BACK TO FORT BRAGG

WALTER LEWALLEN

> A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these have been the years of conformity and depression.
>
> "The White Negro"

WITH NORMAN MAILER, ONE OFTEN GETS THE FEELING that everything is an apology. Did he go to war so he could write the war novel? He reported to Fort Bragg with his heavy IQ test (Lennon 59). Now Fort Bragg is in the rear view mirror of American history. I am constantly going back to Fort Bragg.

I teach at a service university: it is a four-course per semester teaching load. I am expected to do some research, but one conference presentation a year earns me the highest evaluation that I can expect to achieve. I occasionally teach General Education sections of Contemporary Literature, a survey course. Very few English majors show up in these sections, so my readers are not necessarily eager for unfamiliar texts.

How can I work Mailer into the reading list? The *Armies of the Night* is the first thought. Over the last thirty years of my life, it is the book I have always associated with his name. It is a very good book for setting the stage for contemporary literature. The book does not really feel like a "novel as history," so it might go a long way toward introducing the formal issues and problems that contemporary literature poses for most readers. A summary formal question could well be: "Where have we gotten to on our journey of The American Novel from its rebirth as Realism in Twain, then swirling past the modern pillars of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and from its lookout toward Proust and Joyce? Perhaps Joyce is more prescient than other Modernist writers because of the formal properties of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans*

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 8, NO. 1, FALL 2014. Copyright © 2014. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

Wake. Yet Mailer's style continued with modernist experimentation. But how effective was it? Was Mailer, by making himself the center of his style, possibly culpable for the death of the author? In a passage I will come to again in this paper, he says of his generation of writers, "We've spent too much time exploring ourselves" (*Spooky* 163).

Armies is clearly a pillar of New Journalism. It veers along the borders of fiction. It includes an unstable author/protagonist at its center. Drunk on Saturday night, then up on Sunday and it is on to a somber, sober consideration of stakes—"History as Novel." It is a flawed but compelling advertisement for The Myth of the Author: the Writer with a capital W. There is a prizefight that Mailer stages with the figure of Lowell: the Writer vs. the Poet. All fascinating to me. But the first reason in my view to use *Armies* is the dire need for critical thinking about power and its implications

I am reading *Why Are We at War?* This book does as much to reveal the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century as *Armies* represents the 1960s. It is a simpler book. But in some ways perhaps things are simpler now: our politics have become more authoritarian, and less democratic—but that is a simplification. So of course *Armies* is a more complex project, assuming its intention was to reveal a zeitgeist. Locating the zeitgeist of the 1960s requires considerable work.

Mailer is important because he is steadfastly anti-war, although he is not a pacifist. Both books are anti-war books. One is more aimed at a specific war, the Vietnam War. The other is aimed more simply at the war machine. Mailer has no formal objectives to fry in his shorter work—it is straight exposition. And I think that the novel preceding *Armies*—*Why Are We in Vietnam?*—looks more at the war machine than *Armies*: more specifically the corporate, oedipal psychopathy that propels the narrator into Vietnam. Whereas *Armies* examines the anti-war machine, a remarkable double of the war machine—that we have multiple images to support this line of thinking:

1. the football helmeted protesters in flying wedge: armor and phalanx;
2. the picket lines of policemen, and the opposite, parodic lineup of hippies and intellectuals;
3. the insurgent desire to infiltrate the Pentagon;

4. the logistical matters planned by leaders and evolving haphazardly in the heat of confrontation;
5. Mailer as prisoner of war in the makeshift jail afterward.

On the other hand, in Mailer's twenty-first century work we encounter a concise psychoanalysis of the US war machine forty years later. For instance:

1. It is psychology of the "flag patriot";
2. It is the triggering event of 9/11 as intrusion of the Real onto our televisual simulacra of reality;
3. It is misunderstanding of Muslim psychology;
4. It is a kernel problem of the white male ego;
5. It is condensation of the military with fading white male sports supremacy;
6. It is displacement of democracy as ideal by empire as ideal.

But what chance do my students have with Mailer's complex reading of current affairs? I personally love it, but can they even begin to comprehend it? It is lucid to me, but is it lucid to them? There is a pedagogical challenge here.

The first thing I want my students to gain from Mailer's text is a good sense of what he means by "flag patriots," those who practice the non-critical patriotism which came (back) to prominence after 9/11.

READING PATRIOTISM

I doubt that my identity formation (as a reader) was anything like my student's reading development. My first serious period of reading was from about seven to fifteen. It began in the second grade with a hardback book entitled *The Flying Tigers*. A buddy had found a similar book about the air war in Europe. It was pure romance for me. I was infatuated with it and for years was devoted to reading about war, mostly nonfiction accounts. As a teenager my infatuation with war writing was somewhat displaced by my infatuation with science fiction, itself a highly militarized literature. In college I arrived at the modern novel, which tends to be much less militarized. (Mailer was on my radar, occasionally, but somehow I managed to avoid him in a significant way until recently.) However, my earliest formative reading clearly shaped me: I know a lot about American wars. Fortunately for me the Viet-

nam draft ended as I turned 18, so my knowledge of war is not by direct experience. Nevertheless, perhaps my reading knowledge of war was rather typical of Southern boys. Perhaps it is still typical for boys growing up in Alabama and Mississippi. But I did not really know anything about the causes of war. That southern ideological *crèche* infantilizes the boy, rendering him like Ambrose Bierce's deaf boy playing with a toy sword at Chickamauga. War is an oneiric and chimerical romance of heroism, a self-grasping complex in the mind of the child. Before anything else, we play at war as our training for it. Most of my students are women, many 18 and just out of high school—and they seem less over-determined by the war machine. On the other hand, instead of reading about war, my male students have, almost invariably, immersed themselves in war games. Or experienced war itself. Or they have joined the ROTC. Few students, however, have looked for the causes of war.

So when I read this small book by Mailer, it is Eureka experience. I live in a region of North Carolina where the main economic engine is Fort Bragg. I refer to it as the Death Industry. At Fort Bragg, we flush soldiers out of country to go kill people in other parts of the world. It is a bastion of our new warrior caste. It is safe to say that flag patriotism is off the charts in this region of the country. Every third person's livelihood more or less depends on it. War boosts the economy here and everyone knows it. There was no burst housing bubble in and around Fayetteville. I think a third or possibly half my students come from the southeast corner of the state, so they know something about the war economy—whether they realize that they know it or not. Many of them have military parents and my school serves many servicemen, servicewomen and veterans. And the school itself, in a market mentality, promotes an image of flag patriotism in order to attract military consumers. Of course, I am using the corporate discourse ironically here. I think that we at UNCP are doing our servicemen, servicewomen and ROTC students a great disservice by promoting flag imagery. It probably even contributes to the suicide problem that our military personnel and veterans now face. And it certainly promotes a lingering war fever, always ready to intensify at the suggestion of any possibility of action, such as the current Syria situation (in the fall of 2013).

Mailer formed his analysis in *Why Are We at War?* in the period of time between 9/11 and the beginning of the Iraq war in March of 2003. The interview material and speeches and the actual texts that comprise the book were

produced in the latter half of 2002 and early 2003. One interesting part of the book is his analysis of Colin Powell's UN speech that took place on 5 Feb 2003 (37 ff). Mailer spends three or four pages discussing his own appraisal of Saddam Hussein and then he remarks that Powell's speech was primarily intended to get Americans off the fence. Oddly, he ignores what became the black spot on Powell's reputation: the speech's false. Rather than cocked up claims about WMD. And many commentators at the time were pointing to the fact that the intelligence was most likely falsified. Mailer does, however, do a good job in debunking the supposed links among Iraq and Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden.[1]

For my students, however, perhaps the book will provide some critical awareness of events of which they are mostly only dimly aware. Mailer goes to some effort to measure the moral and spiritual dimensions of 9/11 and its aftermath. Many of Mailer's speculations on the riptides of democracy and its negations are proving prescient: empire, loss of liberty via "Homeland Security," the absurdity of trying to force democracy on Iraq, etc, etc.

Describing one of Mailer's later *tête-à-têtes*, Lennon quotes a passage from *The Spooky Art* that Michiko Kakutani liked about American writers. Mailer says:

> Writers aren't taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly myself. We haven't written the books that should have been written. We've spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven't done the imaginative work that could have helped define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding. (Lennon 726)

This point reminds me of one of my own complaints. After teaching literature for many years, I often catch myself judging texts on whether I think that they do anything more than diagnose our problematic identity. *Why Are We at War?* is largely a diagnostic work. Nevertheless, it is also a plea for change, and a claim that we needed to avoid that particular train of events taking us to that sorry war. It also pointedly makes the case in Mailer's sober style that democracy was and should remain the primary ideal and working aim of American culture. That is a claim that I want my students to understand and face.

NOTE

1. Mailer's missing of the beat on Powell makes me want to know more about Mailer's attitude toward US intelligence work at that time.

WORKS CITED

Lennon, J. Michael. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. Print.

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. New York: Plume, 1968. Print.

_____. *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*. New York: Random, 2003. Print.

_____. "The White Negro." *Dissent* Fall 1957. Web. 1 November 2013. Print.

_____. *Why Are We at War*? New York: Random, 2003. Print.

_____. *Why Are We in Vietnam*. New York: Putnam, 1967. Print.