

CHAPTER FOUR

Part Three

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Well before the Mailers started spending all that time on the road, The Naked and the Dead had begun a trip of its own, and right up to the moment of his departure for Italy an incredulous Norman was pulled along in the wake of his novel's progress.

Although he had backed away from his earlier disagreements with his editor, concluding that Bill Rainey had done his best and that it was too late to change anything anyway, he nevertheless continued to dislike the line-drawing of the soldier's face on the cover. He clearly was unaware of how completely the promotion people in New York had built their whole campaign around this face, setting out a system of advertisements and posters throughout the city which at first simply presented the drawing, with no words of explanation. After a carefully timed pause, a next round of posters and ads went out, this time with the novel's title and author superimposed around the face. And the final round presented the soldier's face with a caption: as if he were speaking. Mark Linenthal[manso] remembered how angry Norman was when one of the ads had the soldier saying: "My name is Croft. I'm one of The Naked and the Dead and you can meet me on May 6th,"

which was the publication date.

Norman saw the Croft advertisement and two others like it in late April, and, first, wrote a note to Rinehart editor Jean Crawford, with whom he had kept up a hitherto friendly correspondence:
Have you all gone crazy? This is the most revolting advertising I have ever seen in my life. [4/28/48nm]

He vented his feelings at much greater length, however, and with real bitterness to the now-retired Bill Raney, just back in New York from his misleadingly harmonious Paris visit. Denouncing the ads as "swill," Norman wrote:
This has been to an extent my fault. My first reactions to the advertising were not happy ones (the ones months ago) and after objecting I subsided too weakly and too quickly. If I had known that 1) Old Bullet-face was to be carried through every bit of advertising until he is inseparable from the book, and 2) that in being carried through he was to degenerate and degenerate until the only thing which could shock me now would be to have a soap-box opera and breakfast food tieup with Bullet-face, I would have known enough to scream and scream and scream until the worst excesses of even disorganized advertising brains would have given pause to some extent. [April 30, 1948]

Norman's letter is long and detailed, and ends with the observation that "This is one argument I cannot lose as far as I am concerned, for if the book sells a million copies, I will still be convinced that it would have sold two million with better

advertising."

A deeply disheartened Bill passed the letter along to his Editor-in-Chief, John Selby, who answered it for the first time on May 5, the eve of publication. Selby told Norman, in what he may have intended to be a friendly tone, that there are two fundamental difficulties, one of which is that although you know how to write as few do, you haven't the slightest idea about the sale of books. The other difficulty is that you are trying to do things after they already have been done. If you had wanted to oversee the advertising you should have stayed in this country.

This in turn triggered an angry reply from Norman, and then a further rebuttal from Selby, accumulating into a final total of eight long letters: four each from the two men on the subject of the advertising campaign. Norman never changed his mind about the unsuitability of the line-drawing--he dislikes it even now--and Selby of course made a sort of collection of the many letters and other commentary from the trade testifying to the campaign's excellence, passing these along to Norman at strategic intervals.¹

The subject gradually lost its edge because The Naked and the Dead began selling at a rate that required both men to interrupt their arguing in order to address the practical consequences of its success. Bill sent Norman two telegrams on May 6, announcing

¹Besides a number of letters from booksellers and publishers, Selby sent Norman an article from Publisher's Weekly for June 1948, pp. 2424-2427, announcing that the American Institute of Graphic Arts had selected The Naked and the Dead as one of the six best-designed books published in the United States during the month of May.

that the Book Find Club had just identified Naked as its July selection and asking for five hundred words by return airmail to serve as part of the Club's publicity. Norman complied immediately with eight hundred words (in which he complained about his publisher's advertising campaign and recommended both Charley Devlin and Fig Gwaltney as talented, undiscovered authors)², and the Club proceeded to print its own edition (though using Rinehart's dust jacket) of the novel, which would sell to members for \$1.65. Rinehart's Managing Editor explained the deal to

Norman:

We are all pleased that the Book Find Club has chosen THE NAKED AND THE DEAD as their selection for July. This will involve [their printing] 35,000 copies for which they pay a royalty of [ten cents] a copy, so that there will be \$3,500.00 to split 50-50 between you and Rinehart. [AAS6may48]

Four days later Bill wired again:

Reprinting immediately[.] Airmail corrections[.] Hope to make changes this edition.

Norman, caught flat-footed, couldn't believe that Rinehart was already re-printing beyond its own initial run of twenty-five thousand, and thought, (incorrectly) that perhaps the new printing was for The Book Find edition. But he responded with a list of fifty-one proof corrections that he had caught so far, and promised to finish reading the first edition for additional

²Norman's complaints, as well as the names of his friends, were edited out of the final copy, which appeared in a handsome, 8-page brochure with a memo by Club Director George Braziller, an essay-review by screenwriter Cecil Belfrage, and a prominently featured rendering of the soldier's-face drawing.

corrections within two days. This second edition was for fifteen thousand copies, and Norman's corrections did not arrive in time to be incorporated, but eleven days after initial publication Bill was envisioning a third edition, and, describing the early signs of the novel's popularity, he spoke not only of displays in all the Manhattan book stores but of a remarkable middle-American response:

A surprising thing is that the order dept. has been receiving orders from small towns all over the country--Moscow, Idaho and E. Jumpoff, Missouri--and that is significant for small-town people do not as a rule buy books; if they do, it is through the Literary Guild and not at \$4 in book stores.[brl7may48]

The next day, May 18, Rinehart ordered a third edition of twenty-thousand copies[js18may48], bringing the Rinehart total for the month to sixty thousand and the grand total, including the Book Find edition, to ninety-five thousand.³ Norman, who was

³PROBABLY THIS FOOTNOTE SHOULD BE REPLACED BY A GRAPHIC REPRODUCTION OF THE ADVERTISEMENT ITSELF, WITH CAPTION.IT IS TO BE FOUND ON SHEET ELEVEN OF THE SCRAPBOOK.

In early June, Rinehart designed an advertisement (complete with soldier's-face) that used the rapid-fire printing sequence of the first three editions to argue that readers unwilling to wait for their copies should hurry to "place your order with your bookseller now to avoid disappointment."

The text of the ad recites the publishing history to date:

"We published Norman Mailer's novel on May 6th, with a first printing of 25,000 copies. By publication day just under 15,000 copies had been bought by booksellers. Then they started reordering.

"In the next seven days we shipped or 'back ordered' 12,812 copies--and were out of stock.

"Meanwhile the [printer] had put a second edition to press-- 15,000 copies (all we could get paper for.) This entire edition is being printed and bound in under ten days--a phenomenal effort. These books should have arrived in your bookstore by the time this advertisement appears.

"A third edition of 20,000 (total to date, 60,000 copies) has been started to press to take care of the orders which have been

becoming increasingly attracted to the idea of fleeing to Italy, wrote a short note to John Selby that made no mention whatever of the failure of the advertising campaign: All those editions are making me gasp. It does seem unbelievable that a war novel should sell like that. I, frankly, don't understand it.[nm21may48]

The New York Times Sunday Book Review for May 23, listing the novel for the first time as a best seller, put it in 16th place. By the following Sunday the book had moved up to 13th, both listings based on out-of-date sales reports. Norman was trying to correct for false optimism, but it was becoming obvious that even if this was just a flash in the pan, it was certainly a dazzling one.

Of course, it was no flash in the pan, and Norman must have known it by the time he left for Italy. But it seems clear that in some sense he rejected the fact, refusing to take it in, and in the face of his doubts Bea and Barbara and even his mother also reserved judgement. During their Italian tour, however, the definitive returns began, and as Rinehart went through edition after subsequent edition (and The Book Find Club also

piling up. If you intend to read Norman Mailer's remarkable novel we suggest that you place your order with your bookseller now to avoid disappointment."

The headline for this two-column, half-page layout announces that The Naked and the Dead was "Selling faster than any novel we have published since [the 193? bestseller] Anthony Adverse." Among other places, this advertisement appeared in the same New York Times Sunday Book Review that first listed the novel in first place as a best seller: June 20, 1948.

reprinted, bringing its own printing to a total of 60,000) The Naked and the Dead became the hottest commercial property in that season's American fiction market. It moved up the Times Sunday Book Review list in two large jumps, landing in the number one slot on June 20, and there it remained for eleven straight weeks, dropping down to Number Two only on September 5. This turned out to be a kind of false dip, and it surged back up to first place by October 3, where until mid-December it alternated between first and second place. By the end of 1948, the Rinehart edition alone had sold 137,185 copies.⁴

Transfixed though he must have been as these statistics began

⁴ See Publisher's Weekly, January 22, 1949, p. 268.

One reason for the October resurgence was the announcement in that month by The Book-of-the-Month-Club that it would distribute the \$4.00 Rinehart edition to its members as a book-dividend selection. Having passed over the novel as a primary selection in May, the BOMC had conceded its importance by having J.P. Marquand review it in the July, 1948 BOMC News, but at that time the Club offered no dividend credit with the book's purchase.

In 1949, the novel was ranked in the first five for every week but one through the end of March, and stayed on the charts through mid-July of that year. In the end it showed a run of sixty-one weeks as a best-seller, nineteen of them as number one and forty-three weeks in the top five. By the time of Rinehart's publication of Norman's next novel in 1951, its hardback sale of his first--for which the author received sixty-cents a copy--must have topped two-hundred thousand.

Paperback rights were sold by 1951 to New American Library, which began selling its Signet double edition in January of that year for fifty cents a copy. This edition proceeded through innumerable reprints and price rises for thirty years, selling over three million copies at a final price of \$2.95. At this point the paperback rights were reclaimed by Rinehart (then Holt, Rinehart and Winston), which in 1981 issued a handsomely designed trade paperback (at an initial price of \$7.95) that remained in print until 1998, when it was replaced by a 50th Anniversary with a new preface by the author.

to emerge, there was little immediate action that Norman needed to take in the face of them, since Rinehart's accounting office at least for the time being served as his banker. Once he got back from Italy and the south of France, however, he found that other aspects of the book's commercial success did call for active response on his part, requiring him to start behaving like the owner of an immensely valuable literary property. His accumulated correspondence was filled with business matters, one of the most persistent of which was the signing of contracts for publication/translation rights outside the United States.

Marketing the book in the English-speaking world, as well as in Japan, posed a special problem for Rinehart, because of immensely restrictive publication-policies in such countries concerning obscenity. But each time a ban on the book was declared--in Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and even Japan--public officials would quickly set about reversing themselves. This was not because of any legal action taken by Rinehart, but rather seems to have been caused by the grass-roots expression of demand from foreign readers and their publishers that the book be made available.⁵ In countries like Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, France and Italy, the less constrained publishing industry pressed forward with offers to Rinehart to begin translation and publication without delay.

⁵Do a footnote on the struggle to get the book into print in English speaking countries and Japan. But keep it short. The ongoing narrative will revisit this subject at various points along the narrative line ahead.

Rinehart was sensitive to the problem of the often debased value or restricted availability of many foreign currencies⁶. and tried to negotiate contracts that required available dollars-only whenever possible, which usually resulted in fairly modest advance-payments⁷, but the main effect of all this on Norman was to make him aware that he needed someone to represent his interests. Since separating from the William Morris Agency in June, 1946, he had depended completely on his publisher to handle business matters, but the growing complexity of negotiations, and the fact that he and Rinehart were contracting to share between themselves various sums of other people's money, made him see that he needed a literary agent.⁸

In point of fact he seemed to need several kinds of agents, because two of the most persistent and troublesome areas of commercial decision-making in his correspondence concerned the movies and the legitimate stage. All the early signs indicated that The Naked and the Dead was a highly marketable property for both. Norman's response to this was not only on a business level, of course, since as a writer he had felt drawn toward both film

⁶Footnote here on foreign currency restriction policies--use France as the e.g.

⁷Here do a note illustrating the terms of the Danish, Swedish, German, French etc contracts.

⁸On May 10, 1948, Norman wrote to Rinehart's Adelaide Sherer: "I may be wanting an agent soon. I've thought haphazardly of Ivan Von Aum or Don Cogden (would be interested in all your ideas about them.)"

and stage since his second year at Harvard. His repeated applications for an MGM apprenticeship, and his 1942 summer at the Joy Street Playhouse in Boston, not to speak of his mental hospital play--for which he coined the "Naked and the Dead" title--all attest to this. So he addressed the film and theatre aspects of his novel's management with pointed attention.

Rinehart, hard pressed by the characteristic Hollywood demand for dozens of studio examination copies, advised Norman early on to retain a specific agent to deal with the screen-rights problem, and recommended the Hollywood-based Sam Jaffe Agency. In early May Norman agreed[ibid] to permit that Agency to try to market the novel, and he soon heard from Evarts Ziegler, in the Agency office, suggesting that Norman himself might want to work on the screen play if any studio took enough of an interest to commission one. Norman's pleased response, delivered through Rinehart editor Adelaide Shere, acknowledged that he in fact did have some ideas about how to convert the novel to the screen, and he added--in reference to a little 16 mm film that he and Millie and Harvey had undertaken back in the States-- "Let Bill tell you about the movie Harvey Anhalt and I made last year."⁹ Norman's most remarkable reaction to the mention of Hollywood and the possibility of his going there, however, concerned not movie-making but rather the subject of his next novel: The main thing is that I would love to get out to Hollywood for several months. I have several ideas for novels now, but all of

⁹Note here the Mailer/Anhalt/Millie film fiasco.

them are a little too small. The trouble with writing something like The Nkd and Dd is that you get frightened if your next canvas is small. And Hollywood, I think, would fill the bill. [n>as10may48]

In the next few weeks the Ziegler machine went into action, as he reported that a Jaffe Agency bulletin representing the novel had gone out to two hundred studio people, and that thirty copies of the novel were currently being read. A major problem, he cautioned, was the climate in Hollywood at that time. The War Department, first of all, was exhibiting ambivalence concerning cooperating with films that depicted "war and its horrors," and Ziegler thought that War Department cooperation with a production of The Naked and the Dead "would be invaluable." In addition, he worried that "omniscient" thinking in many of the studios about "the state of mind of the public at the moment" might incline against so grim a property as Naked. In fact the Hollywood blacklist campaign was in an active, if rather early stage, but Ziegler made no mention of politics as such. Rather, he concluded with a listing of studios that had expressed "enthusiastic" interest--MGM, Columbia, Paramount (he did not mention Selznik)--and of people who had read or were reading the book, including: Dore Schary, Mervyn LeRoy, Otto Preminger, Bill Wellman, George Stevens, Sam Spiegel, Harry Kurnitz, Hal Wallace and Humphrey Bogart. [Sherer to norman, 26May48]

Norman had scarcely left for Italy, his mind abuzz with these movie-mogul names and thoughts of Hollywood opportunities, when Stanley Rinehart received a phone call from Lillian Hellman saying

that she might want to dramatize The Naked and the Dead for the stage. After some days and some conversations, in the absence of the author she offered the publisher the terms under which she would write and produce a stage version of The Naked and the Dead. An exchange with the Rinehart office and, apparently, the Jaffe Agency followed, provoking the playwright into firing off this wire to Norman in Paris on 24 June, just prior to his return there:

One week ago we presented decent terms to your publishers. They returned today with most surprising offer I have heard in Theatre. It is now obvious I have been used to stimulate movie offers which is shabby stuff and I am positive done without your knowledge. I have explained to Rinehart that contract must be agreed on tomorrow and he says he will phone you tomorrow. Whatever happens I am sure you had nothing to do with ugly situation but by tomorrow I want either to start writing or to forget whole business. Letter follows. Warmest regards.

Lillian Hellman

Norman had just returned from the last leg of his trip when he got this wire, along with a set of letters from Hellman, Rinehart, his cousin Cy and, with Cy, Uncle Dave Kessler (the possessor of Norman's power-of-attorney.) All of the letters addressed complications in the Hellman negotiations, and all proposed solutions of various sorts. As Norman sorted through these epistles, preparing responses to their various suggestions, objections and demands (including Hellman's demand for immediate meetings with Norman in New York), he could hardly have helped being struck by the unfamiliarity of his new decision-maker identity. But with considerable firmness he proceeded to seize the day, and among the first things he did was put in a telephone call

to Lillian Hellman.

When Norman was a freshman at Harvard he had taken Phyllis Bradman to see the Broadway production of "The Little Foxes," [Chap. Two, Part 1, p. 14] and when he was at the Joy Street Playhouse the Hellman name must have been among the most prominent in its pantheon of the revered. Now, in addition to her unquestioned position in the front rank of the American theatre, she was also one of its most outspoken supporters of the new Progressive Party and its various ideals. For Norman to be calling her in the role of a fellow artist, a peer responding to her request that she be permitted to execute the dramatic adaptation of his novel, may well have been--in a season of new experiences--the most thrilling experience of all. They talked, and she explained the terms she was offering: one thousand dollars up front for a one-year option, and a very elaborate set of further terms should a producible script emerge by June 30, 1949. Norman was so pleased to be talking to her that he hardly cared about these details, and he told her the terms were fine and that his representatives would sign off on them immediately. He also said that he would be available for the conferences she wanted as soon as he could arrange it.

Norman then called Cy, told him of his understanding with Hellman, and asked him to consult with Hellman's representatives and to execute the appropriate contract. Uncle Dave was to use his

power-of-attorney to sign off.¹⁰ Then Norman wrote to his publishers[], informing them and the Jaffe agency that Cy was now his lawyer and professional representative. And finally, he canceled his August steamer-reservations and booked plane tickets for himself and Bea for July 20. It was clear that if he was to function as a commercially successful man of letters, he would have to do it at home, in reasonable proximity to his publisher, his lawyer and, indeed, his now-mollified adaptor to the stage.

While he was still in Paris, however, there was much immediate business to be done. At the end of June they gave up their Rue Brea apartment and moved back to the Hotel De L'Avenir for the weeks remaining. In addition to packing most of their things, they had some things to dispose of, most notably the Peugeot. When he bought it, Norman had intended to sell it before he left--presumably to a European buyer for something like the equivalent in francs of the thousand dollars it had cost. But now, behind the sober, man-of-affairs mask he had assumed with various lawyers, agents and publishers, a to-become-familiar, less businesslike Norman began to show himself. Conscious of being royalty-rich, he decided to donate the car to his own version of the Spanish Civil War resistance movement. He felt guilty that he

¹⁰On July 2, 1948, Cy and Uncle Dave completed contract negotiations and signed off for Norman on an elaborate contractual agreement. On the same day Hellman wrote to Norman, telling him how patient she had been with everybody and how good the contract was. The one thousand dollar advance was paid by producer Kermit Bloomgarden on July 26, into an account set up for Norman with the Authors League of America.

had never had time to go back to Spain and try again with the escape plan, and he wanted to keep it alive by giving the car to the young Spanish activists in the Paris refugee community. Thanking him, they however explained that none of them knew how to drive, that they did not understand the mysteries of title-transfer, and that, in any case, the key to the escape plan was an American driver in an American-owned car. [barbara]

In what, over the years, would come to be recognizable as a classic Mailer solution to the problem, Norman decided that under these circumstances he would give the car instead to his sister, and have her take his place in the escape-plan scheme. Barbara was thrilled by the idea, but she didn't know how to drive either, so Norman gave her a crash-course of instruction, his own ludicrously-forged driver's license, and what Barbara recalls as "some sort of paper" transferring the car's title from his name to hers. He also recommended that she recruit a co-conspirator/fellow-driver to share the experience, and an enthusiastic, properly licensed Barbara Probst thus entered the picture. This enterprise then began to take on a life and develop a legend of its own.¹¹

Apparently satisfied that he had taken care of the Peugeot matter quite effectively, Norman arranged through his publisher

¹¹ something of the life and legend that followed for the two Barbaras, citing Barbara Probst Solomon, Arriving Where We Started NY, Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 65-102; Barbara Wasserman's text in The Hudson Review.

for the purchase of a car for himself in the United States--a hard-to-get new Dodge, at a cost of two thousand dollars--and addressed the remaining details of his departure. He had time only for a final round of farewells with friends and family--Fan and Barbara were not scheduled to return to the United States until September, and Barney was staying on for much longer--before boarding with Bea the July 20 flight for New York. At a farewell dinner just before their departure, Barney offered Bea a piece of fatherly advice that must, at least in retrospect, have struck her as prescient, and even at the moment seemed to one observer[bps, manso] to be unkind:

'You're going back to America, Norman's going to be famous, and you're going to have a lot of competition.' He then told her she had to dress better and look more glamorous.[BPS, manso, p.120]

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The landscape of Norman's life was reshaped during the last eight months of 1948 to a degree that could hardly be overstated, and the development then of The Naked and the Dead as a commercial property certainly created one of the most important features of his new world. But, to Norman, a still more important development during those months was created by reader-response to the experience of actually reading his novel. He had never been exposed to waves of reviews and rapidly accumulating files of direct mail from readers. As a young man still shy enough to be uncomfortable when dining alone in public with his wife, he found

the experience disorienting, permanently so, he would later decide. Not that he was overwhelmed by the depth of insight into his work that such attention revealed: on that score, indeed, he found the critical reaction of readers--whether reviewers or private correspondents--to be quite narrowly focused. It was just that there was so much of it, and that it expressed such passionate feeling.

The first wave of responses to a 721-page novel such as this was almost sure to be the fruit of a single, and not infrequently a hasty reading, produced by deadline-pressured reviewers hurrying their impressions into publishable form. Reading these reviews now, in the light of accumulated scores of critical studies and thoughtful meditations, one finds them hasty indeed, but they can offer an insight into the literary/historical situation of the moment that is recapturable in few other ways. Thus the fact that so much of the immediate response to The Naked and the Dead expressed a sort of shock of recognition may be the most significant first thing to acknowledge about the book's reception. Gore Vidal recalls his own competitive version of registering this recognition when Norman's novel first appeared:
I remember thinking meanly: So somebody did it. Each previous war had its big novels, yet so far there had been none for ours. [rfl/m&w, pp95-96]

Judging from the reception of The Naked and the Dead, this ability of America's second World War to produce an answerably big novel was on the minds of a great many people besides Gore Vidal by

1948. Like him, most reviewers seem to have been on the lookout for it, and--with considerably more conviction than he--they made it clear that they thought Norman had been the first to produce it.

What did the appearance of such a book mean to this audience? Surely the concern was not merely commercial: there was little respect registered by reviewers or audience for the best-seller as such, and the popular publishing-industry belief that there was no money in war novels would hardly have interested the reading public at large. No, a "big" novel about the war was wanted, we may suppose, because it would be a sign that the postwar American imagination, through the agency of one of its novelists, had finally come to the point of being able to take the war in, to circumscribe and possess it as, after all, the war had possessed and circumscribed the country for such a long time. When the war ended in August of 1945 the country had been locked in its grip since at least December of 1941, and probably well before that. During this time the individual imagination, insofar as it had independence at all, was able to envision only the transitory historical events of the day. Virtually all of the important, widely read war books published during the war were topical and non-fictional, and every person was made to understand that compared to the priorities of the war, his or her own situation did not--as the Bogart character says in Casablanca--amount to a hill of beans. At best, the wartime imagination was free to

imagine the truth of this axiom, and after the war something very different was expected.

With due respect to the movies, postwar American society was a reading culture, and postwar readers, both high culture and low, were waiting for a novel that was comparably powerful to the experience of the war. Such a story was important because it would be a sign that our creative imagination was beginning to bring the historical experience of the war to closure, cutting the war down to size and affirming the ability of interior individual imagination to free itself from external institutional authority. But from 1945 through 1947, what the increasingly hungry audience got instead was either popular culture entertainment that provided first-rate fodder for the stage and screen--Thomas Heggen's Mister Roberts (1945) and James Michener's Tales of the South Pacific (1947)--or high culture meditation that excluded too great a part of the reading public: John Hawkes' surrealist The Cannibal (1946) and John Horne Burns' episodic The Gallery (1947).

It was 1948, at last, that turned out to be the year to watch for serious, but broadly based war novels. Four years before, Stanley Edgar Hyman had published his prophetic essay "The New War and Peace," in which he imagined what the great book of World War Two would be like when, inevitably, it was finally published¹².

¹²Norman first read this essay--which appeared in the same volume of Cross-Section as "A Calculus at Heaven"-- while he was in Basic Training at Fort Bragg. It is discussed in Chapter Three, Part I, p. 37.

While what the critic imagined was hardly a picture of any of the three best war novels actually published in 1948, his invocation of Tolstoy did suggest accurately the standards of both seriousness and popular readability to which the much-awaited major postwar novel would have to aspire.

Besides Norman's war novel, 1948 saw the publication of Irwin Shaw's The Young Lions and James Gould Cozzens' Guard of Honor, both by already recognized and respected writers, and both vigorous contenders with The Naked and the Dead for that year's Pulitzer Prize (which Guard of Honor won.¹³) Shaw's highly-touted novel sold well--though not so well as its publisher had expected--and he and Cozzens both got more than a little respectful critical attention, but it was indeed as if the reading and reviewing public had been spirited away from them by their new and unknown competitor. Norman's novel must have been the most widely reviewed and remarked in America that year--a number of prominent critics wrote on it two and three times¹⁴--and the wave of attention that broke over it proclaimed, like Vidal, that somebody had indeed finally done it: The big war book was at last in the big audience's hands.

Formal identification of The Naked and the Dead as a work of

¹³Tell story of 1948 Pulitzer Prize competition.

¹⁴Do a footnote on the mass, the simply quantity of reviews, or maybe just cite three multiple-essay critics? Charles Rollo, Orville Prescott and Lewis Gannett, just offhand, wrote three, two and two in 1948-49, as represented in the scrapbook xerox file.

novelistic art, discussable in one or another kind of great tradition, ran through one important dimension of the book's reception, and if no one went so far as to identify Norman as the heir apparent to Tolstoy, War and Peace nevertheless came up often enough: Time magazine evoked it (along with Moby Dick), and the New Yorker was both severe and complimentary in its quite elaborate comparison.¹⁵ In the Saturday Review of Literature cover-story (with the cover design presenting the author's face in a framework recalling the line-drawing face on the novel's dust jacket), Maxwell Geismar's qualified praise dwelt on how Norman's novel went beyond the Dos Passos Three Soldiers tradition of WW I American fiction--with its emphasis upon individual protest against the peculiar tyranny of military life--into identifying the military as a microcosmic model of our society as a whole. Geismar identified this sense of scope as powerful, as prophetic of major World War II novels to come, and as perhaps consciously Tolstoyan. At the very least, and quite commonly, Tolstoy--along with more recent examples of the Russian novel such as Sholokov's And Quiet Flows the Don--was invoked to predict the distance soon

¹⁵"The battle scenes are so vivid as to suggest Tolstoy's War and Peace, the common soldiers as clearly visualized as Tolstoy's peasants," the Time reviewer wrote, adding later: "The little group sets out on a mission as weird in its way as the quest of Ahab for the white whale." 10 May 1948.

John Lardner, in the New Yorker (15 May 1948, p. 115) suggests that Mailer should have learnt simplicity from Tolstoy, but says that The Naked and the Dead "is closer to Tolstoy in its sharp colors and orderly plotting," and adds that its "whole structure" also shows Tolstoy's influence.

to be travelled in the work of this gifted new American writer[Memphis, Tenn. Commercial Appeal, 7/11/48, Walter Neal Gardiner].

It was of course usually against the tradition of World War I novels that critics measured The Naked and the Dead, and few of the many reviewers who did this failed to see Norman's debt to John Dos Passos¹⁶. Some saw the debt as a sign of weakness, or at least of authorial inexperience[], but most identified the association as a sign of the fast literary company Norman was able to keep, if not always to go beyond[]. Only slightly less frequent were comparisons with Ernest Hemingway, usually citing A Farewell to Arms, and once again the tendency was to suggest that the earlier tradition of disillusion on the part of a lost generation was being replaced by a tougher, less sentimental vision of wartime and indeed of peacetime experience.[]¹⁷ A third novel that

¹⁶On May 6, 1948, evidently by request, Dos Passos wrote his old editor Stanley Rinehart a letter generously endorsing The Naked and the Dead and its author:

"Though a little uneven, the good parts are much the best stuff to come out of World War II. The boy's a first rate novelist right as he stands."

¹⁷Hemingway's reaction to The Naked and the Dead was characteristically less generous than that of Dos Passos, claiming that much of Norman's knowledge of military experience was not first hand and not always accurate. The older novelist did, however, concede quite a lot: "Mailer's a psycho, but the psycho part is the most interesting thing about him. Chances are he won't be able to throw another fit like The Naked and the Dead. But if he does, I better watch out. There'll be another Dostoevsky to contend with, and no one lasted more than three rounds with Mr. Dostoyevsky." [Quoted in Kenneth S. Lynn, "One Round Writer?" Commentary, March, 1983, p. 88.

critics used for favorable comparison with remarkable frequency was Eric Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, for above all readers perceived The Naked and the Dead as an anti-war testament.

When the novel was compared with other World War II fiction, it was usually to identify it as ground-breaking, and more successful than its immediate peers in establishing a new tradition to stand against the old. Perhaps predictably, Gore Vidal's private judgement (unpublished at the time), was that Norman's novel, though a commercial success, was over-praised and over-derivative, not to be compared in quality with the John Horne Burns' tale of the year before, or, for that matter, with Vidal's own army novel of 1946, Williwaw. But most published comparisons with contemporaries--while much less common than with World War One fiction-- were considerably kinder than Vidal. Charles A. Rollo, for example, in one of his three 1948 essays that include praiseful assessments of Norman, called his the only war novel of the first six months of the year to stand in the first fictional rank of the American publishing scene: Capote's [Other Voices Other Rooms] and Mailer's [The Naked and the Dead], plus Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country, Thornton Wilder's The Ides of March, and in some reviewers' opinion, Ross Lockridge's Raintree County, just about accounted for the literary eclat of the past six months of the year in fiction. [NYTBR, July 4, 1948, p.1]

Among the few essays in 1948 that seek seriously to compare post-World War Two war-fiction, Malcolm Cowley's mid-1948 survey of

nine examples of the genre¹⁸ argues that none of them actually achieves to major status. He concedes, however, that Norman, despite his over-indebtedness to James T. Farrell, should be awarded best-of-breed honors, and finds that current war-fiction, at least thus far, was more successful as document than as art.

Indeed, if we are to believe the great bulk of its reviews--as well as the comments in direct-mail, reader response--it was as a document rather than as a discretely aesthetic achievement that The Naked and the Dead was most frequently read. Unlike Malcolm Cowley, however, most such readers considered the book's documentary authenticity to be not the measure of its limitation but rather the main source of its great power as a novel. Even critics who disapproved of the novel--and they were not rare--tended to employ the same criterion, complaining that the trouble with the novel was that it documented the wrong things in the wrong way. Audiences evidently had developed a taste for the documentary during the war, the gritty new European cinema was exploiting it with brilliant effect (Vitorio DeSica's "The Bicycle Thief" was released in 1948), and the traditional notion that documentary realism represented a lower order of imaginative creation was directly challenged in the August 31, 1946 New Yorker, which was entirely given over to the publication¹ of John Hersey's documentary narrative Hiroshima.

Novelist and Pulitzer Prize winning war-correspondent Ira

¹⁸List all nine of Cowley's picks, and give the citation.

Wolfert, writing an essay in The Nation titled "War Novelist," formally argued the case for The Naked and the Dead as a triumph of essentially documentary art.¹⁹ Expressing due respect for Norman's imaginative powers as a fictive storyteller, Wolfert made the case that the novel nevertheless tracks a path broken for it by war correspondents, whose documentary work, including his own, was of a lower but very importantly foreshadowing order of imaginative power. Like Mailer's novel, the correspondent books typically began on a troop ship before an invasion, followed the troops into the beach on assault boats, gained the beach and spread inland, usually concentrating--as Norman did--on an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon working out of division headquarters.

Such outfits always were the targets for the war correspondent rooting around in this field. By following them he got a campaign on [both] the staff and the working-stiff level. On the front one couldn't see the war for the people in it, and back at headquarters one couldn't see the people for the war they were in, but an I. and R. platoon was involved in both, in the war and its people.

Wolfert claimed that Norman's narration is essentially an act of reporting, in the voice of a reporter (a good many reviews remarked that, though a novel, the book had no "plot.") What differentiated The Naked and the Dead from its wartime,

¹⁹The Nation, June 26, 1948, p. 723. Wolfert won the Pulitzer in 1942 for his dispatches from the Solomon Islands campaign, which in 1943 were published in his book Battle for the Solomons. He was also the author of a 1943 novel, Tucker's People, and would publish his own war novel, Act of Love, later in 1948. His novella, "My Wife the Witch," appeared in Edwin Seavers' 1944 Cross-Section, along with Norman's "A Calculus at Heaven."

journalistic forbearers, Wolfert suggested, was the novelist's "more knowledgeable attitude" toward the events of an after all by-gone day. The attitude of participating journalists who were caught in the actual battle and reporting the experience on close to the day it happened had necessarily been defensive, and in

being so was narrow in knowledge and limited in understanding:

when a man is in battle his brain becomes a defensive weapon in his head. However he grapples with it, it has a will of its own on such occasions and provides him, not with truth, but with the echoes of it which will enable him to survive.

Thus what correspondents of the day produced while breaking the trail which Mr. Mailer follows was a description that was accurate on its surface but false--or at least only temporarily true--internally.

The limitations of the wartime correspondents were shared, Wolfert insisted, by the wartime audience, which would have rejected a book that tried to do more than this kind of self-defensive describing--"for we were all in the same boat during the war. Whether at home or on the battlefield, our minds were one great cry for survival." With the war now over, however, the postwar audience sought what Wolfert called a knowledge about the war that was broader, more penetrating than would have been welcome earlier, and "The Naked and the Dead extends our knowledge of the war" by combining its author's command of journalistic technique with his novelist's imaginative penetration. "We are lucky," Wolfert concluded, "that we have a writer of such quality to satisfy our hunger for more knowledge about the war."

The greater part of the novel's popular reception confirmed the Wolfert diagnosis: the secret of its success lay in the

authenticity of its harsh reportage, which was somehow raised to a new level. Its power "goes deeper and higher than expert reporting," they said, though the Mailer ear was always "phonographic" or "stenographic," and the eye always "photographic."²⁰ A virtual chorus of reviews repeated the judgement that the various powers of the book came together to produce an effect that was shocking, that it delivered this effect on a variety of levels, and that the real question was whether or not the reader was going to be strong enough to take it. High level shock was shown to reside in the spectacle of an American general who was a fascist and a top sergeant who murdered his lieutenant in the field; less dramatic shock was produced by the conditions under which the men had to live and the state to which they had been reduced; moral shock emerged as defenseless prisoners were killed, sometimes sadistically, sometimes for reasons of practical convenience. But the kind of shock that received the most notice, and in a curious way that told most about the audience reacting to it, was the shock of language.²¹

Certainly profanity and obscenity--carefully filtered though it was in Norman's text--in the enlisted-man vocabulary served as the most common basis for objections to the novel:

²⁰PM, NYHerald Tribune,, and a photographic source should go here.Photo/phono are both in Cincinnati, Ohio Times-Star, Jul 5, 48

²¹The note should cover the whole spectrum of "shock", listing maybe ten reviews, and saving out the specific analyses of language, so that they can be used in the next paragraph.

If you want to make the acquaintance of a novelist with a remarkable ear and uncanny insight, be prepared also for the biggest mass of verbal sewage since the first asterisk blushed and sank from sight. [Harry Hansen, "The First Reader," NY World-Telegraph, 5/7/48]

Such combinations of concession of power with objection to obscenity are typical of one kind of negative comment, which takes the form of challenging the judgement of the reporter: Veterans, reading this transcript of emotions, prejudices, cliches, obscenity and other filth say 'Yes, this is precisely as it was. The report is stenographic.' One does not challenge such expert testimony. Yet one doubts that the relentlessly realistic author has told all concerning his characters. . . .He excels in photography, but is he an artist? [The Sign Union City, NJ, July 1948]

At its most serious, this kind of complaint reads the objectionable element as evidence that the novel as a whole lacks validity--or at best is valid in the wrong way:

A cast-iron stomach, and overpowering will to plough onward, forever onward, and a strictly masculine ability to absorb great gobs of profanity, obscene language and the dregs of the vocabulary of the English language, are prerequisites to a couple of sweaty evenings with this ponderous tome. It could have been boiled and parboiled from 721 pages down to 400 with the same effect. [Pittsburgh, PA Sun-Telegraph, 6/12/48]

Observations objecting to the novel's language could be comical, as in the case when an otherwise rave review in the Montgomery, Alabama Advertiser [7/11/38] looked forward to the publication of an expurgated edition: Some day this book may be expurgated, just as many classics, and then it will be read for the honest story it tells of men under fire. [7/11/46. Ray Gould]

Usually, however, the line that divided reviewers who objected to the language from the great majority of critics who admired and praised it, was a line of hot dispute, where admirers chose to defend the novel as a whole in terms of its harsh representation of language. Sometimes such reviewers simply scoffed at the prudery of these attacks, characterizing the attacker as "pursing his thin lips" while re-editing the manuscript, and wondering "if the same results could not have been achieved without such foul language."

The answer to the reviewer's question is a firm no. Mr. Mailer's object in writing the book was to distill the ferment of war into a vessel small enough for convenient handling. He wanted the distillate of his thoughts and experiences to look like war, smell like war, taste like war, and--in fine--to be unmistakably a product of war. If his tired, raw-nerved combat soldiers had spoken in fine Spencerian script instead of the vulgar argot of the jungles and the beaches they would have been something less than a reasonable facsimile of soldiers. [H. R. Pinkard, "Washington Also Had Its Battles," Huntington, W. Va. Advertiser June 27, 48 (sheet 15)]

Similar condescension was expressed by defenders of the novel's language who reprinted benighted protest letters from readers, and then patiently explained in print why such readers were wrong.²²

But some defenders of the language in The Naked and the Dead

identified its attackers as dangerous, insofar as they missed the novel's paradoxical point: apparent obscenity is not obscene at all, while apparent decency and respectability can mask a viciousness that is truly obscene. The New York Herald Tribune's

²²See Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," NYT Dec. 20, 1948 [in Lennon, Essays], and W.T.S., in the Providence, R.I. Journal June 27, 1948. [sheets 32 and 15]

Richard Match explained that the men's language is merely: The argot of efficient obscenity that served as a medium of communication in the Army of the United States. [Richard Match, "Souls of Men Stripped by Battle and Boredom," NY Herald Tribune 5/9/48]

And Robert Perkin, in a Colorado review picked up and reprinted by the Saturday Review of Literature²³, elaborated the point at length:

Mailer writes GI as it is spoke. He will be criticized for the language his soldiers use.

GI talk is over-pungent, repetitious, and unimaginative in its expletives. But it is neither obscene nor blasphemous. The GI is merely a man, as pure in heart as any, who is much put-upon, who has been handed society's most filthy job, and who is toweringly and continually browned-off about it.

In denying the apparent obscenity of the military language, however, both Match and Perkin pointed out that something truly loathsome is to be found in the novel, and should be identified and appreciated as such by the reader. Both reviewers referred to the presence of General Cummings, of whom Match wrote:

In General Cummings, Mailer departs from surface realism to create a general officer unlike any other in fiction. Neither hearty nor profane, a soft-voiced philosopher of the fascist Right. 'The morality of the future,' he told Hearn, 'is a power morality.'

'We're not in the future yet,' Hearn answered.

'You may consider the Army,' General Cummings observed pleasantly, 'as a preview of the future.'

Perkin pushed this point further, spelling it out as the conclusion of his review:

²³The SRL of June 19, 1948 reprinted much of Perkin's review from The Rocky Mountain News, noting that the novel "has enjoyed the success it deserves, despite the carping of readers who find the language too outspoken for comfort. [Perkin] effectively answered such critics, and incidentally sparked a flock of reorders from all parts of Colorado."

There is obscenity in Mailer's book. It is in the mind and heart of General Cummings. Cummings is a brilliant man, a scholar whose knowledge passes his understanding, and he is a Fascist by choice. He repeats, and believes, that war is man's natural state. He worships power, and his ambition already scales ahead to the day he sees when he will share the consolidated power of America with a few other conscienceless men like himself. His proposal for all other, lesser men:

'The role of the 20th Century man is anxiety.'

Mailer repeats the General's diagnosis several times, and at the end it becomes the dominating, continuing, unanswered question of the book.

Thus it is possible to see in the contemporary reception of The Naked and the Dead a point of conjunction between what admirers of the book regarded as its most serious dimension of moral concern and its most superficial. In the years that have followed, interestingly enough, the recollection of the book's use of obscene language has in many minds outlasted its premonitions regarding the rise of fascism in postwar America. Possibly because it was simpler to address the question of language than the question of political morality in the postwar decades, the question of obscenity in the literary language of The Naked and the Dead has been kept alive in criticism, in legal actions that have cited the book, and even in lexicographical commentary, and this process has given birth to a sort of legend regarding Norman's use of obscenity in his first published novel. As recently as 1998, a Rebecca Mead New Yorker "Talk of the Town" piece perpetuated the legend:

In 'The Naked and the Dead,' which was published in 1948, Norman Mailer changed every 'fuck' to 'fug,' which sounded ridiculous even then. ["The Boards," Rebecca Mead NYker, Jan. 12, 1998, p.31]

Mead evidently used as her source a 1995 lexicography volume,

The F Word, in the Ray Blount, Jr. "Foreward" for which we find: Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead (1948) had to render [fuck] as fug. Which led Dorothy Parker to tell the young novelist, when she met him at a party, "So you're the young man who can't spell

fuck." [The F Word, ed. Jesse Scheidlower, Random House, NY, p. ix.]

Here legend jostles with legend, since, in the oft-told original of the Dorothy Parker story, her line was spoken by actress Tallulah Bankhead, who in fact Norman never met and whose press agent--Norman supposes--made up the whole thing²⁴. The story that Norman revised his manuscript at some point, substituting the spelling fug for fuck, originated with people who knew him at the time and who thought they remembered a state of the manuscript before the spelling was changed. Cy Rembar, in his 1968 book The End of Obscenity [Random Hs, NY, p.17n] claimed to have suggested the substitution at some time during the process of composition, and Little, Brown editors Angus Cameron and Adeline Lubell believed, with differing degrees of certainty, that the original manuscript sample the author submitted to them in September of 1946 still carried the unrevised spelling.

Norman has doggedly denied this, but Edward de Grazia, in his 1992 book, Girls Lean Back Everywhere: the Law of Obscenity and

²⁴"Mailer, McLuhan and Muggeridge: On Obscenity," Realist interview by Bob Fulford, in JML, Conversations, pp. 116-117. This 1968 interview records the Talullah Bankhead story, or that of her press agent, and Norman's indignation: "I became a sort of household joke."

the Assault on Genius [Random Hs, 1992, pp. 520-21], chooses to believe the editors rather than the author, partially because their belief is shared by Hilary Mills--who got it from Ted Amussen. In various interviews, and at least two letters to editors²⁵, Norman has explained that from the very start he employed the fug spelling, and that therefore no revision could have taken place.

Examination of his original letters of composition, written in 1945-46 while he was still in Japan, as well as the earliest manuscripts written after he returned--including the 186 page sample submitted to Little, Brown--confirms his contention: fug was the spelling from the very start. Yet it is doubtful if the revision story, let alone the Tallulah Bankhead/Dorothy Parker follow-up story, will ever completely lose credence. People testify to the revision so as to be able to claim participation in the book's composition; the impulse is evidently irresistible and even, quite possibly, unconscious. Thus clouds of witnesses are inclined to recollect their participatory presence, to honestly believe their recollection, and to swear by it with enough conviction so as to be believed in their turn.

In any event, all this bears interesting witness to the power

²⁵See the "Mailer, McLuhan and Muggeridge" interview, above, and letters to the editor of *Life*, 15 October 1965, p. 34, and *Newsweek*, 23 November 1968, p 7: "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 use."

of America's continuing obsession with obscene language: it is still the dimension that people most frequently recall, fifty years and more after the book's original, multi-dimensional reception.

iii

One dimension of the reception that mattered a good deal at the time, to author as well as audience, involved the personal-identity image of the author that the novel, its criticism, and its commercial promotion created. Before the summer of 1948 was over, Norman Mailer was a name that conjured up not only a vision of the big novel with the line-drawing on the cover, but also of the young man who wrote it.

The fact that he was only twenty-five years old must have been emphasized in at least half of the reviews, unavoidably causing his first interviewer to ask, while gazing into his eyes: "How could so young a face have written such a book?"²⁶ Besides

²⁶Levitas, p.xx in jml.

John Lardner concluded his New Yorker review on a note of high-culture impatience with such pop-culture stereotyping: "It is a matter of record, set down twice on the jacket of 'The Naked and the Dead,' that the author is twenty-five years old. I don't think that is a fact of much significance, unless it means that Mr. Mailer's next novel will be a bit less ornate than his first one, that at twenty-seven or twenty-eight he will be too tired to write seven hundred and twenty-one pages at one clip. His age has no bearing that I can see on the fact that he is a man of wisdom and perception, who tells a good story powerfully and well." NY 15 May 1948, pp. 115-117.

the cover portrait on The Saturday Review, dozens of other representations of that face circulated through the pages of newspapers and magazines. Reviews often presented capsule biographies or, they simply inferred, from the novel and the few publisher-supplied facts, an idea of what he must be like. And since it is the case that, before his career was over, Norman would become famous to some--infamous to many--for the public figure he presented, what is especially interesting about his first public image is how very different it was from the ones he would eventually acquire.

Perhaps the most unobtrusive element in Norman's first public identity was modesty. A common assumption among reviewers was that in order to write about combat so knowledgeably, the author of The Naked and the Dead must have had to undergo extensive personal experience in the field. When neither he nor his publisher made an effort to exaggerate his, after all, very limited combat experience, it was not unnatural to conclude that they were being modest about it, and many readers seem to have drawn that conclusion. It somehow fit the photograph that was run along with most reviews and commentary, the one that first appeared on the back of the dust jacket. Full-page, it shows him unsmiling but pleasant, dressed in tweeds, white shirt and tie, turning his face slightly toward the camera from his left profile. His right hand, with cigarette, rests on his crossed right knee. He is young, nice-looking in the fashion of contemporary film stars John

Garfield and Farley Granger, his naturally protruding ears are unobtrusive, and beneath the picture, like a caption, are six lines of biographical fact, only one word of which--"rifleman"--suggests combat.

The credit-line on this endlessly reprinted portrait is "Photo by G. Maillard Kessler," a New York artiste in whose studio²⁷ Norman also posed for a second shot: same clothes, but taken full-face front, with the author leaning forward and staring into the lens, the cigarette in his right hand somewhat masking the angling-out of his right ear. These two pictures, sometimes closely cropped, were the ones most editors used, and they supported the identification of a modest, middle class, and serious young literary man who was evidently sober about both his book and the personal recognition that was having the effect--among others--of circulating his picture throughout every newspaper and literary magazine in America.²⁸ As if to confirm the impression created by these pictures, Norman used his interview opportunities to emphasize the bourgeois character of his

²⁷The photographer was Dave Kessler's brother, who did portraits of most of the family at one time or another and kept a successful Manhattan studio which the family regarded as exotic.

²⁸Norman may have become a little tired of seeing these pictures because after he got back from France he posed, in a T-shirt, for a much less formal series taken by one John H. Popper. These began appearing as the book's continuing success called forth more Mailer stories in the fall of 1948. One of the Popper pictures was used in place of the usual line-drawing of the soldier's face in a Rinehart advertisement celebrating 11 straight weeks on the N.Y. Times Book Review bestseller list.

background and, in that tradition, he was well-mannered about negative and sometimes personally abusive reviews.

Six days after returning from France he was interviewed at Bea's Boston family home, where Louise Levitas of the New York Star²⁹ paid particular attention to his mother-in-law's large, old-fashioned living room, a comfortable place with family pictures on the grand piano and tall, awninged windows from which you could see sunlight on the lawn outside.[levitas,p5] As Norman spoke to the interviewer, "his wife, a pretty, dark-haired girl, very shapely in a cotton dress and sandals," sat at his feet on a footstool. Such an unthreatening depiction, in which he "sprawled on the couch, looking like a collegiate on vacation," was reflected in an accompanying photograph showing the young couple, arms around each other's waist, grinning while striding confidently toward the camera. The presentation is of a lucky young man whom it would be a pleasure to know. The same identity was reaffirmed that very week in a Horace Sutton mini-interview in Cue magazine[Horace Sutton, 8/21/48, p. 17] that pictured a smiling, t-shirted Norman talking almost exclusively about the money he was making.

A variation on this identity appeared two months later, when Lillian Ross did a biographical piece on him for the New Yorker's

²⁹ The Star had recently replaced PM as New York's liberal tabloid newspaper. It spread Levitas's generously illustrated interview across three pages and twelve columns of its August 22, 1948 Weekend Edition's "Weekly Magazine," and included an excerpt from the novel.

"Talk of the Town." Noting that he was wearing a suit and tie for the occasion, and formally mixing her a scotch and soda at the Rinehart conference-room bar, Ross remarked that she'd heard rumors about his "rough-and-ready" reputation as "a young man with a strong antipathy to literary gatherings and neckties." Norman assured her that he really didn't have any deep-seated prejudices

concerning dress:

"Actually," he said, "I've got all the average middle-class fears." He thinks the assumption that he hasn't got them grew out of his meeting some of the literati last summer when he was wearing sneakers and an old T shirt. He'd just come from a ball game and it was a very hot day. "I figured anybody with brains would be trying to keep cool," he said. [Ross, JML, p. 12]

So resonant was this bourgeois-but-good-guy element in his emerging public persona that it stuck to him, historically, and forty-seven years later, looking back on the publication of The Naked and the Dead in their Reader's Guide to the Twentieth Century Novel, Peter Parker and Frank Kermode recorded:

It seemed that a "normal," competent novelist of some substance had appeared on the American literary scene, and Mailer's public persona played along with this: "I've got all the average middle-class fears," he told an interviewer. Contemporary interviews record him declining to attack the few voices hostile to the book and withholding comment on contentious issues. [NY, Oxford U Press, 1995, p. 280].

A quality related to this general air of respectability was the specific matter of Norman's Jewishness. Though it played a prominent part only in the columns of the Jewish press, it was more than merely mentioned in the general commentary. Thus the fact that his unpublished first novel ("No Percentage") was an autobiographical story "about Jews in New York" was often

remarked,

and his almost universally acknowledged Brooklyn roots were often connected with this aspect of his life:

[The Mailers] had a four-room apartment in 'a quiet section of two-family houses and trees, a mile from Ebbetts Field and Prospect Park. It was the most secure Jewish environment in America. Everybody around us was Jewish.' [levitas p, 9] See also "Norman Mailer," in Current Biography, pp. 37-38, where both No Percentage and this is picked up and repeated.]

We are even informed that Norman's mother-in-law was a past president of the Jewish War Veterans auxiliary.

Jewish newspapers were generous in their coverage not only of the novel but its author, and he was celebrated in a six-column story with a blazing full-page headline in the Yiddish-language Morning Journal of June 11, 1948. This story used a cropped version of the dust-jacket photo, but a month later, in the also Yiddish Daily Forward, side-by-side review and feature stories consumed the better part of fifteen type-columns and, besides the dust-jacket picture, offered the reader separate, in-uniform photographs of both Norman and Bea, along with a picture of a proudly smiling Fan and Barney. Norman's Cousin Cy may have been referring to one or another of these two newspaper coverages when, years later, he joked about the parochialism of a Yiddish newspaper review of The Naked and the Dead that began: "This is a

story of two Jewish boys. . ."³⁰

In fact, the English-language Congress Weekly [Dec 13?, 1848], published by the American Jewish Congress, ran a joint-review of The Naked and the Dead and Irwin Shaw's The Young Lions later in 1948 that seriously addressed the question in the review's title: "Jews in American War Novels." Though the reviewer acknowledged the presence of other important characters in Norman's novel, he did focus in on its two Jewish soldiers and unapologetically studied them as significant exempli of the modern fictional figure of the Jew, just as he identified Mailer and Shaw as significant examples of the then-building but still largely unacknowledged number of Jews in the first rank of American postwar writers. Though this essay talked mostly about the novels, and the way their Jewish characters "will do more to influence the mores of Americans that will a dozen scholarly treatises," Norman's own Jewishness was also remarked. While discussing the modest, decent character of Private Goldstein, the reviewer concluded: The end portrait of Goldstein is a fine one; one senses that Mailer, in writing this Jew into his book, pours some of his own experiences into the portraiture. ["American War Novels," Harold R. Ribalow]

Private Goldstein probably comes as close as any of the characters in The Naked and the Dead to having a chance at achieving some modest postwar version of the American Dream, and it is of course the case that much of Norman's post-publication

³⁰See Rembar, The End of Obscenity, p.198n. Privates Roth and Goldstein are the only two Jewish characters in the novel.

identity was presented as a literary version of the American Success story. Insofar as his Jewishness was made a part of his identity, it for the most part related to this kind of rags-to-riches tale in which the humbleness of his origins was signalled by the code-word Brooklyn. Every biographical note, however brief, mentioned Brooklyn; so that when it was occasionally added that he and his Brooklyn neighborhood were also Jewish, this only served to intensify the point that he began his climb at the very bottom of the American ladder. His first rung up from Jewish Brooklyn had been Gentile Harvard, a place mentioned just as frequently as Brooklyn and always in opposition to it, in the way that rich is always positioned in opposition to poor.

Not that Harvard was said to mark the moment when monetary riches came to Norman--he reached that rung on the ladder later--but Harvard is identified as moving him all the way up in class: Being at Harvard was lucky for a writer.

'It's an extremely complex place,' he said. His fellow students came from all over the country, poor and rich and average, the socially elite, outcasts, giving variety to college life. [Levitas, jml p. 9]

At the same time, Harvard was said to have given him the setting for his first, foreshadowing literary success. One kind or another of success, of course, is the controlling theme of every American Dream story, and if in the Norman Mailer version his first success was escaping Brooklyn for the sanctuary of Harvard, his second was winning the Story magazine contest while at Harvard and thus discovering that he could make it as a writer.

An important archetypal convention of this kind of story is that success not come too easily, and the young writer's failure to publish his first two novels was featured in many of the publicity accounts; but the point of his having persevered and gone on was the main one. His shrewd strategy of entering the army as an enlisted man--the better to position himself for writing--not to mention surviving the war and actually writing the novel, were the culminating accomplishments in a story that concluded with the achieving of success itself, and the gratifications that accompanied it. These were even foreshadowed by the fact that Norman went to Europe after completing the novel, spending a pre-publication academic year doing the things that most readers in 1948 only dreamed of doing: Paris, the Sorbonne, touring Italy and Spain. "In Paris," he told the New Yorker, "you can just lay down your load and look out at the gray sky."

Success was even shown to have its downside, and a faint nostalgia for the now-vanished life that preceded it--Paris before the fall, as it were--is detectable. His condition after having returned to success in the United States, he went on to tell

Lillian Ross, was not without its difficulties: Back here, the crowd is always yelling. It's like a Roman arena. You have a headache and scurry around like a rat, like a character in a Kafka nightmare, eating scallops with last year's grease on them. [p. 13]

In another interview he spoke of the requirements of his "new status:" business talks with the publisher, conferences with Lillian Hellman, who was writing a play based on the book, and the usual

literary cocktail party (said Mailer with a grimace) at which he met reviewers. [Levitas, p. 6]

But Norman's life-story in all versions depicts him as ending in a cascade of royalties and the prospect of more success with the next book.

If speculation about the nature of the next book was a comparatively muted element in the public story, interest in the question of royalties from the present book was quite the opposite. The commercial success of The Naked and the Dead was covered in newspapers and magazines with at least the same attention as its critical success, and those widely circulated photographs of the author clearly depicted not only a handsome, nicely attired and talented young man, but a rich one. The New Yorker estimated his after-taxes income for 1948 at thirty-thousand dollars, while Cue and Current Biography put his profit for the first three months of publication alone at forty thousand (which was a good deal closer to correct.) All interviewers represented him as being anything but intoxicated by this unaccustomed condition, and readers learned from the New Yorker that:

He finds apartments depressing and has a suspicion of possessions, so he and his wife live in a thirty-dollar-a-month furnished room in Brooklyn Heights. He figures that his thirty thousand will last at least five years, giving him plenty of time to write another book. [Lennon, p. 13]

A considerably less Spartan, not to say more believable representation of his new-found prosperity appeared elsewhere, where Norman acknowledged his newly gained "fantastic security,"

and joked that the frantic pace he had been setting since his return to the United States was pushing him into extremes of

financial expenditure:

If I [resumed] living in the manner to which I was accustomed, the money would probably last for fifteen or twenty years. But if I live according to my present scale, it [may only] last a day and a half. [Current Bio/via Cue, p. 39]

Though Norman acknowledged to Cue that he was shopping for a New England hideaway, he was not really saying that he had fallen victim to self-indulgent extravagance. He actually meant that he was spending his time and a significant amount of his money, now that he was back in America, doing something that did not in the least fit into the conventional bourgeois success story. He had declared himself a wholly committed activist in the Progressive Party effort to promote Henry Wallace as a candidate for President of the United States.

Of course there had never been any secret about Norman's political sympathies, but as the views of a private person they had been of no particular interest to others. After the publication of The Naked and the Dead, when so many reviewers took note of the novel's characterization of General Cummings and its depiction of the totalitarian effect of military life--Time spoke of the book's "narrow political bias"--readers had to have been aware of Norman's point of view. At the same time, however, it would have been natural for such readers to assume that these authorial politics would continue to be expressed in literary form, and that Norman had no special plans for, say, actively

campaigning in connection with the November, 1948 elections.

Yet such campaigning was exactly what he intended to do, as he forthrightly explained to interested interviewers once he got back to the States.³¹ Mixed with all the talk of bourgeois respectability, down-home Jewishness and rags-to-riches success, it appeared as a somewhat incongruous biographical element--enough so, it may be, to have put some editors off from assigning reporters to interview him. On the other hand it was also true that he had been comparatively unavailable for interviews during the first three months of his novel's published life, and American editors may have felt that his success story had lost some of its freshness by the time of his return. Yet it is noteworthy that in June, while Norman was on the road in Italy, *Life* magazine had made a friendly proposal for a Paris picture story then and there. Norman turned them down tartly (Rainey wailed that "you are throwing away publicity some people would give their lives for!" [br7/12/48]) treating the proposal as unworthy of serious consideration. In retaliatory response to this, with the success of the novel by then the talk of the literary world, *Life* assigned someone to write a feature editorial on The Naked and the Dead and its disrespectful young author.

The full-page *Life* editorial appeared on August 15, 1948,

³¹Norman's reason for committing himself to work in the Wallace campaign almost certainly had to do with the problem of discovering his next novel. His political conviction was real, but in itself was not nearly strong enough to compete with his felt need to get on with his writing. See Chapter Five.

just about the time of Norman's first New York interviews, under the title FICTION IN THE U.S., and a three-column sub-head: We need a Novelist to Re-Create American Values instead of Wallowing in the Literary Slums. There were no pictures, and the stance was not overtly biographical, but the argument fixed specifically upon Norman as representing the figure of the contemporary American novelist: a figure who has evolved out of a modern literary tradition that perversely distorted the truth about this country. Acknowledging that "Mr. Mailer's novel is good, even excellent, of its kind," the piece argues that such a novel would never have been written the way it was "if it were not for the obsessive literary convention that began with the slumming excursions of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris and Jack London."

In launching so basic an attack, *Life's* editors were opening an argument between institutional apologists like themselves and most of America's first generation of post-war literary artists, whom they quite properly would come to perceive as subversive of institutional authority--not to say fearful for the situation of individuals abused by institutional machination. The argument between these antagonists would rage for at least thirty years, dividing the country along a cultural fault line that Norman's career, in particular, would chart with almost geological precision. In this, his first encounter with it, Norman stood accused of "slumming." The editorial explained: Slumming begins as an effort to extend one's sympathies, to learn how the other half lives so that one can help improve the general quality of life. But it ends all too frequently in disgust and

weariness, and in a hatred for all life.

The failure of Norman's novel to include what William Dean Howells--praised in this editorial--had called the smiling aspects of American life is the fault being found by Life magazine, which calls at the end for "some novelist with the ability to transcend the slumming convention, to recreate the variety of America anew." The deepest bitterness in the essay is directed past Norman at the established modern tradition, which stands accused of shaping and warping otherwise gifted young novelists. It would not take long, however, for such nice distinctions to fall away, and in Life's next mention of Norman the gloves come off: less than three years hence the editors will remember The Naked and the Dead simply as "insidious slime" [a1951 Life editorial on James Jones]. Against Norman, in his various efforts to combine the identity of artist and radical cultural critic, Henry Luce's Time/Life publication enterprise would continue a bare-knuckle attack for many years to come.

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END C

End Chapter Four, Part III

END CHAPTER FOUR