

HOW THE NEW LAWS AFFECT SOUTHERN SCHOOLS

Saturday Review

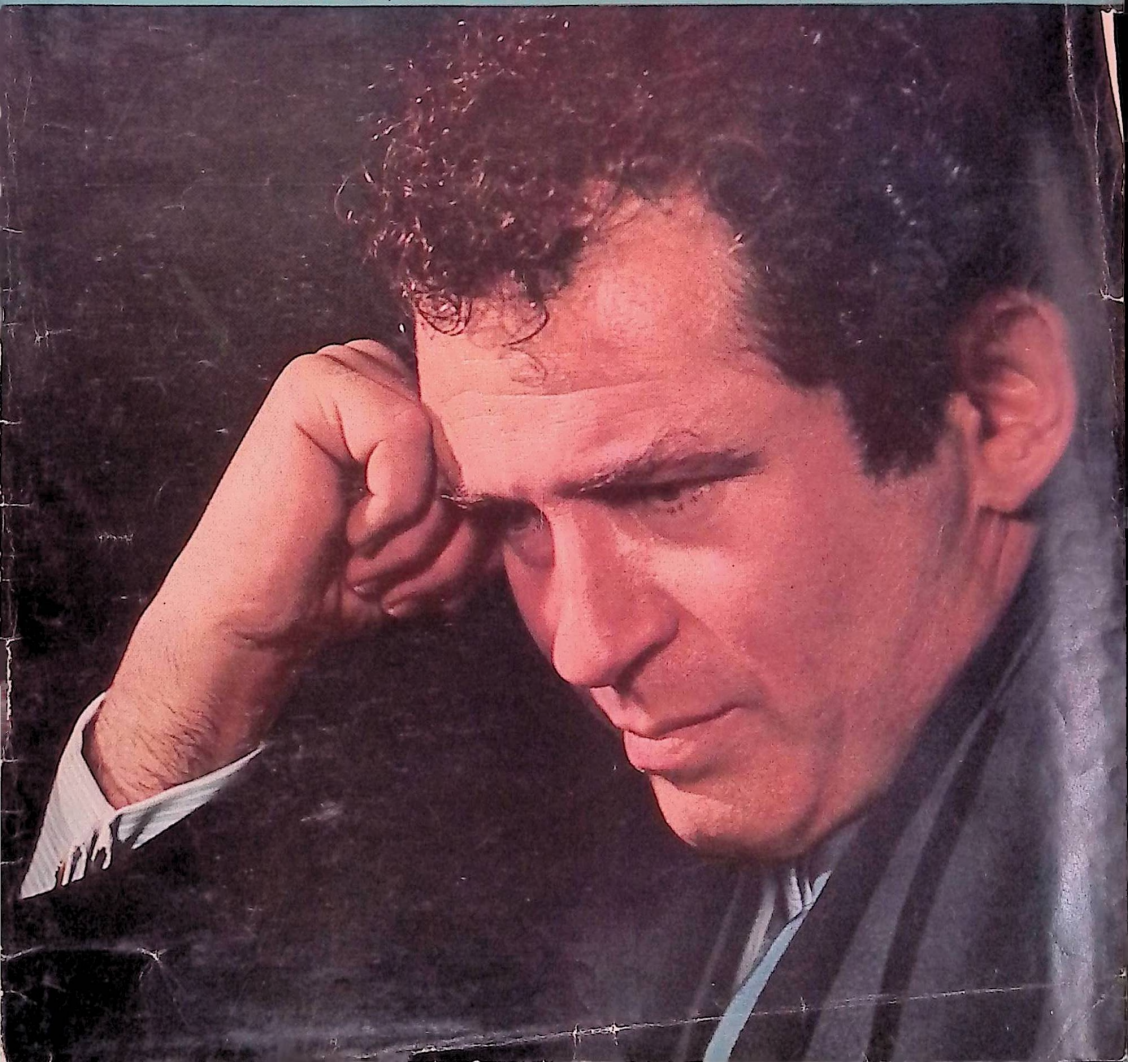
March 20, 1965 25¢



IS NORMAN MAILER'S NEW NOVEL A LITERARY HOAX?

By Granville Hicks

Norman Mailer, author of "An American Dream" (See Literary Horizons)





Books

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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!"