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Ivan DIMITROV
St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

EXISTENTIAL AWARENESS IN NORMAN MAILER'S *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*

Abstract: *There are episodes in Norman Mailer's novel The Naked and the Dead that seemingly contradict its realistic genre when ordinary soldiers experience moments of mystical awareness and knowledge about everything and everyone. Admittedly, these moments are fleeting. Yet, studying these flashes of insight inevitably leads to the conclusion that the young author of mere 25 years packed a lot more in his magnum opus than mere realistic representation of war. The brief epiphanies described in the novel place it among the ranks of the long tradition of transcendental thought in American letters starting back in the 19th century with Emerson and Thoreau.*

Keywords: *existential, mystical, transcendental, awareness*

The Naked and the Dead is by far Norman Mailer's *magnum opus* and one of the greatest novels about World War II. At first glance, the title of the novel refers to the hapless victims of the war. However, in his insightful essay *Norman Mailer and the Cutting Edge of Style/The Naked and the Dead*, Frank McConnell lays out an alternative, metaphorical interpretation of the author's meaning behind the title of the book where the crucial word is 'and', denoting not "identity, but rather an opposition between the two key terms" (McConnell). He argues convincingly that "to be naked, then, is to be at once terribly frightened, exalted, and intimate with one's own most intensely conscious self". And alternatively, the 'dead' characters in the novel are those who "never to have had such a moment, never to have watched the intricate style of your assurances crumble around you and then be forced to recognize what, amid the rubble of that fallen temple of normality, there is to assist in the construction of a new and stronger selfhood" (McConnell). In this article, I expand on McConnell's thesis and identify some of the moments of surrender of the urge to control, coinciding with an almost metaphysical experience of subsuming one's self into a larger identity and awareness.

There are several moments of spiritual/psychological surrender in the novel when defenses are overwhelmed by the incremental effect of circumstances and the soldiers get a momentary epiphany of transcendence of their limited self. The first one of these episodes takes place at the beginning of the novel when Red looks down from the ship's railing:

He drooped his body over the railing, and looked down at the water. Despite the lethargy of the ship, the wake burbled rapidly. The moon had passed behind a cloud, and the water looked dark and malevolent. Terribly deep. There seemed an aureole about the ship which extended fifty yards from the side, but beyond that was only blackness, so vast, so dense, that he could no longer determine the ridge line of Anopopei. The water churned past in a thick grey foam, swirling and shuddering along the waves the ship formed in its passage. After a time, Red had that feeling of sad compassion in which one seems to understand everything, all that men want and fail to get. For the first time in many years he thought of coming back from the mines […] *entering his house* […] *and in all the years that had passed, he had never remembered it except in bitterness. And yet now, looking at the water he could have some compassion for once, could understand his mother and the brothers and sisters he had almost forgotten. He understood many things, remembered sad incidents, ugly incidents… It was a type of understanding which could have come to him only at this moment, culled from all his experience, the enforced restlessness of two weeks on shipboard, and the mood of this night as they moved toward the invasion beaches.* (Mailer 1998: 13 – 14)

This moment of understanding and compassion towards both his family members and strangers is short-lived and "lasted for only a few minutes" (Mailer 1998: 14). Yet, the striking intimacy and mysticism of the scene puts it in stark contrast against the military theme of the novel, which, however, does not provide any further explanation of the psychological dynamics of this cathartic experience of one common enlisted man, who, finding himself briefly alone on the deck of a landing ship at night while gazing at the black void of the churning ocean, suddenly becomes everyone, subsuming his self into a collective consciousness, transcending his limited subjective self and expands to encompass in a loving, unconditional embrace everyone he has ever met. The transformation he undergoes is very similar to what spiritual traditions provide as an account of God's unconditional love and understanding. Intriguingly, people who have had NDE (near death experience) also describe God's unconditional love and the lack of judgment. In an ironic twist, however, Red realizes that his insight into the nature of it all cannot last and that he, after all, is not God:

He understood it all, knew he could not do nothing about it any longer, and was not even tempted. What was the use? He sighed and the acuteness of his mood slipped out with his breath. There were some things you could never fix. It was too mixed up. (Mailer 1998: 14)

Another moment of letting go in the novel is precipitated by an epic storm which blows away the tent where the soldiers are taking shelter:

A tremendous gust of wind bellied under the tent, blew it out like a balloon, and then the ridgepole snapped, tearing a rent in the poncho. The tent fell upon the four men like a wet sheet, and they struggled stupidly under it for a

few seconds before the wind began to strip it away. Wyman got the giggles and began to feel around helplessly. He lost his balance and sat down in the mud, struggling feebly under the folds of the tent. "Jesus", he laughed. He felt as if caught in a sack and subsided into a helpless laughter. Too weak to punch my way out of a paper bag, he said to himself, and this made everything seem even more ludicrous. (Mailer 1998: 99)

Apparently, Wyman is one of the 'naked' characters in the novel because he is capable of seeing the hilarious aspect of being helpless in the face of the elements. After doing their best to keep the tent down, the four men are defeated and drenched to the bones by the walls of rain. Wyman, realizing the futility of struggling against a superior adversary, collapses in cathartic laughter. Paradoxically, in the laughing clutches of defeat, Wyman scores a victory. He accepts his human frailty and limitations, letting go of the urge to control. The next example of transcending the clamoring of the ego is when Brown is carrying the wounded Wilson. The helpless state of Wilson triggers a wave of compassion in Brown:

Something in the limitless darkness of the night, the tenuous protection of the grove, and self-absorbed suffering of the wounded man beside him had combined to leave him naked, alone, a raw nerve responding to every wind and murmur that filtered into the wood from the bare, gloomy hills in the blackness about them.

"Just take it easy, boy", he whispered.

All the lost things, the passions and ambitions of his childhood, the hopes that had curdled and turned to bile, swashed through him. Wilson's talk of his child, loosed an old desire in Brown; for perhaps the first time since he had been married, he wished he was a father, and the tenderness he felt for Wilson had little to do with the amused condescension with which he usually considered him; Wilson was not wholly real to him at this moment. He existed in this brief duration of Brown's mood as the body, the flesh, of Brown's longings. He was Brown's child, but he was also a concretion of all of Brown's miseries and disappointments. For a few minutes he was more vital to Brown than any other man or woman had ever been.

Only it could not last. (Mailer 1998: 537)

Wilson's helplessness triggers emotional response as well in the other soldiers who are carrying his stretcher through the jungle. In fact, carrying Wilson is one of the most transcendent episodes in the novel. The four soldiers are exhausted physically and psychologically to a point where they can barely walk and every step is a sublime effort on a par with Sisyphus's toil pushing the boulder up the mountain. And just like Sisyphus, all their efforts come to no avail when they lose the body of the already dead Wilson, which is carried away by the strong current of a river. After investing so much, both physically and emotionally, in carrying Wilson for days in the hope of saving his life, the sheer fact of him disappearing in the current of the river unleashes a stream of consciousness of metaphysical anger in Ridges:

It was the first time he had cursed since childhood […] *leaving behind a vacuum of anger and bitterness. Wilson would not have his burial now, but somehow that was not important now. What counted was that he had carried this burden through such distances of space and time, and it had washed away in the end. All his life he had labored without repayment; his grandfather and his father and he had struggled with bleak crops and unending poverty. What had their work come to? "What profit hath man of all his labor wherein he labored under the sun?" The line came back to him. It was part of the Bible he had always hated. Ridges felt the beginning of a deep and unending bitterness. It was not fair. The one time they had got a decent crop it had been ruined by a wild rainstorm. God's way. He hated it suddenly. What kind of God could there be who always tricked you in the end?* (Mailer 1998: 681)

The loss of Wilson opens up a similar stream of consciousness in Goldstein, who being a Jew, deliberates on the endless and apparently meaningless suffering of his people throughout history. The physical exertion of carrying Wilson sets off in Goldstein a mystical line of speculation where Wilson becomes the symbolic heart and takes on a larger than life meaning. The loss of the heart is a crushing blow to Goldstein and he lapses into a bout of metaphysical despair very similar to that of Ridges:

But the heart could be killed and the body still live. All the suffering of the Jews came to nothing. No sacrifices were paid, no lessons were learned. It was all thrown away, all statistics in the cruel wastes of history. All the ghettos, all the soul cripplings, all the sacrifices and pogroms, the gas chambers, lime kilns- all of it touched no one, all of it was lost. It was carried and carried and carried, and when it finally grew too heavy it was dropped. That was all there was to it. He was beyond tears. He stood beside Ridges with the stricken sensation of a man who discovers that someone he loves has died. There was nothing in him at the moment, nothing but a vague anger, a deep resentment, and the origins of a vast hopelessness. (Mailer 1998: 682)

By now, we can already discern a distinctive pattern of how the author pits his characters against trials and tribulations, slowly undermining the props of the self and when the critical amount of suffering and humiliation is reached, the edifice collapses and the self is naked and vulnerable, but also receptive to new vistas of intuitive wisdom. It is worth mentioning that the words 'humiliation' and 'humility' have the same root 'humus', which means earth, soil. By crushing the ego, humiliation transforms the self into a new, more malleable and less rigid identity. This is exactly the transformative path that Mailer sets for another of his characters, Roth. Exhausted from the strain of climbing the mountain, Roth collapses to the ground unable to move, upon which Gallagher calls him "Jew bastard":

The blow, the word itself, stirred him like an electric charge […] *It was the first time anyone had ever sworn at him that way, and it opened new vistas of failure and defeat. And there was something else working. All the protective*

devices, the sustaining facades of his life had been eroding slowly in the caustic air of the platoon; his exhaustion had pulled out the props, and Gallagher's blow had toppled the rest of the edifice. He was naked another way now. (Mailer 1998: 661)

The author's intention to the interpretation of the title is evidenced by the metaphorical connotation of the word 'naked', denoting psychological/spiritual vulnerability. Roth is crushed; the blow does not make him stronger in any way and shortly after this he falls to his death, unable to jump over a gap in the rocky ledge of the mountain. And yet, the author's interest in probing his characters' ability to transcend their default mode of existence is clearly outlined in this episode. McConnell elaborates further on this episode:

Naked another way now; five words and a blow have forced Roth to a point of existential nakedness, a point where he comes face to face – not with the cosmic void – but rather with the conditional, fragile, mortal nature of his own mind and his own body, a point where the props and assurances, the style, of his normal at-homeness with himself no longer avails to mask himself from himself. And if he is naked at this moment, he is also more startlingly alive than at any other moment of his life. To be naked, then, is to be at once terribly frightened, exalted, and intimate with one's own most intensely conscious self. (McConnell)

At the other end of the *naked-dead* spectrum, Sergeant Croft represents the dead characters in the novel. He is depicted as a soulless murderer, at one point even crushing a small bird that one of the soldiers found in the jungle. His *deadness*, evinced by his sadistic proclivities, is complemented by fixation on climbing Mount Anaka:

At noon they reached the end of the ridge and had a shock. It dropped for several hundred feet of precipitous rocks into a valley of stone set in the middle of the mountain, and beyond it the center of Mount Anaka rose far above them, ascending as high as they could see in tier upon tier of forest and clay and jungle and rock, rising vertiginously for what seemed like thousands and thousands of feet. They could not even glimpse the peak; it was lost in a coronet of clouds… Behind him Mount Anaka bored into his back as if it were a human thing. He turned around and stared at soberly, feeling again the crude inarticulate thrill it always gave him. He was going to climb it; he swore it to himself. (Mailer 1998: 643)

To Croft, Mount Anaka is an adversary that must be subdued. There are definite parallels between his fixation on the mountain and captain Ahab's obsession with killing the white whale in *Moby Dick*. Croft orders his men to climb higher and higher for the sole reason of conquering and bringing under his control that offensive, towering rock. It is at this point that Croft is pitted in stark contrast against the 'naked' characters in his inability to let go of the urge to control. Conversely, as we already saw, nakedness and aliveness in the novel presuppose the capacity to

accept one's limitations and let go of the urge for control, culminating in a mystically-charged experience of oneness and compassion for others. Croft's yearning to subdue the mountain is mocked to a grotesque defeat by a swarm of huge hornets whose nest he inadvertently disturbs in his fatigue when they are just short of the top of Mount Anaka. The epic climb of vertiginous walls of rock and sheer cliffs disintegrates into a hilarious tumble head-over-heels down the mountain, chased by hornets, throwing away rifles and backpacks. Croft is defeated and he knows it. And yet, the final interpretation of that fact is ambiguous based on his thoughts, rendered by the narrator, while they are on the boat the next day, sailing away from the island:

> *Croft stared at the mountain. The inviolate elephant brooding over the jungle and the paltry hills. It was pure and remote. In the late afternoon sunlight it was velvet green and rock blue and the brown of light earth, made of another material than the fetid jungle before it. The old torment burned in him again. A stream of wordless impulses beat in his throat and he had again the familiar and inexplicable tension the mountain always furnished him. To climb that.*
> *He had failed, and it hurt him vitally. His frustration was loose again. He would never have another opportunity to climb it. And yet he was wondering if he could have succeeded. Once more he was feeling the anxiety and terror the mountain had roused on the rock stairway* […]
> *Croft kept looking at the mountain. He had lost it, had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself.*
> *Of himself and much more. Of life.*
> *Everything.* (Mailer 1998: 709)

This final account of Croft's stream of consciousness has two important points. The first is the word 'frustration', denoting his inability to extract wisdom from the clutches of defeat, as we saw the other soldiers do. That is, he stays in the metaphorical *dead* category. He is unable to experience the revelation and understanding that comes from letting go of the urge to control. Curiously, he feels that he could have arrived at some metaphysical revelation only upon defeating and climbing the mountain. This second element confirms Croft's inability to conceive of the world in any other way but as a power struggle where he must always win. Defeat and humiliation are not an option for him. However, as already mentioned, the path to humility weaves its way through humiliation and the ability to accept it, to bring down the defensive walls surrounding the ego and ultimately, to allow a new, more malleable, and yet more robust self to rise out of the ground (humus) like a phoenix from the ashes of the old one.

A brief mention is required here of the other *dead* character in the novel, general Cummings. While Croft is struggling to grasp at some mystical revelation that could perhaps redeem him, Cummings is an accomplished fascist who believes unconditionally in power. McConnell describes him in the following manner:

> *Cummings, the general, is in absolute control of the invasion of Anopopei, and therefore in control of the lives of everyone else in the book. He is the*

> *first and perhaps the most disturbing of those self-conscious, preternaturally intelligent, horrifyingly soulless capitalists and controllers who are a permanent feature of the Mailer landscape. In him we see the epic ancestor of movie mogul Herman Teppis in The Deer Park, millionaire Barney Kelley in An American Dream, even President Lyndon Johnson in The Armies of the Night. Cummings is an evil man; and his evil consists, more than in anything else, in the deliberation and callousness with which he takes part in the dance of power and death, all the while knowing it to be a crime against the very sources of the human spirit.* (McConnell)

Early on in the novel, the general takes on under his wing Lieutenant Hearn, believing that he could mold Hearn into becoming a cold manipulator of human life as himself. When Hearn openly challenges and rejects the general's philosophy of power, Cummings sends him on a meaningless mission. During the reconnaissance mission sergeant Croft intentionally withholds information, resulting in Hearn's death. Thus, the two 'dead' characters in the novel unwittingly conspire to kill Hearn. Incidentally, both of them perceive lieutenant Hearn as a threat to their respective domain of power.

The Naked and the Dead is an epic metaphor which uses war as a sweeping canvass for a psychological inquiry into the human condition. By pitting his characters through trial and tribulation and wearing their ego defenses thin, Norman Mailer foregrounds the capacity of some of them to transcend the limited self and become, at least momentarily, a part of a larger, metaphysical One/Self. In these brief moments, the soldiers manifest mystical knowledge and understanding about everyone they have known and met. This state of enhanced consciousness is identical to what NDE survivors describe. The most astounding element of the near death experience is the life review, when a person relives various moments of one's life, but intriguingly, experiences these moments also from the vantage point of everyone they have been in contact with and feels the emotions of others. In other words, the self becomes everyone else, denoting the existence of an objective, metaphysical connectedness between all beings. As already seen, some of the soldiers manifest a similar capacity, if only briefly, to become mystically charged with supernatural insight and knowledge that defies common sense and rational explanation. The capacity to *let go*, and metaphorically speaking *let God* is the author's strategy to winnow the grain from the chaff; to distinguish the *naked* (alive) from the *dead* characters in this novel.

This transcendent element is unusual for a war novel which upon its publication in 1948 "immediately established itself as the best American novel about World War II and a masterpiece of "realism" (McConnell). Incidentally, although Mailer touches upon this idea and as we see it sets a framework for the novel, *transcendentalism* in American letters has its origins with Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his poetic essay *The Over-Soul*, Emerson lays out the idea of the connectedness of all human beings. He was influenced by Vedanta Hinduism and the concept of the Over-soul is a direct borrowing from Eastern philosophies:

> *The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character, and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE* […] (Emerson)

The crucial part in the above quote is "to which every part and particle is related". This idea resonates directly with several of the moments of transcendent clarity and understanding experienced by Mailer's characters. Another disciple of transcendental ideas in American letters is John Steinbeck, who was also strongly influenced by Eastern philosophies and believed in the interconnectedness of all beings. Probably the most overt statement of that philosophy comes at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath,* voiced by Tom Joad: "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one" (Steinbeck 1992: 578).

The presence of a strongly pronounced undercurrent of transcendental/existential motives in an ostensibly realistic novel is a testament to the genius of the author, who, it should be pointed out, was only 25 when he wrote it. The *Naked and the Dead* provides a wide panorama of the human condition by probing the unplumbed depths of the soul pitted against the rigors of war. In that sense, the focus of the novel is not on war itself, but rather on its psychological impact upon the ordinary soldiers and like all great examples of literature, which belongs to the wider realm of disciplines called *The Humanities*, studies the vast subject of the human being.

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