

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD:
THE BEAST AND THE SEER IN MAN

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IT IS OFTEN A SHOCK TO REREAD THE EARLY WORK of a writer we have come to admire. The second time around this work usually seems rather thin; we find we have remembered effects that do not exist, values that were never there. Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), is a special example of this phenomenon. To reread Mailer's book is indeed to revise our first impression, but in this case the "revision" is all to Mailer's benefit. What we encounter is a work of enduring power, a power simply incommensurate with the novel's reputation. We find that we have tended to value Mailer's first novel for the wrong reasons: as a guide to combat during World War II, as a work of social criticism, as the best of our recent war novels. *The Naked and the Dead* is all these things, but it is also something quite different and more important. At age 25 Mailer was able to use his military experience as the backbone of a long and complex narrative that transcends the generic boundaries of a "war novel." Forty years later the nature of this achievement is still not generally understood.

Certainly *The Naked and the Dead* is more than the "report" of a sensitive young man who survived active service and returned to tell the tale. Mailer began to plan the novel long before his combat experience at Leyte and Luzon. He has traced its origins to the first days of our participation in World

War II: "I may as well confess that by December 8th or 9th of 1941, in the forty-eight hours after Pearl Harbor, while worthy young men were wondering where they could be of aid to the war effort, and practical young men were deciding which branch of service was the surest for landing a safe commission, I was worrying darkly whether it would be more likely that a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific" (*AFM* 28). Much as his General Cummings plans the campaign of Anopopei, the 19-year-old Mailer was already formulating his strategy for a major novel. He had gone a long way toward fulfilling this ambition before serving a day in the army. While still a student at Harvard, Mailer wrote a short novel that can only be considered a trial run for *The Naked and the Dead*.¹ From books published during the war, especially John Hersey's *Into the Valley* and Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, he got the idea of writing his novel about a long patrol. Indeed, it was this decision that led Mailer to volunteer for service in a reconnaissance outfit.² These facts suggest that Mailer went to war in search of combat experience that would enable him to complete a novel he had already conceived. It would be foolish to deny the impact of World War II on the book Mailer finally published, but *The Naked and the Dead* is hardly a transcription of the experiences that came Mailer's way during the war. He seems to have decided rather early that the war could furnish an invaluable *background* for a major novel. His preparation for this work covered a full six years.

Discharged in 1946, Mailer began his book in earnest and saw it published in 1948. From the first it was an enormous popular and critical success.³ Much as his book was liked, however, Mailer was not given sufficient credit for his *novelistic* abilities. Reviewers tended to assess the book as either a disguised documentary or a work of social criticism. To read the novel in these terms is to minimize Mailer's achievement. It is to overlook what differentiates *The Naked and the Dead* from other major novels of World War II, novels so different as *The Gallery*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Catch-22*. Unlike these works, *The Naked and the Dead* is unified by a full-scale dramatic action. Features of Mailer's book suggest the documentary or the work of social criticism, but they are integrated with the novel's dramatic structure and are not its *raison d'être*. To establish this point should help clarify the real achievement of Mailer's "war novel."

THE NOVEL AS DOCUMENTARY

It may seem naive to read *The Naked and the Dead* as a documentary, but there is a persistent tradition of doing just that. Indeed, many early critics assumed that Mailer's intention was to transcribe the crucial events of his army career—thus, Marvin Mudrick's description of the novel as “a manual of soldiering in the tropics”⁴ and Ira Wolfert's opinion that in *The Naked and the Dead* “the most powerful talents developed . . . are those of the journalist. The story is reported. It is not so much a reading of life as a description in depth of an event in life.”⁵

Such views may appear reductive, but who would deny that Mailer's concern for verisimilitude often seems obsessive? The intricacies of davit machinery; the mechanics of tent building; the aspect of a rotting corpse; the effects of a long, sustained march through jungle—virtually everything in the novel is rendered in elaborate, professional detail, as Mailer follows an army platoon through the several stages of a Pacific campaign. Nor is this practice merely a matter of itemizing the paraphernalia of army life. Repeatedly, Mailer employs his “phenomenal talent for recording the precise look and feel of things” to illumine the conditions his characters must suffer.⁶ Nor is he less convincing when dealing with his fictional campaign as a whole. When looking over the shoulder of General Cummings and analyzing the progress of the campaign, Mailer achieves the authority of a retired army officer dictating his memoirs.

But of course Mailer is not dictating memoirs, his own or his characters'. Though many of the novel's episodes derive from his personal experiences, Mailer insists that we should not read the book in this fashion: “In the author's eyes, *The Naked and the Dead* is not a realistic documentary; it is, rather, a symbolic book, of which the theme is the conflict between the beast and the seer in man. The number of events experienced by the one platoon couldn't possibly have happened to any one army platoon in the war, but represent a composite view of the Pacific war” (*Current Biography*, 410). Mailer does not deny that “the book will stand or fall as a realistic novel.”⁷ What he rejects is a simplistic connection between the novel's techniques and its formal ends. Mailer adopts the realistic conventions of most twentieth-century American fiction, but realistic techniques do not point unerringly to the formal aims of a “realistic documentary.” Besides referring to *The Naked and the Dead* as a “symbolic” book, Mailer insists that he is neither a

realist nor a naturalist: "That terrible word 'naturalism.' It was my literary heritage—the things I learned from [John] 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*" (Breit, 20). A book whose aspirations suggest those of *Moby-Dick* should not be discussed as a documentary, "realistic" or otherwise.

The novel's symbolism is one feature that transcends the limits of a documentary, but more important still is the story told. Some of the enormous detail in this book may be attributed to Mailer's indulgence of his special knowledge of war; certain episodes and characters contribute little except as they add to Mailer's "description in depth of an event in life." But Mailer usually manages to relate whatever he describes to the novel's elaborate dramatic action. The conditions on Anopopei, Mailer's mythical Pacific island; the routine of army life; the many actions forced on the men—these things are always seen in relation to the characters and their developing conflicts. Contrast the resulting effect with that of James Jones's *The Thin Red Line* (1962), a work that might truly be called a realistic documentary.

The Thin Red Line resembles Mailer's novel in many obvious ways. It too describes the campaign for a single Pacific island (in this case, Guadalcanal). Like Mailer, Jones observes every facet of the campaign, from the initial landing to the mopping up. Like Mailer, Jones employs the literary device of the microcosm as he follows a representative group of men (C-for-Charley-Company) throughout the campaign. Yet the two books are not really similar, as Mailer himself suggests when he aptly describes *The Thin Red Line* as "so broad and true a portrait of combat that it could be used as a textbook at the Infantry School if the Army is any less chicken than it used to be." He goes to the heart of Jones's intentions: "Jones' aim, after all, is not to create character but the feel of combat, the psychology of men." For Mailer, "*The Naked and the Dead* is concerned more with characters than military action"—and so he cannot see that his book is truly comparable to *The Thin Red Line*.⁸

Mailer's comments are very much to the point. His novel differs from Jones's in that its central concern is to develop its many characters. Jones's characters might as well go unnamed, so little difference does it make who they are or what they do except at the moment Jones happens to use them to illustrate an aspect of combat. Nothing in *The Thin Red Line* is comparable to Mailer's gradual development of the conflicts among his major charac-

ters. No effort is made to prepare for shifts in the action. In fact, there is no dramatic action in *The Thin Red Line*. As Mailer suggests, Jones is not interested in such an action; his intentions correspond to those Mudrick and Wolfert attribute to Mailer. By contrast, *The Naked and the Dead* is rooted in the traditional development of character through a structured series of episodes. We must judge its documentary features as they do or do not serve in this development.

THE NOVEL AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Much the same argument applies to elements of social criticism in *The Naked and the Dead*. The existence of such elements is obvious: the criticism of the army as an institution that informs every incident in the novel; the attack on totalitarianism that emerges from the discussions between General Cummings and his aide, Lieutenant Hearn; the grim portrait of American society developed through the I and R platoon, especially in the "Time Machine" biographies of eight enlisted men and two officers (Cummings and Hearn). Yet we must still ask how these features function in the novel as a whole.

Before we assess their function, however, we should first understand the nature of Mailer's social criticism. Far too often *The Naked and the Dead* is treated as the work of a "young liberal" whose critique of American society is substantially the same as that of Dos Passos, [James T.] Farrell, and [John] Steinbeck.⁹ Prior to World War II Mailer was, in his own words, a "progressive-liberal." And in 1948, after finishing *The Naked and the Dead* and traveling through Europe, Mailer did join the campaign for Henry Wallace. Nonetheless, *The Naked and the Dead* is not the work of a political liberal. In *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer suggests that his early short novel, "A Calculus at Heaven," makes "an interesting contrast to *The Naked and the Dead*, for it is an attempt of the imagination (aided and warped by books, movies, war correspondents, and the liberal mentality) to guess what war might really be like" (AFM, 28). That the novella was determined in part by "the liberal mentality" certainly makes it an interesting contrast to *The Naked and the Dead*, for we have his own word for it that when he wrote his first published novel Mailer was an anarchist, not a liberal (AFM, 271).

This difference helps to explain some common misreadings of the later work. Standard critical procedure goes something like this: first, the critic assumes that *The Naked and the Dead* is a thesis novel and that its thesis re-

sembles those expounded by writers such as Dos Passos, for Mailer's "sympathies" are also progressive; then the critic finds that the novel's action does not consistently support the presumed liberal thesis and so either points out Mailer's failures of execution or begins to talk about trusting the tale and not the teller.¹⁰ This procedure involves at least two fallacies: (a) that *The Naked and the Dead* is a thesis novel and (b) that Mailer uses the book to advance liberal values and a liberal social critique. I will return to these problems after considering the novel's action, where I hope to show that what seems inconsistent or weak to the reader who takes Mailer's liberalism for granted is nothing of the sort if we approach the novel without this presupposition. Here I would simply stress that Mailer did not write his novel to do the work of a sociologist.

Mailer's social vision does emerge during the novel, especially in those sections which trace the men's backgrounds, but his characters are not "examples" in a sociological tract. Consider the "Time Machine" sections. If *The Naked and the Dead* were really a thesis novel, these biographies would function as evidence in Mailer's "argument" concerning the American social scene; however, I think Barry Leeds suggests the real relation between the biographies and the rest of the novel:

Thus, while *The Time Machine* is used to portray the home of a Midwestern businessman, the slums of Boston, or Harvard Yard, it is the presence on Anopoei of men who have experienced these places, which justifies Mailer's detailed treatment of them, and obviates the possibility of their introduction seeming stilted. Every element of American society dealt with becomes integral to the novel as a whole, not merely because it seems to fit into a recreation of that society, but because it is drawn from the life of a character in whom the reader has come to believe.¹¹

The "Time Machine" may be a laborious device to enrich our experience with the men on Anopoei, but that is its function. Although Leeds cites Martinez, he might have mentioned any number of other characters. When Gallagher learns of his wife's death, for example, he becomes an important figure in the novel for the first time. At this point Mailer introduces a "Time Machine" section on Gallagher's Boston-Irish background, his training in frustrated prejudice.¹² Just as we first see Gallagher as fully human, stunned

by the loss of his wife, Mailer highlights his ignorance and bigotry. Paradoxically, we are all the more impressed by Gallagher's intense feeling for his wife. He becomes a more complex and interesting character than would have been possible had his biography or his mourning been presented alone. Thus, Mailer uses the "Time Machine" to illuminate character, introducing the device at just that moment in the narrative when it best supplements the novel's action.

The "Time Machine" differs, then, from similar devices in the works of John Dos Passos¹³. The "Camera Eye," "Newsreel," and biography sections in *U.S.A.*, for example, are clearly intended to complement the narrative in the manner of a thesis novel. These sections are not directly related to the narrative; they do not even concern its characters. Instead, they are determined by and substantiate Dos Passos's attack on the American social system. Mailer's use of a similar device is for a quite different end. The "Time Machine" sections are intended to comment on each character's role in the action. When this does not happen—as in the belated "Time Machine" passage devoted to Polack, a figure of no real significance (*NATD*, 608–20)—the reader is likely to find the material digressive, even intrusive. Mailer's novel differs from Dos Passos's trilogy in its use of social elements to clarify a dramatic action, not a social argument.

THE NOVEL AS DRAMATIC ACTION

I am suggesting that *The Naked and the Dead* is a rather traditional novel. This is not meant as criticism of the book. If it lacks the stylistic and formal innovations of Mailer's more recent novels, especially *An American Dream* (1965), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), and *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *The Naked and the Dead* is nonetheless a more successful work. It is successful in its adaptation of a novelistic form we can trace from Richardson and Fielding down to Mailer's immediate precursors, Hemingway and Faulkner. This form emphasizes character and action—staples of fiction as central to *The Naked and the Dead* as they are to the novels of Austen and Dickens. Interpretation should begin with precisely these features.

It may seem rather harmless to argue that *The Naked and the Dead* is essentially "a novel of character," as John Aldridge first suggested and Mailer once confirmed.¹⁴ In fact, however, there are fairly important consequences if we accept this idea. Indeed, we will probably have to reject the more pop-

ular interpretations of Mailer's novel. Consider Randall Waldron's "case" against Mailer's conclusion:

The central conflict in *The Naked and the Dead* is between the mechanistic forces of "the system" and the will to individual integrity. Commanding General Cummings, brilliant and ruthless evangel of fascist power and control, and ironhanded, hardnosed Sergeant Croft personify the machine. Opposing them in the attempt to maintain personal dignity and identity are Cummings' confused young aide, Lieutenant Hearn, and Private Valsen, rebellious member of Croft's platoon. Mailer fails to bring this conflict to any satisfying resolution: at the novel's end Hearn is dead and Valsen's stubborn pride defeated, but likewise Croft is beaten and humiliated and Cummings' personal ambitions thwarted. . . . [T]he conclusion of *The Naked and the Dead* and its total meaning are unclear.¹⁵

Like Norman Podhoretz and John Aldridge, Waldron dislikes Mailer's ending because it fails to generate the radical "protest" presumably intended.¹⁶ Waldron obviously expects the book to end as this kind of thesis novel is supposed to end—with a clear demarcation between victim and victimizer. Again like Podhoretz and Aldridge, he assumes that Mailer conceived the book as a warning against totalitarian tendencies in America and cannot see that Mailer achieves this purpose by treating his villains in the same manner as his heroes.

But why assume that Mailer intended to write a protest novel? If we make this assumption, the novel's ending—indeed, the coherence of the whole work—is called into question. We would at least expect Mailer to distinguish among his characters sufficiently to clarify his own moral position and to articulate his "warning." As Waldron remarks, Mailer "fails" to do this. My own view is that he never intended to do so. If we stop treating Cummings, Croft, Hearn, and Valsen as representative figures in a political allegory, we should come to see that Mailer prepares all along for the ending Waldron and others find so disappointing. In examining *The Naked and the Dead* as a dramatic action we should not only make sense of what others find "unclear" but also get at the true sources of the novel's power.

Mailer's published remarks on the composition of his novel tend to confirm that he did not organize it around a political or social "thesis." Mailer says that from the first he wanted to structure his book around a long patrol involving a single army platoon (Plimpton 1967, 260). It seems likely that he first intended to write a collective novel in the manner of Dos Passos, using the patrol to examine under stress a group of men broadly representative of American society. While he does something like this in the published novel, Mailer reveals that his book changed as he completed the second draft. It changed because he chose to develop two characters outside the platoon, General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn: "The part about the platoon went well from the beginning, but the Lieutenant and the General in the first draft were stock characters. If it had been published at that point the book would have been considered an interesting war novel with some good scenes, no more. The second draft was the bonus. Cummings and Hearn were done in the second draft" (Plimpton 1967, 257). As Mailer suggests, the fleshing out of Cummings and Hearn "made" his novel as a work of art. Mailer patterned their relationship after the conflict between Croft and Valsen, the leading members of the platoon and presumably the main characters in the initial draft. *The Naked and the Dead* came more and more to deal with these four major figures; it began to take on the full dimensions of a novel of character.

Mailer's two plot lines are sufficiently similar they might almost be considered a double plot. In each case a character of liberal sympathies fights for his integrity against a fascistic superior; in each the "good" character is defeated while the "bad" character fails in his most ambitious undertaking. Whereas Croft's tactics against Valsen are openly sadistic, Cummings exercises an intellectual tyranny over Hearn. Finally, however, this is a minor distinction, for the results are indistinguishable. These conflicts are reminiscent of much "protest" literature with which *The Naked and the Dead* is often compared. Cummings and Croft seem prototype fascists, the villains of scores of proletarian novels; Hearn and Valsen seem the archetypal victims of such novels. If we take a closer look, however, we should discover subtleties appropriate to Mailer's overall design.

Initially, the feud between Croft and Valsen seems a simple matter of irreconcilable personalities. Certainly this is our impression in part 1, where Croft and Valsen nearly come to blows in a scene that is repeated with variations throughout the novel, until their quarrel is resolved on Mount Anaka.

Their “roles” are fixed this early: Croft as the aggressive platoon leader; Red as the recalcitrant private who resists authority and authoritarians (*NATD*, 31–32). Red is presented from the outset as a proud but rather ineffectual man who is capable of feeling “a sad compassion in which one seems to understand everything, all that men want and fail to get” (*NATD*, 14), but who has no hope of translating his feelings into action: “Everything is crapped up, everything is phony, everything curdles when you touch it” (*NATD*, 350). Both his compassion for others and his personal cynicism define Red as Croft’s opposite. Croft is an obvious, even a spectacular sadist. As a National Guardsman he kills a striker for no other reason than the pleasure it gives him (*NATD*, 161). On Anopopei he tantalizes a Japanese prisoner with kindness before shooting him in the head (*NATD*, 195), crushes a small bird in his bare hand (*NATD*, 530), and coldly arranges the death of Hearn (*NATD*, 598). Croft loves combat, for only in combat does he find release from his hatred of the world (his “Time Machine” section concludes, “I HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT IN MYSELF” (*NATD*, 164). Croft must master everything that is not in himself. He is confident that he can do so, for “he had a deep unspoken belief that whatever made things happen was on his side” (*NATD*, 9).

Yet Croft and Valsen are not mere foils, as Mailer reveals in the first half of part 2. This section of the novel moves toward two separate “moments of truth,” one experienced by Croft and the other by Valsen. The first such moment climaxes Mailer’s account of the Japanese counterattack, a performance as fine as anything in the book. Here we see Croft in his natural element, the violence of war. He controls his men so fiercely that he revives Valsen’s hatred (*NATD*, 125, 129). Indeed, he treats the weaknesses of others as if they were personal enemies (*NATD*, 137). Yet the climax of this episode is Croft’s moment of *fear*—more precisely, his awareness that he too can be made afraid. This recognition sends “a terrible rage working through his weary body” (*NATD*, 155), and its effects are felt through the rest of the novel, until Croft’s rage is expended against Mount Anaka.

The second climactic moment occurs when the men go to search Japanese bodies for souvenirs. This hunt is a nightmare, revealing, in Chester Eisinger’s words, “the deepest urge toward violence and debasement in human beings” (Eisinger, 35). Red finds it oppressive because he must pass through piles of rotting bodies. The stench is overpowering, the corpses horribly distorted and maggot-ridden. Suddenly Red is “sober and very weary.”

Unlike the others, Red understands that he is surrounded by the bodies of *men*. Standing over one such body, he experiences a kind of epiphany: "Very deep inside himself he was thinking that this was a man who had once wanted things, and the thought of his own death was always a little unbelievable to him. The man had had a childhood, a youth and a young manhood, and there had been dreams and memories, Red was realizing with surprise and shock, as if he were looking at a corpse for the first time, that a man was really a very fragile thing" (*NATD*, 216). Different as Croft and Valsen are, their climactic insights in part 2 are quite similar. Each discovers that "a man was really a very fragile thing." They differ, of course, in how they respond to this discovery: Croft tries to exorcise it through violence, while Red accepts it with a "wise" melancholy. This section of the book is structured to reveal the common anxieties underlying their radically different approaches to life.

In the second half of part 2 Mailer develops an even more complex antagonism. Prior to the represented action Cummings more or less adopts Hearn as his protégé. He sees in Hearn an intellectual equal and a sympathetic ear for his theories about the nature of power. When Hearn responds to the general's attentions with something less than gratitude, his fate is to illustrate Cummings's first principle: "There's one thing about power. It can flow only from the top down. When there are little surges of resistance at the middle levels, it merely calls for more power to be directed downward, to burn it out" (*NATD*, 323). Throughout the book we see Cummings trying to "burn out" Hearn's resistance. The conflict here seems quite straightforward. Indeed, critics often refer to Hearn as Mailer's liberal spokesman. Hearn's resistance to Cummings is supposed to represent Mailer's own political feelings and to justify Hearn's role as the novel's "hero."

The problem is that Hearn represents not so much liberalism as the *desire* to be liberal. Surely he is an odd humanitarian: he likes few people (*NATD*, 69, 328), he is a self-confessed snob (*NATD*, 78), and he feels distaste for Jews (*NATD*, 83) and a "trace of contempt" for the enlisted man (*NATD*, 168). Temperamentally, Hearn is an aristocrat. It is not surprising that he defends his liberal notions with faint conviction, for his real commitment is to himself: "The only thing that had been important was to let no one in any ultimate issue ever violate your integrity" (*NATD*, 326). Hearn would protect his "inviolable freedom" and so avoid "all the wants and sores that caught up everybody about him" (*NATD*, 79). His motto is appropriately sterile: "The

only thing to do is to get by on style" (*NATD*, 326). Defined by his detachment, his distance from real human concerns, Hearn is best known by his failures to act.

Because he feels no real commitment to his humanitarian interests, Hearn is vulnerable to the same urges that move Cummings and Croft. Hearn is fascinated by Cummings, who has the ability "to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action" (*NATD*, 77), because Hearn is drawn to power himself: "Always there was the power that leaped at you, invited you" (*NATD*, 353). Resentment of his position vis-à-vis Cummings mingles with his desire to be like Cummings: "he had acquiesced in the dog-role, had even had the dog's dream, carefully submerged, of someday equaling the master" (*NATD*, 313). Hearn comes to believe that "divorced of all the environmental trappings, all the confused and misleading attitudes he had absorbed, he was basically like Cummings" (*NATD*, 392). He even comes to fear that "when he searched himself he was just another Croft" (*NATD*, 580).

What Hearn fears is that he is no less a fascist than Cummings or Croft. But even Cummings is more complex than this might suggest. A self-styled "reactionary," Cummings prefers fascism to communism because "it's grounded firmly in men's actual natures" (*NATD*, 321). To say the least, Cummings has no high opinion of man's nature. He thinks Hitler "the interpreter of twentieth-century man" and believes "there's never a man who can swear to his own innocence. We're all guilty, that's the truth" (*NATD*, 313). But, of course, Cummings does not see himself as he sees others. Indeed, he has a mystical sense of his own destiny: "The fact that you're holding the gun and the other man is not is no accident. It's a product of everything you've achieved, it assumes that you're . . . you're aware enough, you have the gun when you need it" (*NATD*, 83–84). Cummings views himself as the man with the gun. He is speaking of himself, not "man," when he says that "man is in transit between brute and God" (*NATD*, 323).

Cummings's vanity is immense, his ambitions worthy of Ahab. We learn early that his intention on Anopopei is to "mold" his troops, the terrain, and even "the circuits of chance" to the contours of his will (*NATD*, 85). Confident that he can dispose of any obstacle, natural or human, Cummings believes that life is like a game of chess (*NATD*, 180). But his rationality is a disguise, as Mailer makes clear by exposing the real forces at work on Cummings; self-pity amounting to paranoia, and homosexuality.¹⁷ As the novel

unfolds we learn that Cummings is no closer to harmonizing “Plant and Phantom,”¹⁸ body and spirit, than are the men of Croft’s platoon, or Hearn.

During part 2, then, we come to see the novel’s central conflicts as rather more ambiguous than they appeared at first; in each case the antagonists have more in common than we might have supposed. This is made especially clear in part 3, in which the four major figures all suffer a remarkably similar fate. As noted earlier, each “good” character is defeated by his totalitarian opponent. Hearn is the victim of both Cummings and Croft, for Cummings transfers Hearn into a platoon already selected for a dangerous mission and Croft deliberately plots Hearn’s death. Red’s defeat is not fatal, but it is no less decisive. A man committed to nothing except his own personal integrity, Red is so beaten down he feels relief after he confronts Croft and is defeated: “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” (*NATD*, 696).

Yet if they triumph over Hearn and Valsen, Cummings and Croft are hardly the novel’s “victors.” Throughout part 3 Croft’s efforts are directed toward conquering Mount Anaka, the great mountain that towers over Anopopei, “taunting” Croft with its “purity” and “austerity” (*NATD*, 497, 522, 527). The mountain becomes for Croft what his troops are for Cummings: the “other” that resists his control and must be molded to serve his will. Like Cummings, however, Croft is unable to control the circuits of chance. When he stumbles over a hornets’ nest, the men flee down the mountain and the march abruptly ends (*NATD*, 699–700). Croft is left puzzled and spent; “Croft kept looking at the mountain. He had lost it, had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself. Of himself and much more. Of life. Everything” (*NATD*, 709).¹⁹ This passage recalls the single section devoted to Cummings in part 3. Faced with “mass inertia or the inertia of the masses,” the men’s resistance to his more grandiose ambitions, Cummings is unable to find a meaningful pattern among the forces at work in the campaign: “There was order but he could not reduce it to the form of a single curve. Things eluded him” (*NATD*, 571). Like Croft, Cummings must finally give the circuits of chance their due. He attempts with his final attack what Croft attempts on Mount Anaka, but the campaign ends in manner he could never anticipate (the inept Major Dalleson, not Cummings, engineers the final assault). Cummings must admit that “he had had very little or perhaps nothing at all to do

with this victory, or indeed any victory" (*NATD*, 716). For Cummings too there comes the knowledge of personal limitation.

As noted previously, Mailer is often criticized for refusing to create ideologically satisfying characters. The assumption here is that Mailer wrote his book to "defend liberalism" (Eisinger, 37) to warn against the antiliberal forces within the American system. But Mailer has made it clear that he "intended" something quite different—something that might even *require* the treatment of character we find in *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer says that he conceived the book as "a parable about the movement of man through history" ("Rugged Times," 25); he defines its basic theme as "the conflict between the beast and the seer in man" (*Current Biography*, 410). It would seem that for Mailer the movement of man through history is an ongoing struggle between the bestial and the visionary forces in man himself. This idea is not terribly original, of course, but the power of *The Naked and the Dead* depends not on the originality of its ideas but on how well they are embodied in the novel's characters and events.

Moreover, Mailer's ideas are not as schematic as I may have suggested. Unlike the typical proletarian or social novel, *The Naked and the Dead* does not present its beasts and seers in obvious counterpoint. If Croft is set against Valsen in the book, who is the beast and who is the seer? The epigraph to part 3 is relevant here: "Even the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom. But do I bid you become phantoms and plants?" (*NATD*, 431).²⁰ This rhetorical question implies that man should be neither "plant" nor "phantom" exclusively; neither all body nor all soul; neither beast nor seer. Man should seek harmony between the physical and the spiritual, though, as Nietzsche observes, even the wisest among us is a "disharmony and hybrid." This is certainly true of the major figures in *The Naked and the Dead*, each of whom carries within himself Nietzsche's bestial and visionary forces. The ultimate effect of Mailer's parallel plots is to emphasize this "disharmony" in each character. When Cummings and Croft suffer defeats comparable to those of Hearn and Valsen, we should realize that Mailer rejects a crude contrast between good and evil. In dramatizing the conflict between the beast and the seer in man, Mailer shows that *all* his characters are subject to the same conflict.²¹

Surely Mailer establishes this kinship between Cummings and Croft. Both are power moralists who rely on fear and hatred in their command of others; both are inordinately ambitious; both function as Hearn's enemy and

plan to have him killed. Each is “coldly efficient” (*NATD*, 179), latently homosexual²², and obsessed with his wife’s infidelity (*NATD*, 182, 200). They share an extreme individualism that is coupled with a strong sense of personal destiny. For Cummings, “the fact that you’re holding the gun and the other man is not is no accident”; for Croft, “if a man gets wounded, it’s his own goddam fault” (*NATD*, 522)—if Cummings sees himself as the man with the gun, Croft sees himself as the man who will never be wounded. Cummings and Croft are most alike in their common rejection of accident or chance as a determining force in life. Cummings’s ambition is nothing less than to mold the circuits of chance, while Croft has “a deep unspoken belief that whatever made things happen was on his side.” Each possesses a naive faith that he can work his will on the world.

In their rejection of determinism Cummings and Croft almost justify Podhoretz’s suggestion that they are the novel’s “natural heroes” (Podhoretz, 387). While Hearn and Valsen suggest vacillation and futility, Cummings and Croft are all energy and commitment. “Natural heroes” is a bit much, however. We should not see Cummings and Croft as mere villains, but neither should we equate Mailer’s admiration for certain qualities in Croft with, say, admiration for the character as a whole.²³ In response to the question “Whom do you hate?” Mailer once answered, “People who have power and no compassion, that is, no simple human understanding” (*AFM*, 271). Can we fail to apply this statement to Cummings and Croft?

What prevents these characters from being purely hateful is what Mailer calls their “vision” (*NATD*, 156). Croft is moved by a “crude unformed vision,” and Cummings is driven by “one great vision” (*NATD*, 323), momentarily embodied when he observes his first battlefield and experiences “the largest vision that has ever entered his soul”: “There were all those men, and there had been someone above them, ordering them, changing perhaps forever the fiber of their lives. . . . *There were things one could do.*” As he surveys the battlefield Cummings is “choked with the intensity of his emotion, the rage, the undefined and mighty hunger” (*NATD*, 415). This hunger is Croft’s crude unformed vision; this rage is Croft’s “rage” at the frustrations of the final patrol (*NATD*, 527). Moreover, the vision these men share is no mean one. As we have seen, Cummings’s greatest urge is to be omnipotent; Croft too is tantalized by “vistas of such omnipotence he must wonder at his own audacity” (*NATD*, 40). The common spirit that links Cummings and Croft is unmistakable. In one sense they are the novel’s “seers”: confident of the

world's tractability, they are determined to achieve destinies commensurate with their mighty hungers.

Unfortunately, Cummings and Croft are also the novel's principal "beasts." There is nothing so despicable in *The Naked and the Dead* as Croft's calculated destruction of the lame bird discovered by one of the men, and Cummings is subject to the same impulses, as we learn when he comes upon a cigarette Hearn has put out on his floor: "If he had been holding an animal in his hands at that instant he would have strangled it" (*NATD*, 318). Hearn discovers early in the book that Cummings is capable of atrocities as great as any Croft will later commit. Behind the general's "facade" is that naked animal closeted with its bone. The naked animal in Cummings finds expression in his power morality, his persecution, and finally his execution of Hearn.²⁴ The conflict between the beast and the seer in man is precisely conflict within both Cummings and Hearn. The urges that move them are *both* bestial and visionary.

In his portraits of Hearn and Valsen, Mailer further undermines the "structure of protest" readers have expected of him (Aldridge, 138). To achieve such protest, Mailer needed to depict Hearn and Valsen as more or less admirable figures victimized by the representatives of an unjust society. But of course he presents them in a very different light. Whereas Cummings believes that "in the Army the idea of individual personality is just a hindrance" (*NATD*, 180–881), Hearn and Valsen have no commitment except to their individual personalities. Both place the highest value on what Hearn calls "inviolable freedom." They ask nothing more specific from life, because they also share contempt for what life offers: Red's "particular blend of pessimism and fatalism" (*NATD*, 444) is everywhere evident, while Hearn believes that "if you searched something long enough, it always turned to dirt" (*NATD*, 183). Because they have found so little to value in life, Hearn and Valsen have lived as drifters. Unlike Red, Hearn has not literally been a hobo, but his lifestyle might easily be mistaken for Valsen's: "Get potted, get screwed, and get up in the morning, somehow" (*NATD*, 347). Hearn and Valsen are confirmed in their pessimism by what happens to them on Anopopei. Each is made to struggle for his inviolable freedom; each concludes that "there were no answers" in this struggle (*NATD*, 585, 704). The repetition of this exact phrase emphasizes that neither Hearn nor Valsen discovers a sustaining belief. In both men the qualities of the seer are blunted.

We tend to think of Hearn and Valsen in relation to their enemies, but this contrast can be misleading. Hearn discovers in himself many of the qualities that unite Cummings and Croft. Both Hearn and Cummings are “born in the aristocracy of the wealthy midwestern family” (*NATD*, 169); both have domineering fathers who force them into “masculine” activities (boys’ camps and athletics for Hearn; military school for Cummings); both become “cold rather than shy” (*NATD*, 407) and suffer a displaced sex life (like Cummings, Hearn “fights out battles with himself” on the bodies of his women [*NATD*, 416]). During a football game Hearn experiences “an instant of complete startling gratification when he knew the ball carrier was helpless, waiting to be hit” (*NATD*, 344)—a clear enough parallel to Croft’s sadism. The connection between Hearn and Croft is most obvious during the patrol, where each man tries to redeem his failure early in the campaign and Hearn comes to think of himself as “another Croft.”

Although Red does not so clearly resemble Cummings, interesting similarities exist. When the campaign begins to go badly, Cummings undergoes “the amazement and terror of a driver who finds his machine directing itself, starting and halting when *it* desires” (*NATD*, 300). This event echoes Red’s discovery of “a pattern where there shouldn’t be one” after the death of a young soldier (*NATD*, 39). Red’s kinship with Croft has already been suggested. Once he is defeated by Croft, Red finds that he is happy to obey orders without feeling he must resist. When the march up Mount Anaka ends, Croft experiences much the same emotion: “Deep inside himself, Croft was relieved that he had not been able to climb the mountain. . . . Croft was rested by the unadmitted knowledge that he had found a limit to his hunger” (*NATD*, 701). Once their ambitions are thwarted, Cummings and Croft do not seem altogether different from even Red Valsen.

Does the resemblance among these characters “humanize” Cummings and Croft or “expose” Hearn and Valsen? The answer must of course be *both*. Cummings and Croft are not entirely reprehensible; Hearn and Valsen are not quite admirable. The whole action is directed toward these ironic judgments. “Only connect,” Forster advised, but none of the major characters is able to balance the beast and the seer within himself. What Red lacks in energy and purpose Croft lacks in compassion and the ability to expand his unformed vision beyond the need for power. It is much the same with Hearn and Cummings. Hearn would seem to be the one most likely to connect the warring forces in himself, but Hearn is perhaps the most incomplete of the

major figures. Neither Hearn's sympathies nor his desire for power are ultimately authentic. It is one of the novel's many ironies that Hearn is nonetheless the one character who achieves even a limited dignity.²⁵ In *The Naked and the Dead* there is no correlation at all between goodness and the fruits thereof.

Even as he dramatizes their conflicts Mailer hints that his characters are basically alike. This does not evidence moral or aesthetic confusion; instead, it makes possible Mailer's rather terrible commentary on his creations. At the end he collapses their several fates into a single fate—disillusionment—and confirms what has been implicit throughout: man is a “disharmony,” “corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness” (“Rugged Times,” 25), and the world he inherits has no sympathy for his weakness. Croft and Valsen may seem polar opposites, but whether they seek power or personal freedom they are doomed to a common failure. Their apparently different desires represent what Mailer once insisted we see in all his characters: “yearnings for a better world” (“Rugged Times,” 25). Mailer does not mock these desires; indeed, nothing else redeems Cummings and Croft even lightly. What he does is show how nearly impossible it is to realize such “yearnings.”

Mailer does this in a work that engages our feelings in the manner of all great novels. His primary purpose is not to document the experience of combat or the failure of our political system but to create a dramatic action that embodies more universal concerns. The result is a dark but moving image of the human condition. This image is one Mailer will never again present so starkly in his fiction; indeed, all his subsequent works can be seen as attempts to qualify or even to disavow the bleak implications of his first novel. The “truth” of this image is not really in question, however. What matters is Mailer's success in fleshing out the elaborate dramatic action that unifies his book. A novel of character in the best sense of that phrase, *The Naked and the Dead* remains one of Mailer's most impressive achievements.²⁶

NOTES

1. This short novel, “A Calculus at Heaven,” is reprinted in *Advertisements for Myself*, 29–70.
2. See George Plimpton, ed., *Writers at Work: “The Paris Review” Interviews*, 3d series (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 260; hereafter cited in text.
3. The novel's popular success was such that it remained number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 11 weeks (22 June to 29 August).

4. Marvin Mudrick, "Mailer and Styron: Guests of the Establishment," *Hudson Review* 17 (August 1964): 347.
5. Ira Wolfert, "War Novelist," *Nation*, 26 June 1948, 723.
6. Norman Podhoretz, "Norman Mailer: The Embattled Vision," *Partisan Review* 26 (Summer 1959): 371; hereafter cited in text.
7. Harvey Breit, "Talk with Norman Mailer," *New York Times Book Review*, 3 June 1951, 20; hereafter cited in text.
8. *Cannibals and Christians* (New York: Dial Press, 1966), 112; hereafter cited in text as *CC*.
9. See, for example, Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 141; Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 37 (hereafter cited in text); and Solotaroff, *Down' Mailer's Way*, 14, 18. The phrase "young liberal" is Hassan's.
10. See especially Podhoretz, "Embattled Vision," 371–77; Solotaroff, *Down Mailer's Way*, 3–39; and Howard M. Harper, Jr., *Desperate Faith* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1967), 96–103.
11. Barry Leeds, *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (New York: New York UP, 1969), 16–17; hereafter cited in text.
12. *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1948), 266–79; hereafter cited in text as *NATD*.
13. John M. Muste reaches the same conclusion in "Norman Mailer and John Dos Passos: The Question of Influence," *Modern Fiction Studies* 17 (Autumn 1971): 361–62.
14. John Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 135 (hereafter cited in text). For Mailer's confirmation, see *Cannibals and Christians*, 112.
15. Randall Waldron, "The Naked, the Dead, and the Machine: A new Look at Norman Mailer's First Novel," *PMLA* 87 (March 1972): 273, 276.
16. See Podhoretz, "Embattled Vision," 373–77, and Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation*, 136–40.
17. Cumming's self-pity is revealed throughout the novel; see especially 78, 106, and 182. For hints more or less overt of his homosexuality, see 80, 83, 173, 322, 388, 408, and 425–26. Mailer subsequently regretted the homophobia of his first two novels; see "The Homosexual Villain," *Advertisements for Myself*, 222–23.
18. Part 3 of *The Naked and the Dead* is entitled "Plant and Phantom." The phrase comes from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.
19. Croft's sense of defeat would seem to contradict Raymond Wilson's claim that Croft "transcends" the social and existential pressures that have formed him. Wilson believes that *The Naked and the Dead* is far less pessimistic than critics like myself have supposed. See Raymond J. Wilson III, "Control and Freedom in *The Naked and the Dead*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 28 (Summer 1986): 164–81, especially 174.
20. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, ed. Willard Huntington Wright (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 6.

21. Mailer also dramatizes this division in his minor characters, especially Roth, Gallagher, Wilson, and Goldstein. My Emphasis on the major characters somewhat distorts the value of these minor figures.
22. Croft's homosexuality is difficult to "prove" but seems to be hinted at throughout the book; see especially 145.
23. Mailer has confessed to a "secret admiration" for Croft; see *The Presidential Papers* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 136 (hereafter cited in text as *TPP*).
24. For evidence that Cummings does intend to execute Hearn when he assigns him to the I and R platoon, see 401 and 717.
25. Just before his death Hearn acknowledges the tawdriness of his motives and decides *not* to be like Cummings and Croft (584). He decides to turn in his commission but is murdered before he can make this last and most compelling gesture of rebellion.
26. The best recent critique of Mailer's first novel—and perhaps the best study early or late—is Donald Pizer's chapter in *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982), 90–114. Other recent essays of interest include Wilson's "Control and Freedom"; Bernard Horn's "Ahab and Ismael at War: The presence of *Moby-Dick* in *The Naked and the Dead*," *American Quarterly* 34 (Fall 1982): 379–95; Wenke's chapter on *The Naked and the Dead* in *Mailer's America*, 24–41; and Carol Schloss's chapter in *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840–1940* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 233–49. Pizer stresses Mailer's links with the naturalistic tradition. Horn presents the most detailed study of Melville's influence on *The Naked and the Dead*. Like Wilson, Wenke reads the novel in light of Mailer's subsequent "existentialism," though Wenke acknowledges the many ways in which Mailer's first novel differs from his later works. Schloss argues that Mailer's experience in interpreting aerial photographs moved him towards a form of literary perspectivism.

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