

AHAB AND ISHMAEL AT WAR:
THE PRESENCE OF *MOBY-DICK* IN
THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

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IN 1963, FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICATION of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Norman Mailer discussed Barbary Shore and E. M. Forster in his *Paris Review* interview with Steven Marcus. “Forster,” said the forty-year-old Mailer, “after all, had a developed view of the world; I did not. I think I must have felt at the time as if I would never be able to write in the third person until I developed a coherent view of life.”¹ This of course suggests that the twenty-five-year-old author who wrote *The Naked and the Dead* in the third person had such a view. Mailer’s remarks in another interview, twelve years earlier, imply that the literary influence that most contributed to his confidence in presenting his own “coherent view of life” in his first novel was *Moby-Dick*:

I don’t think of myself as a realist. That terrible word naturalism. It was my literary heritage—the things I learned from Dos Passos and Farrell. I took naturally to it, that’s the way one wrote a book. But I really was off on a mystic kick. Actually—a funny thing—the biggest influence on *Naked* was *Moby-Dick* . . . I was

sure everyone would know. I had Ahab in it, and I suppose the mountain was Moby Dick.²

The whole question of influence is, of course, particularly lively when it comes to a writer like Mailer. Whether seriously evaluating contemporaries and precursors,³ or playing with the presence of precursors in his own work,⁴ no contemporary writer is so explicitly competitive and so painfully self-conscious of “the burden of the past” as Norman Mailer. It is no accident that he is one of the very few novelists singled out in *The Anxiety of Influence*. “Any reader of *Advertisements for Myself*,” writes Harold Bloom, “may enjoy the frantic dances of Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that it is, after all, Hemingway all the way.”⁵ The central implication of my argument is that, in a more liberating sense than Bloom’s, it is Melville, not Hemingway, all the way: that Hemingway, like Mailer’s other immediate predecessors, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Farrell, and Dos Passos, is no more than a simulacrum of the real giant for all ambitious American novelists—Melville, Unlimited.

For Mailer, Melville acts as what W. Jackson Bate calls an “ancestral” influence,⁶ providing him a natural resource which he exploits in order to exceed Hemingway’s limitations in terms of both style and metaphysics.⁷ It is Hemingway’s life more than his work that looms large for Mailer,⁸ as does Mailer himself for other writers.⁹ Indeed, if we are to believe Frederick Exley, Mailer has acted as one of Bloom’s Covering Cherubs¹⁰ by merely talking a good game:

Fifteen years before in *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer had told us that, like Bernard Shaw and Capote, he was embarked on a journey of self aggrandizement and, if necessary, was going to pound the fact of his imagined superiority into our feeble domes. But he had also revealed—a bluff one had believed—that he was into a ten year project out of which he’d come bearing an orange crate of manuscript containing something like a Proustian evocation of the entire sexual spectrum. He hadn’t of course delivered, and despite the occasional flashes of brilliance in his “new journalism,” which was neither new nor journalism, I was with my upcountry, whadda-yuh-mean-by-that? mentality perfectly prepared to demand of him what had happened,

readily poised to point out that he hadn't made good on a promise he'd made me and a million other acolytes who, if not actually writing, were even then nursing our drinks, thinking of putting down words, and being dreadfully intimidated by the grandioseness of Mailer's stated designs, an intimidation I can understand now was utterly calculated for just such a purpose.¹¹

If we put aside the gap between design and execution, Exley here acts Goethe to Mailer's Shakespeare. "And where," asked Goethe, "would an earnest soul, capable of appreciating genius, find the courage even to set pen to paper, if we were aware of such unfathomable and unreachable excellence already in existence!"¹² But when we return from the question of literary intimidation to the methodical exploration of literary influence, it becomes clear that Mailer's exploitation of *Moby-Dick* in all of his fiction, particularly in both the shape and the substance of *The Naked and the Dead*, is pervasive and profound.¹³ Furthermore, the particular terms of Mailer's wrestling with Melville illustrate the particular routes any writer or reader can follow to travel from the present to the American literary past.

The presence of *Moby-Dick* animates *The Naked and the Dead* in seven important ways, four of which are mainly direct uses or adaptations, while the others are reactions against, swerves from, or completions of Melville's epic.¹⁴ The most important of the direct influences is that the egotistical lust for power, the character trait Mailer focuses on in all of his novels, is so directly derived from *Moby-Dick* that it may be justly labeled, "the Ahab within." Second, Mailer adapts Melville's ideas about the meaning of the large external forces that influence the action. Third, Mailer derives the general rhetorical structure of his novel from Melville's. Finally, Mailer appropriates from Melville various epic techniques to make the central action typical and paradigmatic, so that it can carry implications that apply to all of American society.

These four similarities point up the ways Mailer reacts against Melville. First, in terms of the ideas implicit in the two stories, Mailer is far more pessimistic than Melville. Second, Mailer shrinks the magnitude of his Ahab-like figures in three ways: by eliminating any trace of Ahab's idealistic and quixotically moral, albeit destructive, desire to confront and annihilate evil; by splitting the Ahab figure into a pair of intellectual and physical counterparts; and by implying that Ahab's desires are universal rather than unique, that we

all wrestle with the Ahab within us. More important than the thematic changes and closely related to the moral diminution and universalizing of the Ahab figures is the fundamental change in plot. In *Moby-Dick* only protagonist Ahab is driven by the lust for power, and his story is a tragic plot¹⁵ narrated by an observer who has no personal interaction with the protagonist. The plot of *The Naked and the Dead*, like those of Mailer's subsequent novels (with the qualified exception of *The Deer Park*¹⁶) is a plot of education towards self-awareness,¹⁷ in which the protagonist recognizes and comes to terms with the Ahab within him.

This plot difference explains the contrast between, on the one hand, Starbuck's conflict with Ahab over what Ahab ought to *do* and, on the other, the debate between Lieutenant Hearn and General Cummings over who or what Hearn *is*. Imagine *Moby-Dick* with Ishmael as protagonist instead of Ahab, and with a climax that consists of Ishmael's recognition that he shares Ahab's egotistical urges instead of a climax that depicts Ahab's confrontation with Moby Dick, and you have the sort of story that engages Mailer. The depiction of Lieutenant Hearn's conflict with General Cummings in part two of *The Naked and the Dead*, and with Sergeant Croft in part three, are the first two examples in Mailer's work of the careful tracing of the process through which a character achieves this sort of self-awareness. This depiction is at the heart of Mailer's art.

Ishmael's analysis of the roots of Ahab's character in *Moby-Dick* parallels the narrator's analysis of Cummings and Croft, the two characters in *The Naked and the Dead* who most resemble Ahab, Croft taking on Ahab's physical strength and Cummings providing the articulateness, intelligence, and self-awareness present in Ahab and absent from Croft.¹⁸ All are driven by an irresistible lust for power and an enormous egotism that enables them to ignore the desires and sufferings of other inferior mortals. The "grand, ungodly, god-like" Ahab,¹⁹ who would strike the sun if it insulted" him (*MD*, 144), and General Cummings agree that man's strongest urge is, in Cummings's words, "to achieve God" (*ND*, 255). Echoing Ahab's solipsistic meditation on the gold doubloon, Cummings sees himself in that mountain that Mailer, in the 1951 interview, associates with Moby Dick and that means so much to Croft. Ahab observes,

There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers,
and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as

proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab (*MD*, 359).

Similarly, Cummings tells himself, “There’s an affinity . . . If one wanted to get mystical about it, the mountain and he understood each other. Both of them, from necessity, were bleak and alone, commanding the heights” (*ND*, 438). With one temporary exception each, Ahab, Croft, and Cummings isolate themselves from human contact. Ahab tells Starbuck, “Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors” (*MD*, 452)! Like Ahab, who remarks the ‘mechanical’ bravery of his crew (*MD*, 459), Croft and Cummings regard their subordinates—whether a platoon or an entire army—as machine-like²⁰ extensions of their wills and completely expendable (*ND*, 237). Behind this willingness to allow their wills to rule the desires of others stand similar appraisals of human nature. Cummings’s premise, according to Hearn, “that man was a sonofabitch” (*ND*, 455) parallels Croft’s superior contempt toward nearly all other men” (*ND*, 124) and restates Ahab’s more formal proposition that the permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man . . . is sordidness” (*MD*, 184). This cluster of feelings and beliefs, the Ahab within,” gets its most eloquent formulation in parallel passages excerpted from Ishmael’s analysis of Ahab in the chapter called “Moby Dick” and from General Cummings’s reflections after he fires a cannon:

Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them. . . . All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil to crazy old Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick (*MD*, 160).

Cummings's thoughts, which reverberate with Ahab's solipsism, projection, and power, even echo the rhythm of Melville's prose:

All the deep dark urges of man, the sacrifices on the hilltop, and the churning lusts of the night and sleep, weren't all of them contained in the shattering screaming burst of a shell, the man-made thunder and light? . . . All the roaring complex of odors and sounds and sights, multiplied and remultiplied by all the guns of the division, was contained in a few cells of his head, the faintest crease of his brain. All of it, all the violence, the dark coordination had sprung from his mind. In the night, at that moment, he felt such power that it was beyond joy; he was calm and sober (*ND*, 440).

It is no accident that Hearn's undergraduate thesis is *A Study of the Cosmic Urge in Herman Melville*.

The second way *Moby-Dick* influences *The Naked and the Dead* involves Mailer's appropriation of the fundamental disagreement between Ishmael and Ahab about morality, epistemology, and metaphysics. Mailer applies to history the same alternatives Melville applies to Moby Dick. If there is some transcendental meaning to the universe, believes Ahab, it is evil. Ishmael finds this idealism comprehensible but morally dangerous. He denies transcendental meaning, be it good or evil, and locates meaning in an empiricism based upon multiple perspectives and morality in the "mortal inter-indebtedness" that infuriates Ahab (*MD*, 392), and the "attainable felicity" of "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (*MD*, 349). Mailer's application of these alternatives to history yields the proposition that history, like Ahab's cosmos, like Moby Dick himself, is either evil (that is, leading towards totalitarianism) or incomprehensible.

Whereas Melville typically presents his views in pairs of chapters that alternately present Ishmael's and Ahab's views, Mailer embeds his alternatives in his plot by allowing chance to qualify the victories of his matched villains, Cummings and Croft, both full of passionate intensity. The incompleteness of their victory slightly qualifies the final choral hopelessness of the members of the platoon. For the individual, for the platoon, for the army, and presumably, for mankind, time and chance happen to them all. Croft,

after all, does not climb the white whale of a mountain because he has the bad luck to smash into a hornet nest and so misses “some tantalizing revelation” (*ND*, 552). Cummings, with his “almost unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action” (*ND*, 62), in the end must fight the recognition that the victory “had been accomplished by a random play of vulgar good luck larded into a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend” (*ND*, 555). The most willful and Ahab-like of all the characters thus acknowledges to his dismay the accuracy of Ishmael’s sense of the interaction among “chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together” (*MD*, 185). The resistance Cummings encounters from one sergeant (Lanning), one lieutenant (Hearn), and the army as a whole—“The men resisted him, resisted change, with maddening inertia” (*ND*, 556)—suggests that the triumph of fascism is not so inevitable as totalitarian theorist Cummings would like, and an uncertain future seems almost as plausible as a totalitarian one.

Although the plots of the two novels are fundamentally different, the overall rhetorical organization of *The Naked and the Dead* is the third important quality influenced by *Moby-Dick*. Both books break into three basic parts: an introduction to the world of the novel; the presentation of conflicting philosophical points of view intercut with an anatomy of the business—whaling or war—of the novel; and a focused physical action—the final pursuit of Moby Dick or the extended reconnaissance patrol—which is meant to carry, as parable or paradigm, the philosophical and moral weight of all that comes before.²¹ Of course, the basic plot change qualifies the neatness of this organizational connection between the two books because of the shift in protagonist from Ahab-Cummings-Croft to Ishmael-Hearn. Hearn is also, to some extent, a snobbish amalgam of Ishmael and Starbuck. This makes it possible for Mailer to dramatize the Cummings-Hearn conflict in both metaphysical and moral terms, whereas, in *Moby-Dick*, only the moral conflict between Ahab and Starbuck is dramatically rendered: Ishmael never challenges Ahab to a debate concerning matters of metaphysics and epistemology.²²

The way in which the general organization of both books gives significance to the focused actions that close them also illustrates Mailer’s fourth use of *Moby-Dick*: as a source of epic techniques for expanding the main plot of the war novel, Hearn’s journey towards self-awareness, from special case to representative paradigm. As Melville uses whaling as a paradigmatic

nineteenth-century American industry, so Mailer exploits World War II in the Pacific as a typical American twentieth-century activity. Like the Pequod, an army provides an efficient setting for confronting all sorts of men from all sorts of backgrounds under conditions of stress, providing thereby the easy sort of microcosm²³ so familiar and so often reduced to cliché in war movies. This condition allows, of course, for generalization: if a number of characters come to conclusions that share one element, that element becomes applicable to the society at large, particularly if each character is both typical and individualized. Early in the novel, for example, paralleling Melville's use of the doubloon in *Moby-Dick* (MD, 358–63), Mailer exploits the soldiers' reactions to a sudden monsoon to present representative attitudes from the bottom to the top of the army hierarchy. While the General's response, that "the storm had thwarted him" (ND, 85), is as solipsistic as Ahab's to the doubloon, the responses of the common soldiers express their weary familiarity with futile efforts (ND, 77–82).

But Mailer does not stop at these fairly realistic methods of making individual experience representative. While his departures from realism do not approach the radical experimentation of *Moby-Dick*, Mailer does interrupt the synchronic flow of the narrative with two sorts of nonrealistic choric intrusions: four light Chorus chapters on topics ranging from "Women" to "What Do We Do When We Get Out," and ten Time Machine flashbacks into the characters' civilian lives, which are all stories of the thwarted or ironically fulfilled American Dream. These intrusions facilitate his presentation of representative perspectives.²⁴ But Mailer's main method of making us generalize from Hearn's case is his own: ingredients of Hearn's experiences and realizations recur in the experiences of the other members of his platoon who amount to a severely limited "Anacharsis Clootz deputation," certainly a much narrower sample than the Pequod's crew (MD, 108). The extreme conditions of the patrol culminate, in the last fifty pages of the novel, in a cascade of ironic events and bitter realizations, which share the themes of futility, disillusionment, hopelessness, and absurdity.

Platoon member Polack Czienwicz's comment, "And we broke our ass for nothin'" (ND, 549), catches the dominant note. Proto-hippie Red Valsen, whose relationship with Croft is a nonintellectual parallel of Hearn's relationship with Cummings and whom Hearn perceives as "probably worth talking to" (ND, 339), attempts to defy Croft and, like Hearn, is defeated and humiliated:

He was licked. That was all there was to it. At the base of his shame was an added guilt. He was glad it was over, glad the long contest with Croft was finished, and he could obey orders with submission, without feeling that he must resist. This was the extra humiliation, the crushing one. Could that be all, was that the end of all he had done in his life? Did it always come to laying down a load (*ND*, 542)?

The physically weak, snobbish, “modern” Jewish intellectual, Roth, with his “familiar wistful urge for somebody he could talk to seriously” (*ND*, 42), learns and accepts the impossibility of discarding his roots, reacts with “a magnificent anger” (*ND*, 515), loses his fear of the others, and plummets to his death, dying (like Hearn) before any character change can take hold. On the other hand, the physically strong, traditional Jew, Goldstein, sustained through the long ordeal of carrying the dying Wilson by his strong sense of his roots, at the end believes “all the sufferings of the Jews came to nothing” and is left with “nothing but a vague anger, a deep resentment, and the origins of a vast hopelessness” (*ND*, 531). Wilson, golden-haired, exuberant, life-loving, successful—at cards, sex, drinking, hustling, fixing machines—dies from Japanese bullets in his belly, already rotting from the venereal disease his love-making unluckily engendered. But perhaps the bitterest and most pathetic case of all is that of Ridges, the ignorant, inarticulate, deeply religious farm boy, whose simple faith is assaulted and finally shattered:

Ridges felt the beginning of a deep and unending bitterness. It was not fair. The one time they had got a decent crop it had been ruined by a wild rainstorm. God’s way. He hated it suddenly. What kind of God could there be who always tricked you in the end?

The practical joker.

He wept out of bitterness and longing and despair; he wept from exhaustion and failure and the shattering naked conviction that nothing mattered (*ND*, 530–31).

As if all this were not enough, the narrator provides the collective clincher:

The patrol was over and yet they had so little to anticipate. The months and years ahead were very palpable to them. They were

still on the treadmill; the misery, the ennui, the dislocated horror. . . . Things would happen and time would pass, but there was no hope, no anticipation. There would be nothing but the deep cloudy dejection that overcast everything (*ND*, 547).

Implicit in these realizations, as well as in the special nature of Mailer's adaptations of Melville's ideas, is the first important difference between the two novels: Mailer's vision is far more pessimistic than Melville's. Absent from *The Naked and the Dead* but present in *Moby-Dick* is an optimism that stimulates what Charles Olson in *Call Me Ishmael* calls the "finest rhetoric of democracy,"²⁵ an optimism that passionately opposes the satanic grandeur of Ahab's vision and provides the moral counterpart to Ishmael's relativistic epistemology. In *The Naked and the Dead*, in contrast, the imaginative energy of Ahab is located only in the destructive agents, Cummings and Croft. The heroes, not the villains, of Mailer's subsequent novels grapple with that tantalizing revelation that eludes Croft (*ND*, 552).

There is a measure of dignity in the men's endurance: the army resists Cummings, Hearn remains an anarchist to the end, and Goldstein and Ridges become unlikely buddies. And though he dismisses it immediately with "Aaah, fug. All they knew was to cut each other's throats," Red Valsen feels "the first nebulae of an idea, but he could not phrase it. If they stuck together . . ." (*ND*, 548). Not only does Croft's yearning for that tantalizing revelation temper his immorality, but he even—unlike Ahab—realizes "that he could not have gone without" the others (*ND*, 552). These events and realizations presumably help explain Mailer's wishful claim that the novel "has a good deal of hope."²⁶ But all of these hopeful intimations become bare cracks in a totalitarian wall when measured against Melville's optimism:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality (*MD*, 104)!

Such language is alien to *The Naked and the Dead*. Instead, the abstract debate between Hearn and Cummings in the first part of the novel and the physical action in the last part culminate in no hope for individual nobility or political justice, no hope for imaginative grandeur that connects rather than isolates.

The only character in the novel who even comes close to nobility is Lieutenant Robert Hearn, the protagonist. Given the pervasive use of *Moby-Dick* and the fact that the war novel as a genre bristles with potential external actions, Mailer's decision to focus on Hearn's journey towards self-awareness, rather than on the adventures of either of the "Ahab's" of the novel, is crucial and revealing. This choice is the single most important swerve from *Moby-Dick* and demands close examination not only because of the care with which Mailer renders Hearn's journey but also because of the intimacy between the plot choice and secondary transformations of *Moby-Dick*: the increased pessimism; the moral shrinking and the splitting of the Ahab-figure; the choice of history over the cosmos as the relevant macrocosm; and, most important, the implication that Ahab's power lust is typical, not exceptional. Having fastened on this internal education plot, Mailer intensifies and complicates the story when he makes the central trait that Hearn must come to recognize—namely, the Ahab within him—also the very part of his psyche he would most deny.²⁷

These formal decisions immediately suggest not only the origins of Mailer's continuing engagement with internal wars, but also the moral premises that shape the rhetoric of all of his fiction. The moral test a character moving towards self-awareness confronts is whether he will accept or deny whatever traits his self-examination dredges up to consciousness and whether he will express or deny them in action. This sort of test implies that courage, rather than, say, benevolence or intelligence, will be the essential virtue and, further, that the measure of a character's courage will be internal, specifically, the character's willingness to confront whatever truths about himself he likes least. The beginning of enlightenment in this sort of plot is the willingness to accept complex and painful truths about one's inner nature. For such a plot to have intensity, the writer would have to create characters with potential for both courageous awareness and cowardly denial. Since the central action is internal, a further potential complication in the action results from the difficulty in distinguishing rationalization from reasonableness from truth. One technique for dealing with this sort of internal

conflict—the method, in fact, that Mailer chooses again and again—is to provide an antagonist in whom the hero's crucial internal trait is manifest in order to provide an external conflict that would stimulate the fundamental internal one. These sorts of problems and solutions pervade all of Mailer's novels and make their first appearance in Hearn's story, which begins to unfold in part two of *The Naked and the Dead*.

Before focusing in on Hearn, however, as Melville uses Ishmael in the first twenty-five chapters of *Moby-Dick* to introduce the whaling world of his epic, so Mailer introduces the world of his novel in part one with an account of the adventures of the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon (recon) during the invasion that begins the American campaign against the Japanese-held fictional Pacific island, Anopopei. After this overture, the plot divides neatly into two additional parts: part two, which intercuts Lieutenant Hearn's conflict with General Cummings and the actions of recon and some officers during the first half of the Anopopei campaign, and part three, predominantly concerned with Hearn's conflict with Sergeant Croft on a long patrol. The development of the plot consists of what Hearn learns about himself from these conflicts. Mailer's painstaking depiction of the stages of Hearn's inexorable movement towards self-awareness is proportional to the enormous resistance Hearn puts up against accepting the Ahab within him. In other words, the formal swerve from a tragic to an education plot and the thematic shift from one Ahab to a world of Ahabs feed each other dialectically.

The first movement of the plot is intellectual: totalitarian theorist Cummings tries to make passive, leftist Hearn his disciple; Hearn defies the General who defeats and humiliates the rebellious lieutenant, forcing him to reappraise his own character. This defiance leads Cummings to assign Hearn to command recon on a long patrol behind enemy lines. The account of this patrol in part three not only provides a new opponent for Hearn in Croft—a psychopathic, shrewd, nonintellectual variation on Cummings—but also provides an arena of physical action that serves as the testing ground of Hearn's new understanding of himself. The plot acquires some special grace because Hearn's first climactic insight into his Ahab, simultaneous with his recognition that he and Cummings are “both the same” (*ND*, 309), results from his having been defeated by the General, while his second insight, that he is “just another Croft” (*ND*, 451), results from his victory over Croft in their battle for the leadership of the platoon. Thus, only after a realization

that follows a victory does he go beyond awareness to a moral decision that is the first step towards the transformation of his character in a manner appropriate to his new level of awareness; in other words, it takes a full and honest recognition of his Ahab to enable Hearn to choose the identity and values of Ishmael.

Mailer divides the tale of Cummings's attempted intellectual seduction²⁸ into five acts (*ND*, 55–69, 84–90, 130–45, 236–58, and 299–316). Nowhere is the sharpness of the formal swerve from a tragic plot to a plot of thought so clear as in this section of the novel. There is no equivalent of Starbuck's cry, "Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home!" (*MD*, 444). Clearly, if Starbuck's plea had succeeded, Ahab would have headed home. In contrast, any attempt to imagine the terms of a Hearn victory—that Cummings reject fascism for democracy, that Cummings believe that power rises from a people to their government—reveals not only the radicalism of the formal change but also the utter inconceivability, in contrast even to Ahab, of a Cummings change of heart. Cummings's object is that Hearn recognize and acknowledge that, as the General puts it, "you're a reactionary just like me" (*ND*, 68). His three-pronged strategy matches the ethical appeal, emotional appeal, and appeal to reason of formal rhetoric: repeated demonstrations of his own brilliance and efficiency that elicit admiration—even awe in those who witness him in action; petty tasks he assigns to Hearn to force him to experience, then recognize, their kinship; and direct presentations of his theories.

Although Hearn admirably and easily puts down bigoted Colonel Conn during his first appearance in the novel, he is soon revealed to be a tarnished Ishmael. Like Ishmael, Hearn tries to understand the nature of things. Ishmael is stirred by the "mystery" in Ahab (*MD*, 77). Similarly, "it was the riddle of what made the General tick that kept Hearn on." Unlike Ishmael, however, it is not richness of meaning that motivates him: once he finds "the shoddy motive," he loses interest (*ND*, 64). Like "the strange awe" of Ahab awakened in Ishmael by Peleg (*MD*, 77), so Hearn feels "awe perhaps" when he witnesses Cummings's "almost unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action" (*ND*, 62). But, unlike Ishmael, Hearn's awe is laced with resentment.

On the other hand, Cummings, like Ahab, "covertly" relishes the awe he inspires (*ND*, 90; *MD*, 147, 425). Furthermore, if we substitute "musket" for "gun" in the parable about shooting a defenseless man, which Cummings

presents as a preview to his principles in their first encounter and as the point of Hearn's humiliation in their fourth (*ND*, 256), we quickly realize that Cummings's conclusions apply as neatly to Ahab and Starbuck in Ahab's cabin (*MD*, 394) as to his own little parable. We can imagine Cummings's words on Ahab's lips and the General's ideas in the captain's mind. "The fact that you're holding the gun and the other man is not is no accident," says Cummings. "It's a product of everything you've achieved, it assumes that if . . . you're aware enough, you have the gun when you need it" (*ND*, 67).

Prodged by Cummings's masterful manipulations, which like a successful siege press Hearn towards either surrender or suicidal counterattack, Hearn repeats a cycle of insight, guilt, defiance, and defeat in the third and fourth acts of their battle. Boxed into feeling "the emotional prejudices of his class" (*ND*, 133), Hearn begins to resent enlisted men so intensely that he comes almost to believe, to paraphrase Ahab, that the permanent constitutional condition of the enlisted man is sordidness (*MD*, 184). His awareness of this prejudice pricks his conscience, leads him to question the purity of his motives for attacking the bigoted colonel, and triggers childish defiance of Cummings when he realizes that every one of his responses had been anticipated.

Pretty well routed intellectually in the third act (*ND*, 138–40, 143), Hearn does score on a personal level when he reacts with coldness and revulsion to Cummings's self-pitying confession that his "wife is a bitch" (*ND*, 144), and when he implicitly locates Cummings's shoddy motive in homosexuality (*ND*, 144–45). If this is Cummings's "humanities" (*MD*, 77, 443–44), then both Cummings's sniveling and Hearn's brutality mark Mailer's ruthless excising of human moral possibilities present in *Moby-Dick*.

No personal counterattack sullies Cummings's victory in their climactic fourth encounter. His triumph is complete on both the intellectual and the emotional fronts. Humiliated and terrified (*ND*, 237) by a temporarily "gone sour" military campaign (*ND*, 236), Cummings lavishes all the strategic brilliance, tactical efficiency, and attention to detail he customarily applies to military matters on the petty tasks and ploys (*ND*, 238–46) of his personal campaign to force Hearn to self-awareness. Like Iago, Cummings's skill is proportional to his victim's resistance. The collision between Hearn's resistance to recognizing his kinship with Cummings and confronting his Ahab, and Cummings's consummate manipulations pushes Hearn towards his climactic act of defiance.

The act itself, the grinding of a cigarette butt into the immaculate floor of the General's tent (*ND*, 248), is the first of a series of such actions in Mailer's novels, the most memorable of which is Stephen Rojack's stroll along Barney Kelly's parapet: acts that get their significance from the agreement of the participants to bestow significance on them. The contrast between these skirmishes and Ahab's war against the white whale is a measure of Mailer's struggle to give moral weight to a diminished thing. Before Cummings ruthlessly retaliates by forcing Hearn to pick up the butt (*ND*, 256), he fully articulates the historical, psychological, moral, and political correlatives of his own raging Ahab: the future is fascist (*ND*, 253); "man's deepest urge is omnipotence"; "the only morality is a power morality"; power "can only flow from the top down" (*ND*, 255). Imagine Ishmael a witness to this scene, and his description of Ahab glorying over the compass applies equally well to Cummings elated by his victory over Hearn: "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride" (*MD*, 425).

In *Moby-Dick* Ishmael's views are presented at least as strongly as Ahab's. In Mailer's novel, the intellectual debate ends with Hearn's defeat. Cummings's lectures, actions, assignments, and demonstrations get Hearn, in the wake of his defiance and humiliation, to question seriously his muddled liberal socialist ideology and, at the same time, force him to discover that he is less courageous and more vain than he had thought—barely distinguishable, emotionally and intellectually, from Cummings. Before their final encounter, the proposition, "Man had to destroy God in order to achieve Him, equal Him" (*ND*, 308), crosses Hearn's mind, and he realizes that "there were times when the demarcation between their minds was blurred for him," and he reluctantly acknowledges the Cummings-Ahab within him:

Divorced of all the environmental trappings, all the confusing and misleading attitudes he had absorbed, he was basically like Cummings. . . . Cummings had been right. They were both the same, and it had produced first the intimacy, the attraction they had felt toward each other, and then the hatred (*ND*, 309).

On the patrol in part three, forced to act, not reflect, Hearn's actions and decisions confirm this sense of similarity to Cummings and deepen his intimacy with his Ahab. Unlike the intellectual conflict with Cummings, the external battle for leadership with Croft proceeds through many small stages,

not five decisive acts, and, instead of defeats, Hearn's victories stimulate the completion of his understanding of himself. His first clear victory over Croft, when he forces Croft to apologize to Private Roth for killing a hurt bird Roth had adopted (*ND*, 413–15), appears to be an unambiguously moral act until Hearn realizes, "Cummings had probably felt the same way when he had obeyed the order to pick up the cigarette butt" (*ND*, 415). Similarly, only after he wrests effective command of the platoon away from Croft, when he in effect becomes Croft-Cummings-Ahab, does he decide to go back and resign his commission (*ND*, 451–52). He realizes with disgust not merely that he still wants Cummings's approval, but

beyond Cummings, deeper now, was his own desire to lead the platoon. It had grown, ignited suddenly, become one of the most satisfying things he had ever done. He could understand Croft's staring at the mountain through the field glasses or killing the bird. When he searched himself, he was just another Croft.

Further, he is one of the solipsistic radicals who, as Cummings said, "want to remake the world, but they never admit they want to remake it in their own image"; he's "not a phony but a Faust" (*ND*, 451) whose deepest urge, like that of Cummings (*ND*, 255) and Croft (*ND*, 335) and Ahab himself, is omnipotence.

This modern alienated Ishmael has a much harder time than his forbear. Though Hearn's motivation was simply to understand "the riddle of what made the General tick" (*ND*, 64), he winds up discovering that beneath his own liberal hopes and pieties lurk the impulses of that "monster" Cummings, the worst impulses of Ahab himself. But the impulses and ideas are only part of the man, and the presence of evil impulses towards power—towards the Ahab within him—does not doom Hearn (or any of us) to evil actions; rather it makes special and difficult demands on his courage. Though strongly tempted, instead of giving in to his desire for power and his understandable delight in leadership, Hearn, after one last compromise (*ND*, 453), in full recognition of the difficulty of untangling "the rationalization from what was valid" (*ND*, 454), decides that "for whatever reason, you had to keep resisting. You had to do things like giving up your commission" (*ND*, 456). The pure urge for power is contemptible and though his reasons are "probably lousy . . . it was even lousier to lead men for obviously bad mo-

tives" (ND, 456). But before he can act according to this resolve and resign his commission, he is murdered by Croft, though a Japanese finger pulls the trigger. As we might expect, Melville and his whale haunt Hearn's very last realization: the recognition that "undoubtedly" Croft and he . . . were the only two men who would want to try the mountain" (ND, 468), which Mailer in that 1951 interview identifies with *Moby-Dick*. So the not particularly likable Robert Hearn, whose moral growth vis-à-vis the Ahab within him can be traced through three choices of increasingly sharp moral definition—his impulsive defiance of Cummings, his defense of Roth, and his decision to resign his commission—is twice defeated by men for whom the desire for power is the only moral criterion. Melville's Ahab, at least, went down with his crew. His World War II descendants survive, though somewhat chastened, to rage and kill again. In our century it is Ishmael who does not survive.

In none of Mailer's subsequent novels is the victory of the power-hungry so complete and unambiguous. Neither are any of the others so pervaded by *Moby-Dick*. But the lust for power that I have labeled "the Ahab within" is the force that drives every plot. It is the crux of the focal relationship of every novel, the teacher-learner or father-son bond between an older powerful man and a young narrator on the road to self-awareness. Sometimes the older man's lust is pure destructive egotism—as in the cases of Croft, Cummings, Herman Teppis, the movie mogul in *The Deer Park*, and Barney Kelly, the father-in-law of the protagonist of *An American Dream*. Sometimes the destructive component is fused with creative elements or potential, as in retired revolutionary McLeod of *Barbary Shore*, film director Eitel of *The Deer Park*, and Rusty Jethroe, business executive and father of the young hero of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

If the young learners are to grow morally, they must recognize, like Lieutenant Hearn, that the same Ahab lurks within each of them. The external inducements that are present amount only to secondary temptations. But the recognition that they share the same power urges as their teachers—in other words, their identification with the teachers—is the insight that provides the emotional energy that enables them to begin anew. Only disciple Lovett of *Barbary Shore* does not explicitly confront the Ahab within him; hence his choice has the least conviction and power. Sergius O'Shaugnessy of *The Deer Park* recognizes "what cold and violent ambition had been stifling" within him,²⁹ and he partly harnesses, partly renounces that energy.

Stephen Rojack of *An American Dream* feels as if he and Barney Kelly are “running in the same blood”³⁰ before he expels Ahab-Kelly from his soul. D. J. Jethroe and his father Rusty have a few moments in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in which they are “tight as combat buddies”³¹ before the final rupture, which is followed by D. J.’s vision of the Ahab within is a cosmic principle. This final transcendent vision, of a Beast-God whose single commandment is “Go out and kill—fulfill my will, go and kill,” completes the pulling inside-out of *Moby Dick* begun with Mailer’s decision to replace Melville’s external plot of tragic fortune with an internal plot of thought. By the time we get to *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Melville’s presence is quantitatively smaller and Mailer has unmistakably become his own writer. But also unmistakable is that Melville has been deeply interfused with the other elements that generate Mailer’s special view of the world and human beings. What we are given at the end of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a vision of the world in which Captain Ahab provides the largest ethical and epistemological context, instead of Ishmael-Melville.*

NOTES

1. Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians* (New York: Dell, 1966), 209.
2. *New York Times*, 3 June 1951, Sec. 7, 20.
3. See Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Signet, 1960), 414–26, and Mailer, *Cannibals*, 95–130. See also W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (New York: Norton, 1972), 48.
4. Norman Mailer, *Existential Errands* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 265–68.
5. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 28. The other novelists mentioned are Malraux (26) and Mann (54–55).
6. Bate, *Burden of the Past*, 22.
7. See Mailer *Advertisements*, 17–19, and Mailer, *Cannibals*, 99, for his views on Hemingway’s limitations.
8. As, for example, does Fitzgerald’s life more than his fictional characters influence *The Deer Park*. See, for example, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull (New York: Dell, 1966), 48, 528.
9. See Robert F. Lucid, “Norman Mailer: The Artist as Fantasy Figure,” *Massachusetts Review*, 15 (1974), 581–95.
10. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 35 ff.

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11. Frederick Exley, *Pages from a Cold Island* (New York: Random House, 1975), 227.
12. Quoted in Bate, *Burden of the Past*, 6.
13. Michael Cowan's "The Americanness of Norman Mailer" in Leo Braudy, ed., *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 143–57, contains a complementary discussion to mine of Mailer's use of *Moby-Dick*, emphasizing external symbols—the Moby Dick without, not the Ahab within.
14. See Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 14.
15. See Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1975), 83–85.
16. Narrator Sergius O'Shaughnessy's story is one of self-awareness, but protagonist Eitel's may be viewed as a tragic plot of fortune or a degeneration plot of character. See Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, 88–89.
17. An education or revelation plot, according to Friedman's categories. See *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, 89–90.
18. The complementary relationship of Cummings and Croft is a commonplace of Mailer criticism. See Norman Podhoretz, "Norman Mailer: The Embattled Vision," *Partisan Review*, 26 (1959), 375; Norman Mailer, *Barbary Shore* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963); Robert Lucid, ed., *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); Diana Trilling, "Norman Mailer," *Encounter*, 19 (Nov. 1962), 48; Edmond L. Volpe, "James Jones—Norman Mailer," *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964), 114–15; Robert Solotaroff, *Down Mailer's Way* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), 7; and Randall H. Waldron, "The Naked, the Dead and the Machine: A New Look at Mailer's First Novel," *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 276.
19. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851; rpt. New York: Norton, 1967), 76. Subsequent references to this and to *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Signet, 1948) will appear in the text.
20. See Waldron, "The Naked, the Dead, and the Machine," for a persistent discussion of the machine theme.
21. For the compositional underpinning of the architecture of *Moby-Dick*, see James Barbour, "The Composition of *Moby-Dick*," *American Literature*, 47 (1975), 343–60. Like Ahab, "Cummings and Hearn were done in the second draft" of *The Naked and the Dead*. See George Plimpton, ed., *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Viking, 1967), 277. A selection from this interview is reprinted in Mailer, *Cannibals*, 209–21.
22. See Charles Olsen, *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1947), 16–25.
23. For a discussion of the technique of microcosm, see Donald L. Kaufmann, *Norman Mailer: The Countdown* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), 1–12.
24. For the Choruses, see Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 69–70, 145–47, 288–89, and 553. Barry Leeds, in *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), 15–17, traces both devices to Dos Passos. Their function is much like the role of those cetology chapters of *Moby-Dick* (ch. 32, 55, 56, 57, 79, 80, 85, 86, 102, 103, 104, 105), which have no necessary

location within the narrative. The source of the Chorus idea may well be “Forecastle—Midnight,” ch. 40 of *Moby-Dick*, rather than USA.

25. Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 24.
26. “Rugged Times” (an interview), *The New Yorker*, 23 Oct. 1948, 25.
27. For a parallel discussion of Mailer’s interest in emotions and attitudes we tend to repress or deny, see Richard Poirier, *Norman Mailer* (New York: Viking, 1972), 111–64, esp. 157–58. Poirier calls these sorts of issues “the minority within.”
28. Mailer discusses the sexual component of Cummings’s motives in “The Homosexual Villain,” *Advertisements*, 260.
29. Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park* (New York: Signet, 1957), 193.
30. Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (New York: Dell, 1966), 193.
31. Norman Mailer, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York: Putnam, 1967), 128.