CHAPTER III

NORMAN MAILER PRESENTS MAN AS "BEAST"
AND "SEEER" IN THE NAKED AND THE DEAD
Norman Mailer presents man as "beast" and "seer" in The Naked and the Dead

Mailer's first novel, The Naked and the Dead, depicts the disintegration of American society, the resurgence of fascism and the bankruptcy of conventional liberal political solutions. Mailer's description of social reality is comparable to that of Steinbeck, Dos Passos and Farrell who saw American society as highly stratified. This image of America as a super power with a fascist body politic is deftly integrated in the novels naturalistic world in which the individual falls a prey to forces he can neither comprehend nor control.

The Naked and the Dead as a thesis novel exposes in its biopsy of American society's various malignancies -- monopoly, capitalism, racial bigotry, social injustice and insecurity, poverty, religious fanaticism and a plethora of sexual disorders by using the army as microcosm of American society. Most of the fighting men have already been twisted and stunted by the disintegrative and totalitarian forces at work in their world. It is difficult to categorise Mailer in any set of school of thinking. He has elements...
of Marxism, Freudism and the predominant strain in his world view is towards the culture of harmony and development in a world distraught with violence, greed, lust for money, power and sex. Because of its philosophical and moral implications the theme central to the novel is the beast-seer conflict which is examined in the following pages.

Norman Mailer's war novel *The Naked and the Dead* like the other four novels presents the spiritual, and cultural sickness in the contemporary American society. Mailer launches his crusade against the sickness by relating it to totalitarianism. The two major themes that loom large in all of Mailer's fiction are the social ills and the plight of the individual in the contemporary society. It is argued, for Mailer, all social ills are bred by forces of totalitarianism or its mutants which also crush the individual into conformism and stagnation. Mailer's ethic is a compound of courage and commitment to growth.

Each novel contains these two elements: totalitarianism and the lack of courage in the individual in varying proportions. Mailer says in his *The Presidential Papers* that totalitarianism is better understood if regarded as a plague
rather than examined as a style of ideology. He distinguishes it from its older form fascism which was treated as synonymous with dictatorship. It was characterised by its "syndrome of oppression" inflicted upon the people by a governmental authority which was not only inhuman, but invariably antagonistic to the history of the American nation's immediate past. The plague of totalitarianism as it is found in America is as different from classical fascism as is a plastic bomb from a hand grenade. In other words, it has no identifiable nature, no purposeful and controlled action, no direction and no sense of discrimination.

Mailer dramatises in his first novel The Naked and the Dead (1948), his belief that world war II has been a try out of American fascism underway. He regards fascism as a variation of totalitarianism which General Cummings represents in the novel. His hope that America is going to absorb that dream, never once wavers. He even asserts that it is in the business of doing it now. His name is suggestive, in the sense, that he heralds the "comings to America of the horror of totalitarianism. Mailer shows that "liberalism" represented by Hearn, is ineffectual, though it is the only counterforce, to stem the tide of
totalitarianism. It is expressed through the death of Hearn. Hearn's ambivalent attitude toward the General, oscillating between repulsion and attraction, is half-baked liberalism.

Norman Mailer calls himself an "anarchist* when he wrote *The Naked and the Dead*. During the Wallace campaign he belonged to the Progressive Party, but broke off with it at the time of Waldorf Peace Conference in 1949. During his editorship of *Dissent* he was a "libertarian socialist." In 1955, Mailer, "a Marxian Anarchist* sums up how his social ken has changed since 1948 thus:

"I suppose part of the change in my social ken is that politics as politics interest me less today than politics as part of everything else in life." All these years he has been an unaligned radical.

Mailer's eschatological vision, by and large, is Manichean. In the savage, godless world of *The Naked and the Dead*, God becomes a mocking malignant presence to the dehumanised man. The G.I.'s are shown as terrified by a supernatural awareness of something watching over their shoulder and laughing. Polack's dismissal of God, "he sure is a son of a bitch* is contemptuous. These responses
of a mysterious fear and that of a disdainful negation arise from seeing God as a malignant force. Cummings tells Hearne:

"If God exists, he is just like me."¹

No wonder, Cummings, the prophet of fascism, assumes the evil godhead.

Mailer's views on God undergo a shift in The Deer Park where he is associated with love, with the creative processes of life. Towards the end of the novel, Sergius asks God in a mystical moment if sex is where philosophy begins. Mailer's God gives him the enigmatic advice:

"Rather think of Sex as Time, and Time as the connection of new circuits."

This speaks of the shift in Mailer's treatment of God from a malefic to a benevolent force. Donald Kaufmann has rightly observed that "Mailer's search for a "new circuit" between Sex and Time also settles on a mode of morality that fits modern times."²

Mailer's existential theology is in fact the base for this morality.
The idea of God as a "Warring element in a divided universe" obviously pitted against the devil and of man as "the most important part of his expression" lends drama to human existence. It is also reassuring probably flattering to man to estimate himself as a decisive element in the eternal conflict between God and the Devil, between good and evil. Man is no longer a hopeless helpless victim in a world of fortuitous events. He has a hand in the micro-cosmic struggle of which he himself is the battleground; he is free to align himself either with God or with the Devil. Mailer thus concedes the individual freedom of will. One of the knotty problems of the philosophy is that evil and Mailer tries to solve it by stripping God of omnipotence. He says,

"If one considers the hypothesis that God is not all powerful, indeed not the architect of destiny, but rather, the creator of Nature, then evil becomes a record of the Devil's victories over God."  

In such a conception man becomes the architect of his own destiny; he is free to grow or perish. The Devil is as real as God, and probably as powerful but certainly more subtle.

Violence like sex is a prominent theme in Mailer's
work. The war situation in The Naked and the Dead is the justification for the massive violence in the novel. Mailer condemns indiscriminate and senseless violence. He says, "The ideal I had about violence has changed 180 degrees over those years. Beneath the ideology in The Naked and the Dead was an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people. Ideologically, intellectually, I did disapprove of violence though I did not at the time of The White Negro."

The Naked and the Dead is a thesis novel executed artistically by a radical imagination. Mailer writes about The Naked and the Dead, "People say it is a novel without a hope. Actually it offers a good deal of hope. I intended it to be a parable about the movement of man through history. I tried to explore the outrageous proportions of cause and effect, of effort and recompense, in a sick society. The novel finds man corrupted and confused to the point of hopelessness, but it also finds that there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed, and it finds that even in his corruption and sickness there are yearnings for a better world."

The Naked and the Dead is not a mere war novel but a moral fable and an ironic comment on the human predicament
and a warning against a worse fate in store for man, namely totalitarianism.

The biographies, "Time Machine" sections are evidence to Mailer's argument that The Naked and the Dead is a thesis novel. They support Mailer's statement about the spiritual sickness of his characters. They read like pathological case studies - none of them gives a healthy report—because they must prove Mailer's thesis. Whether it is Cummings' sadism or the cruelty of Croft or Martinez's struggle for identity the "Time Machine" accounts provide the reader an understanding of the forces behind their making. They further present in the words of a recent critic, "A picture of America that suggests Mailer's later preoccupation with the decay of urban area, the homogenisation of American life and racist attitude among various ethnic groups."  

Mailer shows through them the inexorability of the past. The individual has little chance of evading or transcending the influences of forces operating in the past. Man is shown as caught in a web of oppression. Time Machine is an example of social determinism. The "Chorus" sections reflect Mailer's early Marxist view that the sickness and brutalisation of life in America stems from the authoritarianism
and exploitation that grew out of the nature of material conditions, especially the economic reality.

Mailer's social vision in The Naked and the Dead is profoundly influenced by naturalism, the prevailing point of view of the American masters of the 1930's Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Farrell and Hemingway. In the naturalistic world, the individual is a prey to certain forces which he can neither control nor comprehend. This perspective informs Mailer's image of America as a corporate power, the body politic of which has a fascist functioning. The pattern of relationships in the book suggests an implicit conspiracy between the fascist minded General Cummings with his faith in rationality and power morality, and the murderously irrational Sergeant Croft, with his passion for violence and defiance of the power of nature. Together they symbolise the death dealing power of the encroaching forces of totalitarianism, which Mailer fears, are at work in American society.

The novel's dramatis personae represent a cross section of American society, geographically, ethnically and culturally. He "explains" their behaviour in the war situation as well as their mental make up by referring to the social determinants at home. Economic determinism makes him a radical thinker although of an indeterminate sort.
The General propounds that "love," "religion" or "spirituality" have no relevance to man's deepest urge to omnipotence.

"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 experience" (p. 258). In his wonted manner, he twists the famous Darwinian Principle of survival to one of survival of the fittest to wield power. Mailer shows graphically that in such a dispensation, the fittest few enjoy all power, condemning the rest to perpetual frustration, bitterness and servility. The fallacy of the General's thesis lies in its total neglect of man who is endowed with rational powers of discrimination and freedom of will. He assumes that man is not manifestly equal or capable of independent rational action. He projects his own ambitions and drives on to all men and creates a God in his own image as Hearn is not slow to discover. Son of a prosperous businessman, he is the image of the "boss," the "businessman" and the "capitalist" who were the prime target of attack by the protest writers in American literary and cultural history during the thirties.
Sgt Croft is another Nietzschean megalomaniac, a vulgar version of Cummings in the novel, morally and spiritually as dead. A grim product of life denying totalitarian society, he hungers for power with an elemental murderous intensity. Made of iron he is a ruthless lover of combat for the sheer excitement it offers him, which is not unlike sexual gratification. Mailer stresses his loss of human values in two acts: his killing of the captive Japanese soldier after engaging him in a cruel frolic for a while and in crushing the mimed bird in his fist.

Croft receives intimations of ecstasy, excitement, awe and fear from Mt. Anaka. As seen through his field glasses, “The mountain looked like a rocky coast and the murky sky seemed to be an ocean shattering its foam upon the shore. The movement of the clouds across the peak seemed like mist spray .... the image became more and more intense, holding Croft in absorption. The mountain and the cloud and the sky were purer more intense in their solid silent struggle than any ocean and any shore he had even seen. The rocks gathered themselves in the darkness, huddled together against the fury of the water. The contest seemed an infinite distance away and he felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought that by the following night they might
be on the peak. Again he felt a crude ecstasy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere.

Croft sees a contest going on between the sea and the mountain — "a titanic struggle." This signifies the antagonism between the Devil and God, evil and goodness, caught in an eternal dialectic.

The contention every social novel should necessarily demarcate its villains from its heroes is a fallacy. The Naked and the Dead does not present its beasts and seers in obvious counterpoint. The novel paints man as both "beast and "seer;" individual men differ in their beastly and seerlike qualities. Such a concept of man has no relation, whatsoever to the social purpose of the novel. Mailer has himself revealed with utmost candour the theme, apart from underlying the symbolic value of the novel. The epigraph to part III, an excerpt from Nietzsche, is illuminating.

"Even the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom. But do I bid you to become phantom or Plant? (p.337)

No man is entirely either "plant" or "phantom", but an admixture of both, a hybrid." Either plant or phantom predomi-
nates over the other causing "disharmony." No man is all body or all soul. The ideal for man is therefore to achieve a harmony between the physical and spiritual in which even the wisest of us have failed.

Interpreted in this light every character in the novel has the "beast" and the "seer" in him, locked in conflict. It is not as if men, some "beast" and some "seer" were arraigned against each other. It is within man that the physical and the spiritual are pitted against each other. This, we believe, is the beginning of Mailer's Manichean Vision. Mailer uses profuse animal imagery to describe the condition of the G.I.'s. War has metamorphically stripped them of civilization and will to assert their humanity. Their bestiality is indeed the outcome of their prolonged conditioning to wartime behaviour by their warlords. The reference at the opening of the novel to Pavlov's experiments with dogs points to another fact about war, man is no longer afraid of becoming an animal, on the other hand, he is more fearful of becoming a man. The atavism of the officers, unlike that of the men, is somewhat refined in their hierarchy of bestiality. Lt. Hearn reviews his relationship with Gen. Cummings in terms of the subordinate's attitude toward his superior.
"He had been the pet, the dog, to the master, coddled and curried, thrown sweetmeats until he had the presumption to bite the master once. And since then we had been tormented with the particular absorbed sadism that most men could generate only toward an animal." (p.313)

Of all the animal imagery like "pigs" "insects," "salmon" "sardines" and "rodents", which Mailer uses, the most impressive is that of ants wrestling and tugging at a handful of bread crumbs in a field of grass, (p.313) because it conveys vividly the pathetic and helpless condition of the men who labour in vain for a cause they have no idea of. These men are shown as having already been "deprived, twisted or stunted by the disintegrative and totalitarian forces and counterforces at work in their world. They are the products of the society of exploitation, repression and perversion, the destroyer of the ideals, moulder of the army, and originator of that totalitarian instinct which hungers for power and control without restraint or responsibility.

All of them with the possible exception of Hearn, have been brought up in abject squalor and have suffered through the Depression. But, their dream of success keeps them yearn for a better world. Martinez, the Mexican-American,
was obsessed with air craft building - "when I am big I build fly planes." Gallagher believes that "A man can get ahead .... I'd see things, and I'd know I was going to be something big." Wyman is confident that "Clair really made me feel I could be something .... I just knew I was gonna be a big guy someday." Goldstein thinks that "a man has to strike out for himself if he wants to get ahead."

Nevertheless the men never realise their dreams. This is the helpless condition which Mailer admits the novel finds man in.

Gallagher as the title of his flashback— "The Revolutionary Reversed" suggests, is shown as a victim of corrupt society founded on class prejudice. He is denied even normal social feelings, but manipulated by petty political bosses who have poisoned him with feelings of antisemitism, anti communism and eventually self hatred. But, he is at heart an idealist and a lover of chivalry, inspired by Arthurian romances. What is noble and good in him has been warped by his repressive society. Martinez's brutalisation and cupidity, as when he steals the gold in the teeth of a skull, camouflage his patriotism and uncommon alertness as a scout.
The excruciating ordeal of the soldiers on the hostile terrain of Anoophei is shown as less paralysing than the insidious social and economic hurdles. Martines became a counterman in despair only after realising that he could not be an aviator because of his race and poverty. Goldstein dreamed in vain of going to college while Roth could not get a job for two years, even though he had graduated from college. Red Valsen is convinced that "nobody gets what he wants", and that man in the patrol always gets "the shitty end of the stick." Ridges who lived on a farm before the war broods over his utter helplessness before nature that would destroy all his work in one single night. "No matter what he tried, no matter how hard he worked; Gallagher seemed always to be caught" (p.140).

Cummings's power morality, and his indefatigable commitment to it against all odds, is the heroic element in his character. His political vision is revealed; "your men of power in America, I can tell you, are becoming conscious of their real aims for the first time in our history. Watch. After the war our foreign policy is going to be far more naked, far less hypocritical than it had ever been; we are no longer going to cover our eyes with our left hand while our right is extending an imperialistic paw." (p.254)
He further sees that by a "process of osmosis, America is going to absorb that dream; it's in the business of doing it now." (254) His dream is the German dream of Fascism. The beast in the General very often raises its head; it becomes effectively venomous when he sends his aide Lt. Hearn, to his death because he has flouted his authority though feebly, by emitting what the General calls, "little surges of resistance."

Croft is a satanic hero with cunning and cruelty as his forte. Mailer holds admiration for him. But he finally humbles Croft to demonstrate the viability of power moralists to manipulate history in opposition to mass will. Mailer shows in the failure of Croft the intrinsic weakness of authoritarianism. He lies the "hope" to which he has alluded. This interpretation is further strengthened by Cummings's failure to destroy the Toyaku Line. His extraordinary powers of military strategy and sophistication in tactical planning for any complex organisation is shown to be utterly irrelevant to the outcome of the campaign. The climactic crackdown on the almost defenceless Japanese occurs in his absence, when he is always pleading with Washington for a superfluous naval support. It is the bungling of the blundering Dalleson who brings the Americans victory having occupied an abandoned
Japanese Bivouac. Dalleson wants to consolidate the position and orders, in a state of extreme confusion, a full scale offensive which, by accident, destroys the hidden Japanese headquarters, the Toyaku Line. The General's contribution to the campaign consists in the mopping up operations, namely, indiscriminate massacre of the Japanese soldiers who have already been reduced to spectral existence by prolonged attrition and starvation.

Hearn's death has aroused much critical speculation about Mailer's intention. It can be understood as Mailer's rejection of liberalism. Aldridge says that it is Hearn's own lack of integrity that "works out his doom and that is death and Dalleson's victory only serve to weaken the structure of the protest on which the point of the novel, to be effective, must rest." 7

It can be argued that Mailer is pointing out the helplessness of half hearted humanism and liberalism in their confrontation with fascism.

Hearn fails to refute the obnoxious theories of the General; nor does he offer any emphatic resistance except giving vent to his disapproval and hatred in sporadic spurts
of anger. His lack of courage and incapacity for effective action, the two deadly sins in Mailer, disqualify him from Grace. The moment he picks up the General's cigarette butt, on pain of a court martial and a five year prison sentence, he stands lost. He becomes aware of his downfall. The Time Machine has already suggested that his study of Marx and Lenin has turned him into a dubious communist. He is described as a "bourgeois idealist" who has no convictions, nor has he ever suffered "economic iniquities" to protest against capitalistic exploitation. By making him fall a prey to the treachery of Croft, Mailer underlines the depravity of totalitarianism. Hearn himself realises before death how disturbingly accurate is the analysis on which the ideas of the General are based and how strong the American potential for fascism actually is. His death, therefore, does not signify the defeat of good at the hands of the evil. In fact, no one wins in this war. Both Cummings and Croft, demonic heroes, are humbled. The Naked and the Dead as a thesis novel attacking the sickness and corruption of American society in general and of the army in particular concedes a small measure of importance to its "bad" characters at the expense of the "good." This indulgence is no glorification of evil; nor does it deflect its warning against the imminent dangers of fascism.
John Aldridge is not happy with the novel’s conclusion for not generating the radical “protest” it is expected to.

The conflict is apparently unresolved, because all the four characters the “good” and the “bad” alike, are balked and beaten in the end. The Naked and the Dead draws no distinction between the heroes and villains because it is already pointed out no man is either “good” or “bad,” a complete “seer” or a “beast.” Critics have argued that either Cummings or Hearn, Croft or Valsen (all members of the novel’s two feuds) is hero. As to the protest in the novel, we think, it is not just limited to a condemnation of the American social structure, but extended to the human predicament. Mailer presents a world in which man is corrupted and confused to the point of helplessness. An unjust exploitative society, shaped by the nascent totalitarian forces has debased man and stripped his world of all hope.

The conclusion of the novel has ominous portents. The picture of Dalleson studying with obvious relish his military innovation—a teaching device which consists of a pin up of Betty Grable—signifies the rise of the bureaucrat accelerating the process of totalitarian take over of America and the world thereafter. In moral terms, this implies the reversion of man to beast.
REFERENCES


4. Mailer, p. 149.

