MAKING WAR WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS: HEMINGWAY, MAILER, AND O'BRIEN

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THE ACTUAL MAKING OF WAR is often more discussed in the realm of national and international politics than it is explored in relation to the actual fields of battle. At this macro-level, fighting—the actual perception of the making and waging of war—is conceived not as an individual experience but, instead, is interpreted as a meta-performance, capturing larger geo-political forces at battle. The making or crafting of war can also be understood as an individual experience that attempts to fashion an item that is accessed by, for, and within a community. In fact, the stories crafted of an individual experience of war are often viewed as being more powerful than narratives produced at the macro-level. John Limon expands this view: "war makes possible or helps make possible literary history" (4). For it is the stories of war, the individual experiences captured on the page that will bring the experience of war to the individual and the experience of war to the literary world.

There is no argument that war and going to war is a central theme, metaphor, and concept operating in the Western literary culture. In fact, there is a plethora of books and treatises and arguments which all attempt to locate a definitive statement about war and how it operates in the culture, generically, and in the literature of the culture, specifically. Yet, telling the story of war and battle is much more than just sharing a good story about a good and a bad guy fighting to the death, metaphoric or actual. Norman Mailer, like others in his generation, recognized and respected the layers involved in making war on the pages of his texts. Mailer observes, "I

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wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol . . . it (the book) was stimulated by a few war books that I had read" (*Paris Review*, par. 52). Mailer recognized the debt that he owed to the influences on his writing, sometimes with a conscious nod and at other times with angry jabs to those who came before him and those who made and crafted an experience of war in fiction.

The narrative crafting and making of war reflects on a history of influential texts. One could begin this overview with a nod to Homer and the other Greek originators of the war-centric epic. This piece, however, focuses on how the prototypical American masculine war authors served as catalysts for Mailer's crafting and making of the individualized and very subjective American war narrative. The American literary canon of war owes a great respect to the literary foundations provided by American war writers. David Lundberg in "The American Literature of War: The Civil War, World War I, and World War II" proclaims, "America's wars have been the source of an important body of literature and a theme for many of the nation's major writers, beginning with James Fenimore Cooper" (373).

Norman Mailer's fiction reflects a subjective quality, also tied to his "New Journalism." This subjective quality used in Mailer's war fiction and reporting owes a great debt to the war writings of the Civil War authors Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane. The crafting of war in Bierce and Crane represents an Americanized view of making war textual and visceral which Mailer picked up and deployed in his fiction—in particular, the realism of Ambrose Bierce and the naturalism of Stephen Crane. James Dawes in *The Language of War* observes that "wars are born and sustained in rivers of language about what it means to serve the cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity; and they are reintegrated into a collective historical self-understanding through a ritualistic over-plus of the language of commemoration" (15). Dawes' mention of the "self" in the narrative draws attention to and effectively connects to the evolving influence on the self in the war narratives of and following the Civil War. The self, in a large sense, was beginning to become more central to the crafting of war in literature than the prior focus on a collective experience. This shift to self appears to start with the crafting of war literature by figures like Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane.

To make or craft war on the page, Bierce attempted to capture the true visceral, almost photojournalistic quality of war. The literary making of war for Bierce was a visual self-construction—it involved a viewer, and it in-

volved the experience of the senses. The key to Bierce's capturing of war was in the individual's observations and how the series of observations established not just the experience being told, but that they also created the identity for the narrator's self. For instance, Bierce's narrator describes an individual soldier in the following passage by stating, "from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with shreds of flesh and splinters of bone" ("Chickamauga" 408). The gory image of a damaged human speaks volumes in its graphic silence. As the reader later discovers, the boy narrator is deaf—the focus on the damaged mouth therefore addresses both a realism of war and an identification of self. In the story the making of war involves a realistic, true-to-life capturing of an image of self that is separate from the communal, yet it operates to communicate information about the self.

Further, Bierce's textual control of images directly correlates to the novel use of photographs to document the battles of the Civil War, another support for the rise of the individual in the narrative understanding of war. An image of an individual in battle emphasizes an individual rather than a mass of soldiers. The most powerful images of war are the ones that contain the haunted eyes of a combatant. As Eleanor J. Harvey observes,

> They [Civil War Photographers] clearly saw their work as both documenting the war and interpreting it at the same time. This was a moment when photography emerged as a powerful visual force in both of those arenas. Images of bloated, dead bodies quelled the romantic desire for paintings of the conflict—the brutality and the body count helped make this an unpaintable war while it was happening. (*Council on Foreign Relations* para. 8)

Many Civil War writers appeared to be aware of the power of this new technology to focus or to refocus a viewer on the individual instead of on the group. As such, making war on the page for Bierce is focused on making war subjective and surreal, while visually and sensually stunning—much like the photographs of the period made war and the mementos of war so much more individualistic and therefore vivid.

For Stephen Crane's naturalistic writing, making war on the page was also about making and producing an individuated moral commentary on

the act of war. Crane's war-making projects a sense of the pessimism offered by naturalism onto and into the narrative. For Crane, the narrative representation of war was made in the text to capture neither a winner nor a loser. Kerry Cavanaugh asserts,

> The work is frequently considered to be the most realistic novel about the American Civil War, despite the fact that Crane was born six years after the war ended. *The Red Badge of Courage* is quite innovative because it chronicles war through a psychological narrative and focuses on emotional states instead of tactical matters. ("Stephen Crane" para. 8)

The war made and crafted on his page attempts to show the effects of war on the individual. The naturalistic idea of making war involved not so much a commentary on whether loss or victory was achieved. Instead, it appears to be about the small moments in war that demonstrate the tenuous and fragile place of a human in a community of war.

In Crane's penultimate war story, *The Red Badge of Courage,* the narrator observes, "there was a consciousness always of the presence of his comrades about him. He felt the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting. It was a mysterious fraternity born of the smoke and danger of death" (143). The textual act of making war for Crane captures a commentary that projects the pessimism of the world as viewed through the battered and tainted optimism of community. Furthermore, the focus on the role of the individual within the brotherhood of the battle expands the power operating in the burgeoning self in the war narrative.

The twentieth century brought forth the idea that no longer is war an experience of the few—that cannot be understood—now, war is the experience of and for all to witness. With the spread of photographs, of newspapers, of the telegraph, the telephone, and radio, the reporting of war changes, and as such, the literary "making of war" in fiction mirrors these changes. The idea of capturing war, of making war on the pages of the text, no longer merely captures the realism of the battle, the community of battle, but now it provides subjective commentary for the phenomenon of combat—the literary text will make war an intimate and eloquent palimpsest for the range of hu-

manity—attempting to truly capture the veracity of the experience, a very difficult task for any writer.

Perhaps there is not a greater influence on Mailer's crafting of war than Ernest Hemingway. While the authors' personalities occasionally conflicted, the influence of Hemingway's works, both fiction and non-fiction, had a profound effect on Mailer. One of the best expressions of Hemingway's advice on how to capture war and thus how to craft war on the page appears in one of his lesser-respected and read texts, *Across the River and into the Trees*. In the text, Hemingway's narrator expresses,

> He knew how boring any man's war is to any other man, and he stopped talking about it. They always take it personally, he thought. No one is interested in it, abstractly, except soldiers and there are not many soldiers. You make them, and the goods ones are killed, . . . They are always thinking of what they have seen and while you are talking they are thinking of what they will say and what it may lead to in their advancement or their privilege (29–30).

In this passage, one can observe the important elements that Mailer eventually embodies in his prose. In fact, Hemingway's desire to make war on the page not be something that exists only as realism nor as naturalism, but something different—a craft of making war so that it is all the more so personal yet so universal truly does shift the perspective. Mailer's works appear similarly to reflect this shift in perspective.

As Mailer was influenced, so too were the authors who followed him that were engaged in the project of making war on the page. To craft a narrative of war and to capture the scenes of battle requires an awareness of a brotherhood—a friendship, if you will—of those who will tell, listen, and share the tales of war. It is not my goal to say that Norman Mailer only reviewed the works of Bierce or Crane or Hemingway in light of his making war in his fiction, but it is my purpose to say that with a little help from their contributions, Mailer makes and crafts an understanding of war, in his texts, differently but with evidence pointing to the influence of the above writers. In fact, John M. Kinder suggests that Norman Mailer's goal in *The Naked and the Dead* is to "remind postwar readers of what was already being excised (both deliberately and inadvertently) from Americans' memory . . . Drawing

upon his own experience as an infantryman, Mailer takes great care to highlight the brutality of combat and the physical and mental abuse suffered by 'common soldiers' throughout the war" (191). Kinder's observations reflect on an impulse that burgeoned with the likes of Bierce and Crane, and a desire that rose in writers like Hemingway and subsequently, Mailer too.

The evolution occurring in Mailer's adaption of the literary war narrative emboldens a different type of making and crafting war on the page. This evolution references Bierce and Crane's shift to self and focus on the morality or lack thereof on the battlefield. In addition, the shift in Mailer also highlights a pessimism, a Modern sense of impotent frustration at war, embodied so carefully yet so carelessly in Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees.* Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* captures the various narrative miasmas operating in the American literary landscape in a profound fashion. For example, Mailer's narrator observes during an early battle scene in the novel with the figure of Brown stating that, "He was suffering an unreasonable panic. Whenever some combat started there was always a minute when he was completely unable to function, and did the first thing that occurred to him. . . . "—later the narrator captures Hennessey in battle: "This was like a movie, he thought" (*The Naked and the Dead* 35–36).

Mailer, later in *An American Dream,* makes and creates a sense of war as something to be personalized, individualized similar to the shift that occurred in Bierce and Crane. The narrator reflects on his experience in war observing, "When I steered us up the hill therefore to get pinned down in a bad, bad line, one hundred feet from the summit, a modest twin dome, a double hill with a German machine gun on one knoll and a German machine gun on the other, I was so ready to die in atonement I was not even scared" (3). The idea that one is prepared to die, to give the self over to the actions of the war reflects on recognition of crafting a war narrative that speaks of both the vagaries of war and the personal responsibility of being part of the battles. In a somewhat closeted fashion, an idea of personal responsibility in war narratives appears to take a role in Mailer's war fiction.

The focus in Mailer's and the other war narratives that were influenced by his war stories is very much related to the tension between responsibility of action and the vagaries of being on the field of battle. This tension between going to war a soldier while being aware of one's responsibility to self is very much reflected in the Vietnam era text by Michael Herr, *Dispatches.* Herr observes:

> Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything that you saw as you were for everything that you did (20).

The notion that you were not only responsible for the actions that you participated in, but that you were also responsible for what you saw and that there is a responsibility needing to speak and to craft a war narrative that gives a voice to that experience is new and also a source of guilt that erupts on the pages of the crafted war narratives of the time.

The addition or attention to guilt in light of one's actions also appears with Tim O'Brien in *They Things They Carried.* In the collection, O'Brien's narrator observes that,

> I was down there with him, inside him. I was part of the night. I was the land itself . . . I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead dumbfuck ex-pals of mine—all those pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon—I was the beast on their lips—I was the Nam—the horror, the war. (209)

Crafting war does not allow for a liberation of the experience, instead it prolongs the experience. In this prolonging—an immersion—the war narrative assumes a sense of power over the reader. The assumption reflects individualized power resulting from guilt of watching—an experience that corresponds to the emotions of the soldier.

Contemporary war writer Stephen Junger in his book *War* states, "The moral basis of the war doesn't seem to interest soldiers much, and its long term success or failure has a relevance of almost zero. Soldiers worry about those things about as much as farmhands worry about the global economy, which is to say, they recognize stupidity when it's right in front of them but they generally leave the big picture to others" (25). Like Herr and Mailer, Junger connects the notion that war is not so much crafted as it is witnessed, yet inherent in Junger's observations is the sense that making war for those

who have not been involves a focus on the individual, the solider at hand, per se. A true war story will never be about the macro, geo-political forces; it is instead about a teller and a listener—a voice speaking of and from the field of battle.

Mailer's focus on the traumas of war and experience reflects and creates in the narrative the testimony of questioning and confusion related to the trauma of war during the period. For Mailer, the narrative presentation of the traumas of war embodies knowledge of the incomprehensibility of the traumatic experience. Thus, as he constructs his structures of fiction, Mailer oscillates between reflecting a testimony based on experience of trauma and creating a fiction drawn from the impossibility of understanding the experience of trauma. James F. Dunnigan states in a book titled *How to Make War: A Comprehensive Guide to Modern Warfare in the 21st Century* that "every infantryman depends on his unit for physical, moral, mental, and medical support" (16). Mailer and those who come before and influenced his prose—and those who came after and looked up to him—all depend on each other as they attempt to craft and make war on the page, a page that is always more of a palimpsest than just a story.

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