

NORMAN MAILER'S *WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?*
AS AN EPILOGUE TO WILLIAM FAULKNER'S HUNTING SEQUEL OF
BIG BOTTOM WOODS

JOANNA DURCZAK

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

Reviews and criticisms of Norman Mailer's *Why are we in Vietnam?* almost invariably associate the book with William Faulkner's "The bear".¹ Parallels between the two are indeed striking. Both are stories of big game hunts, both focus on experiences of the adolescents participating in the expeditions, both elaborate the same theme — of hunting as an initiation ritual. One episode in *Why are we in Vietnam?* seems to deliberately encourage relating the two books together. When its two protagonists set out on a lonely trip into the wilderness, they lash up their guns onto a tree in an act immediately recognizable as echoing the culminating scene in Faulkner's story, where a similarly disarmed Isaac walks through the woods to encounter the Bear. In both books those gestures of voluntary defiance of personal security and rejection of technology-based domination over nature allow the sixteen year old hunters to be receptive of the teachings of the wilderness and let them face the mysteries of themselves, of fear and of death. Knowledge and wisdom derived from such an experience brand the entire life of Faulkner's Isaac. Mailer, though limited by the scope of his narrative which does not extend beyond two very loosely related years immediately following the hunt, implies throughout the book that his protagonists' future was also essentially shaped at the time of the safari.²

Affinities between *Why are we in Vietnam?* and Faulkner's fiction turn out to be still more numerous and more profound if the book is viewed against

¹ See especially: Poirier (1972:141, 150—151), Tanner (1971:367—368), Scott (1973: 75—76) and Jameson (1972).

² One of the implications is already in the title of the novel.

the wider background of a complete section of Faulkner's writings, his hunting stories, which include in addition to "The bear" also "The old people", "Race at morning" and "Delta autumn" and some other shorter pieces collected in the *Big woods* anthology.³ Forming a coherent chronological sequence, Faulkner's hunting stories collectively illustrate one major process. To label it most comprehensively, it is the process of a continuous and irreversible change that has been affecting the nature-man-civilization force system on the American continent for the last one hundred years. What could be more revealing of whatever subtle changes take place than hunting when nature as the wilderness, men as hunters and civilization as their equipment and mental background come into interplay and interaction? Faulkner's stories analyze successive stages in the process from about 1860 to approximately the middle 1940's, recording the progressive devastation of the wilderness in the American South and the simultaneous extinction of the ways of life its proximity was a source of. What Norman Mailer's book of 1967 does is to pick up Faulkner's theme of nature-man-civilization power triangle and to bring up to date the over eighty-year long account to be found in *Big woods*. Eighty years is a long time, sufficiently long to open up a perspective from which the most important characteristics of the power-shift process can be recognized: what course it follows, with what speed and towards what destination. It is the purpose of this article to show how *Why are we in Vietnam?* follows the track set out in *Big woods* and how it eventually reaches that point which the chronology of Faulkner's stories continuously implies as an inevitable future development: when nature is altogether eliminated from the power triangle as no longer an independent element.

One important qualification concerning Mailer's novel has to be introduced at this point. *Why are we in Vietnam?* is a book which makes ambiguity its virtue. Written with a very deliberate elusiveness, aggressively evasive and inconclusive, it repeatedly urges us to be distrustful, to give no credit, to beware of taking for granted any of the things it says. This includes calling into question even such basic matters as the identity of its narrator and the credibility of his version of events. And yet, no matter how frequently we are made to hear that voice which mocks both itself and us who take him seriously, there is only one version of the story which the book elaborates continuously and thoroughly. It assures that the narrator is a white Texan boy relating his real experience; not a mysterious Harlem Negro who — it is suggested at some point — might be merely imagining himself to be participating in a safari hunt. It is this version that has been selected for analysis

³ Faulkner (1955). The anthology contains "The bear", "The old people", "A bear hunt", "Race at morning", each introduced by a prelude and the final one followed by an epilogue. The preludes and the epilogue are untitled. Most of them can be identified as extracts from or versions of the stories included in Faulkner (1965).

here, and this is, basically, how *Why are we in Vietnam?* has been approached by critics.⁴

As has already been said, Faulkner's hunting stories form a chronological sequence with a very strongly accented chronology employing people, events and even geographical changes to mark the passing of years. Time is measured in them with successive November hunting seasons in the eighty year life of Isaac McCaslin, the character around which most of Faulkner's hunting fiction is centered. Whatever happens in the woods is dated in relation to his age. The mongrel Lion is caught and tamed when the boy is fifteen, Boon Hogganback kills Old Ben, the bear, when the boy is sixteen, he is seventeen when Major de Spain sells the land to a lumber company, and well past eighty when the wilderness he used to know ceases to exist. The rhythm of passing years is yet further stressed as hunters alive in one story reappear in another only in the nostalgic memories of those who outlived them or as episodes which constitute the present of "The bear" or "The old people" turn into markers of times long gone in "Race at morning" and "Delta autumn". What was once the present dissolves into legend. The woods surrounding Jefferson shrink and give way to cotton fields. When Ike is sixteen they are a twenty four hour journey by wagon and on horseback; sixty years later the hunters have to drive 200 miles by car to reach them.

Physical changes affecting the Big Bottom woods coincide with and frequently accelerate the less evident but more profound processes of psychological transformation of Faulkner's hunters. The hunting ethic which they recognize and follow undergoes a radical modification. So does the relationship between the lives of the huntsmen in and out of the woods. The shift is from the Indian to the civilized man, the woodsman to the townsman.

In Faulkner's stories there still coexist side by side, but already with different chances for survival, at least three different generations of hunters. Their grouping is not necessarily with regard to their age or race but rather by their attitudes and modes of thinking. The oldest generation is that of Sam Fathers. It recognizes and respects hunting laws bequeathed to white man by the pre-white Indian traditions, and it is a generation of hunters,

not white, nor black, nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive...within the wilderness in an ancient and unremitting contest according to ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter (Faulkner 1965:191-192).

Here the key words are "will", "hardihood", "skill", "ancient and immitigable rules" and maybe even more than any of them, "humility". Together with pride, not mentioned in the quotation, humility and skill amount to chief

⁴ For a comprehensive study of ambiguity in *Why are we in Vietnam?* see Poirier (1972: 132-137) and Tanner (1971: 369).

virtues in Sam Fathers' hunting world. Learning them and absorbing them and balancing them is the stuff of every young hunter's apprenticeship to the woods. They are the humility of somebody who acknowledges his fragility and impotence against the woods and realizes how illusory is the power yielded by the gun and by the compass; skill of knowing how to shoot and what to shoot, when to shoot and more important when *not* to shoot, when to kill and what to do with the game afterwards; pride of possessing the skill and making use of it in what is not a casual episode but a yearly ceremony, a ritualized contest between men and beasts.⁶ To kill an animal a man has to prove himself worthy of its blood — or *his* blood rather, as animals for Sam Fathers are "chiefs" and "grandfathers". The way to show oneself as deserving the right to take life away is through a prolonged introductory ritual testing one's patience, endurance, persistence, self-control and the limits of one's fear. The test is meant to absolve one "from weakness and regret... not from love and pity for all which lived and ran, and then ceased to live in a second in the very midst of splendor and speed, but from weakness and regret" (Faulkner 1955 : 133). So that when a bear or a deer is finally shot, its death is accepted "humbly and joyfully, with abnegation and with pride, too" (Faulkner 1955 : 133), Chickasaw Indian way. "I slew you; my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct afterwards must become your death" (Faulkner 1955 : 133).

But Sam belongs to an order already doomed. He dies leaving behind a successor to it in the person of Isaac McCaslin; but seventy years later when Isaac in turn nears his nineties, he is already fully aware of his complete desolation and displacement. "My kin (are) men whose ghosts alone still companion me: De Spain and Compson and the Old Walter Ewell and Hogganback" (Faulkner 1955 : 208). As for the rest, "They call me 'uncle Ike' now and few of them even care how much past eighty I am: all they care is what I myself know too: that I probably no longer have any business making this trip" (Faulkner 1955 : 200), (to the Big Bottom woods each November). It is not in Ike's power to oppose the course of things. As the woods shrink and retreat southward to the delta of the river, the people who take over the fertile land find themselves increasingly absorbed in their workaday world, the world which continually expands, grows in complexity and claims more and more of their attention. Consequently, the old time hunter's loyalty to the woods must give way to his successor's loyalty which he, however, owes primarily to the world and the business without them. Not incidentally, neither Sam nor Isaac owe much to society in terms of property or family obligations. Sam towards the end of his life withdraws into the woods altogether. Ike, though he lives in Jefferson for most of the year, views his town

⁶ On the ceremonial character of hunting in Faulkner's fiction see Utley et al. (1964: 233-260).

house and his town life only "as a way station in which to pass the time waiting for November again" (Faulkner 1955 : 208). It is a matter of course that once they, full time woodsmen and huntsmen, get replaced by men "with one foot straddled into a farm and another foot straddled into a bank" (Faulkner 1965 : 250), the old emotional ties with the woods will loosen with each successive year. Increasingly distant, less rewarding in terms of trophies, the woods slip from that sphere of affection men used to reserve for them as a part of their patrimonies. The affection gone, the new hunter finds in himself less and less justification for the self-discipline and honor with which the old time one respected the unwritten code of the wilderness. Justifications provided by logic, hunting laws and licences cannot restore the old equilibrium.

Occasionally, in the stories dealing with times chronologically nearer to the present, Faulkner will still introduce figures of belated adherents to the old tradition like the nameless boy in "Race at morning", very Ike-like in his enthusiasm for hunting and affection for the woods. He tries to reconcile the two worlds — the wilderness and the civilization without it. In the boy's own words,

I thought about how maybe planting and working and then harvesting oats and cotton and beans and hay wasn't jest me and Mister Ernest done three hundred and fifty one days to fill in the time until we could come back hunting but it was something we had to do, and to do honest and good during the three hundred and fifty one days to have the right to come back into the big woods and hunt for the other fourteen. And so the hunting and farming wasn't two different things at all — they was jest the other side of each other (Faulkner 1955:195).

So again the familiar insistence on the right to hunt which is not given free but has to be earned, though here with a new accent, an attempt to incorporate the eleven and half months of workaday life into the hunter's life as a meaningful part of it. But Faulkner leaves no doubt as to the following: that the scope, complexity and aggressiveness of the civilization devastating the wilderness require that it be handled by the kind of experience which man cannot acquire being only a farmer and a hunter, even if, unlike most, he is able to reconcile the two meaningfully. This is what the boy's friend and master explains to him saying that nowadays (middle 1940's), farming and hunting

ain't enough any more. Time was when all man had to do was just farm eleven and half months and hunt the other half. But now just to belong to the farming business and the hunting business ain't enough. You got to belong to the business of mankind (Faulkner 1955:196).

How in the years to come the necessity to manage and control "the business of mankind" will condition and cripple the hunter to the extent of rendering him unable to relate to nature otherwise than through aggressiveness is already the stuff of Mailer's *Why are we in Vietnam?* Faulkner essentially only predicts

that the reconciliation postulated by the boy cannot save either the wilderness or the way of life connected with it because the world has grown too complex and too intricate to care what becomes of them.

Another important fact about the boy of "Race at morning" is that dreaming his dreams of restoring the old ways he is but an isolated phenomenon, merely an individual conservative in his yearnings. He stands outside the mainstream, cannot influence or even perturb the direction in which Faulkner's hunting stories unmistakably progress as their setting changes from the 1890's through the 1920's to the 1940's. More significant of the direction are the guest hunters who at some point appear in "The bear", townsmen, "terrified strangers in new hunting clothes and boots who had been lost all day until Sam Fathers went out and got them" (Faulkner 1965: 225). So is Roth Edmonds, Isaac's relative and junior by thirty years, who in the episode closing *Big woods* symbolically exchanges his rifle for a shotgun to kill with it a doe and a fawn.⁸ Hunting gradually ceases to be a way of life governed by ancient rules and rhythms of the wilderness, independent of and unaffected by civilization. It becomes instead an occasional activity divorced from all the meaning which ritual and passionate devotion yielded to it. A pastime of town dwellers, it becomes subject to attitudes and expectations which the town-born hunter carries along with him into the woods as a part of civilizational background.

As Faulkner's stories progress through eighty years registering step by step the devastation of the Southern wilderness and calling into life a spectrum of hunters of ever lowering morale and deteriorating skill, the coming of Rusty Jethroe of *Why are we in Vietnam?* and of the entire situation of Mailer's novel becomes inevitable. It is a successive — if not the final — stage in the process described by Faulkner, a predictable development implied by the order in which Sam, Isaac, the boy, the guest hunters and Roth succeed each other in his stories.

Why are we in Vietnam?, though a big game hunt is its subject and the last American wilderness the locale of its action, is not a narrative of hunting in the wilderness in the sense Faulkner's stories were. The twenty years that have elapsed since Faulkner left off his account seem to have almost obliterated the dichotomy that still existed in his stories — that of civilization and the wilderness. *Why are we in Vietnam?* is already a book primarily about America and American civilization transported in the form of technology, organization and mentality into the wilderness for the purpose of obtaining

⁸ In the *Go down, Moses* version of "Delta autumn" Roth kills only a doe. In *Big woods* the corresponding conversation between Ike and Legate is as follows: "'Who killed it?' I say. 'It was Roth', answering that too. 'It was a doe'... 'All right', I say. 'Bring it in.' 'All of it?', Legate says. 'All of it?' I say. 'You mean he shot two of them?' 'That other one is pretty old and tough', Legate says." (Faulkner 1955:210).

animal trophies. To be exact — into what used to be the wilderness, but no longer is, because that land of Mailer's narrative seemingly beyond the range of civilizational influences turns out to be deprived of what has been traditionally regarded as its distinctive qualities: integrity and perennial order. Mailer's wilderness turns out to be already no more than a park in the civilizational city covering the whole continent, a park which, however vast, is troubled by the same smog, dirt and diseases that trouble the streets.

The setting of *Why are we in Vietnam?* is the last frontier of American wilderness, Alaska Brooks Range. It is a 3000 mile stretch of land, at the face of it still virgin and untouched. All arctic birch and alder and black spruce, "so full of boon in the smell it could make you a religious nut" (Mailer 1970a:47), and peaks and mountain valleys "no man ever saw from the center, only from the air" (Mailer 1970a:121), the territory still abounds in bear, caribou, wolf and moose. But its peace and harmony, Mailer warns right at the beginning of the book, are misleading and superficial. Even though the territory stands intact, what he calls its "psychic ecology" has been exploded into "a mosaic" (Mailer 1970a:78). Putting aside for the time being the question of what psychic ecology is, let us survey the agents of its disruption.

The one immediately recognizable, though neither the sole one nor the most important, is hunting. With enormous consequences it has been discovered to be marketable and in *Why are we in Vietnam?* it is already sold in weekly portions for three thousand dollars per person with a "guaranteed bear trophy in the specification of the safari contract" (Mailer 1970a:44) and "a rebate of 500 dollars per head if we neglect to get you in proper range for a shot at a visible grizzly" (Mailer 1970a:44). Hunting has turned into a large scale business employing full time professional guides and taking advantage of recent technology including helicopters and walkie-talkies. Their services are advertised in carefully calculated phraseology appealing to status ambitions, stereotypes of manhood, the competitive spirit and youthful yearnings for romance and adventure, all meant to attract whoever can afford the price.

We have the best guide in Alaska, and the finest clientele. We're here to take you around and give you *proper* hunting. We're not in competition with the counters. There are counters out in that wilderness... (who) hunt from four in the morning to midnight before they get back to camp, up at four again, they bring out every last piece of meat they can tote, or they don't even cut themselves a steak, just take the head and leave the flesh, imagine! and they maim... they maim game all over the damn place and then let them suffer. We ain't like that. We have the finest people in America come to us, we wouldn't even know how to advertise — we just hope too many people don't hear about us or the simple, fine standard of clientele we possess might be adulterated. Because we offer hunting which is reasonable, decent in its risk, fair to the game, and not utterly deprived of comfort. We do not consider it decadent to have a book or two in the bunkhouse, and if Big Luke knows

how to make a mixed drink, well, whiskey sours sweeten the heart after a long day of hunting (Mailer 1970a:45-46).

This is the new style hunting. It is considered reasonable and efficient. Everything is taken care of, planned and calculated. Trophies are guaranteed, risk is decent and comfort available at request.

As a result of this commercialization the entire emotional context of hunting alters dramatically. What the old time hunter accepted humbly and with pride as a sign of the wilderness acknowledging his long tested skill and patience, will be *demand*ed by a man who paid a company 3000 dollars for "the experience of his lifetime". Moreover, if there are guides of better reputation and of poorer reputation then buying an expedition with a renowned guide immediately traps the hunter in a fierce prestige game. This is the case of Rusty Jethroe, a top executive from Dallas, who arrives in the Brooks Range accompanied by his son, D. J., his son's friend, Tex, and his two subordinates Pete and Bill. His trip has been reserved eighteen months in advance. It is in his son's words, "a class A hunting trip — a Charley Wilson, John Glenn, Arnold Palmer, Gary Cooper kind of trip, next thing in top category to a Jackie Kennedy Bobby Kennedy Ethel and the kids trip" (Mailer 1970a:37). His guide is a celebrated Big Luke, again in D. J.'s words, "the type that is a guide for Charley Wilson or Roger Blough, or J. Edgar — I mean that's who you got to be if you want to get this guide right away" (Mailer 1970a:33). Having bought, then, a week with Big Luke in the Brooks Range, Rusty *must* bring a bear trophy home. He must get it to spite Luke whom he suspects of a scornful and patronizing attitude, to show him that though he is not one of his famous named clients he is nevertheless as worthy of the trip's reputation as any of them. He must prove to others and to himself that he is a hunter at least equally good and preferably better than his adolescent son (over whom he gradually loses all control) and definitely a more skillful one than his two subordinates. He needs the bear trophy to get rid of a nightmare that torments him throughout the safari: that he comes back to Dallas with only a set of caribou antlers and no bear head, and his office staff send him for Christmas an anonymous gift of a pair of antlers of a Texas buck "twice the antlers in width of measurement and holding four more points than the one he air-freighted back from Alaska — you know they'll do that at the office if they got to dig up an old ranch hand's bones to glue them together for antlers" (Mailer 1970a:40). So when at some point in the story Tex and Pete have already shot one bear each, and he has not even fired at any yet, Rusty panics. He quarrels hysterically with the guide and makes demands,

Listen Luke, here is what I suspect is true, it is that you are the Maharajah of this woods and this range of earth, and so I'm expecting you to make the impossible become directly possible and we are going to carry our stretch of hunting to what I would call a successful termination (Mailer 1970a:44).

What aggravates the tensions within the safari group and exposes mercilessly all the greed, aggressiveness and rivalry motivating the hunters is time, the short time they have at their disposal. One essential factor which decided the slow, unhurried pace of hunting in Faulkner's stories is missing in *Why are we in Vietnam?* The factor, impossible under the new commercialized conditions, is the awareness of Faulkner's hunter that there is no need to hurry because if he does not kill his buck or deer one season, the same buck and the same deer will be there in the woods waiting for him next year and the year after and, if need be, the year after that too. The possibility of reconstructing the desired situation practically endlessly gives ease to Faulkner's hunter. It relieves tension, lessens fever and aggression. In "Race at morning" Mister Ernest asks a question which clearly reveals what kind of attitude may build up in the mind of a hunter confident in the infallible recurrence of opportunities,

Which would you rather have? His (the buck's) head and hide on the kitchen floor yonder and half his meat in a pickup truck on the way to Yoknapatawpha County, or him with his head and hide and meat together over yonder in that brake waiting for next November for us to run him again? (Faulkner 1955:197)

The pleasure of hunting is derived primarily from tracking the animal, running it, testing its speed and vigilance against one's own, and not from the very act of killing. Towards the buck or the bear encountered yearly in the same yearly ceremony the hunter develops a feeling, sometimes almost an affectionate one which will keep him from breaking rules and hunting out of season, for instance, and in some cases may even make him reluctant to pull the trigger. An obvious example in Faulkner's fiction is Old Ben, a bear given a human name, attributed human qualities, tracked for decades and when finally bayed — killed almost in grief.

Which of these relationships can be formed within one single week never to be repeated? Haste generated by greed and ambitions allows no distraction from the one aim the hunter has, which is to shoot within the week more game than others and samples big enough or rare enough to impress his companions. Thus, hunting gets reduced to a one-dimensional experience — in killing. Everything else is disposed of as redundant. Tracking, that prolonged introduction in the old time hunting meant to prepare and to calm, is completely eliminated. Rusty has a guide who knows where the good stands are, and the guide has a helicopter to take the guests in 15 minutes to where otherwise it would take them five hours of climbing to reach. The helicopter can, sometimes, take care of running game into gun as well. The new style hunting is a war, war declared on animals. This is not an overstatement. This is the terms in which Rusty and his company think and talk of hunting. Animals are enemies and the more so that they flee. They must be located, bombed

and superblasted. Totally anonymous, mere moving targets in the scope, they deserve no quarter, not even painless and quick death.

Break the shoulderbone and they can't run. Sure. That's where I want my power. Right there. Right then. Maybe a professional hunter takes pride in dropping an animal by picking it off in a vital spot — but I like the feeling that if I miss a vital area I can still count on the big impact knocking them down, killing them by the total impact, shock! It's like aerial bombardment in the last Big War (Mailer 1970a: 59).

Nothing strikes a reader of Faulkner and of Mailer more than how different are the deaths which the animals die in their fiction. Faulkner makes death almost imperceptible, unreal: "Now, Sam Fathers said, shoot quick and slow... Then he was standing over the buck where it lay on the wet earth still in the attitude of speed and not looking at all dead" (Faulkner 1955:113). Disregarding Faulkner's obvious sentiments towards the world he describes, his hunters are too good craftsmen to maim. In *Why are we in Vietnam?* death is nauseating. Mailer is clinical in his descriptions of animals massacred with a dozen of cartridges. He spares no detail of where the bullet entered and what it shattered into a bloody mess and where it left "leaving a hole to put your arm in, all your arm, up to the shoulder if you are not squeamish" (Mailer 1970a:67). The animals die with their heads, hides and antlers smashed, in pools of blood ten feet in diameter, never on "the wet earth, still in the attitude of speed". And again the cruelty of Mailer's presentation may of course be ascribed to his avowed persistence in talking about violence, in whatever form, loud instead of being elegant about it, but at the same time the descriptions in question are only a logical consequence of his having introduced into the story Rusty and his companions. Unlike Faulkner's hunters, they are nervous and in a fever to score, to hit and to kill. So they load their superprecise guns twice as much as necessary and they occasionally fire a good shot, but most of the time they maim.

That hunting has become what it is in *Why are we in Vietnam?* is not a matter that affects only hunters and their individual victims by shaming the former and inflicting suffering upon the latter. The fact is made in the book to be of much more general significance. And here the concept of "psychic ecology" has to be briefly returned to. The northern wilderness in Mailer's novel assumes the characteristics of a complex organism possessed of an acute nervous system capable of receiving and transmitting messages. Thus the anxiety of a caribou chased with a helicopter, hypnotized by "the sound of air boiling, breaking, roaring and tearing, and the whine — what cry of what beast?" (Mailer 1970a:72) or the pain felt by a grizzly with bullet-shattered intestines, do not remain their individual experiences but are conveyed to the entire animal world, and even more than that, to the inanimate world — trees, grass, snow, peaks and rocks. "Because this is above the Circle, man,

every mind, human, animal, even vegetable, certainly mineral... is tuned to the same place" (Mailer 1970a:79). This means that though less conspicuously than with axes and saws, the wilderness is nevertheless being constantly assaulted by civilization by means of all those messages about human (read: hunters') hatred, frustration and aggressiveness and animal pain and fear that circulate over the whole territory. To what effect, is diagnosed by an Indian guide in Alaska who says, "Brooks Range no wilderness now. Airplane go over the head, animal no wild no more, now crazy" (Mailer 1970a:46).

The above view of nature as a single organism, though echoing the American Indian perception of the world, is not the guide's, however. It constitutes a part of a broader belief entertained by the narrator of *Why are we in Vietnam?*, D. J., a sixteen-year-old participant in the safari. Before the implications of his view can be discussed, a few things have to be said about D. J. He stands out from the safari group.⁷ He shoots better and does not maim. Feverish with the hunt as he is, alone among the hunters he perceives and responds to the overwhelming beauty of the arctic world he has found himself in. Genuinely delighted with its landscape and its animals, he repeatedly celebrates them throughout his narrative in a language uncommonly quiet and lyrical for him, frequently almost bordering on poetry. The tone of his narrative otherwise ironical, caustic, often sarcastic, shows him extremely scornful of the kind of hunting he witnesses. He is contemptuous of his brutal "corporate minded" father and his accompanying "flunkies", even more so of Big Luke, corrupted by fame and boredom. He is also evidently derisive of some of his own motives and impulses which he acknowledges to be equally competitive as those of his father: "D. J.'s not Rusty's son for nothing" (Mailer 1970a:39). But what sets him apart from his companions more strikingly than any of these, is the yearning which pervades his whole account of the trip. It is the yearning for the Faulknerian situation when the hunter stops over the game he has shot with the feeling that he deserved the animal's death, and that through his persistence and skill he has shown himself worthy of its blood. Nowhere in the novel do the grief and disappointment that his is not such a case, sound as clear as in D. J.'s account of how he shot his first animal in Alaska.

Nothing so great as the Alaska mountain goat, yeah, you get up at three A. M. in tent camp up high above timber, and you climb, man, on foot above timber, for three hours till dawn, and then climb higher still crabbing up sixty-degree rock slopes, and walking with all heart shit up in your throat along a ledge twelve inches or less, yeah, ooh, making it up, and higher still, *quietly*, and then if you good, you're up there, up above Master Mountain Goat, and when you start shooting at him, he does a step dance like an old Negro heel-and-toe tap man falling down stairs or flying up them, and the first animal D. J. got in Alaska was a mountain goat at two hundred

⁷ For a discussion of whether or not D. J. may be treated as Mailer's alternative to Rusty see Scott (1973: 79–81).

and fifty yards, and with one shot, animal stood on its nose for one long beat of a second, and then did a running dying dance for fifty yards down the rocks like a fakir sprinting through flaming coals, and when he died, *Wham!* the pain of his exploding heart shot like an arrow into D. J.'s heart, and the animals had gotten him, they were talking all around him now, communicating the unspoken unseen unmeasurable electromagnetism and wave of all the psychic circuits of all the wild Alaska, and he was only part of them, and part he was of gasoline of Texas, the asshole sulfur smell of money-oil clinging to the helicopter, cause he had not gotten that goat by getting up in the 3 A. M. morning and climbing the mountain, no... that was how D. J. got his mountain goat: he was flown at seven in the morning up to the top of a spiky ridge not too unlike the moon, set down in a bowl...and waited and in two hours had his shot (Mailer 1970a:69).

So first, a long, almost dream-like sequence, the situation yearned for, fatigue embraced as a part of the contest, then following it, a further qualification, "if you good, you're up above Master Mountain Goat", not a buck, not a goat but Master Mountain Goat, which is to say, if you do outfox him you are *really* good. And immediately following that a dry, quick registration of reality — the helicopter and idle waiting. In an act summing up his disappointment and frustration D. J. refuses to look, except once, at his trophy, the goat's head. He believes he noticed mockery in the dead eyes of the animal, ridiculing him and what he himself regards as a doubtful success.

D. J.'s longings evocative of the old hunting values recognized in "The bear", make him embrace with enthusiasm any experience which he can classify as "real" as opposed to their simplified, marketable versions offered by Obungekat Safari Group. Thence his delight and excitement when Rusty, still without the bear trophy and convinced of Luke's ill will, decides to separate from the group and to try on his own. When he confides in D. J. with his plan, they both run away. In D. J.'s account of their solitary hunt hardly anything gets more stress than the reality of their experiences. "Rusty sprints off with D. J., making *real* rough woodsman time through the woods... they are *real* good, man, tight as combat buddies..." (Mailer 1970a:85).⁸ In his enthusiasm for the real, D. J. almost stylizes his whole account of the event into something like an old time hunting story with a young hunter listening to an old hunter who patiently explains, teaches and passes on to his disciple bits of hunting wisdom like "the only time when a good man with a good rifle is in trouble is when he steps from sunlight into shadow, cos there's two or three seconds you can't see" (Mailer 1970a:90). And D. J., delighted with the real hunt, even declares a ceasefire in his more than three-year long war with his father. Later, when the spell is broken by Rusty's taking claim of the bear which was really D. J.'s, and the old relationships between the two men and in the camp are reestablished, D. J. runs away again, this time with Tex, and this time with a clearly stated intention of purging themselves of all the disgust

⁸ Emphasis added.

and frustration which hunting with Luke has been the source of for both of them. Up in the mountains, however, feeling that running away alone is not enough to cut them off, even in their own eyes, from what they witnessed and were a part of during the safari, they decide to leave their guns behind, and go on climbing with only the rudimentary equipment of a tent, sleeping bags, binoculars and some canned food to keep them from frost and starvation. In anticipation of another real situation which will test their resourcefulness, ingenuity and intelligence in facing risk — this time real and not the "decent risk" of the safari advertisement — they both set off in a spirit approaching exhilaration. "They as light as if they lost gravity. D. J. could take a ten-foot spring. If it wasn't cold ass this morning he'd be ready to go naked" (Mailer 1970a:121).

The two episodes mark the climax in D. J.'s narrative. Both solitary trips finally determine his human relationships: with Tex positively and with Rusty once and for all negatively. They are also his decisive encounters with nature when he experiences it most intensely and arrives at his final understanding of it. Removed from the civilizational context of the camp and its frustrating simplifications, ruthlessness and fraudulent situations, D. J. grows extremely attentive to the world around him. When he tracks his first bear, his attentiveness amounts to something like total awareness of every smell, every quietest sound, every shade of color. He claims he can even sense — like a radar — invisible shapes moving somewhere in the depth of the thicket. When in a more drastic relinquishment of civilization he and Tex abandon their guns and, defenceless and disinterested, open up to watch, to listen, to absorb, their experience reaches its utmost intensity and lucidity. The boys hear the Voice of Nature speak to them.

Such moments of ultimate communication between man and Nature when he is allowed to decode its meaning and its teachings have a considerable tradition in American literature. An obvious example is Faulkner's Ike's venture into the woods, where having abandoned his gun, watch and compass, he encounters the Bear, a symbolic embodiment of the spirit of the Wilderness. A strong current in American literary tradition has likewise determined the outcome of such encounters and the character of messages men read in such circumstances. From Emerson, through Thoreau, Twain, Whitman, to Faulkner and Hemingway, Nature has always revealed to men the existence of order, sanity and wisdom. To recall Emerson's phrase, "In the woods we return to reason and faith" (Emerson 1941:76).

This tradition is openly defied in *Why are we in Vietnam?* To be sure, Mailer's boys do experience the Northern wilderness — if only at the beginning — as harmonious and beautiful. And at the outset of the trip the beauty of it, like they expected it would, comforts, purifies and soothes. But soon they are both overcome with what D. J. identifies as "the sorrow of the North,

the great sorrow up here, brought by leaves and wind, a speechless, electric gathering of woe, no peace in the North" (Mailer 1970a:136). Animal life in the tundra, they discover, is permeated with suffering and cruelty almost commensurable with what they witnessed when hunting with Luke. Animals can murder savagely and mindlessly and unnecessarily, like the bear they watch tearing open a live caribou yearling to devour its entrails though "he's not heart in it", and then ripping it to pieces without any apparent reason. And following the boys' discovery of madness in animals comes a realization of a negative, destructive power emanating from the inanimate nature. Its sad frozen beauty is evil capable of generating aggression and murderous instincts in men. In the culminating scene of *Why are we in Vietnam?* the boys' ecstatic admiration for the splendor of Aurora Borealis turns into homosexual fantasies in which sex, as elsewhere in Mailer's writings, is a way of dominating and destroying.⁹ The same Aurora Borealis lights are finally the medium through which nature communicates its message to the boys: a revengeful and malevolent "Go out and kill".

The lights were saying that there was something up here and it was really here, yeah, God was here, and he was real and no man was he but a beast, some beast of a giant paw and cavernous mouth with a full cave's breath and fangs and secret call... 'Go out and kill — fulfill my will, go and kill' (Mailer 1970a:139 - 140).

The nature of older American literature, that perfect and benevolent instructor to whoever weary of civilization needed confirmation that order and sanity had their say in the world, turns in Mailer's vision into a vicious, malign force.

But the identity of the voice D. J. and Tex heard in the North is problematic. The wilderness of *Why are we in Vietnam?* may be a victim of some power without it. It may serve as a mouthpiece for messages that are not its own. Such are the implications of what we may regard as D. J.'s rationalization of his Northern experience, a theory which he weaves into his narrative and which questions the legitimacy of talking about the nature-civilization dichotomy in the contemporary world. The theory starts from simple, established facts of physics: the existence of the electromagnetic field of the Earth and its concentration near the Poles. Another point of departure are the qualities of some crystals which when placed in an electromagnetic field will vibrate to its modulations decoding thus, in a sense, its characteristics. These facts D. J. extrapolates in a science-fiction-like manner into the realm of the yet unproved, at times fantastic though theoretically not inconceivable.¹⁰ The

⁹ See Jameson (1972:190) and Leeds (1969:195).

¹⁰ Interviewed by Laura Adams, Mailer said: "In *Why are we in Vietnam?* I suppose I trusted metaphor to a degree I've never trusted it before. I worked on the assumption that if I had a metaphor where I might, for example, mix electromagnetism and pine sap in a tree that there was something there. Something scientific yet to be discovered... There may be perfectly good physics behind what seems to be metaphorical" (Adams 1975:207).

electromagnetic field which enshrouds the Earth is for D. J. a subject of continuous disturbances. They result from every minute change involving electricity and occurring at the surface of the planet or inside it, which really means from *any* change, as in *Why are we in Vietnam?* everything from humans to minerals is endowed with electrical powers. Characteristics of those disturbances are, then, coded messages about whatever produced them. Over the Alaska polar region the electromagnetic field is denser and stronger than elsewhere. As the land is full of mountains and every mountain has got ice on its top — crystals of ice, to be exact, attributed to by D. J. the qualities of quartz crystals — the Brooks Range turns in D. J.'s scheme into a gigantic crystal oscillator vibrating to the information-loaded modulations of the electromagnetic waves. D. J.'s Alaska is a "crystal receiver of the continent" (Mailer 1970a:118). All messages of North America go up the Brooks Range there to be decoded and passed on through the land's nervous system, its local electromagnetic field, to all of its animate and inanimate cells.

North American civilization, which is the most immediate source of electromagnetic messages flowing to Alaska, stands in *Why are we in Vietnam?* for a clearly defined set of qualities. It is typified and incorporated in the character of Rusty, who is its most complete and perfect product.¹¹ The barbarism with which he invades the Brooks Range, his maniacal desire for power, obsession with and absolute trust in technology, are the effects of the whole life conditioning he received while functioning in the American system. The system has been for years denounced by Mailer as mad, most explicitly in *The armies of the night*, where the state of the country was diagnosed as that of "a controlled, even fiercely controlled schizophrenia which had been deepening within the years... schizophrenia so deep that the foul brutalities of the war in Vietnam were the only cure possible for the condition since the expression of brutality offers a definite if temporary relief to the schizophrenic" (Mailer 1970b:48).

In *Why are we in Vietnam?* D. J.'s theory argues that via electromagnetism America's insanity proliferates. Emanated by the continent, a massive negative power of which the evil hauled into the North by the hunters is only an insignificant subcurrent, disrupts the psychomagnetic field of the wilderness. Like an organism overcharged with too much negative inload, the Alaskan nature disintegrates: animals change their psychology, the woods lose their monumental cool. In *Why are we in Vietnam?* nature goes insane.

D. J.'s experience of the polar wilderness and his explanatory theory, when viewed in the context of Faulkner's hunting stories, mark the terminal

¹¹ Rusty described in *Why are we in Vietnam?* as "the cream of Corporation corporateness" (p. 222) is referred to in *The armies of the night* as "the walking American lobotomy" (p. 210).

stage in the process of devastation of American nature. The process recorded by Faulkner in its earlier stages and predicted in its outcome is completed in Mailer's novel. In *Why are we in Vietnam?* nature ceases to exist. Not on the physical level; its last frontier, the Alaska tundra, is still an impressively vast and rich piece of land. But the process of destruction is already accomplished in its psychological dimensions. Rusty's case may serve here as a very clear example. In "The bear", the hunters could still abandon for the two weeks of hunting season most of the conventions regulating their workaday lives, and they did it in recognition of and tribute to the ancient laws of the woods. The wilderness functioned in their collective consciousness as a separate system, entering which they assumed certain responsibilities and accepted conditions that were not theirs but Nature's. In *Why are we in Vietnam?*, Rusty placed in the same situation never sloughs his civilizational skin, his "corporation layers", as D. J. labels them; neither, most probably, does he perceive any necessity of doing it. For him the wilderness is already an integral part of his business world, and the safari is no more than a business trip serving to strengthen his position in his family, in his office and in the society at large.

Long dead for Rusty, Nature dies for his son in the course of their week in Alaska. When he sets out for the tundra, D. J., like a spiritual descendant of Faulkner's Great Hunters, still believes the wilderness is a separate independent entity capable of counteracting the influences of the world he lives in. He hopes nature can heal and purge, and what is more important, he *wants* to be purified by it. But the theory he constructs to rationalize the go-out-and-kill summoning, shows him already burying his idealistic notions. Civilizational encroachments have warped and crippled nature. It has lost, D. J. says, its psychomagnetic independence, its identity and integrity. It has been absorbed, incorporated into the global civilization, and it has assumed all of the characteristics of the world to which it was once regarded a counterbalance.

The multidimensional ambiguity of *Why are we in Vietnam?* allows also another interpretation of D. J.'s experience. Since he is the sole narrator of the story, his version of events must be looked upon as liable to be a more or less deliberate distortion of the truth. No matter how much trust the reader tends to put in D. J.'s voice which, though maniacally assertive, is nevertheless at the same time extremely self-ironical and self-critical, a possibility cannot be excluded that D. J. miscalculates the degree of his independence allowed by his background. He may be much more the son of his father than he admits or realizes, and it is not inconceivable that he merely projects upon Northern nature his own destructive instincts. Very significantly, however, the interpretation does not affect what has been said here about the place ascribed to Nature in *Why are we in Vietnam?* Whether indeed itself warped, as D. J.'s theory

postulates, or only interpreted to be so by men already unable to free themselves from their civilization-shaped consciousness, Nature in Mailer's novel gets excluded from the Faulknerian power triangle and denied the status of an independent power.¹²

Faulkner's *Big woods* end on a prophetic note. The very final words of the book, uttered by Isaac McCaslin, are: "This land, said the old hunter. No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution. The very people who destroyed them will accomplish their revenge" (Faulkner 1955:112). In *Why are we in Vietnam?* D. J. notably recalls his hunting experiences on the vigil of his and Tex's departure for Vietnam to fight in the war. And we are aware that this successive trip of the boys has much to do with the call they heard in the North. They set out to fulfill its summoning, to go and kill, and not animals this time. Writing elsewhere on conditions of combat in Vietnam, Mailer said, "they excite a secret passion for hunting other humans" (Mailer 1970b:197). The prevailing impression at the end of the book is that of madness completing a full circle. The insane voice of nature, ravished and warped by men, encourages and energizes the same men, or their children, to turn against their own kind.

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¹² D. J.'s theory may also be viewed as an attempt to sustain what e.g. D. H. Lawrence considered to be a literature-created myth of Benevolent Nature (see Lawrence 1972: 55—56). According to R. Poirier (1972: 139—142), the two boys' experience of Alaska is almost entirely preconditioned by its literary antecedents, of which both of them are perfectly aware. The very term "purification ceremony" with which they label their lonely trip is for Poirier (1972: 141) "something out of literary handbook metaphor manual". Conditioned by literature in what to expect of their encounter with the wilderness, D. J., when he finds the message incompatible with the myth, recurses to his theory. The theory would be then a refusal to acknowledge what the message really meant, which was that the "center of things is insane". Consequently, Mailer's *Why are we in Vietnam?* would have to be viewed as Mailer's argument with the literary tradition which Faulkner's hunting stories represent.

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