

**Norman Mailer and the NFL:  
A Reading of  
*The Armies of the Night*\*  
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In the minds of many, since the Second World War professional football has succeeded baseball as our national game. As Richard Schickel argues in a 1969 *Commentary* article, "by common consent, the most striking sports phenomenon in the 1950's has been the displacement of baseball by professional football as the Great American Game."<sup>1</sup> Professional football, Schickel continues, is "quite a different game from baseball . . . in the requirements it makes of its coaches and players." (p. 65) Professional football players, he suggests, are able to "find a clear well-defined place in the middle of confusion."

Indeed, I believe that the heart of football's enormous appeal to all of us at the moment lies in witnessing this process : We see men making order for themselves out of chaos, and, although violence is implicit in that effort it is not, to my mind, the thing that we really care about. What we really like about football is its clearcut resolution, its release from the tensions of ambiguity. (pp. 67-68)

"The real secret," Schickel concludes, "of the force this game has come to exert on the national imagination" lies in the kind of community these coaches and players have together. He quotes Jerry Kramer, then of the Green Bay Packers, as saying "There's a great deal of love for one another in this club. . . . Perhaps, we're living in Camelot." (p. 65) For Schickel, these words summarize the causes of professional football's current popularity. Professional football presents an ideal simplified world, the dimensions of which at once give us relief from the confusions of life and provide a model for a way of living in the ordinary world. Such statements as Schickel's are necessarily speculative, but this one finds support in an unexpected place, the writings of Norman Mailer, which span the whole period since World War II.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Schickel, "On Pro Football," *Commentary* (January, 1969), p. 65. Further references to this article will be included in parenthesis in the text of the paper.

Looking to literature in search of evidence of historical change is a perilous procedure, but both the relation of literature to history and the sort of writer Mailer is (a journalist as well as a novelist) make our task more simple than it might be. In speaking of the value of literature to the historian, R. Gordon Kelly has given us a useful analogy:

a given literary text is analagous to a response to an interview schedule for which the questions have been lost. The text embodies the response in a complex form, and the meaning of the work may be specified, in part, by reconstructing the "questions" to which the author was responding.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we may imagine Norman Mailer answering, in the course of writing each of his books, questions like "What is your attitude toward the sport of football?" and "What is your attitude toward professional football?" His answers, though, provide not only an indication of a change in attitudes toward professional football, but also lead us, as Kelly suggests, toward the meanings of the specific works themselves. And this is especially the case because of the *sort* of writer Mailer is. He possesses what Peter Brooks calls "The Melodramatic Imagination." Writers with this kind of imagination, according to Brooks, are "constantly tensed . . . to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of spirit."<sup>3</sup> The form itself, he says, is "a degenerate form of the tragic — a form of the tragic, we might say, for a world in which there is no longer a tenable idea of the sacred." (p. 206) "The development of the melodramatic mode from, say, Samuel Richardson to Norman Mailer," Brooks continues,

is perhaps first of all a desperate effort to renew contact with the sacred *through* the representation of fallen reality, to insist that behind reality, hidden by it yet indicated within it, there is a realm where large moral forces are operative, where large choices of ways of being must be made. (pp. 209-210)

We may expect, from a man with this sort of imagination, that everything, every image, every situation, will have its significance in terms of the human spirit, no matter how little it is used. As Richard Stern has said, in the course of an interview with Mailer,

<sup>2</sup> R. Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly*, XXVI (May, 1974), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," *Partison Review*, no. 2, 1972, p. 196. Further reference will be included in parenthesis in the text of the paper.

Isn't a novel controlled by some overriding notion, by a kind of fanaticism which organizes a great deal of disparate material? In a sense, a novel is like the mind of a madman: everything — casual looks, street signs, world news reports — charged with meaning.<sup>4</sup>

This is quite the case in Mailer's writing, which a look at his references to football will certify. In this paper, I will focus on two of Mailer's works, the 1948 novel *The Naked and the Dead* and the 1968 *The Armies of the Night*.

We should note first the importance of sports in Mailer's way of understanding the human condition. His 1957 essay "The White Negro" contains a remark which perhaps best summarizes this understanding. He writes, "for life is a contest between people in which the victor generally recuperates quickly and the loser takes long to mend, a perpetual competition of colliding explorers in which one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same (pay in sickness, or depression, or anguish for the lost opportunity), but pay or grow."<sup>5</sup>

Most of Mailer's critics have concentrated on the second part of this sentence. Our chief concern here will be with its first part; the view that life is essentially a contest. This more and more, for Mailer, results in an interest in specific sports and sporting events. Beginning in the 1960's, Mailer turned increasingly to the world of sports for metaphors with which to convey the meaning of situations or individuals he described in his fiction and non-fiction. Though these are dominated by football and boxing, Mailer also draws from such sports as baseball, gymnastics, fishing, track, horse racing, skiing and even marbles. In *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Werner Von Braun is described as having "the subtle look of a fat boy who has gathered the shooters in many a game."<sup>6</sup>

The football metaphors are often quite bizarre, such as D. J.'s description in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* of the elk who "hunker down their hind legs, and then give each other a clout with their antlers like football lineman making contact." Elsewhere, an elevator operator who has offended Mailer is described as "one Wasp lady who could play tackle for the John Birch Society if and when they field a team" and Hubert Humphrey is described as behaving in his campaign for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination "like nothing so much as a third

<sup>4</sup>From Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Signet Books, 1960) pp. 340-341.

<sup>5</sup>*Advertisements for Myself*, p. 314.

<sup>6</sup>Norman Mailer, *Of a Fire on the Moon* (New York: Signet Books, 1971), p. 69.

string tailback scurrying from sideline to sideline, first Left, then Right, never gaining a yard.”<sup>7</sup>

Mailer is more complimentary when he uses boxing imagery, particularly when he describes himself in terms of boxing. Toward the end of an essay on himself and Nelson Algren, he characterizes himself and Algren as “two middleweight artists.” In *Advertisements for Myself* he presents himself as “a generous but very spoiled boy, and I seem to have turned into a slightly punch-drunk and ugly club fighter who can fight clean and fight dirty, but likes to fight.” He always seems interested in understanding himself as an athlete. In *The Presidential Papers* he describes his thinking as “not unathletic.” But perhaps the strangest and most wonderful use of boxing comes in the book on Marilyn Monroe, in which Mailer speaks of “her competitive instincts as equal to a great prizefighter’s” and, in perhaps for him the ultimate compliment, speculates that “the inside of her heart must have looked like a club-fighter’s face.”<sup>8</sup>

Let us return to our central concern here, football. There are very few references to football, particularly professional football, in Mailer’s first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. I can find just eleven in the 721 pages of the Modern Library Edition of the book. But they are all significant. More than half of them simply characterize various people in the book. The others, as a group, make football symbolic : first of illusion, then, more important for the novel’s theme, of chance, which makes individual effort absurd and meaningless.

We should first consider the references to football which help in the development of character. Major Dalleson and Lieutenant Hearn of the officers, and the enlisted men Wyman, Ridges, Goldstein and Brown are all characterized in part by their relation to the sport of football. The case of Goldstein is the simplest. When we see him as a child, his sense of difference from other children of the neighborhood, and by implication, from the other members of the platoon, is indicated by the fact that he does not participate in football and other street games.<sup>9</sup> Sergeant Brown’s qualities as a soldier and a human being are also suggested by his distance from the sport of football. In high school, though he wanted to play football, he was

<sup>7</sup>Elk: *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1967), p. 191. Elevator operator: *Existential Errands* (New York: Signet Books, 1973). p. 230. Humphrey: *Existential Errands*, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup>Mailer and Algren: *Cannibals and Christians* (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 178. Mailer: *Advertisements for Myself*, p. 19. *The Presidential Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 285. Marilyn Monroe: *Marilyn* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1973), pp. 200, 76.

<sup>9</sup>Norton Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 484. Future references to this book will be included, in parenthesis, in the text of the paper.

too small for the team and became a cheerleader, (p. 548) Wyman's association with football also reflects limitations in his character. On Croft's patrol, after he has lost an argument with Croft, Wyman remembers "a football game he had played once in a sandlot." In this game he loses his will to compete and merely goes through the motions, but is disturbed by the sight of another player on his side "who had never given up." (p. 637)

There are two references to Lieutenant Hearn's football playing in his "Time Machine." Both indicate his lack of self-knowledge, particularly his alienation from his own body, from the irrational forces within him. The first comes in a conversation between Hearn and the football captain at his prep school, who tells him "you don't try hard enough, you don't pull, you could've made the team 'cause you're big and you got natural ability but you didn't want to, and it's a shame because you ought to pull harder." (p 333) Here Hearn simply will not use his physical ability. The second reference concerns an occasion on which he does use it. He plays house football at Harvard (as Mailer himself did) "with a surprising and furious satisfaction."

One play he never quite forgets. A ball carrier on the opposing team breaks through a hole in the line, is checked momentarily, and is standing there stock upright, helpless, when Hearn tackles him. He has charged with all his strength and the player is taken off the field with a wrenched knee while Hearn patters after him.

You all right, Ronnie?

Yeah, fine. Good tackle, Hearn.

I'm sorry. Only he knows he isn't. There has been an instant of complete startling gratification when he knew the ball carrier was helpless, waiting to be hit. There is not even any cynical pleasure in making the All-house football team. (p.344)

Here Hearn seems to be uneasy with his own animal self, which takes pleasure in violence, and to wish to deny its existence.

A comment by Red Valsen, one of the enlisted men, serves as an effective bridge to the second category of football reference, that in which football represents on the one hand illusion, and on the other the overwhelming chaos of the natural world. Valsen characterizes "the goddam officers," as "a bunch of college kids who think it's like going to a football game." (p. 446) In this statement, football is child's play

when compared with the harsh realities of war. Football is part of the ambience that removes college kids and officers from the war's realities as experienced by enlisted men. With the thoughts of another enlisted man, Ridges, Mailer continues to stress the relation of football and illusion, moving it closer to absurdity. Here Ridges meditates on the state of his soul.

Ever since he had been a child he had imagined his soul as a white object the size and shape of a football, lodged somewhere near his stomach. Each time he sinned an ineradicable black spot was inked onto the white soul, its size depending upon the enormity of the sin. At the time a man died, if the white football was more than half black he went to hell. (p. 672)

Other things in the novel are to have the shape of a football. The belly of one of the officers, for instance, "projected in sharp curved lines just beneath his shorts, like a football inflated inside him." (p. 238) This image associates a football with the officer's lack of control over his physical being.

For us the most important mention of football in the novel comes in a conversation between General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn on the subject of chess and war. Hearn is the speaker.

I don't know, but warfare certainly isn't chess. You might make a case for the Navy, where it's all maneuvering on open flat surfaces with different units of fire power, where it's all Force, Space and Time, but war is like a bloody football game. You start off with a play and it never quite works out as you figured it would. (p. 180)

Here we have an equation of football with a world of chance which undercuts any individual effort. Football stands for actuality itself, not illusion here. It represents all the forces in the novel which overwhelm human effort. It thus seems entirely appropriate that when Sergeant Croft is thwarted in his effort to lead his patrol to the top of Mount Anaka it is because he smashes into a hornet's nest "shaped something like a football." (p. 672) Mailer has written that his novel was modelled after *Moby-Dick* and that he "had Ahab in it."<sup>10</sup> Croft (as well as General Cummings) is that Ahab, and though Mount Anaka (and the island in general) function as *Moby Dick* does in Melville's book, the sport of football is clearly

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Richard Foster, "Norman Mailer," in *Seven American Literary Stylists*, ed. George T. Wright (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1973), pp. 242-243.

associated with those forces which insist on the reality of a chaotic universe by which individual effort is ultimately rendered meaningless.

In this universe, “the only character who seems to succeed in having his basic ambition realized is Major Dalleson, “the novel’s model of bureaucratic mediocrity whose hope for the future runs no further than being demoted to nothing less than captain when the war ends.”<sup>11</sup> It is he who inadvertently wins the campaign when General Cummings is absent. The only reference to *professional* football in the book comes in a description of him.

He was too big to do anything else, even bigger than Hearn, and his red face, his bull neck, his broken nose, could express either mirth or rage or bewilderment, the bewilderment always a transitory thing until he realized what was demanded of him. He looked like a professional football player. (p. 71)

General ineptitude, lack of imagination and intelligence, blind obedience to authority, these are Dalleson’s chief qualities, and those which Mailer apparently saw in the average professional football player in 1948. In general, the image of football is overwhelmingly negative in the novel. It is on the one hand associated with individual stupidity and shapelessness and on the other associated with a chaotic universe which renders shapeless and stupid the designs of particular individuals in it.

We can discover the direction in which Mailer’s response to professional football was to move by examining three passages in which he considers the ideals he sees embodied in the Renaissance. His 1963 *Presidential Papers* contained this reference :

Yet America was also the country in which the dynamic myth of the Renaissance — that every man was potentially extraordinary — knew its most passionate persistence. Simply, America was the land where people still believed in heroes: George Washington; Billy the Kid; Lincoln, Jefferson; Mark Twain, Jack London, Hemingway; Joe Louis, Dempsey, Gentleman Jim; America believed in athletes, rum-runners, aviators; even lovers, by the time Valentino died.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Robert Solotaroff, *Down Mailer’s Way* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1947), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>The *Presidential Papers*, p. 39.

Here Renaissance men in modern America are, among other things, athletes. These athletes are heroes, manifestations of what is extraordinary in man. But the only examples he gives of heroic athletes are heavyweight champion prizefighters, "Joe Louis, Dempsey, Gentleman Jim." A second reference occurs in the 1966 collection *Cannibals and Christians*. Mailer speaks here of

the cerebrality of professional football in which the quarterback must have not only heart, courage, strength and grace but a mind like an I.B.M. computer. It marks the turn we have taken from the Renaissance. There too was the ideal of a hero with heart, courage, strength, but he was expected to possess the mind of a passionate artist. Now the best heroes were — in the sense of the Renaissance — mindless: Y. A. Tittle, John Glenn, Tracy, Smiling Jack ; the passionate artists were out on the hot rods, the twist band was whipping the lovers, patriotism was a football game, a fascism would come in (if it came) on Live-Yay! Let's live yay!<sup>13</sup>

Here the football player represents a perversion of the Renaissance ideal; he is missing the "mind of the passionate artist." We should note that names on the lists of heroes in the two quotations are entirely different and that the perversion of the ideal represented by football could result in the formation of a fascist state. Professional football may be viewed favorably because it portrays Renaissance ideals, but the underlying view is negative because it is ultimately a perversion of them. Finally, in a 1968 interview published in *Playboy* magazine, Mailer, speaking of the "legendary Mailer" as opposed to the "Mailer who wanted to grow in his own sweet time," had this to say about the Renaissance in terms of his own career:

This is the point I want to make: I had some instinctive sense — right or wrong — that the best way to grow was not to write one novel after another but to move from activity to activity, a notion that began with Renaissance man; it's not my idea, after all.<sup>14</sup>

Here Mailer sees himself as working in the tradition of the Renaissance man. What these three quotations suggest is that during these years professional football has become a symbol of

<sup>13</sup> *Cannibals and Christians*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Carrol, "Playboy Interview," in *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work*, ed. Robert F. Lucid (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 263.

the values toward which Mailer sees American society moving and the direction which Mailer himself wishes to take. These roads are converging rather than diverging. Let us see how professional football figures in his 1968 *The Armies of the Night*.

As its title indicates, *The Armies of the Night* may be considered a book about war, though it is a different sort of war from that fought out in the pages of *The Naked and the Dead*. The book describes a sort of civil war between various elements of American society, between those who supported America's policies in Vietnam and those who opposed them, and it uses the events of the march on the Pentagon in October 1967 as its text.

There are some eighteen references to football in the 288 pages of the New American Library hardcover edition, and many of them specify professional football rather than the varieties of the amateur game. Among these are a group of characterizations like those to be found in Mailer's non-fiction of the sixties and seventies as well as in *The Naked and the Dead*. Mitch Goodman, for instance, who recruited Mailer for the march on the Pentagon, "looked the way J. D. Salinger would have looked if J. D. Salinger had been tall enough and beefed-up enough to play football, and had fumbled *Catcher in the Rye*."<sup>15</sup> One of the Marshalls guarding the Pentagon has "an intelligent, clean-featured American face, not let us say unlike the pleasant modest appearance of Mr. Fran Tarkenton, quarterback for the New York Giants." (p. 138) Later the U. S. Marshalls are described as "arrayed like linebackers" behind a line of soldiers. (p. 256) Mailer's lawyer Hirschkop is "a man about Mailer's height, but built like a young bull. A perfect fullback. His physique spoke of the ability to mount a good second effort, which was the term in football this season for being able to drive hard with the ball, and when stopped by tacklers, able to drive forward again before the whistle blew." (p. 198) Another U. S. Marshall is described as having "the body and insane look of a very good rangy defensive end in professional football — that same hard high-muscled build, same coiled spring of wrath, same livid conviction that everything opposing the team must be wrecked, sod, turf, grass, uniforms, helmets, bodies, yes even bite the football if it will help. . ." (p. 143) It's important to notice here that parties who are on both sides of the battle at the Pentagon are described in terms of professional football. Football certainly no longer has

<sup>15</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York: The New American Library, 1968), pp. 6-7. Future references will be included in the text of the paper.

simply negative connotations in Mailer's mind. In fact, since it is used to describe both sides, professional football may be seen as imaging qualities both sides, and, by implication, all Americans, share.

Nevertheless, a second group of references does equate professional football with the culture of majority America, with the supporters of the war in Vietnam, with those who guard the Pentagon. Early in the book Mailer imagines that professional football players would support the war in Vietnam. He speaks of

the happy healthy never unintelligent faces of all those professional football players he studies so assiduously on television come Sunday . . . and wonders how they would poll out on the sentiment for the war.

HAWKS 95

DOVES 6

NFL Footballers Approve Vietnam War

Doubtless. All the healthy Marines, state troopers, professional athletes, movie stars, rednecks, sensuous life-loving Mafia, cops, mill workers, city officials, nice healthy-looking easy-grafting politicians full of the light (from marijuana?) in their eye of a life they enjoy — yes, they would be for the war in Vietnam. (p. 34)

The football players here represent the majority culture in America. All these people feel amply rewarded by American life as it is. In fact, professional football is at the heart of Mailer's depiction of the American prosperity of the 1960s.

The labor movement lifted the country and carried it to a field of plenty, but it was a football field where professionals played, and America watched on Sunday full of Peace before the rainbow of the color set, feeling everyone presumably had an unimpeded view of his own set, and Freedom in abundance for a man could always turn his set off, yes, the labor unions now sat closer to the Mafia than to Marx. (p. 85)

For the protesters of the war in Vietnam, of whom Mailer nominally makes a part, the world of professional football represents the enemy — those who must by overcome before the world will be sane. Professional football is one lodging place for the insanity which "technology had driven . . . out of the wind and out of the attic, and out of all the lost primitive places:"

one had to find it now wherever fever, force, and machines could come together, in Vegas, at the race track, in pro-football, race riots for the Negro, suburban orgies — none of it was enough — one had to find it in Vietnam; that was where the small town had gone to get its kicks. (p. 153)

But as a place where the irrational, the mysterious, in American life resides, professional football is of extraordinary interest to Mailer, and he not only identifies it with the forces in the country responsible for Vietnam, but also identifies himself with it, thus making it an important manifestation of the central conflict of the book.

The final group of football images are clustered around Mailer himself, around the persona he presents in the book, and he is careful to indicate he has identification with both sides of the struggle, even though he participates on just one. The first three-fourths of the book focuses on Mailer himself, on the transformation he undergoes as a result of his participation in the march. Early in the book he describes himself as carrying “different ages within him like different models of his experience : parts of him were eighty-one years old, fifty-seven, forty-eight, thirty-six, nineteen, et cetera, et cetera.” (p. 9) His personality he describes as bearing “resemblance to some provincial cathedral which warring orders of the church might have designed separately over several centuries, the particular cathedral falling into the hands of one architect, then his enemy.” (p. 17) This persona, “part demagogue, part clown, part visionary,” is “at once an absurd citizen of ‘technology-land’ in crisis and a bard of the bright dream that lies behind the thickening miasmas of the betrayed and perishing republic.”<sup>16</sup> Mailer’s own transformation from the condition of “absurd citizen of technology-land” to that of the “bard” of a “bright dream,” concerns him during Part I of the book, a Mailer’s-eye view of the march. In the second part, a journalistic overview of the march, Mailer is concerned with arguing that the American middle class at large will achieve the same kind of transformation.<sup>17</sup> Currently divided against itself, America, he hopes, will become whole again. And Mailer presents his own transformation as an achievement of wholeness. He most vividly imagines this at the moment of his arrest, and its setting and his own actions are described in terms of football.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Richardson, “The Aesthetics of Norman Mailer,” in *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work*, p. 194. Richard Foster, “Norman Mailer,” p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Solotaroff, *Down Mailer’s Way*, p. 84.

The occasion is carefully prepared for in terms of football images. In the march to the Pentagon Mailer finds the situation “not unlike the squeeze at a football game — whoever cheers most and sits down last has no seat.” (p. 107) When the marchers get to the parking lot in which the demonstration is to occur, we are told that it was “huge as five football fields.” (p. 116) In the first charge of anti-war demonstrators, some wear “football shoulder pads.” (p. 125) All these details prepare us for the description of Mailer’s arrest. He asks to be arrested, then runs away from the MPs:

then Mailer was behind the MP, he was free of him, and he wheeled around and kept going in a half run to the next line of MPs and then on the push of a sudden instinct, sprinted suddenly around the nearest MP in the second line, much as if he were a back cutting around the nearest man in the secondary to break free — that was actually his precise thought — and had a passing perception of how simple it was to get past these MPs. (p. 130)

Mailer gives the football image extraordinary emphasis here by stopping and commenting on it in mid-sentence. Football is associated with an act which he comes to understand as a crucially meaningful one for him. Later he says of the experience of his arrest that

He felt as if he were being confirmed. . . . Mailer always supposed he had felt important and unimportant in about as many ways as a man could feel; now he felt important in a new way. 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, heart, mind, and sentiment to be a man, as if he had arrived, as if this picayune arrest had been his Rubicon. (p. 138)

Here he describes his transformation, his moment of decision, as an achievement of wholeness. He is “finally one age, not seven.” He has, in Richard Schickel’s phrase, made order for himself out of chaos; he has achieved a “clear-cut resolution,” a “release from the tensions of ambiguity.” He has decided, much in the manner of the narrator of Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” what the meaning of his doing will be.

Later in the book there is another significant reference to professional football which involves Mailer’s persona. While in jail, Mailer reflects

Perhaps because of his sons, he saw everything in terms of football these days; he could see each of his boys in twenty years on a professional football team. The older one was wild and fierce and angelic and delicate, graceful as a young prince, sly as a thief — he would make a great running back, a superb pass receiver. He was competitive as a maniac when he wanted to win. The younger one was capable of taking tremendous punishment (at present from his older brother). He was going to play linebacker, no doubt (and with his sleeves rolled up). He would be enormous, and very powerful, and with the happiest disposition in the world, for his brain was keen, his eye was quick. When a back would come flying through a hole, he would grab him with one hand, hold him in the air and dump him down. Then he would pick him up. “Hope I didn’t hurt you, fellow,” he would say with a happy insane glint in his eye. (p. 168)

It is important to recall the stolid, dull character of Major Dalleson when reading this passage, for Mailer’s image of *him* as a professional football player is so very different from his image of his sons as professional football players. The image of football is different, too. Mailer uses it here basically to describe his sons. That he does so, because he is so obviously proud of his sons, shows that football is now a positive image for him. Professional football, both in this quotation and in his description of his behavior at his arrest, thus becomes a symbol of man’s ability to make his life cohere, to give it design. The image suggests that individuals can, by their own efforts, make meaning in the world.

The image of professional football changed radically in Mailer’s writing since 1948, when it stood for the chaotic world that resisted all man’s efforts to give it meaning. In *The Armies of the Night*, football is a metaphor for the various designs people can give to their lives, and as such, it has moved from the periphery to the center of Mailer’s imagination, as it may well have from the periphery to the center of the lives of many of the middle class in the twenty years between 1948 and 1968. It may be worth speculating briefly here about the possible meanings of this change. We know that in the twenty years between 1948 and 1968 professional football has become much more popular than it had been due, in part, to its adaptability to television, but this fact only accounts for the shift in responses to the sport, and not for the designs of the new responses. We know that in those same twenty years pro-

professional football has become identified with the styles and the corporate structure of the American establishment. For instance, as Mailer makes clear in *The Armies of the Night*, professional football has portrayed itself as a manifestation of establishment values. Not for nothing is the halftime pageantry normally military and patriotic. At football games we find out how we ought to behave and how our communities ought to be organized. A rigidly hierarchical group is essential to the operation of a football team. Its coaches are identified with the managers of a technological society. Hand in hand with organization as an essential value go specialization and mechanization. Each player is valued because he can do one or two things well; these players are discovered and measured by computerized scouting systems with strange names like BLESTO. In fact, the community imaged by a football team may be best understood as a sacred one. The virtues of its members are loyalty, discipline, faith in the coach, sacrifice. This is the kind of community that has appealed to the public that Richard Schickel has addressed. Football is consistently used by the priests of America (Gerald Ford is the latest: he would not tackle his own quarterback) as a metaphor for correct behavior in difficult times.

But football serves two purposes in *The Armies of the Night*, and both are essentially religious. Mailer identifies football's priestly function in contemporary America and deplors it. But he also uses football as a metaphor. He sees the coherence in his own life and shows himself to be growing by using football images in describing himself, at crucial points in the book. And in the last part of the book he makes explicit his own *prophetic* role and seems a twentieth century Emersonian in his efforts to imagine the potential wholeness of America in the late sixties. In his prophecy football stands for an entirely different set of values than those he understands the American establishment to find in it. Organization and specialization give way to spontaneity and self-fulfillment as Mailer imagines himself a halfback, his children pass receivers and linebackers. In sum, professional football in *The Armies of the Night* is a symbol which unites the two warring Americas. It is an image which at once signifies the absence of the "mind of the passionate artist" in America and an assertion that that mind is in the process of being reborn. We may most appropriately end with a quotation from Emerson which describes both how the character Mailer behaves in *The Armies of the Night* and the sort of literary achievement the book is.

The victory is won as soon as any Soul has learned always to take sides with Reason against himself; to transfer his Me from his person, his name, his interest, back upon Truth and Justice, so that when he is disgraced and defeated and fretted and disheartened, and wasted by nothings, he hears it well, never one instant relaxing his watchfulness, and, as soon as he can get a respite from the insults or the sadness, records all these phenomena, pierces their beauty as phenomena, and like a God, oversees himself. Thus he harvests his losses, and turns the dust of his shoes to gems. Keep the habit of the observer, and, as fast as you can, break off your association with your personality and identify yourself with the universe. Be a football to time and chance, the more kicks, the better, so that you inspect the whole game and know its uttermost law. As true is this ethics for trivial as for calamitous days.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Selections*, ed. Stephen Wicker (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957), p. 81. I assume that what Emerson means by "football" is the object we know as a soccer ball, and is appropriately of a somewhat different shape than Mailer's football.