

Mailer's Postmodern *Armies*: The Political 'Postmodernization' of American Nonfiction

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It would be extremely difficult to say whether Norman Mailer's first allegiance, throughout his career, has been to romance or to reality. Mailer seemed to sense from the time of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, that the reality he wanted to express could not be communicated except through romance, and that romance would lose much of its meaning without its realistic content. It was this same conviction, uniting art and reality, that drove Mailer as a young writer into politics.

More than a decade before Eisenhower would coin the term 'military-industrial complex,' Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (hereafter *N & D*) warned of a permanently militarized America. In a 1948 interview, Mailer said of *N & D* that.

I never even thought of its being an anti-war book, at the beginning. But every time I turned on the radio and looked into the newspapers, there was this growing hysteria, this talk of going to war again, and it made me start looking for the trend of what was happening (Levitas 4).

An important character in *N & D*, General Cummings, predicted that the massive organization of America would soon reach beyond institutions to the very personality structure of postwar Americans. Sociologists such as Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*), White (*The Organization Man*), and C. Wright Mills (*White Collar*) would later testify to the arrival of exactly the personality structure that Mailer, through the person of General Cummings, had predicted. The generals, in this case, were corporate executives and upwardly mobile professionals. Mailer had observed the change before any of these social scientists.

Ironically, Mailer's lack of ideological sophistication may have contributed to his uncanny social insight. His political simplicity put him closer to the pulse of American political culture than a "left" critic like F. O. Matthiessen could be, or as a truly "proletarian" novelist like James T. Farrell could be. When Mailer temporarily entered the mainstream of the "left" literary world in the 1950s, he lost touch with that political pulse, which Arthur Schlesinger would term the "vital center."

Gradually, however, Mailer departed for doctrinaire left thought, and regained his more direct grip on American politics. In 1955, when he was asked if fascism such as *N & D* foretold could ever take hold in America, Mailer took the opportunity to warn of the rising dangers of media manipulation. His special target, in this regard, was the media magnate, Henry Luce. Fascism, declared Mailer, "is a very vague word. One variant or another of 'fascism' may very conceivably triumph. It's one of the possible alternatives, isn't it? If it ever comes to America, it will be a very sophisticated and loose fascism. Or is 'loose' spelled Luce?" (Stuart 26). A decade later, in *The Armies of the Night*, 1968, Mailer again accused the media of placing a "forest of inaccuracy" between real events and the consciousness of the American people (245). From *N & D* through *Armies*, Mailer's concern with organized misinformation remained paramount, and played a central role in his search for literary and journalistic responsibility.

Throughout his career—except for his brief period of doctrinaire politics, in the early 1950s—Mailer has taken it as his duty to break down media and organizational barriers, as well as to challenge conservative literary conventions. His literary-political odyssey began in May, 1948, when *N & D* was published. Mailer wasted no time in putting his new fame to political use. For months he gave most of his energy to the presidential campaign of Henry Wallace, who as a Progressivist independent challenged President Truman and, on the Republican side, New York governor Thomas E. Dewey. Mailer made more than eighteen political speeches for Wallace. In his view, "the intellectuals had to immerse themselves in political movements or else they were only shooting their mouths off" (Ross 12). For Mailer, however, "political" almost always included what most would call "cultural." Christopher Lasch provides a useful clue to the political culture of Mailer from the time of *N & D* when he describes Mailer's "cultural radicalism" as a mixture of Marx and Freud (343).

Mailer's early cultural politics is hardly one of the "left" or the "right," as these terms are usually used. Podhoretz observes that *N & D* indicts liberalism for its failure to produce lives worth living (188); yet, as Paul Siegel notes, the entire novel is permeated with a sense of hopelessness that is utterly foreign to Marxism (Siegel 131). Podhoretz supports this view with his observation that at this point Mailer was not so much searching for "a more equitable world as a more exciting one, a world that produces men of size and a life of huge possibility..." (188).

In short, Mailer was not intellectually affiliated with either pole of the political spec-

trum of his day. Rather he was moving in the direction of the “hipster” that he would define a decade later in “The White Negro.” While this hipster would have certain things in common with the “Beats,” he will be more activist and less apathetic than the drifter one associates with a “beatnik” mentality, or with the experiential literature of Kerouac and the early Ginsberg. This activism would remain essentially apolitical and alienated. The hipster is thus

the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, ... or a slow death by conformity ..., why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to ... divorce oneself from society, ..., to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperative of the self (Mailer, “White” 275-76).

In Mailer’s “White Negro,” as Morris Dickstein notes, “the political nostrums have failed, the only salvation is individual and religious” (502).

Just how “religious” the hipster is may be doubted. What is obvious, though, is his new, nonconformist radicalism, which Dickstein describes as a Freudian (or at times Reichian) radicalism (502). Along with Herbert Marcuse and Ginsberg, Mailer turned conservative or reactionary Freudianism into a mandate for progressivism. He thus helped to lay the foundation for New Left cultural politics (Dickstein *passim*). So too, he forged a link between Beat Generation alienation and 1960s politicization (Thornton and Thornton, “Resistance” 95). This would offer—as I have elsewhere noted in the case of Ginsberg—“a poetics of resistance,” the aesthetic prototype for what Christopher Lasch identifies as a “new radicalism” (347). Even in the 1950s, Mailer had anticipated this cultural radicalism, whose roots can be traced all the way back to *N & D*.

For Mailer, as a social novelist, World War II had afforded unique “manifestations of deeper tensions in civilian life” (Schroth 312). In “The White Negro” he would speak of the war as “a mirror to the human condition” (275). Clearly *N & D* was in that sense a mimetic novel. It brought together characters from all strata of twentieth century American life. All Mailer’s characters were indicative of cultural history in the making. Avoiding the cultural nostalgia that one associates with writers such as William Faulkner or Tennessee Williams, Mailer is more than willing to throw himself into the adventure of the new. To the horror of many readers and critics, he deliberately minimizes the tragic implications of the death of his chief protagonist in *N & D*, Lt. Hearn. Being neither a hipster nor an organization man, Hearn—like Williams’ Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Thornton and Thornton, “Myth” 2)—is vainly attempting to turn back the clock to an individualism

which has no place in the postwar social world. Hearn does not perish, like Hemingway's Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as a genuine individualist-hero, but as an irrelevant footnote on a military campaign which is itself but a footnote to the Pacific War. Hearn and all he stands for is literally cancelled out.

Forty years after its publication, Mailer calls *N & D* "the sum total on one's history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time" ("Hazard," 400). Each major character in the novel affected the narrative, making it a much more complex novel than the traditional narrative that many critics have considered it to be. *N & D* already harbings, in that sense, the postmodern Mailer of *The Executioner's Song*. By no means is it purely and simply a naturalist novel, although Mailer did acknowledge his debt to the naturalism of Farrell and Dos Passos, and even to Melville (Breit 15). If his characters are in any sense predictable, it is because they are penetrating portraits of the young Americans who emerged from the Depression. In short, they are Mailer's composite figures drawn from life. Their lives are certainly depressing, but in one sense *N & D* rises above utter pessimism: 'reality' itself, as Mailer depicts it, is never reducible to organizational power. As the major protagonist, Lt. Hearn, states the problem, "everything curdles when you touch it" (275).

While that is certainly a serious problem at the individual level, it is a kind of salvation at the collective level of political and media organization. This very 'Maileresque' insight precludes the kind of doctrinaire commitments that one associates with the Old Left; nor is it identical with New Left ideology, as we shall see. In *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Mailer is attempting a cultural rather than ideological understanding of politics. In this pseudo-confessional novel he describes himself as a "left conservative." This is confusing in view of his 1950s hipsterism, and his widely publicized sympathy for many social misfits in the seventies and eighties, e.g., Gary Gilmore and Jack Abbot. A clue to his meaning, however, may be offered in his consistent antimilitarism, running from *N & D* through *Armies* and to the present, which has wrongly been attributed to either liberalism or the more dogmatic left. His "left conservative" might be understood as "left" culturally and "conservative" politically—but only in the non-interventionist sense of conservative, not the hawkish sense which we associate with much postwar conservatism. Only now, in the post-Cold War era, do we readily grasp Mailer's sense of the word "conservative."

Emphatically, Mailer's conservatism is not in any way reactionary. Its goal is to save a place for the romantic and truly individualistic side of life. This goal affects Mailer's writ-

ing as much as his politics. As Richard Poirier points out, Mailer has always regarded himself as a "savior of the imagination." He therefore sets himself against the limited vision of ordinary journalism (Weber 81). This is not simply to suggest that he replaces ordinary journalism with fiction, as some critics have charged. Rather, as Zavarzadah notes, *Armies* represents another generic form altogether; that of the nonfiction novel (53). Mailer's belief is that history requires not only fact, but nuance (Weber 87). Mailer's postmodernism is historical before it is literary.

Since the first half of *Armies* is largely devoted to self-referentiality, and the remainder to more conventional journalism, the assumption has often been that Mailer seeks to show the superiority of the former. In fact, he is exhibiting the weaknesses of both. What he is in fact suggesting is the necessity of a third option, close to the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe, though perhaps more philosophically exploratory.

As we have seen, Mailer responded to early Cold War realities by adopting revolutionary socialism; but by the late 1960s his radicalism was no longer reducible to any ideological formula. This, obviously, can be compared to the New Left's rejection of Old Left orthodoxy. Mailer, however, was equally opposed to the new certainties which had replaced the old in the minds of younger radicals. He could not endure the self-righteous assurance of the New Left. As we find him in *The Armies of the Night*, he is alienated from all the political factions surrounding him on the October, 1967 Pentagon March. Even his own stated convictions are not immune to his irony—though, unlike many postmodernists, he refuses to give up the conviction that convictions are necessary. This, indeed, is one of the supreme ironies of *Armies*.

Once again, a parallel can be drawn between Mailer's experimental writing of this period and his politics. Throughout *Armies*, style and content are interwoven. While Mailer refuses the easy assurance of traditional realism, he also refuses the worldly indifference of complete self-referentiality. He avoids, in other words, the absolutes of both determinacy and indeterminacy. It is here that he departs from the New Journalism which in other respects he helped to inspire. He is uncomfortable with the relative coherence of the New Journalism, though he shares with the New Journalists an even greater discomfort with the formalism of puristic aesthetics. In short, he profoundly problematizes realism, but like the New Journalists remains responsible to the world of real events.

Mailer, like Tom Wolfe, is a cultural historian as much as a novelist, and in *Armies* he treats the October, 1967 March on the Pentagon from a distinctly cultural perspective. He

confesses his confusion over what he confronts on this march. Self-indulgent middle class kids, from whom he expected little commitment to any cause, proved themselves worthy of his grudging admiration. He struggles to understand the roots of their commitment, suspending his negative pre-conceptions, yet never sharing their enthusiasm.

Many readers, in turn, have been surprised to discover in *Armies* an established author who is frank about his own perplexity and shortcomings. *Armies*, therefore, is not just a record of discovery in the usual journalistic sense of exposing external details. It is also the record of an inward journey—Mailer's journey into the anti-war subculture of the late 1960s—and an invitation to our own inward journey toward conceptual openness. These inner and outer journeys into cultural awareness are guided (or, more accurately, constructively misguided) by the protagonist of *Armies*, Mailer himself. I shall treat this journey in terms of several different dimensions of Mailer's thought and writing in *Armies*: cultural criticism, literary radicalism, narrative style, man vs. machine, religion and philosophy, and the fact/fiction dichotomy.

1. Cultural Criticism

Mailer was more or less drafted for the Pentagon march, and he never entirely gives up his view that the entire thing is "absolutely insane" (*Armies* 50). Part of its insanity is in its odd class composition. He believes that "the middle class is the most alienated from America," because they neither work, as do the working classes, nor do they hold real power (Weber 86). They are the "drug-gutted flower children" and "cancer-pushers" of the American middle class (*Armies* 47 and 297). In Mailer's view this "urban middle-class" has an absurdly absolute conception of pacifism and represents a "closet Communism" (47).

Mailer shrewdly observes the shift from the Old Left to the New Left (*Armies* 250-51). Indeed, Kermit Vanderbilt considers that Mailer's analysis of the middle class youth of the political New Left is more brilliant than anybody else's of the time (319). Mailer sees the confused kids of the sixties "as addicted to and at the same time resentful of modern technology" (319). They are "schizoid victims" of the electronic age (cf. Wolfe's similar view in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* and *Radical Chic*). He wryly comments that by June, 1967 the "Arab-Israeli war" further alienated the Old Left (*Armies* 250). He points out that after the dismal fifties, the sixties "brought life back to the Left, but only for a period. By 1965 the Negroes were disaffected, even profoundly bored with

Left Wing rhetoric..." (*Armies* 248).

Mailer notes the many ways in which the "thousand days" of John F. Kennedy altered the style of America, even in a "sartorial sense" (97). Now, the Old Leftists are sidelined while the New Left and the hippies make revolution (249). Robert Merideth believes that Mailer himself contributed to the growth of the New Left in the sixties (192), but if so, it was without his full consent. Like Herbert Marcuse, he was more "in it" than "of it." Both in a sense were used.

Mailer himself is torn between two Americas: the ideal and the real. One America projects such ideas as conformity, cleanliness, and "America-is-always-right" (*Armies* 177). The "other America" (a term popularized by Michael Harrington's book of that title a few years before) was the America of the Pentagon march. Mailer, being in the march but not entirely "of it," was effectively stranded between these two Americas. Few could see as well as he did the contradictions of American culture and even the march itself.

As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh points out in *The Mythopoeic Reality*, Mailer is struggling to find himself in a schizophrenic America, symbolized by federal marshalls on the one hand, and hippies on the other (156). Mailer himself is not unaffected by this cultural confrontation. He is rather like a surgeon affected by the anaesthetic intended for the patient. His analysis gives way to a "brooding immobility" (156). This leaves the whole event under a haze. Leo Braudy expresses a similar view when he says that "Mailer's America is inclusive, not exclusive" (17). America represents a wonderful playground for Mailer, even as it grows "more corrupt and menacing" (Dupee 100).

His America is a pyramid of totality: "totalitarian architecture, totalitarian superhighways, totalitarian smog, totalitarian food..., totalitarian communications" (*Armies* 199). His view, in this respect, is not that far removed from Jerry Rubin's belief that the Congress was "a servant of the real power in America" (252). Mailer considers that "hamburgers" and "highways"—being fast and direct—are the real symbols of Americanness. Americans, likewise, have little time for second thoughts. They believe themselves to be automatically right in their dealings with other countries—and for this very reason they can spare themselves the trouble of learning the details of America's foreign affairs, a subject about which they know little or nothing (195). What matters to them is not knowledge of what is being done, or has been done. They consider that these impractical subjects are better left to specialists. They have unflinching faith in the superiority of "American knowhow" (165).

Clearly Mailer, in *Armies*, relates that faith to the decline of imagination in day-to-day American reality. Many critics have considered *Armies* “an extended private reading of recent American reality” (Zavarzadeh 154). The problem in previous realism was that realist writing was expected to be “plausible,” while life, as Mailer construed it, could not be (Weber 10). *Armies* provides a corrective in the form of a consciously indeterminate “meta-interpretation,” as Zarvarzadeh terms it (155).

2. Literary Radicalism

Robert Alter regards Mailer as “the most stubbornly political of living American novelists” (312). This of course is part of the driving force behind his realism (313). According to Norman Podhoretz, he was a liberal who abandoned “unreconstructed” liberalism in favor of what he preferred to call “Left Conservatism” (188).

From this designedly contrary position, Mailer analyzes the middle class and the working class (*Armies* 287), and is very critical of both. The working class is loyal to friends, but not to ideas. On the contrary, the middle class is very idealistic, but alienated from the human core of America itself. Mailer is somewhere between the two. During the March, when he meets liberals such as William Sloane Coffin, Jr., the Chaplain at Yale, he feels that he does not belong with such people. Their “air of Ivy League intimacy” revolted him (83-84). A similar feeling had come over him when he attended a demonstration with radicals in Chicago (Braudy 17). There, one can assume, he felt himself a conservative, whereas among liberals he felt himself on the left.

Walter B. Rideout probably understates the case when he says that Mailer’s radicalism is of “an indeterminate sort” (318). Mailer simply cannot accept the radicalism of the new T.V. generation—a curious mixture of LSD, hatred of authority, and subliminal trust in technology (*Armies* 103). He could agree with them, however, that totalitarianism had engulfed the entire nation (136). This, according to Warner Berthoff, is the underlying theme of *Armies* (314). Mailer does not hesitate to compare American totalitarianism with Nazism, renewing a theme which he had developed as early as his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. As Diana Trilling noted, Mailer had long before concluded that fascism is not just a potential in America, but is already a dominant force (47). In America, however, they would play Muzak in the gas chambers. The “two halves” of America—the visceral and the organized—“were not coming together, and when they failed to touch, all of histo-

ry might be lost in the divide" (*Armies* 179).

Michael Cowan thinks that Mailer "sees history as an accelerating movement from unity to multiplicity" (152). Similarly Richard Foster observes that Mailer describes how "a work of art deeply rooted in the dynamics of present history comes into being, and what existential reality is like to an idealistic sensibility which is also highly attuned to those dynamics" (140). These views reach a peak in *Armies*, where Mailer's very writing takes the form of a "multiplicity" of perspectives.

3. Narrative style

There is no dividing, therefore, Mailer's message from his narrative style. Zavarzadeh acknowledges that *Armies* is a self-referential narrative, with the aesthetic control of art, but an art that achieves external verifiability. This combination Zavarzadeh terms a "bi-referential mode," or "fictuality," involving an unresolved fact/fiction tension that defies the standard resolution of "mono-referential" narratives (57-58). This counterpointing of external fact and internal fiction produces "a kind of Brechtian alienation effect which distances the reader, prevents an easy emotional identification ..., and forces the reader to confront the changed actuality" (66). This liberates the reader from "order-hunting." Such a phenomenalist approach to facts gives up the idea of fact as "an embodiment of order, predictability, and ... commonsensical reality" (66).

The narrator of the nonfiction novel is "more similar to the teller of an orally composed tale than to the narrators of either the totalizing novel or factual narratives" (Zavarzadeh 87). Mailer uses the third person vantage point by the first person actee in *Armies*, which is "the narrative of a narratist" (157). Mailer is both "the actant" and "the actee"—the Performer, or public man, who is tied up with politics and who at the same time is the omniscient interpreter of American reality—versus the Scribe who realizes the futility of it all and the arbitrariness of his interpretations (84 and 157). This reveals a schizophrenic gap between "wanting" and "achieving" (157). These are the "two Mailers," the novelist and the journalist. To be sure, the two do not easily coexist, a fact which contributes to the creative tension of *Armies*. Throughout this novel Mailer pits his still romantic idea of authorship against 1960s America (158).

Armies opens with a *Time* article on Mailer, setting up the outside observer versus the performer motif, which in turn makes reference to schizophrenic America (Zavarzadeh

161). Mailer himself is not a perfect observer and in numerous ways warns the reader to be well aware of that fact. He relates, for example, how while attending the political rally that included Martin Luther King's most famous speech, he went out to urinate at the very moment of the speech, and missed the whole thing. Likewise he missed his chance to M.C. the rally prior to the Pentagon march. He accurately describes himself as "a comic hero" (*Armies* 67), which does nothing to lend credibility to the serious points that he makes throughout *Armies*. Obviously there is an ironic side to what Weber identifies as the judgmental voice in *Armies* (48).

This ironic edge, Mailer's characteristic style of journalism, was not new with *Armies*. It was developed during his days with the *Village Voice*. There he developed a journalistic form emphasizing a highly individualistic approach to events (Braudy 8). Braudy sees *Armies* as "reporting" and "semi-autobiography" (11). What draws Mailer to journalism is the mixture it offers of "participation" and "detachment" (12), a mixture which he carries back into literature in *Armies*.

4. Man Versus Machine

Both Mailer and Wolfe express strong anti-technological views. As Cowan notes, Mailer was among the first to recognize the symbolic power that white Protestant America found in rocket technology, which it invested "with all the powers of comfort and cure for their alienation" (155). This is an extension of the anti-technological views that, as Randall H. Waldron observes, were already to be found in *The Naked and the Dead*. There the main conflict was between the mechanistic force of the system and the individual will (315). In *Armies*, likewise, Mailer describes the tension between ordinary citizens and totalitarian forces (92). Mailer portrays the anti-war demonstrators of the Pentagon march as ordinary citizens locked in a mythic struggle against the "high church of the military-industrial complex," i.e., the high church of technology (132). He believes that the Pentagon is not so much destroying communism in Asia as the humanistic future of America. He considers that unrestrained, militarized technology will destroy Asia, not Communism (210-11). He does not glorify the marchers, however. He sees that in the confrontation between the two armies—the LSD army and the Pentagon—there is no place for himself, or the America that he would defend. He sees these armies as but opposite poles of a neo-fascist, "sexo-technological" continuum (110).

5. Mailer's Religion and Philosophy

As we have seen, Mailer tries to reach beyond the superficiality of conventional journalism by uniting the facticity of journalism with "fiction's interior truth" (Weber 80). Zavarzadeh shows that *Armies* involves a nontotalizing sensibility, which he terms "super-modernism" (3). This is very close to the concept of postmodern realism, as I develop it. *Armies* gives us not reality per se but reality as mediated by personal and collective consciousness. Mailer accepts the fictive and often bizarre nature of reality (Zavarzadeh 45). *Armies*, nevertheless, is more 'ontological' than fictive, in the usual 'compositional' sense (124). Mailer pits the "monumental disproportions" of events against the idea of epistemological authority. He thus abandons the role of omniscient writer (128), calling contemporary reality "an intersection between history and the comic book" (161). Seen in this light, Zavarzadeh observes, "*Armies* is an odyssey of a self yearning for a grand pattern of meaning behind its fragmentary experience but aware of the futility of such hungering" (159).

Mailer, as the philosopher of Hip, would not at first sight seem the most likely bearer of religious meaning, yet George Alfred Schrader argues that Mailer's idea of Hip is not that far removed from Kierkegaard's "despair of defiance" (82). Hip, unlike French existentialism, is "based on a mysticism of the flesh and its origins can be traced back into all the undercurrents and underworlds of American life ..." (87). Mailer's hero, the hipster, is closely akin to Kierkegaard's sensuous-erotic genius (91), and Norman Podhoretz contends that Hip also has Nietzschean roots (Dupee 101).

Drawing from these sources, Mailer contrasts the essential values of Christianity with those of American corporatism. His view of Christianity is always shrouded in mystery (*Armies* 211-12). He says that "... it is Sunday, and we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam. Yes, we are burning him there, and as we do, we destroy the foundation of this Republic, which is its love and trust in Christ" (239).

6. Fact/Fiction, History/Novel, and the New Journalism

Critical debate over *Armies* tends to divide between those who think that on the whole it is fiction, and those who think it reportage. Zavarzadeh contends it is neither (53). It is closer to what John Hellmann has termed the nonfiction novel. *Armies* aims to 'cover' the

events, as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* aims to 're-cover' them (180). Mailer in *Armies* is in a war against ordinary conventional journalism's "forest of inaccuracy" (Weber 81). We are reminded again of Tom Wolfe's contest with conventional journalism. Characteristically, though, Mailer's manner is more graphically averse to what he calls "the old literary corset of good taste" (*Armies* 62). Aside from matters of style, he has two serious objections to mainstream journalism: its refusal to take a stand on vital issues, and its obsession with the surface phenomena of events. As he states it,

these reporters will kiss Lyndon Johnson's * ss and Dean Rusk's * ss and Man Mountain McNamara's * ss, they will rush to kiss it, but will they stand up in public? No! Because they are the silent assassins of the Republic. They alone have done more to destroy this nation than any force in it (64-65).

The conventional journalism and the mass media are interested, according to Mailer, "only in processes which are expanding dramatically or collapsing," in other words, only the external scenic factors (*Armies* 259).

Braudy cites, in this regard, the bilateral importance of Mailer's merger of journalism and literature (14). This interplay brings to literature a sorely needed realistic base, while it brings to journalism the deeper understanding of literature. For Mailer personally it helps him to avoid, or at least lessen, the melodramatic element in his writing (15). Mailer comments on journalism in his interview with Steven Marcus:

But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it and I wouldn't want ever to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity ..., but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art. (Marcus 39)

Foster also notes that, for Mailer, the conventional distinction between fiction and fact or between fiction and journalism is "likely to vanish under the stress of creative intensity" (130). This "non-fiction" feeds back into his fiction and is undistinguishable from it. Mailer insists that the practice of journalism, properly pursued, is "not an essential betrayal" of the literary art (130). David Lodge believes that *Armies*, especially, broke the boundary between fiction and reportage, as was suggested by the subtitle: *History as a Novel, The Novel as History*. Writing about himself in the third person, Mailer breaks the stereotype of autobiographical narrative and gives the novel a gripping (if problematic) historical credibility. Unlike so many "postmodern" literary exercises, the end result of *Armies* is a

revalidation of the interpreting experience (Lodge 321-22).

Earlier Mailer had concentrated on revolutionizing the formal or stylistic aspect of his writing. Laura Adams sees his *Advertisements for Myself* as "a rejection of conventional criticism, conventional themes, conventional forms" (340). In *Armies*, however, Mailer brings his revisionist style to bear upon journalistic material, adapting the pose of the objective observer. He is present as a participant in the making of history, and thus contributes to the creation of a new literary form (341), which is nothing other than the New Journalism. Raymond A. Schroth believes that Mailer, in this way, broke the distinction between "life and art, thought and action" (312). In *Armies* he successfully synthesizes life, literature and theology "without sacrificing the novelist-journalist's detachment" (312).

Something of Mailer's attitude toward this synthesis is conveyed in a conversation he has with Robert Lowell, as reported in *Armies*. Lowell says, "Yes, Norman, I really think you are the best journalist in America." Mailer replies that "Well, Gal, ... there are days when I think of myself as being the best writer in America" (*Armies* 33). Mailer is not denying his characterization as a journalist, but is strongly denying, as does Wolfe, the standard dichotomy between journalism and creative writing.

Earl Rovit observes that after his failures with *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, Mailer turns to journalism to reembrace objective reality. He seeks to place himself at the center of "the historically real and actual" (373). His central theme in *Armies*, accordingly, is understood by Richard Gilman as the relationship between "the self and history, the ego and actuality" ("Art" 260). Mailer, Gilman adds, goes beyond a simple confrontation between history and personality to achieve "a new sense of liberation.... Mailer has opened up new possibilities for the literary imagination and new room for us to breathe in the crush of actuality" ("What" 160).

Thus *Armies* points the way for later New Journalism. Gilman, I believe, is mistaken in his assertion that Mailer conceives of novels as being superior reports on social or psychic or moral phenomena ("What" 165). What Mailer has done, rather, is to dissolve the basis on which a clean dichotomy between journalism and fiction could be drawn. Gilman ignores the fact that the journalism which Mailer merges with the novel is a radically revised journalism. Conventional journalism—the simple "reporting" that Gilman refers to—is exactly what Mailer opposes. The same, of course, can be said for Wolfe and other New Journalists, though Mailer's approach to journalism tends to be more experimental or "avant-garde" than theirs. Wolfe and Mailer, each in his own way, adapt contemporary

writing to the demands of the surrealistic world that surrounds us. They would represent (not simply “report”) that world, doing whatever it takes to get the message across; and part of that message is that realism still matters.

Bailey observes that Mailer in *Armies* uses the term history “to signify the collective reality that modifies the individual vision of his protagonist” (257). Wolfe employs similar psychological techniques—using individual vision to catch a glimpse of the forest, or collective reality. The subtitles first of *Armies* and then of *The Executioner’s Song (A True Life Novel)* demonstrate Mailer’s commitment to enter the no man’s land between fiction and real life. Mailer once said that “nothing is more real to the intellectual than a concept!” (*Armies* 27). Since we know that Mailer abhors abstractions, he clearly does not mean “concept” in any abstract sense. Rather, as Frank McConnell notes, fiction to Mailer means “an intelligent shaping and ordering of the inchoate stuff of life itself” (353). Mailer’s search for authenticity in his journalism parallels his search for a connection between the past and the present in *Armies*. He is searching for the larger connections that tie the individual to the nation, or in any case to larger meaning structures, overcoming the alienation that has plagued the individual throughout our modern age.

Gerald Graff, in my opinion, is wrong when he criticizes Mailer for reducing contemporary history to a myth of liberation, “counterposing the hipster and the square, the id and the rational consciousness, the ‘existential’ individual and the plastic, life-denying power of ‘Technology-land’ ” (372). He is right, however, when he states that Mailer doggedly attempts to make his fiction a “testing ground of the historical and social forces of his age” (372). Mailer moves fascinatingly between analyses of his personal feelings, the descriptions of the demonstrators, and sociology on the largest scale (Gilman, “What” 162). In the late 1950s—the era of Mailer’s “hipster”—his principal concern was to achieve a degree of personal autonomy, and hence authenticity. With *Armies*, however, Mailer has moved beyond that point. He refuses to gain authenticity by ‘opting out’ of history. Both as an individual and as a writer, he is returning to the fray.

Mailer’s own explanation for his subtitle helps to clear up some of the ambiguity associated with “History as a Novel,” or the “Novel as History.” He declares that the first book is “a history in the guise or dress or manifest of a novel, the second is a real or true novel... presented in the style of a history” (*Armies* 284). He devotes two-thirds of *Armies* to the first book, which he calls “a history.” This somewhat covertly expresses his intention. He wants to make the historical aspect more meaningful by rescuing history from abstraction.

Likewise, by the same token, he can be said to have begun the postmodern project of saving realism from the critical inroads of modernism. In short, he has initiated the new critical genre which I term postmodern realism. In so doing, he made a vital contribution to what may be called the 'postmodernization' of nonfiction literature.

Despite that contribution, Mailer's narrative style and his personal philosophy were carrying him into an esoteric mode of expression that would not prove conducive to the further development of nonfiction writing. The root of the problem was the egocentric turn that his writing took in the 1960s. His style—which could be loosely described as a prose version of confessional poetics—left much to be desired when it came to strategies of social narration.

In their revolt against modernism, many contemporary writers have joined Mailer in their turn toward confessional modes of expression. Ginsberg's poetry is a good case in point. His personalism, however, is matched by a deep concern for public meanings and causes. His hard realist edge returns poetry to the sphere of social criticism. This is strictly at odds with the apolitical and anti-authorial stance of much modernism. Often Ginsberg is talking directly to the reader, as in his famous poem "Kaddish," yet at the same time he is addressing the most public and timely of issues: the Vietnam War, drugs, the sexual revolution, and ideological conflict. He "renewed the radical force of realism by bringing it over to the side of the counter-culture..." (Thronton and Thornton, "Resistance" 103).

Mailer, as we have seen, picked up this confessional poetics and applied it in prose works such as *The Armies of the Night*, which like Ginsberg's poetry, adds a striking political dimension to confessional literature. Unfortunately this confessional mode has its distinct limitations when it comes to the perceptions of other people, and to the representation of events which have meaning apart from the unique perspective of the narrator. It seems better when applied to poetry, but fails when it becomes the dominant factor in fiction. Its failure is even more pronounced in the case of Mailer's nonfiction, where solipsism precludes the stated historical purpose of a work like *Armies*. To the degree that the reader is genuinely interested in the events being represented, Mailer's egocentric techniques quickly lose their appeal.

In *Armies* Mailer touched upon a great many interesting people and events that have intrinsic interest in and of themselves. Unfortunately Mailer's ego gets in the way. There is much name dropping in *Armies*, but a sad lack of in-depth character analysis. After

twenty-five years, those names cry out for further coverage, and the literary as well as journalistic value of the work suffers greatly. By contrast, consider a partly realistic novel such as Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, whose literary value only seems to intensify over the years. Both as a novel and as a history, *Armies* falls short of what it promised to be, yet it undeniably marks a signal achievement: the political postmodernization not only of Mailer's work but of the whole corpus of politically engaged literature.

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