's insistence on the soldiers' dehumanization reflects acceptable postwar fears regarding conformity and corporatization, but also offers a critique of the processes through which violence to the human body is normalized during periods of war. Mailer's over-elaboration of this motif registers as particularly uncanny. The repetition of mechanical descriptions renders description itself mechanical, sapping imagery of meaning and miring interpretation in a confusing space where familiar literary conventions have become strangely unfamiliar. The novel ends with yet another insistence on the unreality of war when the soldiers realize that "tomorrow the endless routine of harsh eventless days would begin once more." The final disastrous patrol is "unfamiliar, unbelievable," yet the bivouac before them is also "unreal." Finally, Mailer suggests, "everything in the Army was unreal" (709). This constant reiteration regarding the unreality of war acts as a comment on psychological coping mechanisms during combat but it also reveals something of Mailer's inability to cope with his material.

For any reader versed in the events of the war, never mentioned yet never entirely banished from the novel is the fact that the conflict Mailer describes will soon result in the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bomb is nowhere in the text but resides in what might be thought of as the text's unconscious; in the spaces created between a reader's knowledge and what the text depicts. Nagaoka Hiroyoshi defines atomic bomb literature as expressing the evil of the bomb and the survival of human dignity (qtd. in Treat 20), a paradigm that obviously puts an American writer in an ambiguous position. Most American writers who did write about the bomb in its immediate aftermath thus avoided its military application in favor of imagining its more benevolent role in a future utopia. Writers such as Morris Ernst, whose 1955 book *Utopia 1976* promised a pleasing future of atomic power, envisaged a world in which nuclear technology would provide unlimited energy, control the weather, manufacture germ-free foods, provide medical cures and revolutionize agricultural practice. Boyer argues that utopian dreams of a new world of atomic energy were a way of avoiding the unsettling reality of America's use of atomic bombs to obliterate entire populations (Boyer 122). Such utopian dreams of the future "facilitated the process by which Americans absorbed Hiroshima and Nagasaki into their moral history" (124).

Mailer's reluctance to describe the deaths of the Japanese soldiers as real—resorting to imagery of dolls and insects to describe their corpses—is thus

particularly revealing. The mechanization of Mailer's soldiers becomes even more relevant in this context, since the destruction and death meted out by the Second World War comes not from human hands but from technology. Although Mailer does his best to focus on the issues that concerned Cold War America by using the war as a fictional trope through which the country's changing socio-political physiognomy can be examined, he cannot entirely avoid gesturing towards the abyss of total war and mass death. The dark secret hidden at the heart of mid-twentieth century life—the atomic bomb—stages an uncanny return through Mailer's strangely mechanical soldiers, resulting in a novel that both avoids and highlights the terrifying inhumanity of World War II.

NOTES

1. Freud's article on the uncanny remains a seminal text, but in recent years the uncanny's boundlessness has seen it approached via the works of postmodern thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. For a discussion of the uncanny as a trope of deconstruction see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003). The uncanny has also become a trope of postcolonialism; see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); and Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudliez (New York: Columbia UP, 1991); feminism; see Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimlich*," *New Literary History* 7. 3 (Spring 1976); and psychoanalysis; see Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2. 1 (1995); and Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," trans. James Strachey, *New Literary History* 7. 3 (Spring 1976). For other significant studies of the uncanny see Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Gordon Slethaug, *The Play of the Double in Postmodern American Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993); and Paul Coates, *The Double and the Other* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).
2. `The first, and really only, in-depth writing on the atomic bomb by an American in the period was John Hersey's article "Hiroshima" published in *The New Yorker* in 1946, which relates the experiences of six Hiroshima residents on the day of the attack. Before Hersey's piece, the majority of discussions about the atomic bomb in the popular press focused on statistics of devastation rather than the human toll, chiefly to encourage international control of atomic power or promote civil defence. Hersey was the first to tackle the effects of the bomb on its Japanese victims, yet his dry journalistic tone struck some readers as oddly dispassionate. The effect of Hersey's approach, however journalistically appropriate, was to spare readers emotional engagement with the bomb's victims. One reader wrote to *The New Yorker* commending Hersey's

report for reasons the author might not have anticipated: "I read Hersey's report. It was marvellous. Now let us drop a handful on Moscow." For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see Joseph Luft and W.M. Wheeler, "Reaction to John Hersey's *Hiroshima*," *Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (Aug 1948): 135–40.

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