

***Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in
Norman Mailer's The Armies of The Night***

Kader YILMAZ*

Abstract:

As a work of literary nonfiction, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of The Night* has often been studied in the context of its fictional reconstruction of the anti-war demonstration of 1967. Although some literary critics have also acknowledged the author's highly subjective depiction of the march, this aspect of *The Armies of The Night* has received comparatively little critical consideration. Yet, the autobiographical narrative of this book deserves particular attention because it performs an important function in that it enables its author to personalize the march and to analyze the event from the perspective of a witness. This paper argues that Mailer aims to interpret and speculate on the significance of the march by offering his personal experiences and reactions to the events as emblematic of the experiences of the larger society protesting the Vietnam War.

Key words: Literary nonfiction, Norman Mailer, autobiographical narrative, 1960s

Özet:

Olgu yönelimli roman türü olarak, Norman Mailer'in *The Armies of The Night* genellikle, 1967 yılında düzenlenen savaş karşıtı gösteriyi kurgusal bir yapı ile yeniden anlatması bağlamında incelenmiştir. Eleştirmenler, bu protesto yürüyüşünün kurgulanışındaki öznel yaklaşıma dikkat çekmiş olsalar da, eserin bu yönünü irdeleyen çalışmalar azdır. Oysa, bu eserdeki özyaşamsal söylem yazarın gösteriyi öznelştirmesine ve olayı bir tanık gözüyle yorumlamasına olanak sağlaması açısından önem taşımaktadır. Bu makale Mailer'in, kişisel deneyimlerinin ve olaylara tepkisinin Vietnam savaşını protesto eden toplumun deneyimlerinin bir yansıması olduğunu ve bu yolla toplumsal bir olayı aydınlatmayı ve yorumlamayı hedeflediğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: olgu yönelimli roman türü, Norman Mailer, otobiyografik anlatı, 1960'lar

Since it received the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction in 1968, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of The Night* has been considered a major achievement in literary nonfiction which is also labeled new journalism¹. As one of the major works of American

* Arş.Gör.Dr., Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Bölümü

¹ Literary nonfiction is also often labelled "the nonfiction novel," "new journalism," "parajournalism," "literary journalism," "new reportage" or simply "the true life story." Although critics are not like-minded in the naming of this genre the definition of it seems to be

Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in Norman...

nonfiction, *The Armies of The Night* has often received critical attention for its fusion of fiction with fact, and the utilization of the devices of fiction while giving a journalistic account of the Peace March on the Pentagon in 1967. Although some literary critics have also acknowledged the author's personal engagement in the march and his highly subjective approach to the events, the adaptation of the first person narrative in this work has attracted less critical consideration than its study as a work of nonfiction. As a matter of fact, *The Armies of The Night* illustrates the common concern of many new journalists of the late 1960s and 1970s to narrate and interpret or speculate on public facts by developing a highly subjective point of view and/or employing the first person narrative in their journalistic accounts. In Mailer's work the author's subjective approach to the social event he deals with eventually culminates with an autobiographical account of his participation in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Tracing the author's involvement in the protest, *The Armies of The Night* focuses on his conversion from a disinclined participant and detached observer of the march to a committed "revolutionary" who becomes deeply involved in the events that occur. Moreover, by foregrounding his first-hand experience of the riot, Mailer aims to highlight the underlying meaning of the march to its participants for whom the anti-war demonstration has evolved into a symbolic struggle against the authoritarian government which undermines civil liberties to suppress social resistance. In this respect, the utilization of the autobiographical narrative in *The Armies of The Night* enables Mailer to personalize his account of the march and to offer his personal experience and reactions to the events as the nexus of the experiences of the larger society protesting the war in Vietnam.

The intersection of the autobiographical narrative and new journalism in *The Armies of The Night* is not only related to Mailer's preference to do so, but also to the inherently subjective nature of nonfiction. As a matter of fact, literary critics such as James N. Stull share the common assumption that the "ascendance of the new journalism in the 1960s was in part a response to and rejection of traditional journalistic objectivity" (1993:3). Yet, a consideration of the subjective aspect of literary nonfiction requires also a brief insight into the rising popularity of this genre in relation to the social developments of the 1960s and 1970s. Viewed from a historical perspective, this period was considered to be an era of social and political turmoil. This era witnessed the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement, the counterculture, the Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the exhaustion of natural resources, and the space race. The New Left became the dominant movement which included radical leftists, black nationalists, anarchists or pacifists, protesting

a less controversial issue. Many literary critics more or less agree on Tom Wolfe's definition that literary nonfiction is "intense" and "detailed" reporting presented "with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories"(1973: 15). Similarly, Barbara Lounsberry describes this literary form by clarifying what the factual and literary aspect of it is. "Verifiable subject matter and exhaustive research guarantee the nonfiction side of literary nonfiction, the narrative form and structure disclose the writer's artistry, and finally, its polished language reveals that the goal all along has been literature" (1990:xv). In other words, literary nonfiction is a type of writing that conflates the research methods of journalistic reporting with the narrative techniques of fiction.

racial and sexual discrimination, the Vietnam War and the political system. The counterculture movement enabled people to create communities and experience with drugs and communal living, whereas the rest of the society was gazing at TV screens to behold political conventions, the war in Vietnam, or the first steps on the moon. In fact, the events of that era had a deep impact on the American society. Many journalists and writers of the time felt compelled to share Tom Wolfe's assumption that "in the sixties American life was chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous, in a word 'absurd' "(1989: 49). According to writers like Tom Wolfe, in the sixties, life itself had a fictional potential so that they felt compelled to write about facts in the form of fiction rather than inventing fictive subject material. Their efforts resulted in the publication of a number of canonical nonfiction novels some of which are; *In Cold Blood* (1966) by Truman Capote, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and *The Right Stuff* (1979), written by Tom Wolfe, *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979) by Norman Mailer².

More significantly, the replacement of conventional journalism with new journalism, and the narration of public facts in combination with literary imagination enabled the writer to steer away from the traditional 'matter of fact approach' to the events. Indeed, the very use of literary devices, such as the elaborate character sketches, the use of metaphors, and the arrangement of details so as to create suspense and narrative climax, inevitably brought along a subjective point of view in that it required of the author to synthesize facts with his imaginative and interpretive powers. Eventually, some writers of nonfiction, like Joan Didion, Michael Herr, Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer felt compelled to push the limits of subjective journalism even further by placing the authorial self at the center of the narrative process. In a similar analysis, John Hellman maintains that by the sixties, many new journalists left aside the objectivity of traditional reporting and "approached public fact through a frank, obtrusive, liberated assertion of their private consciousness" (Hellman 1986:52). This was often done by acknowledging a participant or observing self and/or

² Although it is debatable, the precursors of literary nonfiction can be traced back to Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and William Hazlitt's "the Fight" (1822). Likewise, works such as Charles Dickens's *Pictures from Italy* (1846), Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872), Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), and John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) are often considered as the forerunners of literary journalism. These novels were based on factual material and composed more of fact than fiction. Nevertheless, critics and writers of this genre generally agree that literary journalism matured and evolved into a distinctive type of literary writing in the 1960s. By that time, journalists and writers as Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, Truman Capote and Norman Mailer aimed to popularize a new type of journalism in their news articles and literary works. The common argument of these new journalists was that the daily life of the 1960s had already become too fictitious, ambiguous and absurd to be covered effectively by the methods of conventional journalism. There was a need for a new approach to the public facts of the times. The reporter had to be freed from his traditional objectivity, and allowed to make use of his imaginative and interpretive talents to be able to capture and comment on the incredulities of public life. As an innovative form of journalism, literary nonfiction evolved under these circumstances. It foregrounded the writer's perception of public events and fused the elements of fiction with the methods of journalism.

Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in Norman...

by disclosing facts in an interpretive style or manner. For example, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) depicts the Vietnam War through a collage of his memories of the combat zones. On the other hand, Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979) offer a mosaic of the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s through the author's fragmented perception of the events as a witness of the times. Similarly Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) reflect the political convulsions of that era as they are confronted by the writer's consciousness. On the whole, these writers engage in a subjective narration of public facts by developing a personal perspective through which the social world is perceived and understood.

Among these works, Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* deserves particular attention for it employs the autobiographical mode as a means to establish a highly subjective approach to the public facts it deals with. More than half of the book is devoted to the writer's own experience of the march. Subtitled *The History As a Novel, The Novel As a History*, *The Armies of the Night* is divided into two main parts: Book One and Book Two³. Book One, titled *The History As a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon*, traces the author's personal involvement in the march, which begins with Mitchell Goodman's phone call inviting him to participate in the demonstration, and ends with his release from jail after his arrest for having transgressed a police line. The protest activities begin on Thursday evening, at the Ambassador Theater with speeches delivered by literary celebrities including Robert Lowell, Dwight MacDonal, and Norman Mailer. The next day, Mailer joins the protest in front of the Department of Justice, where protesters attempt to oppose the war in Vietnam by turning in their draft cards to the Attorney General. That evening, Mailer, Lowell, and MacDonal plan to attend next day's march on the Pentagon and to get arrested in order to publicize the anti-war protest. On Saturday, the crowd gathers in front of the Lincoln Monument and listens to music and some speeches before they march to the Pentagon. Once there, Mailer crosses a police line and gets himself arrested. The police transports him first to the post office in Alexandria and then to the Occoquan Penitentiary, where he spends the night in prison. The next day, an ACLU lawyer gets him out of prison. Book Two, the shorter section of the books, is titled *The Novel As History: The Battle Of The Pentagon*. Based upon secondary sources, such as newspaper accounts and eyewitness reports,

³ As opposed to book one, which is narrated from the perspective of Mailer as participant, book two is narrated from a more objective and omniscient perspective. In relation to the changing perspective in both books Meldan Tanrisal explains, "having presented the interior view of the march as the ambiguous experience of an individual," in book one; in book two "he (Mailer) adopts the convention of the objective point of view used by the historian to portray it externally" (1988:188). Thus, Mailer aims to analyze the march from the perspective of an insider and outsider. Apart from the different perspectives, the different titles of both books suggest that book one is a history of the march, based on the author's personal involvement in this event, while book two is a novel, construed out of secondary sources. On the other hand, both of these titles imply also that the first book is a *history* which poses at the same as a novel, where as the latter one is a novel that poses at the same time as a history of the march. Thus, Mailer blurs the distinction between the novel and history.

Book Two, gives an account of what happens at the Pentagon after Mailer's arrest, and how a small group of demonstrators manage to occupy the military complex until midnight before they are either arrested or forced to leave.

On the whole, as John Hollowell states, *The Armies of the Night* is, "an explicit attack on the objectivity and impersonality of the conventional media" (1977:92). Indeed, Mailer believes that "history is internal" (1968:284). Therefore, his intention is not to give a dry and impersonal account of the march, but an "intimate history of the events" (1968:67). Thus Mailer offers "a personal history which while written as a novel was to the best of the author's memory scrupulous to facts and therefore a document" (1968:284). In Mailer's opinion, the occurrences at the Pentagon were extremely ambiguous and absurd for what had begun as a peace march organized by "a mass of the citizenry," quickly turned into a "primitive mode of warfare" against "the military might of the republic" (1968: 68). By presenting his account of the march in the form of a novel Mailer aims at highlighting the incongruities of the event which can be covered only by using "the instinct of the novelist" (1968: 284). Yet, arguing that an objective narration of the march will not reveal the emotional impact of the occurrences, Mailer resolves to "recapture the precise feel of the ambiguity of the events" (1968: 68) through the eyes of a participant. By using himself as the narrator and protagonist, Mailer eventually creates his own version of history that charts his experiences and impressions of the demonstration. Thus, he personalizes the march and "uses himself as a means toward illuminating the event he is describing" (Merrill: 1999).

More importantly, Mailer's participation in the demonstration serves to see himself, as a representative of the demonstrators, in the light of social and political change. The march converts the author from a repressed and complacent citizen to a self-assertive individual who stands up for his own beliefs and ideals. In

Mailer's opinion, his personal experience of the march is representative of the experiences of the other participants since they undergo a similar rite of passage. He senses that the assertion of the individual self against the oppressive system, which quells individual action and thought, is one of the motives behind the mass rally against the policies of the government and the Pentagon. As a result, Mailer's personal reaction to the demonstrations becomes a point of departure to arrive at a larger social analysis of the significance and meaning of the march on the Pentagon.

Writing in the third person autobiographical voice, Mailer presents himself, at the onset of his book, as a mock hero who consents to participate in an act of "civil disobedience" despite his self-doubts and lack of courage and revolutionary faith. Mailer displays himself as a person who is not so certain about his convictions, and his identity despite his reputation as a confident and arrogant person and left-oriented radical. Moreover, he feels that at the age of forty-four, he is becoming a fairly mediocre man and is suffering "from the private conviction that he was getting a little soft...around the edges" (1968:73). Thus, the reader gains insight to the author's personality which is equally paradoxical as the demonstrations at the Pentagon. Furthermore, Mailer's reservations about the march are given in detail at the beginning of the book. When Mitchell Goodman informs him of their intention to invade the corridors of the military complex, Mailer is not pleased about the news:

Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in Norman...

It sounded vaguely and uneasily like a free-for-all with students, state troopers, and Hell's Angels flying in and out of the reports—exactly the sort of operation they seemed to have every other weekend out on the coast. He felt one little bubble of fear tilt somewhere about the solar plexus. (1968:19)

Although Mailer is sincerely opposed to the war in Vietnam, he finds it difficult to align himself with the leftists, hippies and liberals because he is doubtful that a mass demonstration will be effective in altering the nation's policy regarding Vietnam. At a party which he attends rather unwillingly, he contemplates:

One could hope the cause might finally at the end have an unexpected hint of a wit ... it was bitter rue to have to root up one's occupations of the day, the week, and the weekend and trot down to Washington for idiot mass manifestations which could only drench one in the most ineradicable kind of mucked-up publicity. (1968: 30)

Considering the activities of the forthcoming weekend as a waste of time and energy, Mailer is already looking forward to being back in New York before the protests begin.

However, the comic tone of the book gradually subsides when the protagonist transforms from a disinclined “revolutionary for the weekend” (1968: 70) to a vested partisan. More significantly, Mailer's conversion experience initiates a new understanding of the self which in turn initiates his identification with the protesters and their cause. Having spoiled Thursday evening at the Ambassador Theater, with his drunk appearance on stage to give a speech, Mailer gradually changes his ideas about the march and himself when he joins the protesters the next day. Watching the crowd turning in their draft cards to the Attorney General, he realizes that these people are risking their safety or maybe their future for their beliefs and ideals. This instills in Mailer a sense of respect toward the protesters and initiates his transformation from apathy to involvement which brings about his spiritual growth. As a participant in the protests, Mailer finds a new sense of courage and aspiration which helps him to overcome his self-doubts and inconsistencies. Consequently, he decides to dedicate himself to the cause and to play a major role in the march to the Pentagon. Once the protesters have gathered in front of the building, Mailer willfully transgresses a police barricade to get the demonstration publicized. When the police arrests him he feels:

as if he were being confirmed. (After twenty years of radical opinions, he was finally under arrest for a real cause.) Mailer always supposed he had felt important and unimportant in about as many ways as a man could feel; now he felt his own age, forty-four, felt it as if he were finally one age, not seven, felt as if he were a solid embodiment of bone, muscle, flesh, and vested substance. (1968: 157)

“Standing on the grass”, after his release from the Occoquan Penitentiary, Mailer eventually resolves that:

he felt one suspicion of a whole man closer to that freedom from dread which occupied the inner drama of his years, yes, one image closer than when he had come to Washington four days ago. The sum of what he had done that he considered good outweighed the dull sum of his omissions these same four days. So he was happy. (1968: 238)

Mailer’s growing commitment to the cause, and his identification with the demonstrators also brings forth a severe criticism of the war in Vietnam. According to Mailer, the war is not morally justifiable because it causes the death of thousands of Vietnamese people, including women and children. It relocates populations, and it sheds the blood of America’s finest soldiers to prevent Asia from the invasion of communism. In reality, Mailer claims, the government fails to grasp that communism can be checked only if it is allowed to spread in Asia. Since Asian countries have a primitive culture it would be difficult for them to digest Marxism, and the more communism expands, the more its problems will increase. This would be a safer way for the U.S. to restore its international power.

But more importantly, in Mailer’s opinion, the Vietnam War is an indication of the “oncoming totalitarianism” in America (1968: 211). It illustrates that contemporary America is day by day drifting away from its democratic ideals such as freedom and equality whether at home or abroad. The war in Vietnam is one case among the many which illustrate how governmental authority has increasingly come to manipulate public opinion by using the media and the education system as a means to justify its political aims. However, Mailer thinks, the attempt to undermine autonomous action and thought has ironically backfired and caused further polarization and dissent in the society. Now, the young generation revolt against the authority which “had operated on their brain with commercials, and washed their brain with packaged education, packaged politics” (1968: 103). The military counterpart of the government is the Pentagon, “the true and high church of the military-industrial complex,” (1968: 132) which works more or less with the same totalitarian logic. Consequently, Mailer describes the Pentagon as the “blind five-sided eye of a subtle oppression which had come to America out of the very air of the century” (1968: 132). During the march he observes the marshals whose faces “emitted a collective spirit which, to his mind, spoke of little which was good” (1968: 171). In their physical appearance, Mailer detects a threat that has no limits when it comes to quell dissent.

“At the heart of *Armies* lies,” as John Hollowell maintains, “the deep concern for the individual in a society increasingly governed by bureaucratic and totalitarian impulses that threaten personal responsibility” (1977: 96). Viewed in this light, the march on the Pentagon then becomes a symbolic struggle for individuality against the increasing governmental control. Therefore, Mailer likens himself and the protesters to

Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in Norman...

'revolutionists' who are walking against the totalitarian military machine. Before the march on the Pentagon begins, he gives an impressive speech announcing that this will be the day when "many Americans will have to face the possibility of going to jail for their ideas" (1968: 79). It is after this speech that Mailer aligns himself with a multitude of new lefters, writers and hippies and maintains a leading position in the march until he is finally arrested.

In this respect, the author's participation in the march, and the confrontation at the Pentagon initiates a spiritual growth that not only enhances his understanding of the significance of the march on the Pentagon but also his understanding of himself. In a similar analysis of *The Armies of the Night*, Joseph Wenke claims, "as always in Mailer's work, confrontation serves as an act of self-definition" revealing:

the degree of personal growth in one's ability to overcome fear and act with the courage to stand by one's beliefs and values. By this standart Mailer realizes that he has grown... he is able finally to act with courage and conviction, in effect challenging the government to defend its morally untenable prosecution of the war in Vietnam. (1987: 152)

Indeed, his rite of passage has a liberating effect upon Mailer. It helps the author to overcome his self-doubts, and to redefine his identity as an individual who can uphold his convictions and ideals in spite of a seemingly 'democratic' environment which in fact undermines individuality. According to James N. Stull, "it is perhaps because of this" that Mailer writes autobiographically and "constructs a self-centered universe by appropriating public occasions and transforming them into symbolic stages on which he can dramatize the self" (1993:103). Thereby, Mailer asserts the sovereignty of the individual over the increasingly totalitarian authority.

On the other hand, Mailer's rite of passage is as representative as it is personal because it also foreshadows a conversion that occurs on a wider scale. During the demonstrations, the protesters undergo a similar transformation that instills a new sense of courage and conviction in democratic ideals. In "Book Two," for instance, it is narrated how the demonstrators succeed in maintaining their position in front of the Pentagon through out the night, in spite of the government's efforts to subdue the protest. Finally, Mailer interprets this moment as a rite of passage, "when men and women manacled themselves to a lost and painful principle and survived a day, a night, a week, a year" (1968: 311). He adds:

they were forever different in the morning than they had been before the night, which is the meaning of a rite of passage, one has voyaged through a channel of shipwreck and temptation, and...some part of the man has been born again, and is better. (1968: 312)

Mailer eventually predicts that the clash between the opposing forces might generate a civil war which may last many years. The nation is now divided and it is difficult to be certain about what the future of America will be. In his opinion, the nation is “heavy with child” and:

it is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what?-the most fearsome totalitarianism this world has ever known? Or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? (1968: 320)

Nevertheless, the book concludes with the hope that the transforming events at the Pentagon will induce the nation to reclaim its democratic ideals, at least to a certain extent.

On the whole, Mailer’s involvement in the peace march, and his rite of passage are the central events of the book which display his inclination to personalize the historical facts he has witnessed. As it is stated in *The Armies of The Night*, Mailer’s ultimate goal is to write a personal history of the march and to speculate upon the significance of the events by registering the effects on himself. Consequently, the book turns into an autobiographical account of what he has experienced. In a similar analysis of Mailer’s earlier works, such as “In The Red Light” and “Ten Thousand Words A Minute,” Robert Merrill maintains that “Mailer has offered his reactions to modern life as those of a representative American” and:

what this method suggests is that the nuances of recent history can only be caught in the response of a troubled American to the events which are America. (Merrill 1974)

The same analysis can be applied to *The Armies of The Night*. The author’s participation in the march on the Pentagon is representative of the nation’s upheaval against the oppressive government which attempts to subdue social dissent. In Mailer’s opinion, the march had a transforming and liberating effect which enabled its participants to reassert autonomous action and thought over the increasingly totalitarian authority. Thus, by narrating his personal experience of the march, Mailer has attempted to analyse how this single event fits into the life of an individual and the society as a whole.

Works Cited

Hellman, John. (1986). “Postmodern Journalism.”, *Postmodern Fiction: A Bibliographical Guide* içinde (51-61). Ed. Larry Mc Caffery. New York: Greenwood Press.

Norman Mailer's March: Autobiographical Concerns in Norman...

Hollowell, John. (1977). *Fact and Fiction: the New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Lounsberry, Barbara. (1990). *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Mailer, Norman. (1968). *The Armies of the Night*. New York: New American Library.

Merrill, Robert. (1992). *Norman Mailer Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers.

—. (1999) "Norman Mailer." *Gale Database: Literature Resource Center*. Hacettepe University. 02 May 2003.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/LitRC?locID=hu_tr>.

—. (1974). "Norman Mailer's Early Nonfiction: The Art of Self Revelation." *Gale Database: Literature Resource Center*. 1974. Hacettepe University. 02 May 2003.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/LitRC?locID=hu_tr>.

Stull, James N. (1993). "The Armies of the Night: Norman Mailer's Performing Self." *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary Nonfiction* içinde (101-117) London: Greenwood Press.

Tanrısal, Meldan. (1988). *New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel: Creating Art Through Facts*. Ankara: Hacettepe University.

Wolfe, Tom and E. W. Johnson. Eds. (1973). *The New Journalism*, New York: Harper and Row.

Wolfe, Tom. (1989). "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast." *Harper's Magazine* içinde (45-56) Nov.

Wenke, Joseph. (1987). *Mailer's America*, London: University Press of New England.