

An Essay
on
Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*

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Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead



J. MICHAEL LENNON

NORMAN MAILER BEGAN *The Naked and the Dead* at the age of twenty-three and finished it at twenty-four, but he had already written a great deal before his 721-page novel appeared in May 1948. As a student at Harvard from 1939 to 1943 he had written (but not published) two long novels and over fifty short stories, one of which won a national contest. While he was in army training in 1944, his novella "A Calculus at Heaven" appeared in a collection of the work of new writers. All told, Mailer estimates in *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (2003) that he had written a half-million words before starting on *The Naked and the Dead*, the work that initiated one of the most celebrated and lengthy careers in American literature. A best-seller for over a year, his novel of Pacific combat was also critically acclaimed for its unsparing realism (including a pioneer rendering of the obscene and humorous speech of GIs), its portrayal of a cross section of Americans at war, and its rich presentation of the dynamic relationships of fear, courage, growth, and despair. The novel has also been praised for its depiction of the power of nature, its powerful antiwar sentiments, and for its anticipations of the cold war and the anticommunist witch hunts of the 1950s. It always tops

the lists of great war novels, as well as the lists of great novels of the twentieth century.

Mailer's achievement was the result of extraordinary preparation and plain good luck. Besides his extensive apprentice writing, he was a prodigious reader. He was only a college freshman when the German army invaded Poland in September 1939, but during his first year he was already reading widely, including the books that would aid him in composing his first published novel. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) he notes that during this period "I read and reread [James T. Farrell's] *Studs Lonigan*, [John Dos Passos'] *U.S.A.* and [John Steinbeck's] *The Grapes of Wrath*. Later I would add [Thomas] Wolfe and [Ernest] Hemingway and [William] Faulkner and to a small measure, [F. Scott] Fitzgerald; but Farrell, Dos Passos and Steinbeck were the novel to me . . . before I turned seventeen." In a quote published in Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times* (1985), Mailer recalls that the books of these writers as well as *Anna Karenina* (1886) by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy were always on his writing desk after the war: "And whenever I wanted to get in the mood to write I'd read one of them. The atmosphere of *The Naked and the Dead*,

the overspirit, is Tolstoyan; the rococo comes out of Dos Passos; the fundamental, slogging style from Farrell, and the occasional overrich descriptions from Wolfe."

Mailer notes in *Advertisements for Myself* that after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, "while worthy young men were wondering where they could be of aid to the war effort . . . I was worrying darkly whether it would be more likely that a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific." He followed the war's progress closely and read early combat narratives such as John Hersey's *Into the Valley* (1943) and Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun* (1944), both of which contain accounts of combat patrols. Mailer was drafted in January 1944, the same month he married his first wife, Bea. In *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (1988) he recounts that just before he was inducted into the army he told Bea that he intended to write "THE war novel." Throughout his two years of active duty, he secretly harbored this ambition, "a cold maniacal thing in my heart, sharp as a shiv," he wrote in *Advertisements for Myself*.

Mailer's background was an additional resource. Born in Long Branch, New Jersey, on January 31, 1923, he was raised within a mile of Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, rooted for the Dodgers, and played stickball on the streets of ethnic neighborhoods. He drew on the neighborhood and high school kids of Brooklyn for some of the enlisted men in the fourteen-man reconnaissance platoon (especially the Jewish-, Italian- and Irish-American troops) he follows through the novel, while Harvard helped him with the portraits of several of the officers, most particularly Lt. Robert Hearn, a Harvard graduate and the novel's apparent hero. The men he served with in the 112th Regimental Combat Team, a Texas outfit, in the Pacific theater of operations were also useful. Mailer has explained, as quoted in *Mailer: His Life and Times*, that Sergeant Croft, the novel's tough, sadistic platoon leader, is an amalgam of a sergeant he had encountered in basic training

CHRONOLOGY

- 1923 Mailer is born on January 31 in Long Branch, New Jersey.
- 1939 Graduates from Boys High School in Brooklyn and enrolls at Harvard.
- 1943 Graduates with a degree in engineering.
- 1944 In January marries Beatrice Silverman and is drafted into the U.S. Army.
- 1944-1946 Serves as a clerk, interpreter of photographs, and rifleman in a reconnaissance platoon in the Philippines, and as a cook in Japan.
- 1948 Publishes *The Naked and the Dead* to popular and critical acclaim.
- 1952 Divorces Beatrice Silverman.
- 1954 Marries Adele Morales. Settles in New York City.
- 1955 Publishes *The Deer Park*. Cofounds and names *The Village Voice*.
- 1957 "The White Negro" published in *Dissent*.
- 1962 Divorces Adele Morales. Marries Lady Jean Campbell.
- 1963 *The Presidential Papers*. Divorces Jean Campbell. Marries Beverly Bentley.
- 1965 *An American Dream*. Gives speeches against Vietnam War.
- 1967 *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Arrested at antiwar march at Pentagon.
- 1968 Publishes *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*.
- 1969 Awarded Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for *Armies of the Night*.
- 1971 *Of a Fire on the Moon*.
- 1973 *Marilyn: A Novel Biography*.
- 1975 *The Fight*.
- 1979 *The Executioner's Song*.
- 1980 Awarded Pulitzer Prize for *The Executioner's Song*. Divorces Beverly Bentley. Marries and divorces Carol Stevens. Marries Barbara Norris Church.
- 1983 *Ancient Evenings*.
- 1984 Elected president of American PEN (1984-1986). Inducted into American Academy of Arts and Letters.

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

- 1991 *Harlot's Ghost*. Appointed New York State Author, 1991–1993.
1995 *Oswald's Tale*.
1998 *The Time of Our Time*.
2003 *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*.

and several of the Texans he had known on the Philippine island of Luzon. He saw combat on Luzon and went on a number of patrols, including an ambitious one behind enemy lines that provided a key incident for the novel. But before he transferred into a combat unit, Mailer, a college graduate, served in several headquarters positions. Because he could type and read the coordinates of a military map, he had to volunteer for a reconnaissance platoon in order to escape headquarters duty. He wrote hundreds of letters to his wife and family describing the firefights, the tropical diseases, the men, the jungle landscape, and the ways the army worked and the ways it did not.

The diversity of his assignments, high and low—he was a cook after the Japanese surrender in August 1945—enabled him to study the power structures of the military, what the novel's General Cummings calls the "fear ladder." Power and its permutations, how it is gained, lost, and used, is one of the novel's major themes. It is manifested in the plot and explored in three long, intelligent, but frightening, conversations between Hearn and General Cummings, the latter serving as a prototype for fictional portraits of many autocratic American generals. These dialectical discussions, which foreshadow Mailer's later writing, were added in the final draft and gave the author a great deal of trouble.

The rest of the novel, buttressed by his knowledge of the works of his literary heroes, was much easier to write. In *The Spooky Art* Mailer characterizes his novel as "the solid, agreeable effort of a young carpenter constructing a decent house while full of the practices, techniques and wisdom of those who have built houses before him." Discharged in May 1946,

Mailer immediately began work on the novel. He was as ready as he could be: he had written and read a great deal; his Brooklyn upbringing and Harvard education provided contrasting swaths of cultural knowledge about depression-era America; the letters he had written home, crammed with useful incidents and army lore, constituted an on-the-ground report of the Luzon campaign; his wife and family were enthusiastically supportive; and he had been fortunate enough to be assigned to the Pacific. "I was lucky," he recalled in *Vietnam, We've All Been There* (1992), "because the European war would have been too much for me. I realized that when I read *The Young Lions* and saw how much more [the book's author Irwin] Shaw knew about Europe than I did—I knew nothing about Europe." Finally, Norman Mailer was a disciplined, talented, and ambitious young man.

CUMMINGS AND HIS ISLAND

The novel follows a two-month campaign to take a Pacific island. It is divided into four unequal parts. Part one, "Wave," is the forty-page prologue where many of the enlisted men are introduced and the amphibious landing takes place. Part two, "Argil and Mold," is the second and longest part of the novel, almost four hundred pages. It deals with the first six weeks of the campaign leading up to the final battle against the Japanese. Argil is the white clay that the potter molds; General Cummings seeks to mold his forces into the perfect fighting weapon, and Sergeant Croft attempts to do the same at his level. Part three, "Plant and Phantom," is 280 pages long and deals with the culminating event of the novel, a long reconnaissance patrol behind enemy lines. The section title refers to the physical and spiritual aspects of humans and the disharmony in which they exist. This disharmony is one of the novel's fundamental oppositions. The demands of the body and the aspirations of the spirit are starkly contrasted in the novel. The brief concluding section, "Wake," deals with the mopping up after the Japanese are

defeated. Except for prewar profiles of ten of the characters, which Mailer calls "The Time Machine," all the novel's action is confined to a Pacific island. This locus gave Mailer tremendous narrative concentration. The reader, with hindsight, knows that the island will be eventually taken. It must, because historically the Japanese were routed from one island after another, and the American forces moved inexorably up to the Philippines and then to Japan itself. This focus also imposes a constrained time scheme; the island campaign will not stretch on endlessly but rather have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The island where the novel's events take place is Anopopei—a fictional name invented by Mailer. Maj. Gen. Edward Cummings invades the island with a six-thousand-man force sometime, it appears, in early 1944. (Mailer gives no specific dates in order to preserve the archetypal nature of the campaign.) Shaped like an ocarina, Anopopei is 150 miles long by 50 miles wide, tapering at the ends. The ocarina's mouthpiece, a peninsula where Cummings lands his troops after naval and air bombardment, juts out about twenty miles from the northwest quadrant of the island, as depicted on the line drawing included in every edition of the novel. Following the book's title pages, this drawing is the next thing that readers encounter, which is Mailer's way of emphasizing landscape as one of the defining circumstances of the novel.

Cummings meets little initial resistance and quickly moves south on the mouthpiece toward the main part of the island. The Watamai Range runs along the island's east-west axis, anchored in the middle by the rocky Mount Anaka. Except for the mountain peaks, a thin girdle of beach, and a few rolling hills covered with *kunai* grass, the island is all jungle—dense, soggy, nearly impenetrable. The tide of the war is turning in the Pacific, and Cummings, one of Mailer's most deftly drawn characters, must take the island swiftly if he is to gain a position of importance in postwar America. This is especially true after the near fiasco he oversaw

on Motome, the previous island (also fictional) his troops invaded, where the other half of Cummings' division is still engaged in cleanup operations. The platoon's veterans on Anopopei several times recall their beach assault at Motome and the anti-aircraft guns the Japanese leveled at their rubber boats.

Many of Cummings' troops are sick and demoralized, adding to his problems. Still, he is confident, and for the first weeks of the campaign on Anopopei, his troops "functioned like an extension of his own body." A midwesterner and a West Point graduate, Cummings is renowned for combining "the force, the tenacity, the staying power" of a bulldog with "the intellect and charm and poise of a college professor or a statesman." He is a bold, polished, but ruthless strategist who does not believe that the United States and its allies are fighting to make the world safe for democracy; rather, the purpose of the war "is to translate America's potential into kinetic energy," to become a superpower "extending an imperialist paw." The Soviet Union will have to be engaged and reduced, in Cummings' view, and the United States will then be the only superpower. Anopopei, therefore, is a stepping-stone to the apex of political power in the semi-fascistic state the general envisions the United States becoming. Such a state was (and remains as) Mailer's worst nightmare; like many ex-GIs he worried that World War II would be followed by war with the Soviet Union. "General Cummings," he said in an interview conducted shortly after *The Naked and the Dead* appeared, later published in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, "articulates a kind of unconscious bent in the thinking of the Army brass and top rank politicians. He's an archetype of the new man, the coming man, the one who's really dangerous." In 1946 and 1947, when he was writing the novel, the Soviets were extending their reach, and Mailer had "the feeling that people in our government were leading us into war again. The last half was written on this nerve right in the pit of my stomach."

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

After clearing out the weak Japanese force on the peninsula, Cummings' next task is to amass supplies, build a road to carry them, and marshal his tanks and troops to face the main Japanese force led by General Toyaku. Readers never meet Cummings' counterpart, and there is only one significant description of a Japanese soldier in the novel, a prisoner whom Croft murders after giving him food and a cigarette and looking at a photo of his family. It is a shocking episode that prepares readers for later manifestations of Croft's violent nature. About a third of the way into the narrative, Mailer does introduce Lieutenant Wakara, an American officer and Japanese translator, who reads a portion of a captured diary and reflects on Japanese attacks as "mass ecstatic outbursts, communal frenzies," but this is Wakara's only appearance. Like most Americans, Mailer knew little about Japanese culture, and after this tentative probe he hardly tries to understand the psychology of Toyaku's soldiers, nor is there much consideration of the war generally.

The Japanese are entrenched behind a defensive line that runs from the ocean, just east of the peninsula, to the base of the cliffs of the Watamai Range. To bring his troops face-to-face with the Toyaku Line, as it is called, Cummings moves his troops left in a huge arc through the jungle, a complex maneuver requiring artillery support, excellent communications, and transportation. It also requires that his force be eager to fight and responsive to every tactical snap of his fingers. They are, and Cummings easily repulses a Japanese attack that comes across a river parallel to the Toyaku Line. Sergeant Croft, the reconnaissance platoon leader, is instrumental in stopping the river attacks, in one of the finest set pieces of combat in American literature. But after these early successes, the advance stalls. Cummings pauses for a few days—a big mistake—to extend the road and let his soldiers rest. Now the men are unresponsive: "A deep and unshakable lethargy settled over the front-line troops." He has powerful enemies in the high command, and the

delay in conquering Anopopei causes him great embarrassment; he could be replaced as commander. A reactionary Prospero who has so far ruled his island with superior knowledge, intellect, and the lash of fear, Cummings is stymied by the inertia of his own forces. At this point in the novel it is becoming clear that the real struggle on Anopopei is not between the Americans and the Japanese but between the American officer class and the enlisted men.

THE PLATOON

Croft's reconnaissance platoon, referred to as "Recon," is representative of the sullen recalcitrance of the division's soldiers, although it is led by a man who is most alive when in battle. It comprises men from all around the country, lower- and middle-class soldiers mainly, who have been beaten down by the Great Depression. Six members of the platoon are veterans of Motome: Croft, a mean, whipcord Texan with a taste for inflicting pain; Private Red Valsen, a Swedish-American miner, leftist sympathizer, and drifter from Montana, who serves as Croft's chief antagonist; Sergeant Martinez, from San Antonio, the outfit's scout and Croft's best friend, also known as "Japbait"; Private Gallagher, a narrow-minded right-winger from Boston whose wife dies in childbirth while he is on Anopopei; Private Wilson, an easygoing southerner with a genius for promoting jungle booze, who is gut-shot late in the novel; and Sergeant Brown, from Oklahoma, a worn-out case who is uneasy with responsibility. A seventh veteran, Private Hennessey, is killed on the beach immediately after the landing.

The other eight are replacements: Private Ridges, a dirt farmer from Arkansas; Private Stanley, Brown's sycophant, who is later promoted to corporal; Corporal Toglio, who gets a "million dollar" elbow wound and is shipped home; Private Roth, an unathletic, college-educated Jew from New York who falls

to his death climbing Mount Anaka; Private Goldstein, a welder from Brooklyn; Private Wyman, another midwesterner; Private Minetta, a malingerer from New Jersey; and Private Czienwicz, a criminal from Chicago known to all as "Polack." Mailer was careful in how he allotted space to his characters. The backgrounds of eight of the fourteen enlisted men (Martinez, Croft, Valsen, Gallagher, Wilson, Goldstein, Brown and Polack), and two officers (Cummings and Hearn), are given in the "Time Machine" flashbacks, a device adopted from the biographical interludes in the novels of John Dos Passos. The others are revealed in conversation or via Mailer's omniscient narrator, who presents the thoughts of nearly every named character in the novel. A comment of Mailer's published in *Conversations with Norman Mailer* reveals his scrupulous attention to detail: "I had a file full of notes, and a long dossier on each man. Many of these details never got into the novel, but the added knowledge made me feel more comfortable with each character. Indeed I even had charts to show which characters had not yet had scenes with other characters."

Mailer has been criticized for the Time Machine flashbacks. Critics have argued, with some justice, that a few of the profiles (Brown, Martinez, and Polack) are stereotypical, although he has been praised for others, generally those that his background enabled him to handle more surely (Goldstein, Gallagher, Cummings, and Hearn). Yet most readers agree that the information provided is helpful in understanding the later actions of those profiled. In *The Spooky Art* Mailer explains one of his guiding beliefs when he wrote *The Naked and the Dead*: "One was the product of one's milieu, one's parents, one's food, one's conversations, one's dearest and/or most odious human relations. One was the sum of one's own history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time." He adds that his "characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page." So it is not surprising that some of the characters are predictable, although

this is not true of Cummings and Croft, whose heavily worked intellectual conversations show "something of the turn my later writing would take," according to comments Mailer makes in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*. These two and to a certain extent several others (Hearn and Valsen, Ridges and Goldstein, certainly) are dynamic characters who change in unforeseen ways in the crucible of jungle warfare.

The ten Time Machine trips, averaging fourteen pages each, are distributed evenly throughout the novel, which means that the motivational insights into the actions of the soldiers on the island provided by the earlier trips are more useful than those from the later ones. The last profile, of Polack, is anticlimactic, whereas the two preceding, of Goldstein and Brown, are of greater utility in that these two characters perform their most important actions after their profiles appear, something that shows Mailer's careful planning. The other consideration is pace. Mailer's island focus, as noted earlier, allows him to employ the narrative equivalent of Aristotle's dramatic unities of time and space and action, but escaping the island via the Time Machine after some of the protracted horrors of a jungle campaign is a welcome respite. The narrative leaves the island for a full 138 pages, or almost twenty percent of the novel. Thus, Mailer is able to juxtapose scenes of army life and combat with images of the soldiers in their hometowns, including brief glimpses of their wives and families, scenes that they carry with them as cameos of their early, not-always-happy lives during the depression. Mailer has been criticized for highlighting the sexual energies and hang-ups of the men in every Time Machine trip, although this emphasis is a genuine reflection of the anxieties of combat soldiers in the Pacific theater and far from home.

Because Recon is directly under the control of the general and Major Dalleson, his chief of operations (his G-3 in army parlance), this unit has more contact with divisional headquarters than most units do. As the platoon's name denotes, its specialty is going behind enemy lines

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for intelligence purposes, but it can be given a variety of assignments; it is the headquarters utility outfit. This circumstance gives Mailer the opportunity to provide descriptions of a multitude of miserable tasks—combat takes up only a small percentage of the novel's pages. So readers watch the fourteen men unloading supplies, working on the road from the beach, manning a defensive position on the river, carrying jerricans of water to a hilltop outpost, and moving 37mm antitank guns along a jungle trail. There is also a good deal of waiting around, reading mail, cleaning weapons, digging latrines, erecting pup tents, smoking, goofing off, eating K rations, obtaining and drinking illegal liquor, and hunting for souvenirs. Part of the novel's appeal (especially to World War II veterans) is its merciless rendering of every boring, backbreaking, demeaning activity of the war. Perhaps the best example of this is the early section describing the manhandling of the 37mm guns through the mud, one of the most memorable exertions in a novel. It is an odyssey of fear, exhaustion, and death rendered in meticulous detail.

They started to move, and the labor continued. Once or twice a flare filtered a wan and delicate bluish light over them, the light almost lost in the dense foliage through which it had to pass. In the brief moment it lasted, they were caught at their guns in classic straining motions that had the form and beauty of a frieze. Their uniforms were twice blackened, by the water and the dark slime of the trail. And for the instant the light shone on them their faces stood out, white and contorted. Even the guns had a slender articulated beauty like an insect reared back on its wire haunches. Then darkness swirled about them again, and they ground the guns forward blindly, a line of ants dragging their burden back to their hole.

Nature seems to resist every effort of the troops. Like other great naturalistic writers—Stephen Crane, Jack London, John Steinbeck, for example—Mailer presents the natural world as uncaring, unyielding, implacable, and occasionally beautiful.

Mailer breaks up the narrative in one other way: "The Chorus," which reveals the men's attitudes and leavens the novel with some much-needed humor, grim though it is. These brief interludes, which are presented like the dialogue of a play, are spaced fairly evenly throughout the novel. Their titles reveal their comic intent: "The Chow Line," "Women," "What Is a Million-Dollar Wound?" "Rotation," and "On What We Do When We Get Out." The opening lines of "The Chow Line" are representative of their wisecracking tone:

RED: What the fug is that swill?

COOK: It's owl shit. Wha'd you think it was?

RED: Okay, I just thought it was somethin' I couldn't eat. (Laughter)

COOK: (good naturedly) Move on, move on, before I knock-the-crap-out-of-you.

"Rotation" contains a memorable line, again from Red, that points to the military's maddening bureaucratic nature, the catch-22 routine that servicemen and women of all eras remember vividly. The conversation deals with the army's complicated system of rotating soldiers home after their eighteen-month tour, something that seems never to happen.

MINETTA: I mean what kind of deal is this? Just like the goddam Army, give you something with one hand and take it away with the other, they just make you eat your heart out.

POLACK: You're getting wise to yourself.

BROWN: (Sighing) Aah, it makes you sick.

(Turning over in his blankets) Good night.

RED: (Lying on his back, gazing at the pacific stars) That rotation ain't a plan to get men home, it's a plan how not to get them home.

THE GENERAL'S AIDE

The systematic revelation of the nature of the combat army goes on for the length of the novel, and is one of its notable accomplishments. But the chief purpose of this expository material—

which is intrinsically interesting—is to serve as scaffolding for the two central but related plotlines. The first is Cummings' effort to exercise total and exquisite control over his own division and so defeat General Toyaku. The second, a patrol undertaken by Recon at the direction of General Cummings, is the culminating action of the novel. These two actions are linked by Lieutenant Hearn, Cummings' aide and confidante and the novel's linchpin, who is central to both plotlines. Initially, Hearn is attracted to the general: "It was not only his unquestioned brilliance; Hearn had known people whose minds were equal to General Cummings'. . . . What the general had was an almost unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action." And Cummings is impressed by Hearn, "the only man on his staff who had the intellect to understand him." The general is "looking for an intellectual equal, or at least the facsimile of an intellectual equal to whom he could expound his nonmilitary theories." These theories, as Hearn later reflects, are based on Cummings' belief that "man is a sonofabitch." If you granted him that, "then everything he said after that followed perfectly. The logic was inexorable."

Cummings believes that the only way to realize one's deepest potential, to accomplish anything of significance in the world, is to first control its nasty, selfish, brutish inhabitants through fear. Therefore, Cummings explains, "the natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety." This makes the army, with its "fear ladder" on which every man is submissive to those above and oppressive to those below, a forerunner of the near-totalitarian state Cummings believes America's war victory will lead to. Or as he puts it to Hearn, "You can consider the Army, Robert, as a preview of the future." The general sums up his elitist philosophy to Hearn as follows:

I've been trying to impress you, Robert, that the only morality of the future is a power morality, and a man who cannot find his adjustment to it is

doomed. 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.

The general's power morality is depicted in several ways. He has many one-way interactions with subordinates—Major Dalleson, for example—always handling them like puppets. But Hearn is more of a challenge, and the general employs all his considerable charm and guile to gain his admiration. He gives the blunt, headstrong Hearn various privileges and gets him out of scrapes. Cummings calls these intercessions "papal dispensations." He is also sexually attracted to Hearn and confides in him about his failed marriage: "The truth is, Robert, my wife is a bitch." At this moment Hearn senses that the general is about to "slowly extend his arm, touch his knee perhaps." Hearn recognizes that his admiration for the general, which is not physical, is based on the fact that on one level they are the same; both are attracted to power and cynical about idealism.

But Hearn, a midwesterner like Cummings, also believes that Cummings is a monster and that there is "a kind of guilt in being an officer." A former Communist sympathizer, Hearn is now a liberal-by-default with a pronounced egalitarian streak that makes him resist Cummings' tutelage. His stubborn individualism ultimately brings their close relationship to a dramatic end. This comes about when the general sets Hearn a number of tasks that will make him contemptuous of enlisted men and, he hopes, become his Pygmalion. Recognizing that the general is corrupting him, Hearn impulsively grinds out a cigarette butt on the clean duckboards of the general's tent. Cummings now sees that Hearn is lost to him and forces him to "crawlfish," to pick up the butt or face a court-martial. His resistance burned out by Cummings' superior power, Hearn complies. He then asks for a transfer, which is denied. A few days later Cummings puts Hearn in charge of Recon, replacing Sergeant Croft, and sends

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the platoon on a mission, initially by boat, to determine if the Toyaku Line can be attacked from the south side of Anopopei.

A LONG PATROL

The initial idea for *The Naked and the Dead* was to center it on a long patrol. "All during the war," Mailer recalls in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, "I kept thinking about this patrol. I even had the idea before I went overseas." When he started writing the novel, he decided that he should introduce his characters first, but "The next six months and the first 500 pages went into that, and I remember in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to the patrol." Of course, Mailer does a lot more than introduce the characters in the first two-thirds of the book. He creates the island's symbolic atmosphere and landscape and shows the miseries of war in the jungle. He establishes an intellectual and political framework via the Cummings-Hearn conversations, preparing the reader for Hearn's second test, this one by Sergeant Croft and the men of the platoon. By the time they leave on their mission, a few of them are as familiar to readers as their own families, and readers have a good sense of the soldiers' "fear ladder" relationship to Sergeant Croft, Cummings' tyrannical twin.

Finally, Mailer artfully delineates the military deadlock on the island, one that might be broken, Cummings believes, in one of two ways: first, by a daring attack from the south—if Recon can find a pass around or through the mountains; or second, by arranging for the navy to bombard the Toyaku Line from off the northern shore at Botoi Bay while his main force makes a frontal assault. Of the two possibilities, he clearly favors the second; the Recon patrol is a long shot. But the navy is not eager to send a destroyer to help, and for part of the last third of the novel Cummings is away lobbying those above him for more firepower to burn away Japanese resistance.

Hearn's challenge in taking over the platoon is great. It is not that the men love Croft; they do not. But they are comfortable in their subservience because they see no way to resist it. Croft is tougher and meaner than any three of the platoon combined. They also know that he is a fine, fearless soldier who may keep them alive even as he pushes them to the limits of their endurance. They do not know Hearn and distrust his initial attempts to be free and friendly with them. He finds his command to be frustrating at first because of Croft's longtime control of the platoon, but then he begins to enjoy it as he leads the men forward, even when they encounter the Japanese and Wilson is shot.

After an exhausting march, the platoon pushes through the steaming jungle and the foothills to near the base of Mount Anaka. At one point in the march Croft takes a bird that Roth has found and squeezes it to death. Hearn forces him to apologize, to crawl. But the exercise of power troubles him, and after some reflection he decides to resign his commission after the patrol rather than turn into another Cummings. He realizes that he is "not a phony but a Faust." Shortly after this, Hearn is killed by a Japanese machine gun. His death has been arranged by Croft, who suppresses information about Japanese positions gained by Martinez during a suspenseful nighttime foray behind enemy lines. It is a startling development, and a controversial one. In *The Spooky Art* Mailer admits (many years after he had written the novel) that killing Hearn at this point "may have been too big a price to pay, because the denouement of my novel was sacrificed." He continues:

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and a bad motive that I had for killing Hearn where I did. The good motive is that it was a powerful way to show what death is like in war. The shoddy motive was that I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him or how to bring him off.

War serves up such surprises all the time, of course, but with Hearn, Mailer generates the

expectation that he will achieve some sort of a victory, at least a symbolic victory, over Cummings and Croft, even if he dies in doing so. But the general and the sergeant are ultimately checked, if not vanquished, by nature and by chance.

MOUNT ANAKA

Besides the humid jungle, two other things seem ever present on the island: the rumble of heavy artillery and Mount Anaka, symbols, respectively, of technological and natural power. They are touchstones in the novel, and Mailer rubs them regularly. Croft, brave but heartless, stoic yet seething with violence and inchoate passions, is drawn to the weaponry of modern war and the "wise and powerful" mountain. During an earlier fight at the river, Croft "could not have said at that moment where his hands ended and the machine gun began." The Japanese attack is sudden and ferocious, but Croft "fired and fired, switching targets with the quick reflexes of an athlete shifting for a ball. As soon as he saw men falling he would attack another group. The line of Japanese broke into little bunches of men who wavered, began to retreat." Later, when he looks at the mountain through field glasses, "He felt a crude ecstasy. He could not give the reason, but the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere."

Not long after *The Naked and the Dead* was published, Mailer revealed in an interview later collected in *Conversations with Norman Mailer* that in addition to Farrell, Wolfe, Dos Passos, and Tolstoy, Herman Melville had been on his mind during the composition of his novel. *Moby-Dick* (1851) was the "biggest influence," he said. "I was sure everyone would know. I had Ahab in it, and I suppose the mountain was Moby Dick." Although Mailer was not specific, it is clear that Cummings is Captain Ahab; they have comparable intellectual attainments and

Faustian ambitions. Croft, who actually attempts to conquer the mountain the way Ahab does the white whale, is a visceral extension of Cummings, as virtually every commentator on the novel has noted. It is possible for Croft to be seen as Cummings' demonic underling—what Fedallah is to Ahab—although Croft never interacts with, or even meets, Cummings. Mailer avoids such a meeting to maintain Hearn's singular position as the bridge between the novel's two major parts, and perhaps because it would seem contrived (although Dalleson does mention Croft to Cummings and recommends him for a commission).

This makes Hearn the counterpart to Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, who also argues with his leader, although less effectively. Both are confidantes, and both die as a result of the overreaching and prideful arrogance of their chiefs. But the mountain is the clearest symbolic parallel to *Moby-Dick*. In a comment published in *Norman Mailer: Works and Days* (2000), Mailer says that Anaka "was to serve as an actual mass of stone and as a symbolic base for the book. . . . The mountain was a consciously ambiguous symbol, something too complex, too intangible, to be defined by language." Croft sees the mountain the way Ahab sees Moby Dick: he admires it but hates it; he needs to master it. This challenge engages all of his courage, energy, and sensual intuitions, which are considerable. He has "an instinctive knowledge of land, sensed the stresses and torsions that had first erupted it, the abrasions of wind and water." The platoon follows him without question, confident that he can sense "the nearness of water no matter how foreign the swatch of earth" and that he knows "how a hill would look on the other side."

Before Hearn is killed, he sends four men—Ridges, Goldstein, Brown, and Stanley—back to the beach carrying the wounded Wilson. For the remainder of the novel two physical feats are contrasted: the selfless portage of Wilson and the selfish ascent of the mountain.

During this section of the novel, the narrative shifts back to Cummings only once, when he

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visits an artillery emplacement and decides personally to pull the lanyard that fires the howitzer. When he does, "an odd ecstasy stirred his limbs for a moment," which recalls Croft's physical pleasure in firing weapons. Writing in his journal that evening, Cummings attempts to link all human striving, even the rise and fall of civilizations, to the parabolic flight of the artillery shell. But he is unable to flesh out his ambitious metaphor in words.

It had all been too pat, too simple. There was order but he could not reduce it to the form of a single curve. Things eluded him.

He stared about the silent bivouac, looked up at the stars of the Pacific sky, heard the rustle of the coconut trees. Alone, he felt his senses expanding again, lost in the intimate knowledge of the size of his body. A deep boundless ambition leaped in him again, and if his habits had not been so deep, he might have lifted his arms to the sky. Not since he had been a young man had he hungered so for knowledge. It was all there if only he could grasp it. To mold . . . mold the curve.

An artillery piece fired, shattering the loom of the night.

Cummings listened to its echoes and shuddered.

It would never occur to Croft to put his deeper feelings into language, but he burns with the same desire for order and self-knowledge as Cummings. Cummings is aware of his physicality but is dominantly cerebral; Croft is nearly all instinct and lean muscle. Their proportions are exactly opposite; together they make an Ahab. In his Time Machine flashback Croft is described as "efficient and strong and usually empty and his main cast of mind was a superior contempt toward nearly all other men. He hated weakness and he loved practically nothing. There was a crude unformed vision in his soul but he was rarely conscious of it." There is ambiguity here; it is impossible to say how much Croft is being derided and how much he is being admired. The same is true for Cummings. The

above description of him under the stars, if not exactly a celebration, does seem to esteem his aspiration.

Much of the critical discussion about *The Naked and the Dead* has centered on who or what is the positive force in the novel, and who or what opposes it. The death of Hearn just as he is preparing to resign his commission and adopt silence and cunning to oppose the corrupt repression of the army, complicates the question. Hearn is a bundle of opposed possibilities, and he dies just as he is beginning to discover his true nature; he is the failed hero. In a 1962 interview later published in *The Presidential Papers* (1963), Mailer complicated matters even further by stating, "Beneath the ideology in *The Naked and the Dead* was an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people." Mailer's novel shows that those who attempt to discover their deepest selves in a combat situation will be more successful in doing so than timid souls like Roth (who might be successful in business or as a scholar), or those who believe in collective action like Red Valsen (who has a career before him as a labor organizer), or decent, hardworking men like Goldstein (a welder) and Ridges (who has the tenacity of a successful farmer), or hoodlums like Polack (who would have thrived in the prewar army).

Each member of the platoon has possibilities ahead; some of them will find their futures enhanced by their military duty, and others will not. A wartime army is a warm place for power seekers and war lovers. Croft and Cummings are able to push themselves, probe themselves, courageously seek the vital core of their natures, often through violent or ungenerous acts. People do not grow merely by being noble, Mailer believes. They learn through the dialectic of winning and by losing, by ignoble acts and those of generosity. The novel does esteem Cummings and Croft, in part, while despising their cruelty. During a 1955 interview, later published in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, Mailer was

asked "Whom do you hate?" He answered, "People who have power and no compassion, that is, no simple human understanding." Mailer sees all humans as disharmonies of good and evil, strength and weakness, phantom and plant. Even those he hates are capable of courage—the cardinal virtue for Mailer—and growth. *The Naked and the Dead* and all of Mailer's subsequent novels and nonfiction narratives are without undeviating, unalloyed heroes and villains. He is much more interested in examining the evil in good people and the good in evil ones and the myriad ways these proportions can shift; this is the stuff of the novel for him. And it helps explain why Cummings and Croft are the most memorable characters in *The Naked and the Dead*: Anopei is an ideal testing ground for them, perfectly conducive to their talents, their flaws, and their desire for self-realization.

In the novel's conclusion Croft drives the remainder of the platoon up the flank of the mountain. The men, even Croft, are now more severely exhausted than ever before. Rebellion is in the air and Red is the ringleader, but Croft faces him down and they push on. Even when Roth, the weakest, falls to his death after failing to jump across a gap, Croft remorselessly persists. But nature defeats him; he kicks over a hornet's nest, and the angry insects attack the men and drive them back, weapons and gear left behind. The idea, Mailer explains in *The Spooky Art*, "was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. The incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol we ever took. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean, slimy trail."

Alternating with the description of Croft's climb up the mountain is the account of the bleeding, suffering Wilson being lugged through the jungle and hills toward the beach and safety. Brown and Stanley give up, but Ridges and Goldstein, heretofore seen as weak and hapless, continue on resolutely while the dying Wilson raves incoherently about his sexual exploits.

They did not talk, they were exhausted beyond speech, they only shambled forward like blind men crossing a strange and terrifying street. Their fatigue had cut through so many levels, had blunted finally so many of their senses that they were reduced to the lowest common denominator of their existence. Carrying him was the only reality they knew.

A Brooklyn Jew and an illiterate sharecropper, the novel's odd couple, are tested to the limit and not found wanting. Even when Wilson dies, they do not consider leaving him. They carry on: "Dead, he was as much alive to them as he had ever been." Again, nature intervenes; Wilson's body is swept away by a jungle stream, and Ridges, a devout fundamentalist Christian, swears for the first time since childhood. Bonded by their heroic failure, they stagger to the beach and collapse.

TOTING UP

With General Cummings away trying to "wangle a destroyer or two" from the navy, Major Dalleson is in charge of the situation. In a series of uncertain but effective moves, he first probes, then attacks, then collapses the Toyaku Line, killing General Toyaku and most of his staff. It is later learned that the Japanese were almost out of ammunition and on half rations when the American attack came. In another of war's disproportions, Cummings' inept chief of operations achieves exactly what the general has failed to do. The comic account of his bumbling destruction of Toyaku is one of the novel's finest achievements. Cummings is finally able to obtain a naval bombardment at Botoi Bay, and it is officially credited with turning the tide, but the general knows better. His self-confidence is weakened by his inability to have seen how dispirited the Japanese were: "It was impossible to shake the idea that anyone could have won this campaign, and it consisted of only patience and sandpaper."

Croft has missed "some tantalizing revelation of himself. Of himself and much more. Of life.

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Everything," although "deep inside himself, Croft was relieved that he had not been able to climb the mountain." Cummings has taken too long to conquer Anopopei and so will not be promoted to lieutenant general. "When the war with Russia came he would not be important enough, not close enough to the seats of power, to take the big step, the big leap." Cummings is chagrined; Croft has been humbled; Hennessey, Hearn, Roth, and Wilson are dead; Red has backed down. Nature, chance, and Dalleson (whom the general is forced to congratulate) are victorious. On the final page of the novel the exuberant Dalleson comes up with an idea to "jazz up the map-reading class by having a full-size color photograph of Betty Grable in a bathing suit, with a co-ordinate grid system laid over it." He imagines that the idea could catch on all over the army. "*Hot Dog!*" he exclaims.

Dalleson's lucky success and the novel's many defeats have led some to see the novel as excessively pessimistic. But there have been compensations and gains in self-knowledge, certainly for Cummings and Croft. Both are still growing, still in process. So are Ridges and Goldstein, whose dauntless effort balances in part the mendacity and evil of Cummings and Croft. The two privates have become friends and choose adjacent bunks on the boat back. Red has had the satisfaction of seeing the hornets defeat Croft, and now he has the glimmering of an idea that he needs comrades; he begins to see how they might work together for their common good. The others in the platoon have "a startled pride in themselves" for their effort on Anaka: "We did okay to go as far as we did." Every surviving member of the platoon has been deeply affected, perhaps permanently altered, by their struggles and suffering. In response to criticisms that that novel paints a bleak picture of humanity, Mailer offered the following, shortly after publication, later published in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*:

Actually, it offers a good deal of hope. I intended it to be a parable about the movement of man

through history. I tried to explore the outrageous proportions of cause and effect, of effort and recompense, in a sick society. The book finds man corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness, but it also finds that there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed, and it finds that even in his corruption and sickness there are yearnings for a better world.

At the end the men move off to a new island campaign. Soon they will be in the Philippines, and shortly after that the war will be over. The reader gets the sense that while the campaign (and the novel) has been conclusive, and the men tested in the harshest ways without succumbing, they will now face new opportunities and challenges. The Japanese on Anopopei have been utterly vanquished, and American casualties have been comparatively light, but what lies ahead in the peacetime world is uncertain.

INFLUENCE AND IMPORTANCE

Almost every review of *The Naked and the Dead* was positive. *Time* called it "perhaps the best novel yet about World War II" and compared it to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, as did John Lardner in *The New Yorker*. The reviewer for *Newsweek* said Mailer was "a writer of unmistakable importance" who made some of the novels of World War I "thin and pale by comparison." Mailer's relentless, exhaustive realism was commented on by almost every reviewer and clearly set a new benchmark for gritty authenticity. There was some division of opinion on the novel's obscene language. The *New York Times* reviewer Orville Prescott said it contained "more explicitly vile speech . . . than I have ever seen printed in a work of serious literature before," but a majority of commentators believed the language to be an accurate reflection of the way World War II soldiers in barracks and in battles had actually spoken. Mailer was seen as a pioneer of free speech, and the book was banned for its language in many places. Despite sharp denials by Mailer, several

writers over the years have concluded that he was forced to use "fug" for the book's most common four-letter obscenity. As he put in a 1968 letter to *Newsweek*, "No publisher ever forced me to censor *The Naked and the Dead*. I decided to use the word fug before the book was even begun. In those days the big brother of fug was simply not ready for public hire."

The most perceptive review of the novel was by the literary critic Maxwell Geismar, in *Saturday Review*. He underlined the significance of the Cummings-Hearn dialogues that permitted Mailer to "build up, often very eloquently, the historical and philosophical connotations of the war." Geismar saw that Mailer had enriched literary naturalism by working in some of the ideas of major thinkers such as the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud and the German philosophers Oswald Spengler, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx, something that earlier naturalists would have avoided. The chief virtue of the novel, Geismar said, was its critique of "the American Army in war and in peace, as a manifestation of contemporary society, as well as a weapon of conquest and destruction."

Mailer's novel was not merely a story of mud, guns, and death; it also presented an overarching view of the politics of prewar and postwar. On the one hand, it looked back to the Great Depression, and, on the other, it heralded the world-dividing struggle between East and West—the cold war. In Cummings, Mailer achieved a brilliant portrait of a seductive but ruthless philosopher-general who would be the model for figures such as James Jones's General Slater in *From Here to Eternity* (whose philosophy seems to derive from Cummings' fear ladder), and General Dreedle in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Both novels owe debts to *The Naked and the Dead*. Croft, of course, is the prototype for many intense, murderous, military psychopaths, especially in novels of the Vietnam War. Robert Stone (*Dog Soldiers*), Larry Heinemann (*Paco's Story*, *Close Quarters*), Tim O'Brien (*Going after Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*), Michael Herr

(*Dispatches*), and Philip Caputo (*A Rumor of War*) could all tip their hats to Mailer, as could the makers of the films *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*.

In *Bright Book of Life*, Alfred Kazin, the dean of American literary critics after the death of Edmund Wilson, said in 1973 that *The Naked and the Dead* "was the first 'important'—and is probably still the best—novel about Americans at war, 1941–1945." In 1984 Anthony Burgess included Mailer's novel in his *99 Novels: The Best in English Since 1939*, saying its implicit antiwar message presented "a heartening vision of hope." Many such accolades could be cited, but one more will suffice: the editorial board of the Modern Library listed the novel as one of the top one hundred English-language novels of the twentieth century.

The most thoughtful evaluation of the novel is that of Donald Pizer in his 1982 study *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*. He points out that Mailer's novel is successful because it is a melding of two major types of novel, one that examines power in society (similar to those of Tolstoy and Theodore Dreiser) and another that probes the mysteries of self (similar to those of Melville and Russian novelist Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky). Mailer's novel combines the two types in its exploration of the struggle between humankind's animal, physical roots and its intellectual and spiritual aspirations. Pizer says that Mailer came to a realization:

Man, in short, was a dualistic creature, and a novel could "straddle" this duality in its effort to dramatize both his inner self and the atavistic sources of his social experience. It is out of this venture in straddling that *The Naked and the Dead* assumes its distinctive shape as well as its power and permanence.

Pizer also notes that many critics have missed the novel's "distinctive and integral quality." He argues that they have missed how well Mailer was able to handle both the social and the individual, outer and inner, looking back to the

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1930s and forward to the 1950s. "Above all," he says, "Mailer has successfully created a symbolic form to express the naturalistic theme of the

hidden recesses of value in man's nature despite his tragic fate in a closely conditioned and controlled world."

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