Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 4, 725–740
doi:10.1017/S0021875809991319 First published online 30 March 2010

Pentagon Pictures: The Civil Divide in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*

ANDREW WILSON*

This paper focusses on Norman Mailer's treatment of the 1967 March on the Pentagon in his Pulitzer Prize-winning work of non-fiction *The Armies of the Night*. The visual and linguistic properties developed by the author throughout the first book of *The Armies of the Night* are identified and assessed in relation to the anti-war movements and counterculture temperament of the 1960s. Comparisons are made with post-war writers and earlier North American authors as a means of clarifying "American" aspects of Mailer's handling of his material. Mailer's journalistic techniques, his often spontaneous and engaged responses, are also defined within the context of the social conflicts of the late 1960s.

I. IMAGES

In 1965, Norman Mailer took part in the Vietnam Day demonstrations at the University of California at Berkeley. Alongside other opponents of the war, he gave a speech in which he asked an audience of students and faculty to begin pasting pictures of President Lyndon Johnson on campus: "Without a word, photographs of you, Lyndon Johnson, will start appearing everywhere upside down. It will tell them that we trust our President so little and think so little of him, that we see his picture everywhere upside down."[1]

Mailer, in response to displays of open revolt that year, struck on an image worthy of Johnson's presidency; the leader of the Great Society turned around, with the implication of his mind in the wrong place, in the quagmire of Vietnam. Although other songs and slogans targeted the President directly, the picture protest, in this case, did not gain any popular hold. Nevertheless, the idea of "visual" combat, situationism, was in keeping with the tactics of the Berkeley contingent, if not of the new left as a whole. Mailer shared their

* E-mail: andrew-wilson@live.co.uk

This article is substantially the same as the previously published chapter, The Armies of the Night: Representations, pp. 111–130, in *Normal Mailer, An American Aesthetic* (Switzerland: Peter Lang AG: 2008) by the same author. Peter Lang AG have kindly granted permission for it to be reproduced here.

[1] Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians* (New York: Double Day Dell, 1966), 82.

preference for pictorial spectacle in protesting against the Vietnam War. In his analysis of civil unrest during the 1960s, Maurice Isserman reports on the theatricality of student defiance in an incident which occurred later in the year:

> After a spring of teach-ins, vigils, and peaceful marches against the war, student protestors began to look for ways to "put their bodies on the line." As before, Berkeley pointed the way. In August 1965, several hundred protestors from the University of California had stood on railroad tracks to block oncoming troop trains rolling into the Oakland Army base.[2]

Students standing on railroad tracks blocking trains: a memorable, persuasive image given the mythology surrounding the Pacific and South Western Railroad in the United States, a counterpoint to railroad tycoon S. Behrman's burial by grain in Frank Norris's novel *The Octopus*.[3] As a means of deferring the war machine it is less noteworthy, since there were no casualties and there never were going to be any.

A consensus in the culture of the new left decreed that "symbolic battle" or imaginative protest was critical to stimulating support.[4] *The Armies of the Night* (1968) is part of a spirit of resistance that turned to symbolic, imaginative and theatrical displays for the benefit of audiences across the country. The organizers of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, particularly counterculture figurehead Jerry Rubin, who prepared the theatrical levitation of the military headquarters ceremony, should also receive credit. The Mobilization Committee had planned to invade the corridors of the Pentagon (a decision which Mailer knew of in advance of the march) with the aim of realizing a "revolution by theatre":[5] a horde of disaffected Americans entering the embodiment of Eisenhower's military–industrial complex is a move designed strictly for television audiences and newsprint readers.

In a chapter entitled "The Historian" (in recognition of Henry Adams), Mailer defined the purpose of the march. The protestors were "marching not to capture it, but to wound it symbolically."[6] Writers, photographers and documentary filmmakers bore the responsibility for treating the "wound" and brought the sign, or message, to the citizenry beyond the borderlines of the capital, Washington, DC. An aesthetic criterion filters into their political orientation and participation. Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Jerry Rubin and David Dellinger succeeded. Nearly forty years on, historical data on the March on the Pentagon is less renowned than the images of young protestors

[2] Maurice Isserman, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 190.
[3] Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (London: Penguin, 1986; first published 1901), 646.
[4] Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 54.
[5] Ibid., 47.
[6] Ibid., 47.

putting flowers in the barrels of the MPs' carbines.[7] Photographic spectacle proved a more persuasive force in affecting sentiment regarding the Vietnam War than the optimistic reports made by General Westmoreland and the Johnson administration.[8] With this in mind, Mailer issued image after image in the narrative foreground. The images are memorable and often constituents of American history (in the case of the flowers in the carbine barrel, the MPs' clubs laid on the heads of demonstrators) or of American mythology/folklore (Mailer arm-in-arm with Robert Lowell and Dwight MacDonald during the march, Mailer arm-in-arm with arresting officers on the Pentagon lawns).

Photographic imagery began to play more of a role in "narrating" the Vietnam War:[9] pictures took precedence over print, hastening Mailer's unease with literature and his gravitation to filmmaking and theatre productions of *The Deer Park* in the year of the march. If Mailer's true-life story *The Executioner's Song* (1979) has a cinematic quality, *The Armies of the Night* has a photographic aspect, a series of pictures shot through with commentary from the novelist.[10] In a description of protestors running in a panic from the Pentagon, Mailer refers to the similarity between "this posture of men running in a charge" and "the photographs by Matthew Brady of Union soldiers on the attack across a field."[11] The Civil War motif in *The Armies of the Night*, discussed in due course, symbolizes the tenuous state of the union in 1967, but it also has an aesthetic virtue; Mailer can mythologize the march, even suggest a sepia-reddish tone to its blander aspects. If the Civil War metaphor provides a historical backdrop to the March on the Pentagon, it also lends magnitude to proceedings Mailer himself concedes may be construed as the art or theatre of the absurd.[12]

The images are not only visual, they are also there to be interpreted, and read perhaps as propaganda. Aligning his army, the army of the title, with the

[7] William O' Neill, *An Informal History of America in the 1960s: Coming Apart* (New York: New York Times Book Company, 1971), 244. O'Neill accurately predicted that "posterity will doubtless think the March on the Pentagon remarkable mainly for the book it inspired."

[8] Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 738.

[9] Ibid., 746.

[10] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter and Other Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 1986; first published 1850), 83, 108, 172. Nathaniel Hawthorne had previously used the "painterly" or pictorial technique in *The Scarlet Letter*, with various "views of Hester": Hester as the Madonna with Infant; Hester at her Needle; Hester on the Scaffold with a Scarlet "A" on her breast.

[11] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 126.

[12] Barry H. Leeds, *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 251. Leeds, on this issue, suggests that Mailer is oblivious to the gravity that is lacking in the proceedings. In reference to Mailer's description of fear at the Pentagon, Leeds argues, "These dangers are very real to Mailer, but to a reader who does not share his political views they may seem chimerical."

Union soldiers, he is implying and imposing a judgement on the righteousness of their cause; they are "for the Union" – New Englanders and New Yorkers heading south for war. Misrepresentation through image, a war over images, is even incorporated in the novel. Robert Lowell asks that he and Mailer not be arrested, and therefore pictured, near an NLF flag flying in the Pentagon parking lot: "If we're going to, shall we get away from here? I don't see any good that's accomplished if we're all picked up right next to a Vietcong flag."[13] As with the students' stand on the railroad, the person and his cause are read against the signs of an aesthetic and also ethical backdrop. They were there to have their photograph taken, to be pictured against the horizon of the Pentagon, the Department of Justice and the Potomac River: read as men confronting the magnitude of their country's natural heritage, institutions and infrastructures.

Consider a few of these images. The first image has Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell in a pose of confession. After arriving in the capital, Mailer attends a drinks party where he and Lowell "turned their heads to one another at the empty table, ignoring the potentially acolytic drinkers at either elbow, they projected their elbows out in fact like flying buttresses or old Republicans."[14] The image of Lowell and Mailer seated at a dinner table is preserved in the reader's imagination throughout the "Liberal Party" chapter. Mailer recognizes the value of his own and Robert Lowell's public image and exploits their worth: it is memorable in as far as any meeting of celebrated writers has an interest to readers. And unlike the democrat Walt Whitman during the first Civil War, they separate themselves from their fellow guests – they are bound, Mailer referring to the aristocracy in the case of Lowell, to stand apart from and above their fellow Americans.[15] Their posture conveys secrecy; the two great confessional writers of the 1960s are ready to reveal to each other their private feelings on the march. This first image, as with others referred to below, makes use of the body to register the meaning of the episode. With elbows out, they insulate themselves from contact: an aggressive, combative posture.

Other images include Mailer with a mug of bourbon in one hand and a copy of his novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in the other, and Mailer backstage at the Ambassador Theatre, "squatting on his haunches, or kneeling like a player about to go back into the ball game."[16] These images are linked to desire, whether for colour, shape or matter, and are worthy of emulation, in

[13] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 128.
[14] Ibid., 19.
[15] In his Civil War poem "The Wound-Dresser" Whitman stands level with the wounded on both sides: "Was one side so brave? The other was equally brave!"
[16] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 33.

Mailer's view, as they begin as imitations; many of his stances make clear the influence of Ernest Hemingway's public persona or posturing on Mailer.[17] The latter image signals his status as an American male. Whether he is squatting or kneeling is irrelevant; he offers both sporting images, making a point of his body at the same time: he is athletic, strong and mobile, and therefore at variance, and this is of significance to Mailer, to the negative representation of his fellow protestors: un-athletic, unclean and probably unmanly.[18] In the traditional marriage of American sport and American literature, Mailer puts the presence and movement of a sportsman on the page for aesthetic vividness, in the vein of F. Scott Fitzgerald's characterization of Tom Buchanan as a polo player, or John Updike's Rabbit's basketball feats. These earlier images are a prelude to the image he has been working for throughout the first book: Mailer against the backdrop of the Pentagon, Mailer very nearly inside the Pentagon. Again, for aesthetic gain, Mailer's arrest is noted; he alone is pictured on the lawns outside the Pentagon, crossing ropes sealing off the crowds, running past a line of MPs before being wrestled to the floor. He has put his singular presence against the image of the military–industrial complex, the Pentagon. Without symbols of this magnitude (the mountain in *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), the parapet in *An American Dream* (1964), the Apollo 11 module in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970)) Mailer's interest in his subject recedes, as he verified in his appraisal of his image of John F. Kennedy, in a convertible on arrival at the Los Angeles Convention, for his 1960 convention article.[19]

There is also his underlying conviction that the body is the receptacle of history, an inference that justifies division of the March on the Pentagon into autobiographical history and collective history. If history is shaped by the resonance of external stimuli on the memory, it must also have a correlative in the intensity of the impact on the flesh. This is true of the final image of the first book. Mailer on the lawn outside the prison addresses Americans via an audience of photographers, reporters and cameramen:

> You see, dear fellow Americans, it is Sunday, and we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam. Yes, we are burning him there, and as we do, we destroy the foundation of this Republic, which is its love and trust in Christ.[20]

[17] Lillian Ross, *Portrait of Hemingway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 48. Ross obliges Hemingway by presenting him in a series of postures/pictures.

[18] Alfred Kazin, "The Trouble He's Seen," in Leo Braudy, ed., *A Collection of Critical Essays on Norman Mailer* (New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1972), 63. In this review for the *New York Times* Kazin refers to the lack of "outrageousness, strength, and imagination" and the absence of the "Kennedy Panache" among Mailer's fellow protestors.

[19] Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985), 305.

[20] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 213.

The strength of the metaphor takes on such proportions for Mailer that he does not then state that this refers to no reality in Vietnam. He has tied in ideas of Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ as a sacrament, ideas of a second crucifixion in the context of a second civil war, even ideas of heresy perpetrated by the faithful. The forcefulness of the image, its rhetorical persuasiveness, outweighs its accuracy as a verdict on the Vietnam War. He has juxtaposed Christ with the burning jungles of Vietnam and thus lent an aesthetic appeal to an ungainly state of affairs. In another vein, Octavio Paz likened the massacre of student protestors by the Mexican army the year after the March on the Pentagon to the sacrificial rites practised by the Aztecs:[21] in both contexts, the image of pyramids and crosses flatter the modern machinery of the state. Mailer's images are, on balance, a typical response of an American writer to a puritanical undermining of the body, to outward show, to apparel bearing traces of vanity and desire. When D. H. Lawrence spoke of those who "babbled about children's stories" instead of listening to the new American voice,[22] he ignored the evidence that children's stories thrive on images of the body: the scarlet letter "A" on Hester's breast, Ahab with his leg made from the jawbone of a sperm whale set against the great white whale, Tom Sawyer whitewashing fences. Nineteenth-century American literature had been a "children's literature" as children would be able to retain such images, and the moral embedded in the image. This applies also to *The Armies of the Night*; Mailer encourages his readers to retain the images of the day. The extremity of much of the imagery is then part of a project to overwrite everything enervating and unsightly at work in the Republic in 1967.

II. UNION

The Armies of the Night presents the United States in the first stage of a second civil war. Although the March on the Pentagon is a symbolic battle "in which no one is killed," Robert Merrill is certain that "what it symbolizes is so agonizing that it constantly reminds Mailer of the Civil War."[23] In his next work, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1969), he signals the peak of warfare, and

[21] Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, trans. Helen R. Lane (London: Viking Press, 1975), 136. Paz analyses the shooting of students by the Mexican army and police on 2 Oct. 1967 in the Plaza de Tlatelolco.

[22] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 7.

[23] Robert Merrill, "*The Armies of the Night*," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 132.

the ebb in the national divide in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970).[24] As each book makes clear, the Vietnam War was the dividing issue, with the riots and clashes between demonstrators and law enforcers loosely described as "war." Representation of the Vietnam War, or rather, as Mailer considered it, the Johnson administration's misrepresentation, charged the writing, as did the array of representations of life in the pluralist territory of the 1960s. Throughout the first book of *The Armies of the Night*, "History as a Novel," Mailer defines his country amid the escalations in Vietnam, as if the idea of "America" recedes when disunity prevails. Finding the union in crisis, he converts to the tradition of taming the country through language. Making the subtitle of the first book, "History as a Novel," more meaningful, he finds fiction at work in every representation, nothing less than the fiction of "making" America. This accounts for the literariness of Mailer's explanations for the Vietnam War. He is concerned with the war as a reflection on America rather than as a reality in Vietnam; with the exception of a story of a Vietnamese child in *Saint George and the Godfather* (1972), Mailer does not incorporate details, first-hand or otherwise, on the grassroots situation in South East Asia.[25] The Vietnam War acts a metaphor, an analogy for the worst things in America by 1967; Vietnam as a purgative, Vietnam as a "happening," Vietnam to divert civil war, Vietnam to appease the Christian coalition, and so on.

In his 1968 novel, Mailer hit upon the difficulty of defining a nation. He begins to think of America as a "tender, mysterious bitch who no one would ever know."[26] America has been mysterious for its writers, a place of wonder for both Herman Melville and F. Scott Fitzgerald, but not just in a religious or idealistic sense. The breadth of American territory, physical and social, ensures the majority never encounter in the flesh the bulk of people, places and events that constitute national life. Fewer and fewer, Mailer says in a reference to nationalism and pastoral idealization, "work with their hands (or) wield real power, so it is never their lathe or their sixty acres."[27] The protagonist, in a trope used extensively in American literature, is locked outside America, whether physically (Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*) or

[24] Leo Braudy, "The Pride of Vulnerability," in *idem*, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, 15. Braudy is the first to group the documentary novels together as a trilogy: "*The Prisoner of Sex* acts as a coda to this trilogy because it asserts what had been implicit through them: the primacy of the writer who attempts, however subjectively, to understand the world around him and convey to his audience some sense of its complexity."

[25] Norman Mailer, *Saint George and the Godfather* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1972), 116. [26] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 114. [27] Ibid., 257.

mentally (Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*) or socially (Mailer, ostracized vaudeville figure in the first half of "History as a Novel").

He has to settle on defining America as a woman, his wife. That is his sole union, his marriage: to hand, he has nothing save his wife. His longing to return to New York and be with her translates to a longing to grasp the country, "he would also have thought it cowardly to ignore the relation and dishonest to assume that none of his wife's attractiveness (and unattractiveness) came from her presence so quintessentially American."[28] Mailer is intent on making America tangible to his senses. But he personifies the country in this way for another reason. He is writing within the tradition where the body of the American continent is the body of the American woman: F. Scott Fitzgerald's "fresh, green breast of the new world."[29] Mailer's version of the American wasteland is christened a "technology land" in *The Armies of the Night*:[30] "She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with leprous skin."[31]

Beyond every other distinction, America is defined as a fiction, an abstract country of unreal experience, where wars are witnessed on television and read via newsprint. If Walt Whitman sang in *Leaves of Grass*, "I am the man … I suffered … I was there,"[32] then Mailer's journey to the capital is an equivalent grasp of first-hand experience. Whatever happened in Vietnam would be introduced to the majority of the citizenry through literature, reportage, photography; Mailer, working in accordance with this principle, begins and ends his narrative with reports of his behaviour in Washington made by *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post*. In the end only his novelistic technique persuades that *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post* either misrepresented his involvement or introduced deliberate political bias.[33] *The Armies of the Night* is divided into two books on this premise. In the second, "The Novel as History," Mailer says that "the novel" speculates on areas sealed off by "history": the March on the Pentagon is beyond objective summary: "history is interior – no document can give sufficient intimation."[34] No document, neither historical writing nor the novel, can translate the

[28] Ibid., 171.

[29] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin Books, 2000; first published 1925), 171. Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), 47, sees this as a case for male rule over both wife and country.

[30] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 116.

[31] Ibid., 288.

[32] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (London: Penguin Books, 1986; first published 1855), 62.

[33] Mailer cites the article "A Shaky Start" in *Time* (27 Oct. 1967) as an example of inaccurate coverage of his behaviour during the four-day weekend. Although the article does not misrepresent his words or actions factually, it discredits, as "History as a Novel" indicates, his involvement.

[34] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 255.

intensity of the lived event. Whitman had already resolved Mailer's fears in accounting for the purpose of his poetry in the second chant of "Song of Myself." Whitman gave assurance, "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand … / nor look through the eyes of the dead … / nor feed on the spectres in books."[35] By reading *Leaves of Grass*, and those lines, the reader, however, has to receive things at second or third hand and by feeding on spectres in books. Whitman evidently meant "no longer" after readers had finished his book. In both *Leaves of Grass* and *The Armies of the Night* there is a translation of personal and national life into a literary form that forces readers to renew or revise their sense of self-reliant, first-hand experience.

Mailer and Whitman, as many other American writers working in the Puritan tradition, often exhibit unease of literature: the issue is whether history on the page ever runs parallel to and contends with the history of the individual. In response, Mailer unclothes history ("history is interior"[36]) of its social and economic forces and restores it to the individual.[37] In the nineteenth century, Ralph Emerson had also switched "history" for "biography": "all history becomes subjective; there is properly no history, only biography."[38] History is gauged by the intensity of feeling an incident arouses: history as a heavy heartbeat, as bloodshed; history as a penetration of the flesh, history as a series of memorable images. In his study of *The Armies of the Night*, Richard Gilman credited him for having "rescued history from abstraction and aridity by approaching it with certain 'novelistic instruments' at the ready and in a certain large, general novelistic spirit."[39] Gilman suggested that Mailer's weighty presence in the proceedings, and his use of scene-by-scene construction to re-create the hour-by-hour atmosphere of the event, gave readers a clearer picture and perception of the march than the factual, multiple-testimony-based account featured in the second half of the book. Mailer achieved this by describing the body in a detail reminiscent of James Joyce in his case against abstract nationalism in *Ulysses*[40] and Walt Whitman, the self-honoured "poet of the body," in *Leaves of Grass*.[41] He

[35] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 26.
[36] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 255.
[37] Jeffords, 24. Although the argument here aligns Mailer's approach to earlier American writers, Jeffords' position –that Mailer's autobiographical technique is based on Vietnam narratives – is viable: "the personal experience is the 'documentary' of the war."
[38] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 21.
[39] Richard Gilman, *The Confusion of Realms* (New York: Random House, 1969), 87.
[40] W. J. Weatherby, *Squaring Off*: Mailer v Baldwin (London: Robson Books, 1977), 161. Weatherby associates Joyce's epic day in Dublin with Mailer's weekend in Washington.
[41] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 44.

positions his physical presence in the centre of the text to avoid abstracting his self from his writing. His literature of the body is also then a reaction against the "abstractions and aridity" of history. *The Armies of the Night* is a guide to the territory of the self, with Mailer mapping out his anatomy, sparing neither part nor detail. At a drinks party in Washington, Mailer's heart, which was "never buoyant at best now collected into a leaden little ball and sank, not to his feet but his stomach."[42] His heart, head, eyes, lips, back, chest, even urine have a role in the proceedings. He reports on headaches, hunger, thirst and perspiration.[43] He even goes so far as to confess that his "foot – simple American foot – was, of course, tapping" during the exorcism of the Pentagon ceremony.[44] As in the case of a Puritan introvert inspecting his conscience, he studies the condition of his body as if it were the first or final register of the condition of his country.

III. SONG OF SELF

Despite stressing corporeality, Mailer, as a character, is at once all-presence and enigma. His thoughts mark inroads in the story, yet his history before the march is kept at a distance. Incidents in his past are few and relayed in a random, disinterested manner. He has asked his daughter not to abuse illegal substances at university; he has been married four times; he is editing a film he has acted in and directed, later to be released as *Beyond the Law*; he needed thirteen stitches after his forehead was cut open by a police officer's club. Facts being few, a gulf opens between his past and the present. This has an important implication for characterization. "Mailer" is received by readers as a person acting his way through the proceedings, inventing various conflicting images of himself in lieu of a past. Throughout the four-day weekend, Mailer plays his "favourite persona, the novelist-in-charge-of-practically-everything, of the left as well as the authority it would like to challenge," as Alfred Kazin found in his review.[45] Even if he controls the event, he is not immersed in the "history" of the march. Drawing on the earlier definition, history is lost in the course of self-determinism: the self as a controlling agent rather than the self-determined, used, injured by an array of outside forces.[46]

[42] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 13.

[43] Martin Green, "Norman Mailer and the City of New York: Faustian Radicalism," in Braudy, *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*, 119. Green first notes the detail which Mailer goes into in describing his anatomy.

[44] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 122.

[45] Kazin, "The Trouble He's Seen," 62.

[46] Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 158. Dickstein, in reference to this book, speaks of "the self's hunger to kidnap history and become its agent."

This is the difference between the first and second books. Mailer is arrested, as evidence of self-determinism, by his own volition, as he and Lowell planned the time and place of their arrests; the women seated at the feet of MPs were not able to stop clubs piling down on their heads.

Mailer is at pains to capture a country beyond his grasp; true immersion in a phenomenon is restricted, and this applies to each of Mailer's documentary novels at the end of the decade, when the writing after the event is ever on the edge of the writer's thoughts during the event. He exists in the vacuum of the present, which is not a refuge from historical trauma or future anxiety as it has been in American society, but a sterile quarter between being and nothingness. Much of Mailer's performance and style in *The Armies of the Night* is influenced by this tenuous grasp of selfhood, which D. H. Lawrence had previously discerned in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Lawrence and the other writer of whom Mailer offers a literary defence in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), Henry Miller, ascribed divinity to the self. In *The Tropic of Capricorn*, Henry Miller wrote, "If the self were not imperishable, the 'I' I write about would have been destroyed years ago."[47] Mailer is less certain of the inviolability of the self. He believes selfhood is determined through action, the type of historical incidents referred to earlier. In *The Armies of the Night* there is, in compensation, a large amount of artifice involved in realizing "Mailer" and even his arrest at the Pentagon is staged: "It was as if the air had changed, or light had altered; he felt immediately much more alive … and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this action was taking place."[48] Jack Richardson finds this theatrical sensibility in most of his documentary novels: "his forays into the community are little more than self-lacerating experiences meant to sharpen the nuance and the tone of what he knows will finally be their literary re-enactment."[49] His participation in the March on the Pentagon is as much a literary practise as a political cause. His performance at the Ambassador Theatre on the Thursday evening parodies Whitman's "Song of Myself." As Frederick Karl argues, Mailer's ground plan for *The Armies of the Night* was "nothing less than Whitman's cry of 'I am America' or 'America is me' or 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself' as the song of America."[50] Shortly after mounting the stage, he asks his audience, "Is there a black man in the house?" Unable to see a black face among the spectators, he volunteers to represent African

[47] Henry Miller, *The Tropic of Capricorn* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005; first published 1938), 12. [48] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 129.

[49] Jack Richardson, 'The Armies of the Night' in Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer*, 28.

[50] Frederick Karl, *American Fictions* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 580.

Americans elsewhere, "Well ah'll just have to be the impromptu Black Power for tonight."[51] Although Mailer is impersonating a Brendan Behan or H. Rap Brown figure here, the association with various regional or racial groups is chiefly indebted to Whitman's identification with the downtrodden, enslaved and marginalized. If Whitman was the "hounded slave," then Mailer was prepared to take on the weight of the presidency:[52]

> Mailer thought quietly, "My God, that is probably exactly who you are at this moment, Lyndon Johnson with all his sores, sorrows, and vanity, squeezed down to five foot eight," and Mailer felt for the instant possessed, as if he had seized some of the President's secret soul.[53]

Their declarations are precise metaphors for union: Mailer's identification is theatrical, Whitman's identification is sincere, but both include everyone and everything pertinent to American affairs. Mailer, as Whitman, is a representative figure, but whereas Whitman is America, in that he does not appreciate a dividing line between self and nation, Mailer (and the civil war metaphors are evidence of this) recognizes a gulf.[54]

What Mailer enacts at the Ambassador Theatre reflects another affinity with the Beat generation writers who gained ground in restoring art to public space.[55] The union of the artist and his art is in evidence in Mailer's work (*Advertisements for Myself*) just as the Beat generation, with its practitioners' propensity to connect with audiences through improvised, spontaneous performance and public reading, received recognition on a national level. Acting his way through the weekend, he lays the foundation for his Pentagon book; every move, word, gesture is conceived for the book waiting to be written. Mailer works around another abstraction: the abstraction of the printed word from the spoken word. Intent on bridging the gap between himself and his readers, he finds a place for his body and voice at the centre of his text. His references to Robert Lowell's poetry reading in the days before the march indicate the difference in their approaches to literature. Mailer advances the cause of participation in literature, an event, a stage, a

[51] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 38.

[52] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 62.

[53] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 50.

[54] Joseph McElroy, "Neural Neighbourhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts," *Tri Quarterly*, 34 (1975), 198–218, 215. McElroy dismisses Mailer's claim to a representative position in *The Armies of the Night*: "through some freak frequency in the urine sparkling night of missed connections, Inside Norman might come to equal America."

[55] Lisa Phillips, "Beat Culture, America Revisioned," in *idem*, *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 37. Philips clarifies the extent of performance literature in Beat writing.

voice and an audience to the ritual. Lowell's poetry, as suggested in *The Armies of the Night*, sustains itself in a private setting:

> He was not a splendid reader, merely decent to his own lines, and he read from that slouch, that personification of ivy climbing a column, he was even diffident, he looked a trifle helpless under the lights. Still, he made no effort to win the audience, seduce them, dominate them, bully them, amuse them, no, they were there for him, to please him, a sounding board for the plucked string of his poetic line, and so he endeared himself to them.[56]

Lowell preserves a critical distance from his audience; Mailer, on the other hand, takes literature to a territory where author and audience meet in performance for *The Armies of the Night*, restoring the writer's language to the writer's presence. As a result, Mailer is reluctant to approach the poet's inner world during Paul Goodman's poetry reading:

> Lowell sat in a mournful hunch on the floor, his eyes peering over his glass to scrutinize the metaphysical substance of his boot, now hide? now machine? now, where the joining and to what? foot to boot, foot to earth, cease all speculation as to what was in Lowell's head.[57]

Not only is speculation over Lowell's thoughts minimized, so too is Lowell's presence, which recedes as Mailer moves into focus, and finally disappears just as the protagonist is preparing for arrest, and therefore the image of the arrest, at the Pentagon. As Frederick Karl argues, "the sense of self is so overwhelming" in *The Armies of the Night*, "that in the first and better half of this book we sense the Pentagon March would cease to exist if Mailer no longer perceived it."[58] The sidelining of Robert Lowell sustains the self-absorption and self-observation of the writer. Norman Mailer, narrator, author, observing "Mailer" participant, protagonist. Part of the appeal of *The Armies of the Night* is the novelty of a man describing himself in the third person, even if Henry Adams had used the technique in *The Education of Henry Adams*. He performs a literary miracle using the third-person technique; he can stand outside himself and look upon himself, "such egotism being two headed, thrusting itself forward better to study itself."[59] With the third-person technique, Mailer gets at the side of himself he could not know otherwise, just as he finds America itself unknowable as a great deal exists outside his field of vision, with a literary nod to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as much as to Adams's *Education*.[60] In making

[56] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 44.
[57] Ibid., 40.
[58] Karl, *American Fictions*, 99.
[59] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 54.
[60] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Bantam, 1961). Stein describes herself through the testimony of her first-person narrator. In terms of the cubist influence on the use of this technique, Mailer had also been contracted to write a biography

"Mailer" an outside agent, the writer looks upon his own face, hears his own voice and sees himself as others see him. He has reconciled "I" – Henry Thoreau reminds his readers that it is always "I" speaking in the third person[61] – and "Mailer" – the object of others' perception. He has found in doing so that elusive side of selfhood Whitman evidently had in mind when he wrote, in "Song of Myself," "That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning."[62]

IV. IMPROVISATION

Mailer's intention to define his life through participating in the March on the Pentagon is not just a personal project but one shared by his "armies." The "narcissus-mirror" motif represents the protestors' desire to recognize their lives in the reflection of the public theatre enacted before the world's photographers. Octavio Paz found the same principle at work in the clashes between students and police in Paris in May 1968: "A continuous flow between the marvellous and the everyday, the lived act as an aesthetic representation, a conjunction of action and its celebration. There was a reuniting of man with his image: mirror reflections forced in another luminous body."[63] The third-person technique suggests that self-revelation is more meaningful to Mailer than his perception of any outward phenomenon, given his sense of journeying into obscurity. His commitment to the national ideal of self-determinism is such that any stalling in progress, any regression, is regarded as a descent towards nothingness.

The style he produced for *The Armies of the Night* is an expression of this conviction. In "History as a Novel" he began to structure inordinately long sentences, even though a tendency towards Henry Miller-inspired baroque prose is traceable to his first *Esquire* articles. The sentences containing clause after clause after clause are more in keeping, however, with the spirit of the event than with any direct literary predecessor. They are improvised, spontaneous outpourings, a marriage of metaphors, formal images and adjectival pile-up. The technique is again a manifestation of Mailer's existential outlook. The sentences begin without a view to the end, with the writer choosing his own path, taking his work one step further on the basis of

---

of Pablo Picasso in the year before the March on the Pentagon, and registered the cubist painter's influence on his work when he eventually composed the biography thirty years later.

[61] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; first published 1854), 5.

[62] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 69.

[63] Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, 134.

his mood and instinct.[64] The extended sentences come to their natural conclusion when the writer has exhausted the possibilities of description in the present. The present moment is critical; craft and editorial amendment are passed over in favour of getting it right first time. In the penultimate chapter, "The Communication of Christ," Mailer tries to order his thoughts for a speech:

> So he was happy, and it occurred to him that his clean sense of himself, with a skin of compassion at such rare moments for all – yes, even for noble Commissioner Scaife and the dour U.S. Attorneys, no, not quite them, not quite, but go on – this sense of nice expectation and shining conception of his wife, and regrets for the guards, and pride in the prisoners, too much, much too much, it must come crashing soon, but still – this nice anticipation of the very next moves of life itself (and all for just an incredibly inexpensive twenty-four hours in jail) must mean, indeed could mean nothing else to Christians, but what they must signify when they spoke of Christ within them – it was not unlike the rare sweet of a clean loving tear not dropped, still held, oh he must be salient now, and deliver the best of himself to the microphones and reporters, and in respect to Boyle, pick up some of the Chaplain's language, why not?[65]

The spontaneity of his writing emerges in the alteration of a previous statement. Does he feel sympathy for the US attorneys? "Yes," but then he checks himself; he was caught up in the feeling for the other people he was describing. "But go on," he writes, as if the slip must be included to avoid loss of momentum. Mailer is forever referring back to what he already put down on the page, criticizing what he has conceived, "too much, much too much, it must come crashing soon." The sentences begin to resemble architectural feats ("still held") ready to collapse in a grammatical disorder; his incessant use of "yes" serves to cement unrelated clauses.

Mailer also puts as much of the material life of the nation onto the page as possible to prove the representative nature of his work. The romantic idea of the sublime in America plays a part in the extended sentences: the size and space of the American landscape, the endeavour of its people to contend with and replicate the natural forms with buildings of gargantuan proportions and endlessly proliferating infrastructure, encourages, in the literary field, oversized sentences and epic narratives. The sentences sprawl over the page, marking out the magnitude of the place, the space available to lay form upon: "All the healthy Marines, state troopers, professional athletes, movie stars, rednecks, sensuous life-loving Mafia, mill workers, city officials, nice

[64] Martin Green, "Norman Mailer and the City of New York: Faustian Radicalism," in Braudy, *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*, 112. Green refers to the spontaneity of Mailer's approach to *The Armies of the Night*.

[65] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 213.

healthy looking easy grafting politicians full of the light (from marijuana?) of a life they enjoy – yes, they would be for the war in Vietnam."[66] The lists of nouns, places and people's names is then a litany of the writer's favourite things, which Whitman had done in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Hemingway in his epilogue to *Death in the Afternoon* and Ginsberg in his celebration of the Beat underground in the first section of his poem "Howl." There is the earlier celebration of place and profession ("healthy marines" and "easy grafting politicians") in these invocations, just as the developing country is articulated with wonder in Whitman's epic. For Mailer, and those predecessors, a liberal use of "American" nouns is the key to successfully conveying the material life of the republic.

Mailer's style in *The Armies of the Night* also conforms to the theatrical sensibility of the generation who encouraged his most creative period of writing. As in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) he writes with the feverishness of the age he is trying to reproduce. There is continuous play on the language of the love generation, their music, slang ("child!"), pseudo-religious cosmology ("Outer Space") and intellectual avatar ("the media is the message").[67] Many of these casual references may have received a reworking had Mailer not opted to write *The Armies of the Night*, a novel-length work, in a period of eight weeks.[68] The first book ends, self referentially, with a note on "Mailer" writing the book his readers have nearly finished reading. He claims to have worked at a "rate faster then he had ever written before … as if the accelerating history of the country forbade deliberation."[69] The principle would be put to the test again in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, creating a vision of a writer, hands racing over the typewriter, trying to keep in line with the country rushing ahead on its unforeseeable course. Although Mailer's "write before the world changes" technique should not be confused with Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous prose,"[70] the beat outlook on the "creative present" is at the heart of his approach.

[66] Ibid., 34.

[67] Ibid., 33.

[68] Manso, *Norman Mailer: His Life and Times*, 463. Sandy Charlesbois Thomas reports Mailer "putting in ten, twelve, sometimes fourteen hour days" to ensure the book would be published in the months directly after the march.

[69] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 215.

[70] Ann Charters, "Introduction," in Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London: Penguin Books, 1991; first published 1957), xxvi.