

## SOME REMARKS ON FORMAL INNOVATIONS IN NORMAN MAILER'S THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT

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Many different critical opinions have been expressed about Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and the question of what genre it belongs to has been frequently raised.<sup>1</sup> I propose to consider in detail the form of this work in order to determine what its nature actually is and whether the author attained his purpose.

*The Armies of the Night* is a chronicle of the great peace demonstration which took place in Washington, D.C., and at the Pentagon in October 1967. In this book Norman Mailer reacts to one of the vast anti-Vietnam demonstrations of the various peace groups. A few years later, in July 1969, the author's attention was drawn to another historical event — the first steps of a man on the moon.

Let us take a look at the form Mailer chooses to describe such events, at the purpose of this form and, consequently, at the aim of the book. *The Armies of the Night* is divided into two parts: Book One (History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon) and Book Two (The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon). Book One is more extensive than Book Two and consists of four parts: Thursday Evening (subdivided into six sub-parts indicated by numbers and names), Friday Afternoon (four sub-divisions), Saturday Matinée (six), Saturday Night and All of Sunday (eleven). All these parts describe the development of the event from the point of view of the narrator from Thursday evening up to Sunday afternoon. Book Two is concerned with the organization and preparations preceding the peace demonstration, with a comparatively short account of the whole event seen from a different point of view than in Book One, with the consequences of it, with the social background to the peace movement in the U.S.A., and with the picture of the demonstration given

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<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Hornát, „Mailer věčně provokující“ [“Mailer Ever Provoking”], *Světová literatura* [World Literature], XVI (1971), No. 1, 115—116; Alfred Kazin, „Svědék střetnutí“ [“The Witness of the Clash”], *Světová literatura*, XIII (1968), No. 6, 152 to 155; Zdeněk Vančura, „Mailer proti Pentagonu“ [“Mailer Versus Pentagon”], *Světová literatura*, XVI (1971), No. 1, 116—117.

by the newspapers when it was already over. Book Two is full of the author's thoughts, opinions and observations; it is more static than the previous part of *The Armies of the Night*. As it does not essentially describe the event in detail (this is not the purpose of Book Two, after all), it is not divided into particular parts, but only into sub-divisions (eleven) indicated by numbers and titles. By dividing *The Armies of the Night* into two sections, each with a different function, the author presents to us a reportage with rather complicated structure. It is not only the external structure of the book which is complex but also the stylistic elements of the text. One can find journalistic and fictional elements as well as those of documentary prose in it. Journalism and documentary features prevail, of course, because *The Armies of the Night* is, in fact, a reportage, although Mailer calls it a novel or history. Both terms could be used only as a metaphor. The form and styles the author chooses are dependent on the character of the object or event he describes.

The share of fiction (in proportion to reality) in the subject-matter of *The Armies of the Night* is not so considerable as it was to be in *A Fire on the Moon* a few years later, where the fictional elements have their special meaning presented to the reader in the shape of a metaphor. There is nothing similar in *The Armies of the Night*, in which the fictional elements are included in some formal devices rather than in the object or event depicted. The documentary elements of the book are as follows: the peace demonstration in Washington and the Pentagon in November 1967 (the action, space, time), the people taking part in it (Mitchell Goodman, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Noam Chomsky, the leaders of the peace movement, e.g. the Chaplain at Yale, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Dr. Spock, David Dellinger, Jerry Rubin, and demonstrators Mailer meets and all the politicians he speaks about), peace groups and organizations (socialist splinter parties, the Revolutionary Contingent, trade unions, the Communist Party, etc.), the social and political background to the event, negotiations of the Mobilization Committee organizing the march on the Pentagon with the government and — of course — the author's thoughts presented to the reader. All these subjects are depicted in a way determined by their nature. Thus one can find elements of reportage, the essay and polemic in the book. The elements which can be considered typical of fiction are as follows: two descriptions of the whole march, each handled in a different way; the constant interruption of the narrative continuity by thoughts and meditations; the presentation of the narrators. As far as stylistic devices, poetical images and metaphors are concerned, these are very rare in the book. When present, they are used to characterize facts drawn from reality, not fictitious phenomena. The structural devices typical of fiction that I have mentioned above appear again in *A Fire on the Moon* but there they are more numerous.

And so I think that the subject-matter of *The Armies of the Night* is entirely represented by the facts drawn from reality while fictional features can be found mainly among the structural devices.

The way the author presents the facts to the reader is rather complicated. Although Mailer was a participant in the march on the Pentagon and an eye-witness of it, he does not write a historical document or

treatise, but interpolates into his book such devices that *The Armies of the Night* is on the borderline between documentary prose or journalism and fiction. Mailer creates a system for presenting the matter to the reader that removes the book from the domain of journalism and places it near fiction. It is not Mailer who offers the facts to the reader but the Historian or the Novelist, who appear in both parts of the book to comment on some formal elements but who usually remain behind the scene and behave as omniscient narrators and self-conscious writers. Book One, *History as a Novel*, is narrated by the Novelist, while Book Two, *The Novel as History*, is presented by the Historian:

"The Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile... Let us prepare then (metaphors soon to be mixed — for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein) let us prepare then to see what the history may disclose" (Book Two).

In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer uses the third-person narrative and the simple past tense. And so the Novelist and the Historian do not narrate from the point of view of their egos but become "indirect narrators", as everything is presented through their minds. In *The Novel as History* the whole event is watched from outside, at a great distance and from the point of view of a journalist or a documentary-prose writer (called by Mailer the Historian) giving the reader an account of the preparations, development and consequences of the demonstration. The Historian is really an impartial judge, as a historian should be; he concentrates upon the work of the many organizers and the reaction to the demonstration in the newspapers, then analyses the fragments of the reportages he quotes, compares them and tries to search for the truth. In *History as a Novel*, on the contrary, the Novelist concentrates upon Mailer, a participant in the demonstration, and the four days he devotes to it. But Mailer (called also the Participant, the Ruminant, the Protagonist) is a sensitive observer and the peace demonstration is watched by the reader through his eyes as witness. The Novelist really offers the reader what a novelist should present to him: absorbing narrative, sometimes interrupted by the Protagonist's inner thoughts, which create a commentary to things depicted. And so the Ruminant is an object of the Novelist's description just as the march on the Pentagon is; from the point of view of creative method he is dependent on the Novelist and the Historian in the same way that a protagonist is dependent on the narrator:

"To write an intimate story of an event which places its focus on a central figure who is not central to the event, is to inspire immediate questions about the competence of the historian. Or, indeed, his honorable motive. The figure he has selected may be convenient to him rather than critical to the history... So if the event took place in one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the crazy house of history* (= the Pentagon), it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such a history should be not only off very much to the side of the history, but that he should be an egotist of the most startling misproportions, outrageously and often unhappily selfassertive, yet in command of a detachment classic in severity..."

Let us then make our comic hero the narrative vehicle for the march on the Pentagon" (Book One, Part 2).

And so Mailer, a participant in the march, is in the position of a protagonist, while Mailer the writer is very well aware of this, as the extract quoted above shows. As far as the nature of the Participant is concerned, it appears to be documentary, while the essence of the Novelist and the Historian is fictitious. It would seem that Mailer and the Participant cannot be identified formally, as they are two separate people, two individuals, one of whom is watched by another from outside through the narrator's eyes and is both created and depicted by him, but their "content", knowledge, wisdom, experience, way of life and even wife are identical. No doubt the Mailer depicted in *The Armies of the Night* is Mailer the writer, who really took part in the march. Moreover, they can be identified as one personality, including all details, all thoughts, all feelings. The author chooses the same approach to the reality depicted and to his own person: to describe them in a documentary way. Mailer does not conceal any biographical or personal details; he presents them without hesitation to the reader. In my opinion, the Protagonist's behaviour so precisely characterized in the passage quoted above (from Book One, Part 2) justifies our coming to the conclusion that his nature is documentary, as in *The Armies of the Night* a great portion of the Participant's ego is presented in the form of his personal opinions or biographical facts and these data are perfectly in accordance with Mailer's biography as well. I think that the frequent interferences of the Protagonist with the narrative continuity, in the form of commentaries or thoughts, are created for the sake of provoking the reader. Mailer wants to "arouse" the reader in the same way and for the same reasons that he wanted to rouse his audience in a Washington cinema the night before the march when, drunk, he delivered a clownish, sometimes vulgar speech. All Mailer longs for is to make people think about the problems he presents to them.

As so the presentation of the facts to the reader is done by way of the following line of development: the Protagonist — the Novelist (the Historian), who is a narrator — the author — the reader.

Although Mailer takes pains to see that everything he says sounds truthful and objective, all facts are inevitably seen from his personal point of view and therefore can be subjectively manipulated. But in spite of this the author achieves the highest possible degree of objectivity and impartial judgement, and in spite of the use of various devices typical of fiction (the complicated way of presenting the data to the reader) Mailer remains a reliable reporter. He does not distort information, but offers it in both a journalistic and a non-journalistic way.

Let us take a look at the two parts of *The Armies of the Night* once more. As I have mentioned above, the book is divided into The Steps of the Pentagon (History as a Novel) and The Battle of the Pentagon (The Novel as History). Book One is concerned with the story of Mailer taking part in the Pentagon demonstration, which is seen by him from "inside". He describes the whole event profoundly, fully and eloquently, giving a detailed account not only of the demonstration itself but also of his involvement in it. This is typical of his approach to the matter: he does not start with the beginning of the march itself but with the moment he learns about the event for the first time. Then he goes on to present it to

us from his own point of view. In Book One he depicts the meeting which took place in the Ambassador, a Washington cinema, on the night before the march, and the demonstration in front of the Department of Justice which took place on Friday in the afternoon. The bag with 994 students' and scholars' draft cards was to be handed over to the Attorney General, but he was not in the office. His assistant refused to accept the cards, which were then burnt by the students on the Saturday march. The huge Saturday demonstration is described up to the moment when Mailer lets soldiers arrest him. (That is the purpose of his participation in the march: he wants to lend his prominent name to the idea of action.) Then he does not write about the further development of the march but follows his own personal story. He describes his stay in the prison he calls the Post Office, then a prison in Occoquan, twenty miles from the Pentagon, his debates with the rest of the prisoners and with soldiers, and eventually his release from Occoquan prison after having been under arrest for twenty-four hours. Although Book One follows the Protagonist's adventures, it is not purely narrative. It would not be Mailer if he did not present numerous observations, thoughts, and analyses of various social phenomena for the reader. In Book Two Mailer describes the social and political background to the Pentagon march from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, relating matters he was not an eye-witness to, such as the organization of the march. Book Two also presents a short account of the development of the peace demonstration and the consequences of it, and a confrontation of various reports on the event. We may ask whether the division of the book into two parts was intentional and whether it was necessary. I cannot altogether reject the idea that the author just sat down to write about the demonstration not very long after it had taken place and, full of fresh impressions from having been a participant in it, started the story from his point of view, which was most natural and spontaneous. Having finished his story he realized that it might not be accepted as objective and that there was still much left to be said to the reader, especially about the background to and roots of the event, which are not obvious at first glance. Thus the impulse to write the second part arose. This explanation is not unlikely, because the author admits that when he began his history of the Pentagon it insisted on becoming a history of himself over four days, and therefore was history in the costume of a novel (Book One, Part 4). Then he states:

"Yet in writing his personal history of these four days, he was delivered a discovery of what had been won, and what had been lost, and so found himself ready at last to write a most concise Short History, a veritable précis of a collective novel, . . ." (Book One, Part 4).

Whether it was the author's original intention to write both parts of *The Armies of the Night* or not, each has its special meaning and function. The author describes the function of Book One and Book Two eloquently, using the following metaphors: the first part is "a tower" he "built", so that "the horizon" could be seen from "a forest" created by the mass media which surrounded the march on the Pentagon. "A forest", he mentions, is "a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an

historian" (Book Two). And so the information he offers us in Book One gives us the possibility of judging the consequences of the march and the reports from newspapers presented to us in Book Two. The second part contains even more: it deals with the theoretical motivation of the peace demonstration widely and in detail, and gives a witty and exhaustive analysis of American society — an analysis written with piercing irony and sarcasm, but with hidden grief as well.

Why are we in Vietnam?, the seventh sub-division of Saturday Night and All of Sunday in Book One, is a climactic social and political analysis, seen from the point of view of the international situation. Using film terminology, one can call this sub-part a distance shot showing many international connexions and revealing the true reason for the war in Vietnam: the attainment of political influence. Mailer flatly rejects the war. Thus he takes up a position against his government and is not afraid to stand up for others with the same belief. Moreover, he wants "to awake" those who are still "asleep" or "blind".

History as a Novel and The Novel as History, parts of the titles of Book One and Two, deliberately characterize the genre of the two different sections of the book. The author refers to this problem in detail in the sixth sub-division, A Palette of Tactics, in The Battle of the Pentagon. Although the titles of the Books suggest a play on words, Mailer uses them with serious purpose and explains his intention eloquently in Book Two:

"No one familiar with husking the ambiguities of English will be much mystified by the titles. It is obvious the first book is a history in the guise or dress or manifest of a novel, and the second is a real or true novel — no less! presented in the style of a history."

Mailer says that Book One is his personal history and Book Two is a collective novel, while the first part is written in the form of a novel and the second one in that of history. I think that Mailer is right only to a certain extent. Neither of the two Books can be called a novel because neither of them is fictitious. If the author insisted on the term "a novel" he could have used Capote's expression "a non-fiction novel", one which is based on documentary facts. But while Truman Capote was right to apply his new term to *In Cold Blood*, as it has the aesthetic qualities of a novel, neither of the two parts of *The Armies of the Night* has any of these qualities. And so not even "a non-fiction novel" would be a suitable expression.

*The Armies of the Night* is, in fact, a reaction to a very recent, really historical event. The book is a true account of the development of the demonstration in which the author uses the greatest number of the real facts available. Besides the separate facts, representing the essence of the book, Mailer presents numerous fragments of newspaper reportages and leaflets to the reader. This is a device of journalistic and documentary prose. Mailer does not follow the aesthetic norms and rules of a fictional work; he merely traces the real facts about the demonstration in order to reconstruct the documentary shape of it. A few structural devices and the complicated system of giving information to the reader, which are

typical rather of fiction than of journalism, enrich the form of the book and help the author to exercise an influence on the reader. Thus both journalistic and fictional elements are contained in *The Armies of the Night*, but in my opinion the journalistic ones prevail and are essential in the book, which remains a reportage in spite of Mailer's wishes and intention. The dialogue between Mailer and Lowell in the fourth sub-division of Thursday Evening, The Liberal Party, shows that Mailer does not like Lowell telling him several times that he thinks Mailer is the best journalist in America (Book One, Part 1); and at the same time we must realize that the author never calls himself the Journalist or the Reporter in the book, but appears as the Novelist, the Ruminant, the Protagonist. Nevertheless, what Mailer created in *The Armies of the Night* is much more than mere journalism thanks to his unwearied search for new forms; it is not fiction but "a hybrid" of it and journalistic and documentary prose.

The range of styles Mailer uses in *The Armies of the Night* also proves that the book is on the borderline between journalism and fiction because of the character of the devices included in his creative method. Mailer writes mainly in a sober and matter-of-fact journalistic style which is far from journalese but is his novelist's language. The same approach to the matter depicted is applied by the author in *A Fire on the Moon*, his later work. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer's journalistic style is used to describe the development of the demonstration or to refer to the specific political and social situation. In giving the reader an account of an event, Mailer does not avoid dialogues, which probably had to be completed by his imagination to attain a documentary shape, and also presents a great number of his observations as short commentaries to the reader. Mailer's analysis of political affairs is often characterized by strong criticism and sarcasm. Essay passages dealing with some cultural and philosophical problems occur in the book as well. The essay as genre is itself on the boundary between scholarly literature and fiction because it treats a topic that is the subject of some social science, philosophy, etc. in a style typical rather of fiction than of other branches of literature. But Mailer also uses a style reminding us of "the stream of consciousness", the style applied for instance at the end of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Although Mailer does not go so far as Joyce, he changes the structure of the sentence to a certain extent. This style is certainly a typical fictional device. In Book One (Part 3) the reader finds a complex sentence consisting of 602 words divided into smaller sections of particular completed meaning. The punctuation marks Mailer uses in the sentence are as follows: comma, semi-colon, colon, dash (probably instead of a full stop), brackets; no capital letters occur at the beginning of any section except the last one. The complex sentence expresses a long meditation in freely connected thoughts, associations given in the sentence sections. The "stream of consciousness" deals with freedom, power, patriotism, oppression and the conscience of an American soldier.

The journalistic and documentary style is greatly enriched by Mailer by the use of numerous fragments of newspaper reportages or leaflets concerning the organization of the peace demonstration. The fragments the author quotes are part of his polemic with the press and at the same time

partly represent the documentary qualities of the text. On the other hand, qualities typical of fiction appear not only in Mailer's use of essay passages and "the stream of consciousness" style, but also in the whole structure of the book (watching the event twice, each time from a different point of view), in the character of the narrators (moreover, the Novelist as narrator can sometimes be identified with the Protagonist), and in the frequent interruption of the narrative continuity by the author's commentaries and meditations. These are rather often concerned with the author's personal life, opinions on irrelevant things, etc., while so much room is devoted to them in the book that one must ask whether *this* was the intention of the writer or not. The point is that, having read the book, the reader acquires considerable knowledge about Mailer's own person, his detestation of the telephone, his former experience with drugs, his own opinion of other prominent persons participating in the march, especially Robert Lowell, and Mailer's four wives and six children (including an eloquent commentary on the author's last marriage, that to Beverly Bentley, an actress). If Mailer only wrote about topics that were relevant to any other inhabitant of the modern world (the telephone, drugs), the function of such digressions would be quite clear: they would characterize a typical citizen of the U.S.A. or modern man in general. However, I fail to find any reasonable function for the commentaries with a purely personal theme. I am afraid I have to ask: are they significant for the purpose of the book?

Jaroslav Hornát, Zdeněk Vančura and Alfred Kazin also doubt the functional relevance of the high degree of the author's self-dramatization, although, on the other hand, they do praise Mailer's intention to speak to those American citizens who do not want to see or to understand anything except their families and business, and the masterly skill with which he does this. Kazin says that in spite of Mailer's excessive self-dramatization he remains a true annalist of the march on the Pentagon (Kazin, 154). Hornát states that *The Armies of the Night* is a typical work of Mailer's, with the author as its "protagonist", sometimes excessively unreserved when glorifying, according to his custom, his problematic reputation (on which he prides himself) with unpolished "frankness"; he does so to the detriment of his surroundings and undervalues his "more respectable" colleagues (Hornát, 116). Vančura is even ironical about Norman Mailer: he thinks that, though Mailer was not able to assert that the demonstrators came to Washington at his instigation, he at least described how he became a participant in one of the organization committees for the demonstration (Vančura has in mind the unpleasant scene Mailer caused in the Ambassador cinema), because he had somehow to implant in the reader's mind that it was also *his* demonstration (Vančura, 117).

As for the social criticism involved, *The Armies of the Night* is thoroughly interpenetrated with it. Mailer does not hesitate to tell the reader his opinion on everybody and everything he meets and watches before, during and after the demonstration. And so he depicts with irony or criticism not only the ruling class of the U.S.A. but also, for instance, liberal faculty members, high school pupils and others. Such commentaries are, in fact, digressions and interruptions of the narrative continuity.



Mailer takes full advantage of having been invited to a party given by a liberal faculty man the night before the demonstration; describing his hosts' flat, the furniture, the colour of the walls, a carpet, pictures, the hostess and her behaviour, he starts his meditation about liberals in general by generalizing about what he sees in that particular flat. Thus the reader is given an eloquent explanation of the psychology, philosophy, ideals, aims and way of life of the liberal academic intelligentsia (The Liberal Party in Thursday Evening, Book One, Part 1). This method of characterizing American society by giving more or less separate portraits of particular phenomena or social groups, portraits that finally compose a mosaic of Mailer's society, is applied throughout the whole book. Critical analysis is especially presented in Why are we in Vietnam? and Book Two. After all, the core of the demonstration is a protest against government policy, which is criticism itself. Alfred Kazin says that Mailer succeeded in revealing the uncertainty of American power and especially the guilty conscience of most Americans (Kazin, 154).

The form in which such important matter is presented is no less interesting and significant, for it is, in a sense, new and not commonplace. Almost each of the scholars quoted above has his own opinion on it. Hornát asserts that *The Armies of the Night* is a peculiar reportage (Hornát, 116). Kazin thinks that it is a combination of a diary, an essay, a treatise and a speech and that Mailer succeeded in finding a new form needed by our days (Kazin, 154–5). Vančura simply says that *The Armies of the Night* is a reportage (Vančura, 117). Its author states it is History as a Novel and The Novel as History. To my mind, *The Armies of the Night* is essentially a reportage, with a rather complicated structure containing certain elements of creative methods normally found in fiction. It fully corresponds to Mailer's proclaimed credo, as quoted by Richard Foster: "I suppose that the virtue I should like most to achieve as a writer is to be genuinely disturbing... For me, this is the highest function of art, precisely that it is disturbing, that it does not let man rest, and therefore forces him so far as art may force anything to enlarge the horizons of his life."<sup>2</sup> *The Armies of the Night* is indeed disturbing to a high degree. Mailer provokes the reader, as he provokes the public with his behaviour. That is why I cannot agree with Zdeněk Vančura's opinion that Mailer's later career is a cultural tragedy.<sup>3</sup> This disturbing quality leads me to believe that Mailer has, in fact, successfully pioneered a complex creative method capable of throwing new light on the society of our time.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Norman Mailer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968, 40).

<sup>3</sup> Zdeněk Vančura, „Pohledy na nedávný americký román“ [“A Review of the Recent American Novel”], *Literární měsíčník [Literary Monthly]*, III (1974), No. 3, 95.

## NĚKOLIK POZNÁMEK K NOVÝM FORMÁLNÍM PRVKŮM V ARMÁDÁCH NOCI NORMANA MAILERA

V *Armádách noci* Mailer popisuje mírovou demonstraci — pochod na Pentagon v říjnu roku 1967 — již se sám zúčastnil, byl zatčen a po 24 hodinách propuštěn. Toto dílo tedy obsahuje skutečná fakta a je v podstatě velmi komplikovanou reportáží s hlubokým společenským akcentem. Autor tu používá stylizované postavy vypravěče, Účastníka či Mailera, kterým je ve skutečnosti on sám. *Armády noci* obsahují řadu prvků charakteristických pro žurnalismus a dokumentární prózu; patří mezi ně např. vypravěč-reportér, pečlivý, věrný a detailní záznam historické události, časté citování dokumentů. Naproti tomu autor používá v *Armádách noci* i prvků ryze beletristických: přerušování dějové linie odbočením, komentáři, úvahami, esejistickými pasážemi, citáty z poezie, dvojím pohledem na probíhající děj atd.

Docházím proto k závěru, že tímto způsobem Mailer vytvořil dílo, které je svým žánrovým charakterem na pomezí beletrie a literatury faktu.