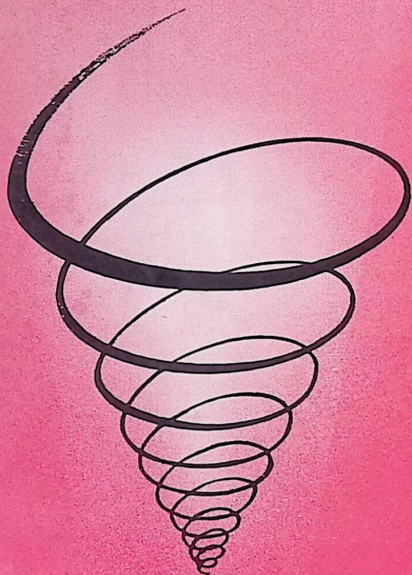


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BOOKS

FICTION IN REVIEW

AMERICANS AT WAR

CHARLES J. ROLO

It was not until three years after the armistice that John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* ushered in the realistic fiction of the First World War. This time the novelists have reacted faster. Some creditable war fiction appeared before the shooting stopped, and by now we've had such books as *A Walk in the Sun*, *Casualty*, *The Gallery*, *The Gesture*, and others. Now Norman Mailer, who is twenty-five years old, bows in with the most impressive novel published to date about Americans in the Second World War. *The Naked and The Dead* is almost a really great novel. Mailer's book lacks the stylistic éclat of *The Enormous Room* and *A Farewell to Arms*, but the writing is more accomplished than in *Three Soldiers*, the characters more completely realized than those in any of the World War I novels. What is perhaps most striking is the difference between Mailer's outlook and that of the older generation. It's more than just a reflection of the changed attitude of the men fighting the war. It suggests on the author's part a broader vision, a greater intellectual maturity.

John Andrews, the hero of *Three Soldiers*, enlisted because he was "sick of revolt, of thought, of carrying his individuality like a banner," and hoped to "stamp out his maddening desire for music, to humble himself in the mud of common slavery." In the Army he expected to "start rebuilding the fabric of his life, out of the real thing this time, out of work and comradeship and scorn. Scorn—that was the quality he

needed." The war, in effect, struck him as an opportunity for self-rehabilitation, nothing else; and "scorn" was to be the life-restoring salve. Andrews, however, was sickened by the "slavery" he had sought out; he was scornful of himself for humbling himself (the very thing he had intended). In his enormous disgust, he concluded that "civilization [was] nothing but a vast edifice of sham, and the war, instead of its crumbling, was its fullest and most ultimate expression." He felt "a crazy desire . . . to throw himself into inevitable defeat, to live his life as he saw it in spite of everything." Revolt had become a sacred duty, and Andrews' eventual desertion smacked strongly of ritualistic self-immolation. For it was gratuitous: the war was over, Andrews was studying music in Paris, his discharge was imminent.

The Enormous Room was a Pilgrim's Progress away from civilization into anarchistic individualism. After his absurd arrest, the author came to feel that everything about the war and his involvement in it "was blague"—a preposterous joke. The disgusting concentration camp—the "enormous room" in which he was imprisoned—struck him as "the finest place I've ever been in my life." Why? Because the people in it, the "Delectable Mountains"—an international of Bowery bum types, at once repulsive and pathetic—were all of them refugees from civilization. The real meaning of civilization was "fully and irrevocably" disclosed to Cummings in the convulsive

coughing of a tubercular prostitute on her way to solitary confinement. The "intelligent revolution" would have come only when it was possible to find people like those of the enormous room "without going to prison." The artist and the bum, Cummings implied, were soul mates; and both were the special butt of the universe (a notion later vulgarized by Saroyan and Steinbeck). A chronic, mutinous isolation was their only defense.

A parallel code emerged from *A Farewell to Arms* and other Hemingway stories of the Twenties. (The kinship which Cummings found with outcasts Hemingway found with bullfighters, gangsters, explorers, adventurers—also lonely individualists.) As Malcolm Cowley has pointed out, what Lieutenant Henry lost in the retreat from Caporetto was his faith in organized society—"It was not my show any more." Society was a malignant enemy; the individual's sole responsibility was to himself. His duty was to stay alive, to preserve his identity.

We can see today that Dos Passos, Cummings, Hemingway, and the rest of them, in exploding the hypocrisies which camouflaged the truths of war, slipped into some fuzzy thinking, some juvenile heroics of their own. They replaced the false romance of self-sacrifice with a false romance of revolt; the windy rhetoric of the righteous cause with a rhetoric of total dissent; the cant of jingoism with a cult of irresponsibility. Having discovered that the wartime slogans were a sham, the

novelists excitedly concluded civilization was an even bigger sham. From this *non sequitur* they took the final plunge into illogic: the individual was depicted as the "fall guy" of a world ("system," "treadmill") for which he himself was in no way responsible. All this was pure romanticism, inverted in its expression but not so very different under the skin from that of the nineteenth-century Romantics.

The despairing fatalism of the World War I novelists, which made of their hero the man "things are done to," was inimical to the creation of four-dimensional characters. As Donald Adams has noted, Dos Passos' people were portrayed in hard, clear outline, as though caught by a moving camera; but the reader never gets inside them; they are never fully known to him. Nor, for that matter, are Hemingway's people. A sympathetic critic, Alfred Kazan, has said of them: "The symbols Hemingway employed to convey his sense of the world's futility and horror were always more significant than the characters who personified them, and they so often seemed personified emotion. . . . The gallery of expatriates in *The Sun Also Rises* were always subsidiary to the theme their lives enforced; the lovers in *A Farewell to Arms* were . . . the abstractions of a lyric emotion. Hemingway . . . was not writing about people living in a real world; he was driving his characters between . . . two poles . . . invoking the specter of their damnation."

It's clear in retrospect that the outlook of the "lost generation" writers seriously inhibited their growth. Cummings, faithful to the logic of his undergraduate revolt, took refuge in Bohemianism; his slender output has been that of a coterie artist who might well have been a major literary figure. Dos Passos produced in *U.S.A.* three novels of tremendous vitality, even though the characters were shadowy figures; but his later disillusionment with revolutionary Socialism, duplicating an earlier pattern, snowballed into a seeming revulsion against everything he had stood for, and his work has become arrested in the process. Of late he has busied himself with political journalism—warnings against Communism and defenses of "free enterprise" in the right-wing magazines.

In Hemingway's case, *A Farewell to Arms* was followed by roughly a decade

of inferior work: his "nihilism" seemed, for a number of years, to be traveling a circular course. *To Have and Have Not* was the work of an angry adolescent, driven to perverse melodrama by inability to define his moral reaction to a crisis (centered on the Spanish Civil War) by which he was deeply aroused. Then, three years later, came *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, whose theme derives from Donne's devotional lines: "No man is an island, intire of it selfe. . . . I am involved in mankind." This novel was the faltering manifesto of a passionate romantic, who had at last come to terms with himself and his suppressed ideals. Robert Jordan, waiting for death, is the first of Hemingway's heroes who feels—and gives his reasons for feeling—that his death will not be pointless. "I have fought for what I believed in . . . If we win here, we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth fighting for, and I hate very much to leave it." Here Hemingway's brilliant half-vision had suddenly, if awkwardly, broadened its compass, and in so doing it lifted his work out of a long decline.

It is the broadness of compass in Mailer's outlook which is so encouraging. In *The Naked and The Dead* he looks steadfastly at complexity and ambiguity, delves into them without simplifying formulas, and projects his findings with an honesty which exactly mirrors his uncertainties. Mailer is as free of illusions about war aims and ideals as the older generation; he is also free of that generation's naive illusion that, having blamed it all on "them" (the anonymous powers-that-be) or on "propaganda" or such, the last word has been said. His revulsion against war is as intense as that of any of his predecessors; but he sees the impossibility of a "separate peace," as well as the theatricality of a private war against society, and he tries to put his finger on the destructive forces at work in the society he comes from. Mailer writes about Army discipline and officer privilege with savage resentment, but he does not slip into E. E. Cummings' idealization of the underdog, and he goes beyond Dos Passos' behavioristic treatment of the uneducated soldier. He shows that the resentments are in part inevitable; in part a carry-over (heightened by war) of the frustrations in the individual's personal history. The personal histories

of his ten main characters are perceptively unfolded in flashbacks interspersed between the chapters. To put all this more generally: The novelists of the Twenties tended to find in war simply a dramatic expression of the conflict between the individual and the universe; Mailer tries to use war as a catalytic agent which enables the novelist to lay bare the hard core of truth about his people and to evaluate the forces that have shaped them.

What I have said is not intended as an overall comparison, to Mailer's advantage, with any of the World War I novelists; such grade-labeling is largely meaningless. I've dwelt on the limitations of the older generation—and stressed only Mailer's qualities—for a corrective purpose. The long drought in American fiction makes one look back on the literary milestones of the Twenties with such nostalgia that, when the rare novel of merit appears, it is likely to be insensibly devalued—a tendency strengthened by the praise and press-agency lavished on glib mediocrity. A newcomer of real importance deserves the benefit of sympathetic perspective.

The Naked and The Dead is hinged on the campaign to wrest from the Japanese the small Pacific island of Anopopei. The narrative is somewhat overlong and greatly overlaid with GI dialogue, much of which reads like uncensored interviews with Dr. Kinsey's investigators. As one reviewer has said, the book is "a saturation bombardment, with every target hit at least three times"; and its structure is somewhat anticlimactic. All this does not prevent its being a story of extraordinary power. You are instantly wrenched into the febrile climate of war—into the dread that grips troops offshore in convoy, waiting for the bombardment to erupt. Thereafter, you are held enthralled through seven hundred pages of terror and tedium, ceaseless discomfort, obscene fatigue, and sudden numbing excitement. There are combat episodes here which for sustained intensity have few if any parallels in the literature of modern war.

Mailer's purpose is ambitious, his design exceedingly intricate. The cast of characters, though each is sharply individualized, constitutes a cross-section of American types; the biographical flashbacks attempt to show the nexus between each man's past and

his conduct under stress. At the same time, the main tensions of the plot have obvious symbolic overtones. Thus we have two distinct but interrelated themes. One might be termed: *Why they behave like Americans*. The other: *The coming struggle for power in America*.

The fullness with which each of Mailer's ten main characters is portrayed would be sufficient to stamp him as a writer of unusual gifts; it is seldom that a contemporary novel achieves penetrating focus on more than a single personality. In Gallagher we have at once a portrait of the small-time crackpot Fascist, and a keen analysis of what makes a "revolutionary in reverse." We have his scapegoat, Goldstein, longing for acceptance and suspicious of overtures, a trifle smug about his "education," and forever harried by a racial heritage of suffering. Martinez, the little Mexican, also feels an outsider; he earns a sergeant's stripes and the nickname "Japbait," but all that "does not make you white Protestant, firm and aloof." Red is the perennial vagrant, chronically distrustful of human attachments, frozen in his weary contempt. Then there's "Polack," who graduated from the orphanage to the stockyards, then to the numbers racket and a flashy bankroll. There's Wilson, a genial, ignorant lecher hailing from the Deep South; and Brown, who flunked out of college and became a crass salesman with a talent for toadying to all the big customers.

War has given to these men a common set of hates and fears. They also share a secret sense of inadequacy, a streak of gnawing loneliness—the endemic afflictions of a competitive society. Stripped "naked" of their protective crust, they are pretty unattractive. Mailer shows up with ferocious honesty the cowardice and self-pity and nastiness in each of them; but their behavior under critical stress reveals a toughness of fiber, a compelling if unconscious sense of duty. About most of them there's something perversely admirable. The final portrait is a contradictory, complicated whole—a living human being. Gallagher, for instance, with his anti-Semitic hysteria is a pretty hateful

specimen until you read about his paralyzing hurt at the loss of his wife; his awkward moment of intimacy with Goldstein; his tormenting guilt when another Jew in the platoon, jumping a crevasse, misses his outstretched hand and dies. There are times when Gallagher is strangely pathetic, a few occasions when he's actually likable. And so it is with most of them.

The book's three crucial characters are Major General Cummings, Lieutenant Hearn, and Sergeant Croft. Cummings—"A Peculiarly American Statement"—is a composite of the elements that might produce a big-time American Fascist. He is liked by the men for the bluff manner which he skillfully affects, and is respected for his stern efficiency. Cummings is a military genius ruled by an obsessive power complex, a thinker of formidable lucidity. To Hearn, his aide, he expounds an icily reasoned doctrine of mass control, which will reach for power masquerading as "conservative liberalism": "This is going to be a reactionary's century. It's the one thing Hitler said which wasn't completely hysterical—The machine techniques of this century demand consolidation, and with that you've got to have fear, because the majority of men must be subservient to the machine.... The natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety.... The only morality of the future is a power morality." Power, says Cummings, "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.... You can consider the Army the preview of the future."

Cummings has his officers fitted into a "fear ladder"; makes them exploit privilege to break the spirit of the men. The general's goal is total control: to strip the division of any identity beyond his personal will. When Cummings finds that Hearn's will eludes him, he sends him on a dangerous reconnaissance at the head of Sergeant Croft's platoon. Croft is Cummings' counterpart on the brute level. An instinctive killer, he would be in Cummings' new order the tool used to burn out "little surges of resistance."

Lieutenant Hearn, Mailer's foil to the general, is his least satisfactory and most important character. A youthful quarrel with his father, a midwestern *nouveau riche*, "expanded into a rebellion, apparently out of proportion, and it is the sum of everything... even of things forgotten." He has been a Harvard radical, then a union organizer, "a dilettante skipping around sewers." He has been the Young Man in New York, first in publishing, then in radio. When war broke out, he worked for Bundles for Britain, followed the headlines of the advance on Moscow, thought of joining the Communist party. A month before Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Army. He has given up trying to understand himself; "He just feels blank."

Hearn would seem to embody the political and moral tensions of the well-to-do liberal intellectual in the final stage of disillusionment, yet too independent to turn Communist or reactionary. A Harvard Marxist once said to him, "You want perfection, you're a bourgeois idealist, and therefore you're undependable." Hearn knows that he's a snob and suspects that he is "basically like Cummings"—that what he needs is control. It is Cummings who supplies (with more precision than the Marxist) the clue to Hearn's contradictions. He is one of those liberals, says the general, who "want to remake the world and never admit they want to remake it in their own image." And Hearn sees himself as "not a phoney but a Faust."

Between Cummings and Hearn, Hearn and Croft, a strange contest of will is fought out. Each of them is simultaneously seeking to assert his mastery over the men—the anonymous masses. Hearn loses out—Croft engineers his death; but when Croft, taking over the platoon, drives the men beyond endurance, they rebel and he is forced to lead them back. Cummings, too, is frustrated by the men: while he is absent at headquarters, the division, following up a minor Japanese withdrawal, overruns the entire island. Still, the communiqué gives him credit for the victory. It's a denouement whose ambiguities contain a suggestive comment on our time.

SUPPLEMENT TWO: THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE

by H. L. Mencken

Reviewed by Horace Reynolds

H. L. MENCKEN has done more to make his fellow-countrymen proud of their language. When he published the first, thin edition of *The American Language* in 1919, Americans were still apologizing for the brashness of American speech, deprecating its differences from the English of England. Today *The American Language*, fourth edition, and its two fat supplements have gone a long way to show that those differences are a sign, not of corruption and weakness, but of growth and vitality. Mencken has brought hilarity and bawdry as well as logic and learning to linguistic inquiry in America. He has written a work of great scientific value with pungency and wit. He has demonstrated that the study of the American language can be one of the most fascinating and exhilarating of intellectual experiences.

The common language is Mencken's oyster. He delights in studying its structure and functions, and it is surely strange that so far no one has accepted his reiterated invitation to write a grammar of our common speech. With our vague notions of the mysteries of linguistics we are likely to think of the vernacular as a speech of irresponsible error and wild corruption. It isn't. Anything can happen in language, as Mr. Mencken well says, but the vulgar language has its laws, and Mr. Mencken has made a start toward their codification, and, thus, has shown the way to future grammarians. In the common language *them* is always the demonstrative adjective, not *these* and *those*. *Whom* and the subjunctive do not exist in the vulgar. As the expression "Between you and I, him and her drink too much" illustrates, the accusative pronoun of the literary language becomes the nominative form in the vulgar; the nominative form often becomes the accusative. There is a parallel exchange of preterit and past participle, as in "He *done* her wrong" and "I have *went*." The vulgar language seeks vigor. In its rhythm and rhyme *go slow* is more imperative than *go slowly*. The question "Who do you love?" is more peremptory than "*Whom do you love?*" The proof of the pud-

din's chawin' the bag, and both these expressions today are sound English; usage has made honest women of them.

In slang America stands pre-eminent among all the nations of the earth. Perhaps the most complete discussion of the subject is here in print to prove it. Here is *yellow* for telegram, *baloney* for automobile tire, *blupe* for an unwanted sound in a sound track, *blizzard*, a beautician's term for a customer always in a hurry, to select a few random shots from the slang of various trades. John Lomax has shown what a happy hunting grounds the prisons can be for the songcatcher, and wordcatcher Mencken has followed him into the steely stillness of the clinks. Such coinages as *kimona* for coffin, *dance hall* for death house, *last mile* for the walk to the electric house, are gayly desperate with the *Galgenhumor* of "The Night Before Larry Was Stretched."

Not all slang dies an early death or is translated to the polite heaven of the higher levels of usage. *Bamboozle* rings bright enough to have been coined yesterday, but it was listed as slang by Dick Steele in 1710. *To knock off* (to quit), *to plant* (to hide), *grub, duds*—the youngest of these bits of current slang is recorded as early as 1662.

Time was when most of the new words that rode out of the West were called Westernisms. Today, says Mencken, Broadway is the chief source of American slang. With this shift in spawning ground from West to East has gone a consequent change in mood. A century ago such coinages as *ring-tailed roarer* ripsorted high, wide, and handsome out of the West. Today the wit of Broadway is abusive, not ebullient. The affirmative spirit of *Paddle your own canoe* has been replaced by such negations as *What he don't know won't hurt him*.

Here are a few dissensions for the Third Supplement, which despite his disclaimers everyone feels Mr. Mencken will surely write. They give some idea of the detail of Mr. Mencken's work: the American language takes in a lot of territory. *Sleep in* is not by any means restricted to western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. It is recorded from Scotland and the northern counties of England in the English Dialect Dictionary. This reviewer used to hear it often in Kingston, Ontario, in 1922. *Children*, historically, is a double plural, so, strictly

speaking, *childrens* is not a double but a triple plural. My Armenian barber tells me that Armenian surnames do not precede the given names. *Segue* is not a word indigenous and native to radio. It is an old minstrel show and vaudeville term. The C. & O.'s *FFV* is not an abbreviation of the First Families of Virginia. This train from its initial maiden trip from Cincinnati to New York, May 11, 1889, has always been called the *Fast Flying Virginian*, although the initials of the First Families phrase undoubtedly suggested its name. Perhaps, also, I dare say that Horace Reynolds spells his last name thus, with an s.

Having added these few drops to Mr. Mencken's ocean, I should like to shout that this is a grand and gargantuan book, rich and gaudy as the tongue it so jauntily explores. It is pregnant with a thousand articles and hundreds of theses. It bristles with fact and theory, the excitements of strange pieces of learning. It reveals that the jazz bands of today are replacing such conventional music terms as the Italian *dolce* with German *schmutz* (lard); that the *oi* sound one thinks of as the hallmark of New York City speech is found in the South, where it is basis for likening the speech of New Orleans to Southern Brooklynese. It shows how such expressions as "They oughta get somebody else to bring it" flourish deep in the heart of Texas, where the double auxiliaries grow. From the Yiddish-American "Was coming many peoples" to the Gullah *curly-flower* for *cauliflower* and *sweet religion* for *sweet alyssum*, it manifests how the tongues of various races have modified the sounds and idioms of American. From it one learns that the immersion of the New England Puritans in Old Testament given names was a revolt against the saints' names of Europe, not entirely a desire to mortify the flesh with such harsh haircloth as *Hezekiah*.

Here in this book Billy Watson's Beef Trust advertises, provocatively, its "two tons of women"; the Atlanta *Journal* announces winsomely that it "covers Dixie like the dew." Here speaks the instinctive balance and style of folk speech in "Let him and her say what is hisn and hern." Here sways the wild flower beauty of such a coinage as *dogwood winter* for a spell of late cold weather; and here is the acrid superciliousness of Broadway's definition of