AN *ETERNITY* FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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From Here to Eternity, The Complete Uncensored Edition
By James Jones
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IT IS A DAUNTING TASK TO REVIEW A REPUBLISHED NOVEL, especially one as well known as James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*. It became a best-seller when published in 1951 and received critical praise, winning the National Book Award prize in 1952 and ranking #62 on the Modern Library Board's list of Best 20th Century Novels. Then there is the perennially popular film, especially the sex on the beach scene with Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr, and many know the backstory of how Frank Sinatra landed the role of Pvt. Angelo Maggio, famously fictionalized by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola in *The Godfather*. Yet, I confess that, until I accepted the offer to write this review, I had never read it; nor had a number of colleagues I asked, save one, a hardcore war fiction buff; nor does the novel seem to be excerpted in the college literature anthologies; nor, I would imagine, is it frequently assigned in college literature courses. I begin to suspect that *Eternity* is one of those iconic American novels, like *Gone with the Wind*, with which many are familiar through its adaptation into a classic American film and through pop culture references, but which few people, sixty-two years after its publication, have actually read. The publication of this unexpurgated edition thus offers readers a chance to discover or to rediscover a great modern American novel. The new edition is also valuable for the Afterword by

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George Hendrick, who includes Jones' notes on his plan for *Eternity* and the author's own key to the novel's symbolism.

For readers unfamiliar with the novel or the film, the first thing that needs to be said is that *Eternity* is not really a war novel. Virtually all of the events take place on the Schofield Army base in Hawaii before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on that infamous December 7, 1941, though many of the novel's characters refer to U.S. engagement in the war in Europe as imminent; nor is a Japanese attack unthinkable, although in its wake one major character cannot get it out of his mind that the Germans had attacked instead. *Eternity* is really about the peacetime military and the toll that service takes, particularly on the enlisted men (EM) and the women who love them, or the ones who simply serve them, since a sizable number of the novel's key scenes are set in bars and whorehouses, havens for GIs on paydays and furloughs.

The novel's main characters are Pvt. Robert E. Lee Prewitt and First Sgt. Milt Warden, both of whom are considered prototypes for characters who appear in later installments in Jones' WWII trilogy: *The Thin Red Line* (1962) and *Whistle* (1978). Prewitt is a coal miner's son from Harlan County, Kentucky, a self-proclaimed thirty-year man, career military, who is gifted with an artistic sensibility manifesting itself in his love for the blues and in his discovery that he is an exceptional bugler, the best, it is said. But as the novel opens Prewitt has transferred out of the Bugle Corps to the infantry because he has been passed over as First Bugler, a display of obstinate pride that foreshadows future conflict with the military hierarchy. Prewitt further learns, as Jones himself did, that the ability to box is one way to achieve status in the peacetime military, so he begins boxing for his company until he accidentally blinds another boxer, thereby breaking a promise to his mother never intentionally to hurt another human being. His decision to quit boxing greatly disappoints his C.O. who then subjects Prewitt to The Treatment, a series of hazing rituals designed to break his will. Milt Warden is considerably older than Prewitt and therefore much more of a realist, but his idealistic streak is revealed in his ethical commitment to the performance of his duties. His complexity as a character consists in a calculated cynicism and hard-boiled demeanor that mask a considerable intellect and somewhat precarious hold on sanity; he is a character who might have appeared in Heller's *Catch-22*. Warden seduces an officer's wife, partly as a gesture of contempt for ruling class authority, only to discover that he is in love with her, and yet he strug-

gles with her demands that he become an officer himself, fearing that he will become that which he despises. While Warden initiates an affair with Karen Holmes, wife of Capt. "Dynamite" Holmes, a woman caught in an unhappy, loveless marriage, Prewitt falls in love with Alma Schmidt, aka Lorene, a prostitute he first meets in a professional capacity, a woman driven to make enough money to return to her native Oregon and purchase a measure of middle-class respectability. Karen is the deeper and more complex of the two, but both female characters exist primarily as adjuncts to their male counterparts. Other memorable characters are Pvt. Angelo Maggio, a tough, wiry Italian-American misfit; the legendary Jack Malloy, a combination Nietzschean superman and proletarian hero who delivers some rhetorical set pieces, clearly an authorial spokesperson; and the sadistic Sgt. Fatso Judson, perpetrator of the novel's most explicit and disturbing violence.

In its depiction of the peacetime military, Jones' novel dramatizes an implicit critique of economic injustice and repressive morality, of authoritarianism and dehumanization. His own military service in Oahu, Hawaii and later during combat in Guadalcanal had initially given Jones a low opinion of EMs, most of whom were uneducated and unskilled and forced into the service by massive unemployment during the Depression, but the young soldier and aspiring author from a relatively privileged, rural Illinois background came in time to serve, as George Hendrick says in his Afterword, as a "spokesman for enlisted men," railing against "caste and privilege and arbitrary authority." The EM's conflict lies not with foreign foes but with the military itself. Jones exposes the awful, even tragic circumstance inherent in soldiers who are forced to sacrifice self-respect and autonomy as a necessary but inevitably destructive submission of individual will to military authority, a degradation they can only escape by allowing their own moral natures to become corrupted. Many of the EMs are, in Jones' words, "shiftless and ignorant." Others, like Warden, are morally and intellectually superior but find their integrity compromised by "graft and frustration and inefficiency." Prewitt and Warden have love/hate relationships with the authority they serve. They cling to idealistic notions of duty, honor, and personal integrity while they hate the incompetence, corruption, and arbitrary exercise of authority. Thus, they struggle with the contradiction of being dedicated to the service that both gives them identity and purpose while negating their individual self-worth.

Jones narrates from a third-person, selectively omniscient point of view,

occasionally shifting into second person to capture a character's self-reflection, and it is in these passages perhaps that he tends to sound most like Hemingway, even though William Styron claims in his forward to the new edition that Jones disdained Hemingway as a war writer who idealized combat despite himself. Jones employs the realists' conventionally lucid, paratactic or running style, though he has a tendency to employ cumulative adverbs, a usage that strikes me as a little too self-consciously literary, as if the young novelist were making a bid for stylistic innovation. He also adopts what I call the Shavian approach to the use of apostrophes, meaning that he generally omits them. Hendrick quotes Mailerian Alex Hicks' keen observations on Jones' occasionally faulty diction and rhetoric, and I would add that Jones' worst stylistic fault is a tendency to overwrite, as practitioners of the long realist novel, indulging their documentary intentions, are prone to do (Tom Wolfe, I'm looking at you); one particular scene in which characters discuss their favorite cowboy movie stars runs on in exhaustive and, to me, tedious detail. Jones's ear for dialogue and dialect is generally good, with one egregious exception: Sgt. Ike Golovitch, a character apparently meant to suggest the authoritarian behavior of the average German in those days, but whom Jones makes speak in the diction and syntax of a Katzenjammer Yoda. Styron states flatly that Jones was "no stylist," and yet he offers a solid assessment of the novel's strengths, citing Jones' authenticity and mastery of the vernacular, as well as his novel's "narrative authority . . . gutsy humor, and . . . immense, harrowing sadness," to all of which I can attest.

Comparisons between Jones' *Eternity* and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), both weighty WWII novels set in the Asian theater, are inevitable and justified. Both employ the conventions of realism and naturalism. Like Jones' novel, Mailer's is based on his own military experiences, in his case with the 12th Cavalry Regiment during its campaign in the Phillipines, although in *Naked* Mailer places much more emphasis on actual combat, interspersing those scenes with those detailing the pre-war lives of its characters. Both novels feature a cast of characters who have become conventions of modern war narratives, literary and cinematic, all the ingredients of the American melting pot: WASPS, Italians, Jews, and myriad ethnicities; country boys and city boys; privileged and underprivileged; proletariat and bourgeoisie. Both novels highlight the conflict between officers and enlisted men. In Mailer's essay "Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on The Talent in The Room," he remembers Jones as a man with "the beer-guts

of a broken-glass brawl" who had "sold out over the years," and yet of *Eternity* he says that it was "the best American novel since the war," adding that "if it is ridden with faults, ignorances, and a smudge of a sentimental, it also has the force of few novels one could name."

In light of this republication, it is worth noting that both Jones' and Mailer's novels became somewhat notorious for suppression of that word we now refer to as "the F-bomb." Knowing that *Eternity* had originally been censored, I made notes as I read of words and passages which likely, I thought, might have been deleted or revised. Luckily, as it turns out, Scribner's attorney Horace Manges did my work for me by keeping a score sheet on which he recorded "259 fucks, 92 shits, and 5 pricks." The original manuscript, Hendrick says, shows 170 pages with changes or deletions, and he argues that the reprinting of these words restores the rhythm of Jones' prose. According to Hendrick, Jones' editors, Maxwell Perkins (who died before the novel was completed) and Burroughs Mitchell had no objections to the potentially controversial language in early drafts sent to them, but Jones was then "blindsided by Scribners' censorship based on its fear of Comstockery and of possible action by the post office," referring to the legacy of US Postal Inspector and anti-pornography crusader Anthony Comstock, who died in 1915 but whose influence persisted well into the twentieth century. In a letter to Mitchell, Jones tries to provide artistic justification for his use of "The Word," the one Mailer spelled "fug" in *The Naked and the Dead*. In another instance, Jones argues the necessity, in a specific scene, of the word "cunt" (861). He also objects to Mitchell's excising of a masturbation scene, also a wet dream scene, as well as a few others that the new text restores. Faithful to the truth-telling ethic of the literary realist, Jones wanted his novel to avoid sounding, he said, "like a historical novel of the *Amber* ilk which cunningly hints at everything but never has the guts to say anything." Jones' reference to Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber* (1944), a bodice-ripping romance set in seventeenth-century England, is a little puzzling since that novel dealt so frankly with sexual matters that it was banned in many states as pornographic. In defense of his own frank treatment of sexual themes, Jones states, "I don't care if anybody thinks I'm a dirty writer. Maybe I am."

Encountering this novel for the first time, and having advance knowledge that some gay scenes had originally been excised, I was particularly surprised by the frequent references to homosexuality among servicemen, so prevalent that had these scenes been entirely censored, virtually complete chapters

would have to have been cut. As Jones states in the Afterword, military life was defined by lacks: of women and money, for example. The lack of women drove soldiers into whorehouses or to their "shack jobs," but the lack of money to afford prostitutes drove many of the men into what Jones calls *"abortive homosexuality*," or "playing the queers" for free drinks and the occasional sexual encounter to relieve tension. In a letter to his brother, Jones complained about Manges' objection to the description of a picture of a hermaphrodite which was cut from the original manuscript. Other previously deleted scenes are one in which Maggio reveals having received money from a rich man to perform oral sex and one in which the Army conducts an investigation into homosexual activity among military personnel. One of many reasons Jones' novel is valuable to us now is as a testament to a lot of underground, or, more properly, closeted history of U.S. military culture in that time and place. Readers who already know the novel will likely find rereading it a rewarding experience. Those who, like me, are reading it for the first time will discover a work of accomplished artistry and tragic vision.