

RESTRAINED RESPONSE

American Novels of the
Cold War and Korea,
1945–1962

ARNE AXELSSON

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Introduction

The aim of this work is to provide an overview of American war and military novels set in the 1945–1962 period. In doing so, it attempts to estimate the literary qualifications of that body of work and to add to our understanding of the period by relating the view of time and circumstances in these works to the picture emerging from other historical sources. The underlying assumption is that what finally constitutes the value of American military novels of the early postwar period is neither that they represent a lasting contribution to the canon of great American literature, nor that they form a unique body of historical information—although they may sometimes do both. Our reward for studying these works is the clear delineation of a period. The extraordinary degree to which military and civilian experiences and viewpoints were confronted, mixed, and fused in the early postwar years characterizes this era as strongly as any trait. American military novels operate in the very center of this field and could contribute by functioning as a lens with a variable focus, equally capable of sharp close-ups of detail—highlighting particular features of time and background as well as human relations and individual development—and wide-angle displays that bring out the common characteristics of a period or an area. By training this lens on the first phase of American adaptation to the kind of non-decisive confrontation typical of the period between World War II and Vietnam, we might achieve a unique perspective on the American reaction of restraint and measured response to unprecedented demands

and dangers, accompanied by valiant efforts to rise to the occasion and find new ways of meeting new challenges to American values and ideals.

Two major problems attend a study of this kind: the tracing of all relevant primary material, much of it out of print, ephemeral, and inadequately recorded, and the selection of works suitable for discussion in the text. An outline of the solution to the first problem is given in the introductory remarks to the Appendix, which lists key data and summaries of all works included in the investigation. The selection of novels for extended treatment was complicated by the fact that the literary critic's artistic and thematic criteria do not always tally with the historian's priorities: topically relevant writings are not necessarily of the highest quality, or even of marginal interest, in terms of literary craftsmanship or artistic creativity. In the end the choices were subjective: primarily, books were selected that were both representative of socio-literary phenomena and interesting as separate specimens.

As regards the time period, the overriding criterion is that a major part of the action take place between V-E Day and the Cuban Missile Crisis, so World War II novels and Vietnam War novels are not included. Then, the works are arranged in two main categories: those dealing with the 1945-1953 period and works set between 1954 and 1962. Geographical setting and thematic considerations decide further subdivision, each sub-category taking up a chapter or a major section. The second part of the Appendix lists the works ordered in such chapter-related categories.

The term "novel" as used in this study refers to a work of at least about 100 pages that tells a story (or several interrelated stories) in prose. The proportion between factual and fictional elements, however, is not a major consideration. The exact position of a work on a scale ranging from documentary reporting to fantastic storytelling is regarded as less important than the fact that a story is being told. As it happens, the overwhelming majority of the books treated would also be covered by any traditional definition of fictional writing.

Some flexibility has been applied to the identification of a key concept in the target area: American military experience. The military is that group in society whose primary function and responsibility concern armed conflicts between sovereign states. Broadly speaking, American military experience entails all that the American armed forces have been and done, whether directly related to war or not;

but, in practice, the focus is on those aspects of the military experience that are most closely associated with war. In the period studied, this includes postwar occupation, the Cold War, some aspects of the arms race and the space race, military training, barracks and ship-board life, and the armed conflict in Korea. Restrictivity has been exercised about including works dealing with international espionage, politics, and the science fiction of future wars but a few such novels have been found relevant to the mainstream of the American military experience. Throughout, the wide field of civilian-military relations has been used as an overlay of all these areas to bring out a more generally valid perspective on the period than what could have been achieved by an approach exclusively limited to military concerns.

The choice of the years 1953/54 and 1962 as demarcation dates may require some comment. Mainly, they marked points of culmination after times of increasing Cold War tensions, most tellingly revealed by the announcement of the policy of "massive retaliation" in early 1954 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962. Both climaxes were followed by some years of diminishing strain in superpower relations: in 1954-55 Stalin's successors turned out to be less intractable and gave a more conciliatory impression than expected—in June 1955, the Soviet Union even offered apologies and recompense for shooting down an American airplane over the Bering Strait. Similarly, in 1963, the shock waves of the Cuban scare created an international climate favoring improved relations between the great powers, which resulted in the "hot-line" connection between Washington and Moscow as well as the signing by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union of the atmospheric nuclear test ban treaty. Also, there are the obvious historical facts that in 1953 a major armed conflict in Far East Asia involving the American military had just ended, while in 1962 another such conflict was just starting to develop, a conflict that was to be the main concern of U.S. military people and politicians throughout the following decade. Even so, these dates should not be taken as historical watersheds beyond discussion. They do, however, constitute a convenient basis for imposing some order on a large and heterogeneous material.

As for the starting point of this study, it is clear that the year 1945 is a milestone in human history. It marks the ending of the largest and most destructive war ever perpetrated by man, killing more than forty million people—two-thirds of them civilians—and wounding perhaps twice that many. Almost 300,000 of those killed

and more than half a million of the wounded were Americans. These figures may seem almost insignificant compared with the losses of Germany and the Soviet Union but the changes following the conflict were no less momentous in America than elsewhere. Government had grown large and omnipresent, controlling an unprecedented percentage of the GNP and intruding itself on every aspect of national life, from deficit financing to race relations. Emerging from the war as the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world, the United States abandoned its traditional isolationism to be the standard-bearer of democracy and capitalism in a worldwide ideological struggle with an alien way of life committed to burying the west. Preeminence in science and technology guaranteed America's position in the world and brought the forces of nature under man's control to an extent and on a scale unimaginable only decades earlier. But that same science and technology also formed disturbing attachments to government and big business; disturbing, because, by some dark imperative poorly understood, this new creature threatened to dictate its own growth in an increasingly dangerous and dehumanized world.

In no sector of American life was the change brought by World War II more dramatic than in the military. For the first time in its history the United States was saddled with a large standing army. The size and importance of the military forces in peacetime America cast the armed services in political and policymaking roles for which they were poorly prepared by training and tradition. Soldiers and sailors who used to be leaders of men and masters of arms were now expected to be "managers of violence," to cope with the most disturbing revolution of all: the development in weaponry. During World War II the technology of armed combat changed so drastically that it affected the very nature of war. A profession wedded to tradition was cut off from its roots and left to find new bearings in a dangerous world seemingly adrift from the past.

Also, literature was necessarily affected by the drastic changes brought about by the war. To recollect in tranquillity a reality as unreal as that of Dresden, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima is difficult and demanding, for authors as for other human beings. The outcome of the war had upheld some all-important principles, the loss of which would have meant the virtual end of both life and literature as we know them. But the price had been staggering. The war had destroyed not only bodies, minds, and property, but also, it seemed, whatever remnants of beliefs in absolute values and in norms for human behav-

ior that had survived the disillusionment after World War I. If the World War II generation has not been labeled as "lost" in the same sense as the victims of the earlier war, one reason which suggests itself is that in the forties there was precious little left to lose.

On the other hand, what little there was really was precious; between the two world wars it had enabled writers like Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hemingway to re-create in their art a universe that still made some kind of sense. It had its share of loss, suffering, and alienation, to be sure, but human dignity was still largely preserved and, implicitly at least, there was still hope for man. After the senseless slaughter and human degradation of World War II, in a postwar world where relativity and the uncertainty principle reigned and the fate of mankind soon seemed to hang in the balance of megadeath, such propositions became harder to believe. Consequently, the traditional, realistic novel suffered a setback. It had depended on a fairly common ground of interpretation and emotional responses among its readers to concepts like love, honor, courage, compassion, God, even some sort of good-evil opposition, however relative. Not even the powers of Faulkner and Hemingway now seemed sufficient to turn the novel into an artistic vehicle which could effectively cope with the new situation—*A Fable* is not *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Old Man and the Sea* is not *The Sun Also Rises*. New writers, especially novelists, were slow to emerge and when they did come—writers like Nabokov, Bellow, and Barth—their works were to suggest a break with traditional realism and naturalism and a turning toward myth, inner drama, and surrealism.

As critics registered what seemed as an absence of great novels and novelists in the late forties, some of them even concluded that the novel as a literary genre was dead. Deprived of its substance and its sense of direction, they said, the novel had ceased to interest and influence people who were busy creating a new world, a fast-paced, affluent, technological world, whose utilitarian bias made imaginative writing seem far less important than factual and informative production—the increasing popularity and importance of the so-called "New Journalism" movement after the war was cited as a case in point. And for people's spare time, a number of prewar phenomena and inventions were beginning to cater to growing postwar markets. Magazines, radios, movies, automobiles, television, and a host of other activities promised to turn novel-reading into an obsolete, dull, and generally useless pastime. Granted that much of this was quite true,

the death sentence of the novel was still somewhat hastily pronounced, in particular as it left out of account the entire expanding field of popular literature. Book clubs and the paperback industry were soon to demonstrate the competitiveness of book-reading, even though, at least to begin with, quantity seemed easier to provide than quality.

After a period of recollection and recovery, however, a new literature emerged in America, and the novel, far from being dead, turned out to be one of its most vital forms of expression. As always, the conditions that governed society and the world at large were reflected in the literature. It often took as point of departure the surrealistic realities inherent in modern mass societies, stamped by a politico-military balance of terror, characterized by rampant technological development, and plagued by increasing dehumanization of man and the consequential alienation of the individual. Not unexpectedly, writers often turned for their subject matter to the predicament of this alienated individual, persecuted by unfathomable forces, a victim of systematic, yet meaningless, effrontery and violence. The plight of the anti-hero and the outsider facing an inhuman but effectively organized society thus became one of the main preoccupations of postwar literature. Another focus developed around the existential self, often with a concentration on artistic self-expression and the act of creation. Forms increasingly tended toward the imaginative reconstruction of reality on different levels and away from verisimilitude and photographic accuracy, elevating subconsciousness over consciousness, emotions over intellect, dream over reality.

The military novel survived, too, even if the alleged bad quality of the writing that came out of World War II was often cited as evidence of the desperate situation of the novel in the late forties. Apart from Norman Mailer, James Jones, perhaps James Gould Cozzens and John Hersey, what was there worth considering? And, even granted that *The Naked and the Dead* and *From Here to Eternity* were impressive and important works, could they really stand a comparison with *A Farewell to Arms* and *Three Soldiers*? Judged by the standards set by Hemingway and Dos Passos the new war novels seemed of an inferior order, limited in scope, impoverished in expression. No doubt, the World War II chroniclers generally do suffer from such comparisons, unfairly so to a great extent, not only because few writers compare favorably with the "lost generation" giants regardless of time and circumstances but also because, as we have seen,

novelists in the post-World War II era labored under other and in many respects much more difficult conditions.

Still, new war and military novels did appear in the late forties and early fifties. Although few can be compared in quality to the masterpieces of World War I or even the better World War II novels which came during and immediately after the war, many do throw light on contemporary issues and conditions and some are distinguished by depth of treatment and felicity of expression. One must bear in mind that these new military novels, with their postwar chaotic or vacuum-like settings, are attempts to come to terms with historical changes on an enormous scale and so could not, even if the writers' talents had allowed, repeat the artistic expressions and thematic concerns of earlier war novels. Authors interested in depicting the military postwar world now had to struggle with uncertainties not only in concepts, ideas, and technique but also in subject matter. The military novel after World War II was, in a way, as cut off from its tradition and its past as the military itself. The political development and the new kind of limited war that was to follow would not diminish the gap; it would take decades—and a *Catch-22*—to even partially bridge past and present. Small wonder then that the response of authors to the new military world of America often seems as restrained and forced as the military response to international challenges.

The general literary postwar development toward formal experimentation and imaginative embroidery is less noticeable in modern military novels. This may be a reflection of the uncertainties just discussed: authors, feeling a strong need to remain on as firm ground as possible, choose to anchor their stories in traditional forms, compensating for the overall fluidity of subject matter and background by the use of stable and well-established procedures on the technical side. Another reasonable explanation is that many authors lacked the knowledge or inclination needed for technical experimentation and artistic sophistication: most of them were neither professional writers nor distinguished as literary craftsmen. Yet another explanation for the choice of a traditional, realistic reporting style may be that reality itself, in particular in the Korean context, provided enough surrealism and absurdity. This trait was to become even more emphasized in the Vietnam War novels, where reality and actual experience would seem to defy all efforts of elaboration and interpretation, compelling the writer to play the part of a strict recorder of events.

Similarly, the influence of nonfiction and the New Journalism is noticeable in works like Bach, *Stranger to the Ground*; Russ, *The Last Parallel*; and Thorin, *A Ride to Panmunjom*; but the real flowering of this genre was to come in works dealing with the Vietnam War.

The result is that, with few exceptions, the military novel sticks to a traditionally realistic framework, the barracks yarn and the war story still the predominant bases for narration. These stories typically begin at the beginning, unfold their tale, possibly draw a moral, and come to a close, with varying degrees of finality but certainly on the last page. When interpreted within their historically defined contexts, however, the accumulated testimony of all these works reaches beyond concerns of literary technique and expression, even beyond particular military and civilian-military issues, to characterize and illuminate a crucial period in American history. To be able to assemble such an illuminating picture, however, it will be necessary first to take a closer look at the various constituent parts.

A Note on Notation

A system of in-text references has made it possible to dispense with the usual footnote apparatus. Sources of quotations are given within parentheses as page numbers, which always refer to the first edition of the work under discussion as listed in the Appendix. Information in letters to the author is acknowledged by the word "Letter" followed by the date. Further data are supplied whenever needed to identify specific sources.

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