

HEROIC NARRATIVE RESOLUTION IN *THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT*

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"The Armies of the Night is structured like the Iliad."

Barry Leeds, 1969, p. 256

NORMAN MAILER LONG ASPIRED TO GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, especially to writing that would "change the consciousness of the times"¹ or "take the temper of the times and turn it."² Very likely, he also aspired to extra-literary acts of his own to rival the "heroism" he saw in the Mohammed Ali of "King of the Hill" and *The Fight* and behind enthusiasm for JFK in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," for he boxed, ran for office, address public affairs and both wrote and starred in *The Armies of the Night*.

In his longer narratives, Mailer's protagonists frequently fall short of their aspirations. In *The Naked and the Dead*, anti-authoritarian Lt. Hearn is offed by the thuggish Sgt. Croft and Croft's attempt at a heroic crossing of the pass over Mt. Anaka ends in failure. In *Barbary Shore*, principal protagonist Mickey Lovett ends the novel gaining no more than the intellectual legacy of the book's other notable protagonist, McLeod, a legacy of Trotskyist ideological formulations that Lovett himself, on reception, terms "poor hope." In *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream*, O'Shaughnessy and Rojack's quests for meaning end up with each on the road in search of a fresh start. In *Why are We in Vietnam?* DJ's embrace of a less hypocritical mode of masculinity than his father Big DJ's bluff machismo offer scant satisfaction. In *The Executioner's Song*, Gilmore's narrative end with Gilmore's death, albeit this is a death partially transcended because preceded by some attainment of love and met with dignity and courage. In *Ancient Evenings*, Menenhetet and grandson Little Menie, about to sail across new "dominions" on the "Boat of

Ra" (704), sit together in "the pits of a new misery" where Menie reflects that "the weight of the failure of my father in his four lives falls heavily upon the son" (706).

Executioner's Song, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *Oswald's Tale*, *The Gospel According to the Son* and *The Castle in the Forest* have more complex relations to the self-realizations of their protagonists, and related resolutions of their narratives. Gary Gilmore and Jesus Christ, protagonists of *Executioner's Song* and *The Gospel According to the Son*, finesse the issue of protagonist success by wanting their own executions; as *Oswald's Tale* transitions into a commentary on, rather than telling of, the Oswald story after it first, Minsk-set book; and as *Harlot's Ghost* and *The Castle in the Forest* were to have been continued in further volumes. Finally, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, albeit aided by adherence to the conventions of the formulaic tough guy investigative genre, arguably achieves narrative resolution as well as *Armies*. Specifically, amateur investigator Tim Madden identifies the criminal perpetrators of confronting him; and he largely, but not entirely, settles the challenges that have accompanied them,—“not entirely” because he ends the tale spooked.³

If Mailer's protagonists frequently fell short of their aspirations, Mailer's novels have been broadly seen by critics as sympathetic as Poirier, Bloom and Merrill to often have failed to achieve artistic resolution. Perhaps literary irresolution has been tied to failures of protagonist successes in overcoming struggles to realize their quests for meaning. Consideration of hero stories may be illuminating here, for in hero stories protagonists typically do realize their quests: Prometheus obtains fire, Odysseus returns home and regains family, George Washington fathers a nation and Shane lifts the burden of lawless cattlemen off the backs of homesteaders. Heroes, and gratified hero worship, frequently appear in the pages of Mailer's, but most of the involved heroes stand at a distance from Mailer, JFK and Mohammed Ali, Patterson and astronauts.⁴ Here however, I argue that in *The Armies of the Night* protagonist Mailer enacts a hero story and that in doing so helps author Mailer triumph over artistic irresolution.

One very influential generalization of the hero story is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* with its “Call to Action” (i.e., “Call to Adventure,” “Refusal of the Call,” appearance of “Supernatural Aid” and a “Crossing of a Threshold” into “The Belly of the Whale” of action), its full “Initiation” into the challenges of action (i.e., “The Road of Trials,” “Reaction

of the Hero” to challenges, “Meetings with a Goddess” (and a “Temptress”) and “The Ultimate Triumph” and “Apotheosis”) and the final “Return” (i.e., “Refusal of the Return,” “Flight” back, “Rescue” and “Crossing of the Return Threshold,” and emergence as a “Master of Two Worlds” with the “Freedom to Live”).⁵ Most of these phases of the Hero’s progress are enacted by Mailer in *The Armies of the Night* in about the same order articulated by Campbell.

Take the “Call to Action” and its initial refusal. Mailer receives a phone call from Mitchell Goodman to join the October, 1967, weekend March on the Pentagon, indeed speaks to some fellow activists at D.C.’s Ambassador Theater the Thursday before the big weekend but refuses the invitation until word of a plan to “close down” the Pentagon (9) excites him. At Thursday’s event Mailer receives “Supernatural Aid” from the “spirits” of several bourbons and the inspiration of several literary demi-gods [in particularly the much admired Dwight MacDonald and the “fine, good and honorable” (75) Robert Lowell (75)]. The Thursday day speeches at the Ambassador approximate a first “Crossing the Threshold” and entry into the “Belly of the Whale,” for speaking proves a chore: our very drunk candidate no sooner enters the stage at Ambassador when he encounters setbacks of the sort stipulated by Campbell for the early stages of the hero story, slurred speech and a harangue that receives mostly boos and is not even well received by MacDonald and Lowell and exposes our candidate hero as a man with weaknesses of the general sort common to aspirant heroes to overcome.

Take the “Initiation” into action. The ambiguous goals and circuitous progress of the March’s attendance speeches Friday at the Department of Justice (where draft cards are returned) and at the Saturday Lincoln Memorial rally and March across the Potomac to the Pentagon provide numerous psychic and physical obstacles to Mailer’s progress toward his ultimate goals of arrest (and at least one meritorious speech). No enabling or emasculating goddess or temptress is encountered, but many trials impede our pilgrim’s progress. To draw on some of Vladimir Propp’s famous Slavic folk tale parallels to Campbell, “ordeals are encounters” (74), impede Mailer’s advance, perhaps most notably where lines of U.S. Marshalls and Military police block Mailer’s run to the area of the Pentagon steps where arrest is guaranteed (under arrangements made between march organizer David Dellinger and the Pentagon). More happily, Mailer’s progress toward arrest is aided by the Proppian “magic” (70) of the Fugs-Hippie incantation to levitate the Pentagon and wise words from allies Dave Dellinger and Sloan

Coffin, MacDonald and Lowell (especially from the “not unimpressive” Coffin (68), most especially because old friend and much admired stylist and truth speaker MacDonald and Lowell—“best, most talented, most distinguished poet in America”—demonstrate approval and support following the Ambassador fiasco that had dramatized Mailer’s initial inadequacy for hero status). Indeed, Mailer’s last stretch in pursuit of “The Ultimate Boon” and “Apotheosis” via arrest, requires a combination running back and debater’s skills for passage beyond the barrier posed by Marshalls and police—“without a club on his head” (131). Mailer begins his run past Marshalls and police into the area where he must be arrested feeling “much more alive—yes, bathed in light” (130). Upon arrest he is in such good humor that he engages in pleasant conversation with the arresting Marshall, who, “the arrest now utterly discharged,” appears, “quiet, honest, not unintelligent, non un-humorous” to Mailer; and, held at the Alexandria Post Office shortly after the arrest, he feels “a mild exaltation on which he had traveled through the day, a sense of cohering in himself which he supposed the opposite of those more familiar states of alienation he could always describe so well” (163). Moreover, the protagonist’s “Boon” is twofold, for arrest is complemented by delivery of a speech on “burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam”—at the hearing for charges and sentences that Mailer himself responds to with a “Wow” (215). Moreover, if we consider Mailer as author as well as protagonist, the “Boon” and “Apotheosis” are fourfold, for in addition to the protagonist’s arrest and the speech, the author delivers *two* statements that might be said to have aspired to accomplishing some “change in consciousness of the times.” One is the cogent analysis of “Why are We What in Vietnam?” that might orient people to the war, the second is the beautifully if complexly marshalled, resolutely objective account of the March presented in the form of *Armies’* concluding section, “The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon,” a resource for historians, as well as celebrants and critics, of the March.

As for our hero’s heroic “Return,” this involves no “refusal to return” nor any “magic flight” (unless we find magic in Mailer’s encounter with “the Nazi” in his initial transportation from the Pentagon in a Volkswagen camper). However, it does involve a “Crossing of the Return Threshold” complete with a “rescue” of sorts from a week jail sentence by legal counsels de Grazia and Hirschkop. Further, Mailer does return “Master of Two Worlds.” The challenges of the March are well met and a refreshed variant

of the World of wife and kids and press annoyances is rejoined. Mailer returns with his “Freedom to Live” enhanced by this mastery of the world of the March, indeed with a variously resolved narrative taking shape before the reader’s eyes due to author Mailer’s activism narrative command. Yes, leaving his court hearing from “Commissioner Scaife and dour U.S attorney, Mailer “felt a liberation,” felt like “a whole man closer to that freedom from dread which occupied the inner drama of his years” and felt a sense of “nice expectation and shining conception of his wife” (213).

To be sure, in *The Armies of the Night*, author Mailer’s narrative, like that of protagonist Mailer, may seem resolved for reasons beyond those so valuably advanced by the hero story, for the matter of narrative resolution may not entirely be a matter of narrative structure. Literary judgment of resolution may be influenced by assessment of stylistic quality, which may reasonably be judge extraordinarily high in *Armies*. Key to *Armies*’ stylistic quality, rhetorical technique aside, is the access that *Armies*’ style provides to a consciousness engaged in apprehensions of successions of powerfully vivid present moments that are themselves strung together and energized by courses of action. This consciousness is conveyed with is complex as well as electrifying for it intertwines emotional, imaginative, intellectual and kineshetic element. In *Armies*, the analytical Mailer of essays as factually and conceptually well detailed as “The Meaning of Western Defense” is joined, in a first person indirect voice approaching stream of conscious, to the energetic narrator of events strikingly evident by *The Naked and the Dead* (its “Long Patrol” segment in particular). The effect is expressive of an ornate analytical observation amidst action.⁶ One cause of this electrifying complexity would seem to be Mailer’s possession of complex mind so relentless in its attention to “large topics which present no quick answers” that “the question became obsessive” (Mailer, 2013 [2006]). Further attempt at explanation here is beyond obsessiveness of this paper’s author.

Stylistic accomplishments aside, enough for now to know that Mailer achieves an impressive narrative resolution in *Armies* aided by his heroic activist exertions and hero story literary template. Literary uses of the heroic form not only pervade such popular genres as the Western and hard-boiled detective tale (Cawelti). From time to time they emerge in such serious literary efforts as Carlyle’s *History of Frederick the Great*, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Indeed, by Lukacs’ 1971 account, the novel is a transformation of the epic, among other things, a hero story. And

Armies, of course, although not precisely a novel consists of “History as a Novel” and “The Novel as History” (ix).

NOTES

1. “First Advertisement for Myself,” *Advertisement for Myself*, p.15.
2. “Some Children of the Goddess,” pp.102–130.
3. On the spooked Madden, take these last sentences from *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*. “The last news I had from Provincetown was by way of a friendly floater who passed through Key West and told me Harpo went mad. It seems he gave another séance some time ago and claimed to glimpse six bodies at the bottom of the sea. From these depths, two headless women spoke to him. Poor Harpo was committed and from what I hear, is only to be released a little later this year” (229). For more detail on failed protagonist aspirations and narrative “pessimism” in much Mailer see Hicks.
4. “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” and *Of a Fire on the Moon* nicely complement “King of the Hill,” *The Fight*, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” and *The Armies of the Night* all are instances of Mailer’s Carlyle-like obsession with heroes and hero worship, although only *Armies* is relevant to the issue of narrative resolution in Mailer’s longer narratives.
5. See Campbell, pp. 20–51; and Segal, Raglan and Rank for wording of the phases of the hero’s journey (Call to Adventure, etc.). Note that the landmark characterization of *The Armies of the Night* as hero story and epic was provided by Barry Leeds’ association of *Armies* with the *Iliad*’s “structure” noted in this paper’s epigraph (1969, p. 256). Characterization of *Armies* as “classical epic” in theme, style and narrative structure has been discussed by Seib (1974, 89–95). Seib’s discussions of epic theme and style is brief, but goes beyond the reach of this paper: the theme is “Warfare” (p. 90); the style is “objective, lofty, elaborate in imagery, elevated in tone” (p. 90). His more extended discussion of narrative structure draws on theoretical works that do not stress the progressive action of the hero story phases as do the works of Campbell, Propp, and Segal and Regan important here. However, Seib’s discussion does address aspects of the epic and provide insights into *Armies* that are not included here. For example, Tillyard on the epic’s anchoring of the epic hero in the common man, as well as the superior, man (p. 17) and the epic’s sometimes “choiric” voice (p. 20), and Bowra’s detailing of some traits of the hero as superior man (p. 3).
6. This style of “intellect in action” has precedents in the less action intensified expressions of complex conscious in *The Education of Henry Adams*, as well as in such stretches of Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* as the one in which Ulrich becomes too engaged in reflections of the Zen-like characteristics of street combat to respond effectively to a mugging. It has more recent precedents in the more action-embroiled experiences of some Bellows’ characters, for example Artur Sammler’s experience of a mugging early in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. It has precedents in the range of Mailer’s writing from the fictions through *Ancient Evenings* through such varied non-fictional compositions as “The Meaning of Western Defense,” “Ten Thousand Words a Minute,” and “Su-

perman Comes to the Supermarket.” For some of its rhetorical subtleties, technically regarded, see Mosser.

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