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I

In 1914 T. E. Hulme predicted with accuracy that now seems akin to prophecy that twentieth-century art was moving toward the creation of forms “associated in our minds with the idea of machinery”; toward the time when a sculptor would prefer to organic, natural forms “the hard clean surface of a piston rod.” Fifteen years later Hart Crane, who dubbed himself “the Pindar of the Machine Age,” and whose poem The Bridge has been termed “the most extraordinary example of the psychological impact of mechanization on modern poetry,” called for the poet to embrace the world of the machine, “for unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., acclimatize it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles, and all other associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function.” And Crane’s friend and editor Waldo Frank, also writing in 1929, echoes the poet’s call for the “acclimatization” of the machine, attributing its growing capacity to pervade and dominate human experience to “a negative reflex of man’s incapacity as yet to create a Whole in modern terms and to assimilate the machine as a means and a symbol within it.”

But in spite of such admonitions to absorb mechanization and to recognize its rightful and defining place in life and literature; even in spite of the degree to which Hulme’s prediction about the influence of machine forms on art has been realized, American writers have for the most part resisted the overtures of the machine. The Dynamo and the Virgin continues as a central and informing metaphor for the “tragic doubleness” in modern history, and the dominant tone of the century’s literary treatments of the machine remains one of tension. This tension is particularly evident in the novel.

Norris’ Magnus, associated with the life force as symbolized by the wheat, battles the machine in the form of the railroads. Nearly all of Dreiser’s major characters, from Carrie to Clyde—and especially Cooperwood, victimized by his inordinate hunger for big business—are studies of the individual and his natural, biological drives in contest with the oppressive forces of industrial, financially and materially oriented society. Sherwood Anderson’s Hugh McVey, though esthetically in tune with the machines he invents, is helplessly caught up in the shifting values of the new industrial Midwest. Steinbeck’s Joad family, driven from their land by a tractor owned by big financial interests, are relentlessly harassed by the machine brutally symbolized in the broken-down automobiles that are the hallmark of their pathetic migration. Robert Jordan and his band of Spanish guerrillas battle planes and armored vehicles with horses, hand guns, and homemade bombs. Ike McCaslin lives to see his beloved wilderness transformed into a land of flashing neon, speeding automobiles, sheet iron, and hoisting locomotives. In all of these the basic conflict between man and machine is presented as a central dilemma of modern life.

From the earliest times, Lewis Mumford points out, “war has been perhaps the chief propagator of the machine.” It is in war that mechanization—and its associate forces of industrialism and statism—reach their most dramatic ascendency and make themselves felt most immediately. Thus it is in war novels that the man-machine conflict finds its most intense and direct expression. In World War I and the American Novel Stanley Cooperman gives considerable attention to the conflict as it manifests itself in the novels of the first war. He relates the books of Cummings, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, and others to the “impact” of machine warfare on a generation that, having been comfortably and naively optimistic about the humanizing and liberating miracles of technology, was profoundly shocked to discover what a horri-
ble monster the machine could be. In the closing pages of his study Cooperman distinguishes between the novels he has examined and those written during and after the second war. By the time of World War II, he contends, the machine had been thoroughly assimilated into our culture. As opposed to the shock effect of mechanized warfare as he describes it in relation to the violently antiwar, antimachine novels of the twenties, the generation of the forties was so reconciled to machine civilization that such shock was no longer possible.

What had been a “dance-macabre absurdity” at the Marne and Verdun had become a “universal situation” in which the writer’s focus was not on the machine itself but on the “drama of human values” just as it might be examined in “the drawing room or office, industrial plant or courtroom.”

But a close examination reveals in many American World War II novels a very definite focus on the machine and a violent protest against it. Underlying the lighthearted story of John Hersey’s A Bell for Adano (1944), the tension between mechanism and humanism is symbolized by the conflict between General Marvin’s armored cars, tanks, and guns and the painted wooden carts of the Italian villagers. In Frederic Prokosch’s Age of Thunder (1945) the essentially quiet, leisurely movement of a group of people in a rural landscape is regularly interrupted by sudden, screaming air attacks that emphasize the overwhelming noise, violence, and destructiveness of the most horrible of war machines. A theme similar to Hersey’s in A Bell for Adano helps to unify the series of sketches that make up John Herne Burns’s The Gallery (1947), as the time-honored dignity of European culture is contrasted to the ugliness and vulgarity of machine-oriented Americans—“automatons from the world’s greatest factory.” In James Jones’s From Here to Eternity (1951) the army is a metaphor for the bureaucratic, impersonal systems of twentieth-century industrial and political institutions, as those systems conflict with the efforts of the three major characters to maintain their individual integrity. The central conflict of Hersey’s The War Lover (1959) is between the humanist Broman and a twisted hero of the machine, pilot Buzz Marrow, who confuses strength, masculinity, even sexual potency with flying his airplane. The bizarre world of Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961), in spite of its hilarious absurdity, is a brutal exposé of machine society carried to its most frightening extreme—an Orwellian nightmare peopled by totally amoral creatures, in which absolute power is vested in the state through military, financial, and industrial control. The crucial point of Jones’s second war novel, The Thin Red Line (1962), is precisely that the individual has been swallowed up by the machine in the form of the only main “character,” the ominously personified “C-for-Charlie Company.”

Each of these writers envisions a world in which not only life and dignity, but human moral, spiritual, and rational processes are opposed by unreasoning forces of anonymous brute mechanism: And they each attempt to come to grips in their art with the problems posed by such a world. They draw on the substance and language of the machine world itself for themes, characters, structures, rhythms, imagery, and symbolism from which to forge a new set of forms and metaphors capable of defining the condition of man threatened by what Frederick Hoffman has called “the extravagant and irrational demonstrations of pure force.”

This informing influence of the machine can nowhere be studied with greater interest or reward than in Norman Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead. To reread The Naked and the Dead in these terms is important on two counts. First, it views the book in a light that has not been trained on it before, and that illuminates and enriches our understanding of it as a novel. Second, it underlines and clarifies the function of the machine as a controlling metaphor in World War II novels by demonstrating the organic importance of that metaphor in the first really significant, probably the best, and certainly the most imitated of those novels.

II

The Naked and the Dead has been interpreted in a number of ways. Mailer himself has maintained that it is an ultimately hopeful “parable about the movement of man through history.” Admitting that it sees man as corrupt and confused to the point of helplessness, he insists that 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.” Most readers have denied these positive elements, making the book a pessimistic, bleak, and hopeless account of men defeated before they start by all
sorts of deterministic forces. Some see it as a roughly existential document in which the horror and absurdity of war are presented as normal in the context of the human condition at large, which is itself essentially absurd. Still others—perhaps taking Mailer at his word—put it in the class of novels in which war is horrible enough, but still an educational, broadening experience in which the soul is tested and purged by adversity, and positive values triumph. Each of these interpretations is defensible; the book is by no means clear in its thematic conclusions.

The central conflict in The Naked and the Dead is between the mechanistic forces of "the system" and the will to individual integrity. Commanding General Cummings, brilliant and ruthless evangel of fascist power and control, and iron-handed, hard-nosed Sergeant Croft personify the machine. Opposing them in the attempt to maintain personal dignity and identity are Cummings' confused young aide, Lieutenant Hearn, and Private Valsen, rebellious member of Croft's platoon. Mailer fails to bring this conflict to any satisfying resolution: at the novel's end Hearn is dead and Valsen's stubborn pride defeated, but likewise Croft is beaten and humiliated and Cummings' personal ambitions thwarted. But while the resolution of the conflict may be ambiguous, the nature of it is not. The principal burden of the novel is to explore the condition of man struggling against the depersonalizing forces of modern society: the forces of "the machine." Structure, character, imagery, and symbolism all contribute to the formation of a sustained and pervasive metaphor in which war, army, and battle stand as a complex of figures for the military ambition to form the fascist ideology he expounds to Hearn on the island. Hearn, also the scion of a factory man, escapes from the crude materialism of his father and the family business into the confused humanism that makes him the foil for Cummings in the island sections. Aboard ship on his way to the Pacific, he agonizes over the seemingly futile condition of the young in mechanized America:

Somewhere in America now were the cities, and the refuse sitting on the steps, the electric lights and the obedience to them.

(All the frenetic schemings, the cigar smoke, the coke smoke, the passion for movement like an ant nest suddenly jarred. How do you conceive your own death in all the marble vaults, the brick ridges and the furnaces that lead to the market place?)

And all the bright young people of his youth had butted their heads, smashed against things until they got weaker and the things still stood.

A bunch of dispossessed ... from the raucous stricken bosom of America. (pp. 352-353)

The choleric Boston tough guy Gallegar is trapped in civilian life between the drab, boiled potato routine of a city worker's stereotyped existence and a pathetically romantic idealism in which he dreams of heroism:

What's in it for a guy? Work tomorrow.
(He would defend the lady in the lavender dress with his sword.)
He fell asleep in the chair, and in the morning he had a cold. (p. 279)

Goldstein is caught in the facile and mediocre conformity of the materialist lower middle class. On his twenty-five-dollar welder's salary, he and his wife settle down in their three-room flat, full of cheap furniture, calendar pictures, and tacky bric-a-brac, their infrequent marital storms "buried in the avalanche of pleasant and monotonous trivia that makes up their life" (p. 459). Brown is the typical industrial salesman, wooing customers on the golf course, in nightclubs, and in boutiques, hating the system that forces him to "produce and cause that's what you gotta pay off on." (p. 559). Red Valsen takes to the hobo's road to escape the very real and present threat of the machine, which, with smothering Dantesque horror, traps him in a mechanistic inferno:
Croft’s sadistic drive to cross the mountain with his patrol is equally thwarted by opposing forces of nature: the numbing, bruising river; the impenetrable jungle; then the mountain itself, huge and treacherous; and finally, with brutal comic irony, the swarm of horns that turn the machine’s grim assault on Mt. Anaka into Mack Sennett farce.

Thus the primary structural and symbolic quality of *The Naked and the Dead* is informed by the conflict between men (and the natural forces with which he is associated) and the machine. Within this broad and pervasive metaphorical environment the conflict comes most vividly to life in the persons of the four major characters. Much of the dramatic and ironic power of the novel comes from its double view of the battle for Anopopei island. We see the campaign from afar as it is directed by General Cummings, and, with the ironic shock of abstraction converted to immediate reality, how it is carried out in the field. This double view also reveals that another battle—the one between man and machine—is raging both in Cummings’ tent and in Sergeant Croft’s platoon.

This conflict as it functions on the officer level between Cummings and Hearn is complicated by ambiguities and complexities in each of them. The General’s latently homosexual attitude toward Hearn is at once cruel and tender, and Hearn discovers in himself some of the same lust for power and control that he hates in his ruthless superior. Apart from these provocative ambiguities, however, the tension between Cummings as a character representing the machine system and Hearn as a man acting in desperate opposition to it is abundantly clear. As I have already pointed out, while Cummings is the perfected product of an industrial-materialist background, Hearn is a frustrated escapee from just such a heritage, bewildered and confused by the plight of his generation, lost in the machine context. As an aide to Cummings, Hearn is thrown into contention with the General that marks him as the book’s chief representative of the antimachine. He counters Cummings’ repeated insistence on the necessity of individual subservience to the machine with arguments in defense of “the continual occurrence and re-forming of certain great ethical ideas” (p. 177). That these arguments are weak and stammering in comparison with Cummings’ brutally rigorous theories helps to sustain the consistent theme of the individual
smothered by overwhelming forces of the system. In the tense climax of their conflict, Hearn leaves the cigarette on the General’s tent floor in an act of wildly courageous defiance of that system. But the result is that Cummings, not satisfied with forcing the mutineer to his knees by an exercise of power vested in hate and fear, cannot tolerate the threat to that power that Hearn now represents for him. Hearn is ordered to the patrol and to his death.

Cummings himself is in many ways like a machine. Cooledly efficient and physically inexhaustible, he works for hours directing the opening of the campaign “without taking a halt, indeed without referring once to a map, or pausing for a decision . . . . It had been a remarkable performance. His concentration had been almost fantastic” (p. 77). Studying a host of subjects as a young officer, “he absorbs it all with the fantastic powers of memory and assimilation; he can exhibit at times, absorbs it and immediately transmutes it into something else” (p. 420). Such mental powers, so reminiscent of a computer, clearly point to Cummings’ function as a machine-like, other-than-human character. The suggestion takes on more weight in a passage describing his quarters: “Wherever he was . . . he never seemed to live in a place. The tent was so austere. The cot looked unslept in, the desk was bare again, and the third and unoccupied chair rested at perfect right angles to the larger of the two foot lockers. The tent floor was bare and clean, unmarred by mud. The light of the Coleman lantern threw long diagonals of light and shadow across the rectangular objects of the tent, so that it looked like an abstract painting” (p. 172).11 Cummings is different from other men, who get things dirty and rumple the blankets and bring mud in on their feet; he leaves no human tracks.

In this barren, sterile, angular tent, Cummings reveals the broader, more abstract manifestations of his machine mentality in the lectures on social, political, and military philosophy that he delivers to Hearn. It is a philosophy based on manipulation of the masses through power maintained, as he maintains his over the division, by hate and fear: “The Army,” which he considers as a model for future society, “functions best when you’re frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates” (p. 176). And it is specifically a philosophy for the mechanized world: “The machine techniques of this century demand consolidation, and with that you’ve got to have fear, because the majority of men must be subservient to the machine, and it’s not a business they instinctively enjoy” (p. 177).

Cummings’ role as a product of and symbol for the machine becomes most explicit and effective in a moment when he comes into intimate contact with the actual machines of his division. Firing one of the big guns himself, he experiences a kind of mechanistic orgasm, from anticipation, to climax, to detumescence:

He realized the tenseness with which he had been waiting for the shell to land by the weak absorptive relief that washed through his body. All his senses felt gratified, exhausted. The war, or rather, war, was odd . . . and yet there was a naked quivering heart to it which involved you deeply when you were thrust into it. All the deep dark urges of man, the sacrifices on the hilltop, and the churning lusts of the night and sleep, weren’t all of them contained in the shattering screaming burst of a shell, the man-made thunder and light? . . . In the night, at that moment, he felt such power that it was beyond joy; he was calm and sober. (pp. 566-67)

Moved and inspired by this orgasmic encounter with the guns, the General makes entries in his journal that continue the equation of the sexual with the mechanical: “The phallus-shell that rides through a shining vagina of steel, soars through the sky, and then ignites into the earth. The earth as the poet’s image of womb-mother, I suppose” (p. 568). He goes on to liken other machines to animals—the tank and truck are like “buck and rhinoceros”—but most significantly, he sees men as machines: “And for the obverse, in battle, men are closer to machine than humans. A plausible acceptable thesis. Battle is an organization of thousands of man-machines who dart with governing habits across a field, sweat like a radiator in the sun, shiver and become stiff like a piece of metal in the rain. We are not so discrete from the machine any longer, I detect it in my thinking.” Then with pointed dramatic irony: “The nations whose leaders strive for Godhead apotheosize the machine. I wonder if this applies to me” (p. 569).

Cummings is a man so imbued with the machine, its language, its power, its values, that he not only defends it as the instrument of military and political control, but has allowed it to penetrate to the very depths of his being. It is his aphrodisiac; the object of his lust and passion. He
confounds its forces with those of life and regeneration, its objects with human beings. Thus Cummings' function as symbolic character has crucial implications for the central theme of the novel: that the machine is capable of extending its domination to the most fundamental levels of man's existence; of becoming a threat to his very nature and to his humanity.

The conflict between man and machine is joined on the enlisted level in the running battle of wills between Sergeant Croft and Red Valsen. In physical appearance and temperament each personifies the force he represents. Never smiling, "made of iron," and reputed to have no nerves, Croft is almost like a robot man: "His narrow triangular face was utterly without expression...and there seemed nothing wasted in his hard small jaw, gaunt firm cheeks and straight short nose. His thin black hair had indigo glints in it" (p. 10). Whereas Croft is thus cold, machine-like, the color of gunmetal, Valsen, whose stubborn resistance to the Sergeant's dehumanizing tactics is symbolically like the jungle's resistance to the machine, is markedly sanguine, alive, organic. Red-haired, florid, and freckled, he has "a large blob of a nose and a long low-slung jaw," and he laughs readily, "his rough voice braying out with a contemptuous inviolate mirth!" (p. 12). As this physical and temperamental contrast reflects, the two are natural enemies, Croft brutally demanding meek obedience and Valsen constitutionally opposed to being controlled.

The contention between them, which begins very early in the book when they quarrel over a minor point of discipline and ends in their dramatic encounter on the mountain when Red is finally broken, parallels the contention between Cummings and Hearn. Valsen, who like Hearn is an escapee from the machine, also like him finds in that escape a fragmented, unsettled, and lonely life. On the island he pits the only thing that life has left him—his jealously guarded individuality—against Croft's authority in an opposition that mirrors Hearn's challenge of Cummings. The likenesses between Croft and Cummings that mark them as co-machine characters are many and sometimes subtle. While Cummings learns a mechanistic, industrialist philosophy from his father, Croft learns from his to love the guns that he uses, like the General, with strange masculine excitement. While Cummings confounds power and violence with his sexual virility and "fights out battles" on his wife's body, Croft, making love to his wife, boasts "Ah'm jus' an old fuggin machine. (Crack...that...whip! Crack...that...WII!PO!)" (p. 162). While Cummings, at the moment when he discovers Hearn's revolt against his power, feels that "if he had been holding an animal in his hands at that instant he would have strangled it" (p. 318), Croft, at the peak of his wild demonstration of power on the mountain, crushes a bird in his hand. While Cummings formulates theories about making men subservient to the machine, Croft, running the platoon by hate and fear, translates those theories into everyday practice.

Croft's function as representative of machine forces and counterpart to Cummings is consummated in the novel's final section when he becomes a surrogate for the General by assuming the role of enemy to Hearn. Cummings had assigned the Lieutenant to the patrol because he threatened the power of the machine; now Croft deliberately leads him to his death because his humane approach to leadership again threatens that power. The quickened dramatic intensity of this final section is primarily the intensity of Croft's mad drive to conquer the mountain. His compulsion to force the platoon to his will as the instruments of this mania is parallel to Cummings' desire to make the division the instrument of his own larger conquest. The movement up the mountain is accompanied by the progressive submergence of Croft's humanity, which abandons him completely when he crushes the bird in his fist, prefiguring his virtual murder of Hearn the next day. Thus the rifle that he levels at Valsen in their final climactic standstill is no better symbol for the destructive power of the machine than he; it is a confrontation between the machine incarnate and the individual man in a last abortive act of rebellion against it. As Hearn, in stooping to pick up the cigarette from the General's floor, had submitted to the combined pressures of Cummings' will and the threat of military punishment, Red surrenders to the force of Croft's will and the threat of his rifle.

But as Cummings' obsessive lust for personal victory is frustrated by the almost accidental winning of the campaign while he is absent, now Croft's last short climb to the peak is thwarted in a most unexpected form, the swarm of hornets.

Again, the conclusion of The Naked and the Dead and its total meaning are unclear. The failure
of Cummings' and Croft's designs would seem to indicate the failure of the machine to work its will upon man and nature, and to justify reading the novel as a "parable" of man's refusal to be dehumanized by the forces of mechanized society. Yet Hearn's death and Valsen's shattering humiliation clearly dramatize the defeat of man by the machine. And the final scenes leave the definite impression of man lost, helpless, passive in the grip of the anonymity and meaninglessness of modern life. In the boat returning to camp the men discover that the campaign has been easily won while they were gone, that all their suffering has been for nothing, and that they are going back to the same old deadening routine. In this context the song they feebly sing to cheer themselves takes on a bitterly ironic significance: "Roll me over / In the clover. / Roll me over, / Lay me down / And do it again" (p. 707). The final thoughts of Red Valsen, beaten representative of the antimachine, seem best to capture the concluding mood: "You carried it alone as long as you could, and then you weren't strong enough to take it any longer. You kept fighting everything, and everything broke you down, until in the end you were just a little goddam bolt holding on and squealing when the machine went too fast" (pp. 703-04). And they also sound a last clear note in evidence for the informing nature of the man-machine metaphor in the most influential American novel of World War II.

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Notes

1 "Modern Art and Its Philosophy," in Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art, ed. Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, 1936), pp. 82-97. The productions of the cubists, the glass, metal, and wire creations of the early constructivists, the machine-like horse of Duchamp-Villon, Braque's gleaming bird—which Lewis Mumford likens to the shell of a torpedo—and the work of present-day constructivists, who actually work with steel girders and piston rods, cutting and welding their truly machine-like creations, all stand as ample evidence of Hulme's foresight.


4 The Rediscovery of America: An Introduction to a Philosophy of American Life (New York: Scribners, 1929), pp. 41-42.


9 "Rugged Times" (an interview), The New Yorker, 23 Oct. 1948, p. 25.


13 For an interesting commentary on the thematic ambiguity in the novel, see Norman Podhoretz, "Norman Mailer: The Embattled Vision," Partisan Review, 26 (Summer 1959), 374-76.

14 This and all subsequent references to The Naked and the Dead are to the Random House edition (New York and Toronto, 1948).

15 Note here that Mailer, likening his scene to an abstract painting, is using the same angular lines, hard, clean light, and "forms associated in our minds with the idea of machinery" that Hulme predicted were to be the distinguishing features of modern art.

16 These abnormal sexual responses of Cummings and Croft are an index to an important concern of the novel: the frustration or perversion of love in mechanized society. Along with other themes already discussed, this concern has its metaphor in the machine's violent attempt on the natural purity of the island.