Love in the Trenches: Images of Woman in Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead*

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Like Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway before him, Norman Mailer presents war as a metaphor for human existence and women as a defense against death. For each novelist, women exist not so much as human beings who love and are loved during the most savage of times, but as a means for men to cope, albeit unsuccessfully, with the prospect of annihilation. In fact, far from being redemptive, women are just another military objective for the men of *The Naked and The Dead*—one more village to take, one more arsenal to destroy. Similarly, in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms*, it is the image of the feminine, not the reality of women, that matters. In Mailer's portrait of WWII, women are little more than pawns in the men's lust for power and conquest.

Although Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* is in the tradition of war novels from Crane to Hemingway, he transforms the ways these two writers linked women with nature and sex to show in his book men's perverted impulses to power. Also unlike Crane and Hemingway, who focus on the individual facing war, Mailer's real interest is in the human movement towards totalitarianism and war as a principal expression of modern civilization. Further, in *The Naked and The Dead*, Mailer links sexuality and nature. For instance, Mailer makes much of how his characters respond to the looming presence of Mt. Anaka. Mailer has said that Mt. Anaka represents "death and man's creative urge, fate, man's desire to conquer the elements" (Rothe 410). The desire to conquer this sizable mountain relates implicitly to the men's desires for control, especially over their emotional and sexual lives. General Cummings, for one, analogizes himself to Mt. Anaka.

> There's an affinity, he told himself. If one wanted to get mystical about it, the mountain and he understood each other. Both of them, from necessity, were bleak and alone, commanding the heights. (423)

Cummings' subordinate, Sergeant Croft, feels a somewhat different connection with Anaka, a mixture of yearning and antagonism:

> Again, he felt a crude ecstacy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. (374)

This romanticizing of the landscape appears also in the work of Stephen Crane. Unlike Cummings and Croft, Crane's Henry Fleming is just a boy, not far removed from the time when he needed his mother's protection; in times of fear and trauma, he still seeks maternal comfort. So he turns to nature—Mother Nature. To compensate for his lack of sexual experience, Fleming also eroticizes nature, but in a callow yet tender way quite different from the way in which the men in *The Naked and The Dead* eroticize it. Fleming relieves his alienation from the "moving monsters" (15) of troops by lying in the grass, where he imagines nature's concern:

> The blades pressed tenderly against his cheek. The moon had been lighted and was hung in a treetop. The liquid stillness of the night enveloping him made him feel vast pity for himself. There was a caress in the soft winds. And the whole mood of the darkness, he thought,was one of sympathy for himself in his distress. (19)

The nature Fleming seeks is an adolescent fantasy—at once regressive and infantile—but at the same time sexual. For example, his retreat from battle into the forest, where he longs for "dark and intricate places" (46) is an image both of a return to the womb and

of penetration. Whether nature is a mother or a lover, Fleming sees her as sympathetic and beneficent. This view, which resonates in war novels from Crane through Mailer, is strongly embedded in the American pastoral myth. Annette Kolodny, in her study of the land and American metaphor, discusses how settlers, in their own battles to tame the land, feminized the landscape. She points to how this feminization allowed settlers to not only assuage their fears of the unknown, but to assert mastery over the land as well.

> . . . was there perhaps a need to experience the land as nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown . . . ? In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it. (*The Lay of the Land* 9)

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, when Fleming feminizes a landscape threatened by war, he imagines both a maiden requiring protection and a mother-figure offering protection. In *The Naked and The Dead*, the threat and terror of the landscape actually become enticing to Cummings and Croft; however, they see the landscape, particularly Mt. Anaka, as masculine rather than as feminine. For them, the power of nature is awesome and threatening, hardly comforting. In this respect, Mailer follows Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Although Hemingway's landscape is generally a post-Romantic one, from which all signs and meanings have fled, Frederic Henry does blame the death of his lover Catherine on an actively malevolent nature.

Mailer's Cummings and Croft, however, believe that mastery of nature is possible. Further, conquering nature (Mt. Anaka) becomes connected with sexual mastery for both Cummings and Croft, each of whom, tellingly, experiences sexual difficulties. Cummings wants to "subdue . . . [his wife], absorb her, rip her apart and consume her . . . he fights out battles with himself upon her body, and something withers in her" (415-16). Croft is married, too, but his wife sleeps with his friends—even with his brother—and taunts him about his sexual inadequacies.

But Cummings and Croft aren't alone in their self-doubts; all of the men in Mailer's novel have fears about their potency and manhood. In fact, one of the most frequently used adjectives in the novel is "impotent." These men are unable to sustain physically or emotionally satisfying relationships with women. Martinez feels that he can only be a man if he has sex with aloof, white Protestant girls; Goldstein cries in his wife's arms because of his failures in lovemaking; Wilson, the incorrigible "stud," suffers from venereal disease, a fact which terrifies him more than any battle.

The men in the novel who do praise or trust their wives and lovers often do so for spurious reasons. For instance, Minetta trusts his lover because he believes that no one can match his superior sexual abilities. Goldstein never impugns women's fidelity, but this attitude stems more from insecurity about the troubled sexual relation with his wife. When he does defend his wife's faithfulness, he says that he can trust her because she is a mother—at best, willful naiveté.

In general, Mailer's men's attitudes seem to blend chivalry and cynicism. Gallagher's attitude towards his wife, Mary, illustrates this point. Growing up, Gallagher read romances and dreamed of defending ladies in lavender gowns. When he marries, however, he is disgusted by Mary's penchant for eating potatoes while lounging around the house in a frayed slip. The picture of Mary and her potatoes is as unromanticized as the one of Henry Fleming's mother in *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Both Gallagher and Fleming deny reality as they try to fit the women in their lives into a narrative of gallantry and defense of delicate womanhood. When, for instance, Fleming decides to enlist, he goes to his mother's room to tell her. He tries to draw his mother—the only woman he knows well—into his fantasies, though she persistently, if inadvertently, deflates them. When Fleming leaves, his mother's potato peeling and concern for her son's dry feet make a less Homeric farewell than he had hoped for. Fleming had envisioned the leave-taking, imagining not only his own tender parting words, but also his mother's. She, of course, fails to follow this eloquent, imaginary script, instead fussing about the socks she has knitted him, packing his favorite blackberry jam, and cautioning him about bad company. These may be Fleming's

mother's ways of showing maternal love, but it is clearly not the farewell scenario the young soldier imagined. As a result, he sets off dissatisfied without quite knowing why and "ashamed of his purposes" (8).

Gallagher's dissatisfaction with Mary recalls not only the adolescent fantasies of Henry Fleming, but also the frustrated ambivalences of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*. Gallagher reacts to the news of Mary's death in childbirth much as Frederic Henry had reacted to such news about Catherine. Gallagher has no more paternal feelings for his child than does Henry; he feels, in fact, a "quick passage of relief" (263) when he thinks the baby has died. Mailer's Mary, like Hemingway's Catherine, has a small pelvis. After learning that Mary has died, Gallagher feels that the word *dead* "had no sense" (263) in much the same way that for Frederic Henry, Catherine's corpse has no more reality than a statue. Gallagher responds "as if he were hearing a story about someone else in which he was not very interested" (263). Gallagher's progression from idealized love of a woman to cynicism marks out the progress of most of the male characters in *The Naked and The Dead*. According to these men, women build their lives around petty concerns and are best treated as sexual machines which men should control.

For such men, women are valuable only when they feed men's fantasies about men's own greatness. Goldstein's wife tells him that he is a "finer type person," a "thinker" (486); Wyman says that "Claire really made me feel I could be something . . . a big guy" (196). Insofar as she holds up a flattering mirror to the man, a woman is useful, though she has no real importance to man in his most vital existence which, as Cummings points out, is in competition with other men:

> The average man always sees himself in relation to other men as either inferior or superior. Women play no part in it. They're an index, a yardstick among other gauges, by which to measure superiority. (245)

A telling depiction of woman as useful object occurs at the end of *The Naked and The Dead* when Major Dalleson, who has

blundered his way to victory, decides to use a pin-up of Betty Grable superimposed over charts to interest the soldiers in their map-reading class.

Because they feel that relationships with women are so difficult, the men of *The Naked and The Dead* eroticize other aspects of their experience just as Henry Fleming eroticized war and feminized nature. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, though, Fleming sexualized war because he was a youth without any real sexual experience. The prospect of war is the first event to powerfully stir his passions. When Fleming first hears the church bells tolling news of an important battle, he is lying in bed; he "shiver[s] in a prolonged ecstacy of excitement" (6). These feelings, so intensely sexualized, strengthen his resolve to enlist. But actual war brings Fleming no sexual gratification, only horror from which he flees to nature, which he anthropomorphizes into changing figures of comfort, beauty, and power—"a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (46), "a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him, . . . a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called to him with the voice of his hopes" (108).

Cummings, of course, *is* sexually experienced, and unlike Fleming, *is* sexually gratified by war. In his journal, Cummings writes about the projectile of a missile, comparing it to the Spenglerian curve all cultures follow, the graph of tragic action, and to the curve of a woman's breast. Cummings also analogizes the missile blast to orgasm as he describes the "phallus-shell that rides through a shining vagina of steel, soars through the sky, and then ignites into the earth" (568). War becomes Cummings' surrogate for sex, in that he believes that "there was a naked quivering heart to it which involved you deeply when you were thrust into it" (566).

Cummings' varied sexual images and Fleming's shifting images of the feminine reflect a search for psychological wholeness and satisfaction. These shifting images have a psychological validity since desire, as Freud noted, is not tied to a particular object, but rather is an attempt to recover satisfactions first provided by family relationships. It is the revival of a memory, the original satisfaction of which is irrecoverable. Desire is thus mobile, ever-seeking new images of the original desire. For Henry Fleming, nature is the

perfect repository of different images; scenic changes and even the same landscape viewed under varying conditions may suggest new aspects of nature. So, though Fleming is temporarily disenchanted by nature, he can return to it later "with a lover's thirst, to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks; an existence of soft and eternal peace" (135). These images also suggest that he has not separated his ego from his maternal substitute and achieved full autonomy, which would allow him to form a mature, sexual love. His attempts to return to nature for solace suggest that Fleming is trapped in an unconscious womb-like state in which no distinction is made between the self and the world. Although he may be physically separated from his biological mother, Fleming's inability to reject the pathetic fallacy in nature, his mother surrogate, demonstrates his persisting adolescence.

Something similar holds true for Cummings, although he doesn't seek maternal solace from nature. He wishes to dominate nature. Andrew Gordon, in his psychoanalytic study of Mailer's work, believes that the real enemy in *The Naked and the Dead* is the "introjected image of the mother" and that the internal conflict is never resolved (68). In Cummings' "Time Machine" section, for instance, we learn that as a boy he liked to sew. His father accuses Cummings' mother of making the child a sissy and slaps her, even though she says that she never prompted the boy to sew. She does, though, sneak Cummings out into the countryside to paint, warning him not to tell his father. The boy does tell his father, though, for although he fears his father, he also admires his strength and despises his mother's weakness. Cummings' father decides that only military school will make a man out of the child. This notion succeeds all too well in turning Cummings into a brute, his father's definition of manhood.

If the soldiers, like Cummings, hate the feminine part of their nature, it is not surprising then that homophobia governs many of their relationships. For example, the incident in which Lieutenant Hearn defiantly crushes a cigarette butt into the floor of Cummings' fastidiously clean quarters weaves motifs of homosexuality, anality, and hatred of the feminine to illustrate power relationships. The habitually meticulous Cummings

glances around his tent one day and realizes something is wrong, but before he can pinpoint what it is, he has a "feeling of inordinate anxiety"(317). Then he spots the problem. "On the middle of his floor was the match and the cigarette butt, mashed into the duckboards in a tangled ugly excrement of black ash, soiled paper, and brown tobacco" (317). Discovering a note from Hearn, Cummings determines it is Hearn who has deliberately soiled his tent. Symbolically sodomized, Cummings reacts not only with rage, but also with a loss of physical control when he suffers from loose bowels. Such humiliation brought about by a subordinate pains and sickens Cummings but, more importantly, makes him afraid. To master his feelings of weakness and to reassert his manhood, he re-enacts the mashed cigarette scene later with Hearn. But this time, Hearn is the one who will be shamed. Cummings throws down his cigarette and tells Hearn to pick it up. The lieutenant does so, but feels violated. He returns to his tent, and "for almost an hour he lay face down on his cot, burning with shame and self-disgust and an impossible impotent anger" (326). The prone position of course suggests sodomy. Motifs of homosexuality which point back to *A Farewell to Arms* and Frederic Henry's fear of emasculation, relate to Mailer's characters' fears about their masculinity and to their feelings of conflict about women.

Certainly in both Hemingway's and Mailer's works, the men fear being overwhelmed by women, whether that threat comes in the form of actual women or from the feminine side of their masculine selves. Nancy Chodorow and other psychologists, who have examined the fluid boundaries of women's egos and the effect of that fluidity on relationships, suggest that for women, identities flow and merge with others. Men, with their sense of highly contained and autonomous egos, may perceive these movements as intrusive or even threatening to their sense of self. Catherine and Frederic Henry's differing reactions to their Alpine isolation in *A Farewell to Arms* illustrate how a woman's sense of boundaries can threaten a man's. While Catherine rhapsodizes about their togetherness, Frederic withdraws, responding tersely and defensively to her as he tries to maintain his independent ego and

avoid merging with the feminine. It's little wonder that when Catherine dies, Frederic's grief is tinged with ambivalence.

The feminine is not so tidily eliminated in *The Naked and The Dead*, however. Because its power to overwhelm an inchoate self is so strong, the desire to quash the perceived weakness of the other—the feminine or homosexual in oneself—grows as well, turning into sadism. It is an old psychological saw that the impulse to crush the weak is driven by a child's original desire to master the world, or a specific person, usually the mother. Or as Cummings puts it:

> When we come kicking into the world, we are God, the universe is the limit of our senses. And when we get older, when we discover that the universe is not us, it's the deepest trauma of our existence. (323)

According to Freud, the first type of sadism is a nonsexual will to power. When children realize that their desire for mastery, especially over their mothers, is threatened by the revenge of their fathers, they turn to masochism which is simultaneously an expression of the desire for mastery and a defense against their fathers' vengeance. Freud observed that sadism and masochism are hardly distinguishable in adults. In *The Naked and The Dead*, the impulses toward sadism and masochism are related to the Oedipal conflict which governs the men. Clearly, their desire to master their mothers is generalized to other aspects of their life, especially towards women. Whether they understand the impulse or not, all the male characters feel it. Hearn, for example, incisively and articulately says he cast off women because "deep within him he needed control and not mating" (580), while Wilson, with characteristic dimwitted gusto, says: "Jus' get 'em afraid, that's the only way a woman understands" (374).

Because Mailer is dramatizing the origins of men's sadism towards women, he explores the Oedipal conflict, a subject which neither Crane's nor Hemingway's treatment of women required. Cummings' willful pride, intimidation of others, and desire for total mastery make him the classic anal-sadistic personality. For some of the men, he is also a quintessential father figure. Although

Hearn detests Cummings' fascism and observes their similarities with horror, he is also attracted to his commander and acknowledges his "Father dependence" (74).

Mailer's characters' lingering Oedipal conflicts which lead to their sadism and misogyny are exemplified, not surprisingly, by the landscape.

> In the early drab gray twilight it [Mt. Anaka] looked like an immense old gray elephant erecting himself. . . . The mountain seemed wise and powerful, and terrifying in its size. (447)

The term *erecting* and the metaphorical use of a huge frightening animal reminds of Freud's case study of little Hans and his fear of horses as an Oedipal manifestation. Certainly the mountain inspires Oedipal feelings in Croft. He feels compelled to climb the mountain, but is also tormented by unbearable fear and anxiety. When the climb is thwarted by a nest of hornets, Croft is both relieved and frustrated because he "had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself. Of himself and much more. Of life. Everything" (709). In short, Croft finds no successful resolution of the conflict. Nor do any of the characters in Mailer's novel resolve the problem. Like Henry Fleming and Frederic Henry, these men's internal battles continue.

In his war story, Mailer, like Crane and Hemingway, finds the image of woman commanding his soldiers' minds. While war rages around these men, a greater struggle takes place within their own spirits. They may try to transmogrify, idealize, villify, or dominate women in order to achieve emotional independence. But what they seek cannot be found by turning women into symbols, whether positive or negative ones. A better refuge would be to end psychic warfare and to forge relationships with women whose love cannot stay death, but which offers a basis for peace. □

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