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LITERARY HORIZONS

A Literary Hoax?

EVER since the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948, Norman Mailer has been a figure of importance on the American literary scene. The novel had a strong impact when it was published and has lasted well; in spite of its indebtedness to Dos Passos and Hemingway and in spite of some clumsiness, it stands as the best American novel about World War II and as the most remarkable exhibition in recent times of the naturalistic technique. Since its appearance, however, Mailer's work has received rather more condemnation than approval. *The Barbary Shore* was generally regarded as an interesting and—because Mailer was not content to repeat himself—an honorable failure, but a failure. Parts of *The Deer Park* were greatly admired, but as a whole it was not a success. And since that novel was published, nearly ten years ago, we have had only collections of odds and ends, of which *Advertisements for Myself* (SR, Nov. 7, 1959) was the most notable.

However, spotty as his career has been, Mailer's name is almost always mentioned when there is talk about American literature since the war. Some people will say that this is because of his gift for getting his name before the public in nonliterary as well as literary contexts, and it is true that he has made more headlines than most of his contemporaries. But, on the other hand, he continues to be taken seriously by persons whose judgments have to be respected—for instance, Diana Trilling, who wrote an essay about him in *The Living Present*. Mailer's new novel—*An American Dream* (Dial, \$4.95)—has stirred up talk during its appearance as a serial in *Esquire*, and one can predict that quantities of words are going to be spent on it in the weeks to come.

This, it should be pointed out, is not the big novel that, in *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer announced he was writing. It seems, on the contrary, to be a book that he conceived and executed

on the spur of the moment. At the end he dates it, "September 1963-October 1964." The jacket indicates that serial publication had begun in *Esquire* before the book was finished: "Mailer undertook to write *An American Dream* under the same conditions of serial deadline that Conrad, Dickens and Dostoevsky met in their day." (That, I think, is the extent of the resemblance between this work and the work of the aforementioned authors.)

The only way to suggest the quality of the novel is to summarize it at some length. This is how it begins: "I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz." The narrator is named Stephen Richard Rojack, and the girl is called Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly. President Kennedy does not play much of a part in the novel, though he is mentioned later, but the girl does, and so does the business of being a war hero. Rojack quickly goes on to tell how he killed four Germans in Italy, an occurrence that left an enduring mark on his psyche.

Rojack, we learn, was graduated from Harvard *summa cum laude*, became a hero, went to Congress. Deciding he was not made for politics, he committed political suicide by supporting Henry Wallace in 1948. After that he became "a professor of existential psychology" at a university in New York City, wrote a book, and achieved success on a television program. He married Deborah seven years after he seduced her, but, at the time the novel begins, they are separated.

The novel, according to the jacket, covers a period of thirty-two hours. At the outset Rojack, suffering from what is no doubt existential nausea, contemplates suicide, but instead of killing himself, he goes to see his wife, whom

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he strangles. (This is the cliff-hanging climax of the first installment.) After making love, in a rather eccentric fashion, described in detail, to his wife's maid, he throws his wife's body out the window onto the East River Drive. He makes love to the maid again, though rather hurriedly this time, and descends to the street, where he is taken in charge by the police. His story, of course, is that his wife jumped.

Released by the police because of some mysterious influence, Rojack immediately goes to a joint to see a singer named Cherry, who, along with some gangsters, was involved in the traffic jam that took place when Deborah's body hit the pavement. After defying her former lover, a prizefighter, he takes her to her apartment on the East Side and, one may be sure, makes love to her.

The next day, after losing both his television job and his teaching job, he keeps an appointment with the police. Although the evidence against him seems strong, he is again released. He returns to Cherry's bed, and in due season he hears her story. She was at one time the mistress of a mysterious millionaire with

underground connections, who turns out to be none other than Barney Kelly, father of Rojack's late wife. More recently she has been the mistress of a Negro singer, Shago Martin, who comes to pay a call and is thrown downstairs by Rojack.

Rojack has one more appointment, with his father-in-law, Kelly. He sees Deirdre, Deborah's daughter, presumably by her first husband, a child of whom he is fond. While he is talking with Kelly, the phone rings. "It was Jack," Kelly says. "He said to send you his regards and commiserations." After a conversation in which it appears that the situation may have international implications, Kelly reveals that Deirdre is in fact his daughter. (The novel would obviously be incomplete without a touch of incest.) There is another business of near-suicide, after which we have a report of the murder of Shago Martin, and then Rojack arrives at Cherry's apartment just in time to hear her dying words.

I hope it is clear that not for a moment can the novel be taken seriously as a portrayal of life in America—or anywhere else. This is the make-believe world of Ian Fleming and Mickey Spillane. However, Mailer has a streak of pretentiousness that keeps the book from being the good dirty fun that Fleming's books, if not Spillane's, often are.

I should like to believe that the novel is a hoax, and perhaps to some extent it is. Look at the title. What do Americans dream about? Sex and violence—as television producers and magazine publishers well know. So here, it may be argued, we have sex and violence reduced *ad absurdum* if not *ad nauseam*. In other words, the book may be a sat-

ire, an expression of moral indignation.

What I see as the great obstacle to the acceptance of this theory is the fact that in other works Mailer has spoken in favor of sex, in all forms and in as great a quantity as possible. He also has sometimes seemed to regard violence as quite a good thing. Mrs. Trilling quotes him as having said that a murder might redeem the murderer: "... in the act of killing, in this terribly private moment, the brute feels a moment of tenderness, for the first time perhaps in all his experience. What has happened is that the killer is becoming a little more possible, a little bit more ready to love someone." I cannot see that the assorted murders in *An American Dream* have this redemptive quality, although perhaps that is what Mailer meant to convey.

But if one rejects the theory that the novel is a hoax, one faces a distressing alternative. If one believes that Mailer intended *An American Dream* to be taken seriously, one has to conclude that he has gone to pieces as a writer. The least one can say for the earlier novels is that he tried hard, and in *Advertisements for Myself* he expressed the highest ambitions for his future work. *An American Dream*, however, seems to be something that he dashed off in spare moments. He accepted the challenge of *Esquire* and produced his monthly installments, ending each in the tradition of *The Perils of Pauline*. If the book is not a joke, a bad joke, it is something worse.

The absurdity of the book is not limited to the plot. Stephen Richard Rojack is a kind of superman, not only a high-powered intellectual but also a handy man in a fight. Mailer identifies himself with Rojack so closely that the poor pro-

fessor is allowed to have no reality. We don't believe in him as a Congressman or as a professor or even as a lover; he exists simply as a projection of Norman Mailer's fantasies about himself. He is Mailer, as Mailer would like to be. The other characters are but dummies for Mailer-Rojack to manipulate.

The writing is the sloppiest Mailer has ever done. Here is a passage to suggest a tense moment: "I didn't realize until I reached the street that I had been holding my breath. My uneasiness was almost tangible now; I could feel some sullen air of calm, exactly that torporous calm which comes before a hurricane. It was nearly dark outside. I would be late, but I had to walk to the precinct, I had the conviction that if I entered a taxi there would be an accident." (Rojack is given to premonitions of this sort.) Here is a tender passage: "Once, in a rain-storm, I witnessed the creation of a rivulet. The water had come down, the stream had begun in a hollow of earth the size of a leaf. Then it filled and began to flow. The rivulet rolled down the hill between some stalks of grass and weed, it moved in spurts, down the fall of a ledge, down to a brook. It did not know it was not a river. That was how the tears went down Cherry's face." There are also some fancy passages about smell, Mailer having, it appears, a remarkable nose.

In the essay to which I have alluded, Mrs. Trilling wrote: "Where do we, where shall we, where can we derive our moral sanctions: from a failing tradition or from the wild, free impulses of our racial infancy, from the ego or the id? This is the ultimate pressing question of our time, separating our historical period from any that came before it. And because Mailer not only knows the full force of the question but passionately devotes himself to its answer, he transcends the follies and excesses which attend Hipsterism and claims his place in the forefront of modern writers." She also wrote: "Intense as his literary dedication unquestionably is, his religious mission is now infinitely more compelling. Just as he writes in order to preach the word of God, he acts in order to attain to God, by whatever thorny path. And when he invites us to follow his example he literally means us to join a religious crusade."

I wonder what Mrs. Trilling makes of *An American Dream*. It is possible, I suppose, to regard it as a momentary lapse and to believe that Mailer will go on to do work that will justify and even enhance his reputation. But it seems to me to represent such a failure of critical judgment that I cannot lightly dismiss it. It makes me wonder how much longer Mailer will hold "his place in the forefront of modern writers."

—GRANVILLE HICKS.



"Miss Hoyt, you're the sixty-third secretary I've had who's quit to get married!"

European Literary Scene

Paris critics, facing the parallel openings of Henri de Montherlant's *Civil War* and Max Frisch's *Andorra*, insisted on viewing the plays as the "confrontation of the week," since both treat of republics in turmoil. Gilles Sandier of *Arts*, who coined this phrase, is typical of the younger generation of critics who view Montherlant as old hat: "He puts to his lips the trumpet of Lucan. Here we have two great rhetoricians paired off. Could it be that Montherlant is committed only to epic theater? He has tipped us off: 'Brecht? Don't know him.' M. de Montherlant is not very curious. Romans are enough for him, with a few Spaniards thrown in."

All this is very hard on one of the greatest traditionalist playwrights of France. Whoever would expect Montherlant, great-grandson of the Count of Riancey, one of the leaders of the legitimist party in the nineteenth century, to be, like Brecht, writing theater for the new homogenized society? Since 1929 he has been writing old-line plays—sometimes called dissertation-theater—and, sure enough, *Civil War* is so classical that it observes the so-called twenty-four-hour unity of Aristotle and even has two choruses, albeit tape-recorded. Out of Suetonius, Lucan, Plutarch, and Cicero comes this wordy condemnation of the internecine warfare that split Rome between Caesar and Pompey. The action, or rather inaction, takes place in Pompey's camp a few months before the Battle of Pharsalia. It is all crowded onto the small stage of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, whose walls echo Diderot and Valéry.

Pompey is a typical Montherlant hero, vacillating between decision and indecision. Montherlant is obviously fond of him, as he was of his earlier somewhat dislikable heroes: cruel Ferrante in *La reine morte*, the weary Alvaro in the *Maître de Santiago*, and even his *Mala-testa*. Here again Montherlant is preoccupied with the alternatives of action or renunciation. The unsure Pompey is balanced by Cato (played by the veteran Pierre Fresnay), haughty, sure of himself, aphoristically wise, and impatient with the incompetents surrounding him. "The only honest man in a dishonest crowd, the only clairvoyant among the blind, what a frightful burden." Reviewers accept the play as typical of this playwright: rhetoric over action, cynicism over idealism, doubt over conviction, history over life, and maxims over

truth: "Today traitors are seen as saviors of their country and saviors as traitors," "a dictatorship is as good as the man himself is good," "the youth of today is going straightway to pot," and so on. The critics are agreed that this "political" play does not come up to the tradition of Shakespeare and Corneille. Still Jacques Lemarchand in *Figaro littéraire* finds in it marmoreal qualities of density, firmness, and polish.

The Theater of the Commune of Aubervilliers, one of the liveliest new suburban playhouses in the Ile de France, challenges its venerable rival with Max Frisch's *Andorra*, written in 1961 and picturing a guilt-ridden, post-Hitlerian world. A mythical little country (Austria, Switzerland?) ambiguously named Andorra borders a colossal state, militaristic and anti-Semitic. Although there are no Jews in Andorra, the people have been exposed to all the racist clichés. The schoolmaster, having fathered an illegitimate child, pretends that his son was a Jewish waif rescued from the Blacks (Nazis). The citizenry, caught in the gangrene of racism, turn on the waif, decide to deliver him up like a propitiatory goat. On learning his true identity and race, the young victim is all the more angered. Out of courage and disgust, he elects to go and share the fate reserved for Jewish hostages. The revival of this well-made play is applauded widely, as is the decision of the director to present such a reliable commodity as a Frisch play, especially since Paris has seen of Frisch only *Biedermann*. The timing is also opportune in view of the imminent application of the statute of limitations to Nazi war crimes. I cannot refrain from quoting here the American critic George Wellworth's judicious comment on this play: "Many of the speeches put into the Andorran townspeople's mouths read like parodies of Viennese talk. If the leading citizens can speak like this after the event—and they do—then there is ample reason to look upon *Andorra* as Frisch's most complete expression of despair in the potential of human nature."

The death of T. S. Eliot was followed, naturally enough, by a spate of articles in the Continental papers placing the poet in particular national perspectives. The French were quick to note that Eliot owed much to Racine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valéry ("the most completely lucid about what he was doing"), and the Italians recalled his obvious love

of the *dolce stile nuovo* poets and Dante, instilled in him by Pound. If one believed all the claims of influence made in the various countries, one would agree with Arnold Bennett that Eliot was more European than the Europeans and kept nothing from his native America. Whatever Eliot brought with him from the States, it is incontestable that he died, like his favorites Vergil and Dante, a spokesman of occidental culture. Writes Montgomery Belgion in *Arts*: "Eliot is not only a perfect English poet. He is at the same time a poet whose voice has become the voice of Europe, Europe in the heart of its past." It is only natural that a poet who declared himself "royalist in politics, classic in literature, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" should have roots deeply embedded in the soil of Continental Europe.

And yet Europe can never completely forget that Eliot's origins were in our own West. For his passing made some Europeans think of the death not long before of another American. In *Fiera letteraria*, Pietro Spinucci concludes a long appreciation of Eliot and his political orientation: "It is without malice and merely to underline certain bizarre coincidences in human affairs that we note the fact that a few years back Eliot had bestowed upon him the title of honorary sheriff of Dallas, Texas."

The Academy of Sciences in the USSR is publishing at Leningrad the complete correspondence of Ivan Turgenev, including letters now brought to light for the first time. Several of these deal with that happy period of his life after he had been discovered by Mérimée and Flaubert and had become so at home in France that Henry James devoted an essay to him in the former's survey of French novelists. A few are addressed not to the great tragic love of his life, the married Pauline Viardot, but to the fickle Valentine Delessert. Having observed France sign an armistice with Prussia on 28 January 1871, Turgenev watched with dismay as the populace of Paris moved to insurrection. It was, he said, a dubious gesture at best and one that made him fearful. On 28 March the Commune set up the red flag and instituted a Terror which was to last until the end of May, when it petered out like the earlier Decembrist Rebellion in St. Petersburg. In London (where the Viardots had found haven) Turgenev fretted over this "red terror" and wrote to Valentine from Portland Place on 17 April:

Chère Madame,

I should prefer to hope that this letter will not find you in Paris. On the other hand, I should so much like to have news of you. In this uncertainty I am writing you. It is frightful to me to think of you there in your normally peaceful Passy, much more subjected