

MAILER'S CAMPAIGN

THE PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS. By NORMAN MAILER. Putnam. 302 pp. \$5.00.

Reviewed by MIDGE DECTER

NORMAN MAILER'S *Presidential Papers* is a collection of much of his occasional writing of the last few years. There are the epic essays on the 1960 Democratic convention and the first Patterson-Liston fight; some poems; a couple of interviews, one real, one imaginary; a chapter from a novel in progress; some columns done for *Esquire* and COMMENTARY; a speech delivered in debate with William Buckley; and a few assorted sundries. The pieces are of varying lengths, intensities, and postures, held together by the kind of introductory comments Mailer originally fashioned for *Advertisements for Myself*. Unlike the earlier collection—which spanned many more years and several turnings in his career—the *Papers* are all products of a single and ever-intensifying preoccupation: that vision of men and society for which Mailer has (not entirely arbitrarily) pre-empted the name of existentialism.

The book, like so many of its author's public performances, will not fail to outrage (and all the more since the assassination of President Kennedy). For one thing, because it is exactly that, a public performance. Mailer is a writer who has not for one moment allowed his contemporaries to forget the impulse to seduction by exhibition that trembles beneath the written word. But more important, I think, is that throughout the *Papers* Mailer's cheekiest and gaudiest moments are precisely his most serious ones; he therefore cannot be taken seriously except in his own

way on his own terms—which is a form of tyranny that few writers are not either too timid or too well-mannered to impose.

Consider the shocking liberty of these pieces. Norman Mailer sets out to define the application of his existentialist notions to politics; this definition is extracted and formulated out of his own writings; and the whole thing is then consecrated to the education of the President of the United States. What is more, his address to Mr. Kennedy is undertaken in no mere spirit of fun—with little of that ebullience which derives from the new dispensation to make clean sport of public affairs—but for the purpose of being listened to and even wielding some influence. He has himself photographed for the dust jacket seated on an old-fashioned platform rocker; even this is only half a joke, one can see it in his eye—he has considered the position. And taking for himself the ear of the President, what does he offer? The gleanings of three years' insistent and child-like spiritual adventuring, which involves him in considerations of the nature of God and the Devil, magic, violence, cancer, and excrement. What impudence!

To judge from past responses, however, what most of Mailer's confreres are apt to find being violated here is not their sense of the sanctity of John F. Kennedy (though now, of course, that too) but rather their traditional commitment to what should be the sanctity of *Norman Mailer*. Those liberties of his that have always been most violently objected to are not the liberties taken at the expense of public propriety and responsibility but the ones that threaten certain hard-earned pieties of the literary community itself. The truth is that a writing man may with impunity act out just about anything in rela-

tion to the society out there—complacency, cynicism, destructiveness, even criminality—anything, that is, except a simple desire to be implicated in its power.

THE trouble with Norman Mailer as a literary figure, then, is that he is always, in the radical sense of the word, so unruly. No sooner is he settled among us at peace, holding our major concessions to his talent and achievement and promise, than he is off again, setting up the next test of his personal strength—and of our willingness to venture. For where he goes he must take everyone, must have confirmation, assent, bigger and newer concessions. When he should be gratified, he turns out to be restless; when he is engaged in what would go down as interesting play, he turns out to be in dead earnest, demanding of us an answering dead earnestness. When he should above all be consolidating his position as a Leading American Novelist, he announces that he is running for President, or Mayor of New York, or whatever. He is, in short, an altogether untrustworthy citizen of the Republic of Letters.

One always speaks of him this way, as a figure, a citizen, instead of merely as a writer; it is really impossible to separate the two. Nor does Mailer himself do so. He gives over his personal gestures and his prose equally to the judgment of the age. For what he is seeking at every moment is the *effect*, the visible effect of his power to create new possibilities, to work what he has called "a revolution in the consciousness of my time." Therefore everything about him is made to matter: not only his books and pieces and poems, but his discoveries of mood as well; or that he beat William Buckley in debate and the *New York Times* failed to record his victory; or that he had

divined a victory for Patterson in the sixth round, who never even made it through the first; or that he had on a certain occasion not been smoking; or that, to take the matter about as far inside as it can go, some of the body cells had probably expired as a result of a given spiritual onslaught. Now it would not be politic to ignore the fact that such pressure on the material of experience can also be called by a simple, ugly, clinical term. But clinical terms are not so much beside the point as beneath it. For the real point is not that Mailer defines a world over which his being is sovereign, but rather that he risks finding all the dimensions of the real world in himself. He is to be the social microcosm—and thus our voluntary scapegoat for weaknesses and corruptions and inadequacies. This is not a modest or endearing ambition. Its stakes are murderously high. But on the other hand, were Mailer to win, he would win all.

IT is important to remember about Norman Mailer that though his gestures can be foolish—in the sense of being wasteful, disruptive, misplaced—they are almost never without the grace of consciousness. (As it often works out, he comes under indictment for just those aspects of his behavior and attitudes that he himself finds it necessary, for the sake of what he would assert, to expose. I am thus-and-such a kind of fool, he says, and those who cannot really bear his disorderliness tend to accept at face value this offering of his self-irony.) The closest he has ever come to being utterly graceless is in his piece on Jackie Kennedy. He tells us that after the appearance of his essay on the convention that nominated her husband, she sent him a letter, clearly full of praise. In his answer to her he announced that he was contemplating a work on the Marquis de Sade, and later tried to explain this egregious blunder on grounds of inaccurate sociology. But when a gentleman tries to interest a distant, beautiful, and famous lady in *his* interest in

the Marquis de Sade, he is obviously making love to her. And in Mailer's case the love he was making—just like the whole misbegotten impression he presented of the lady in the first place—was merely the expansion of some feeling of pleasure with himself. It was unintelligent of him not to know that; he deserved her silence.

But such lapses are rare. Considering the particular fates chosen for tempting by this man, and the number of temptations offered them, it seems something of a miracle of the spirit that they are so rare. He manages, for instance, to swagger through his introductions, propose solutions to the problems of juvenile delinquency and capital punishment, discuss his hatred of masturbation, analyze the cause of cancer, or even mount a poetic attack on the book reviewers of *Time*—all without making himself look the least bit prettier. He distances himself from nothing, and he withholds nothing. In the shattering account of his almost diabolically perfect louse-up at the famous Liston press conference, one comes upon the denouement—Mailer, a parched beggar, finally wringing one moist “I like this guy” from the world champion—knowing that no matter what his pose of the moment, he will never allow one to be deceived in him. Whether or not he is making a revolution in the general consciousness, he has, perhaps alone in this country, succeeded in investing public unruliness with a serious style. At the very least, then, he may effect a permanent improvement in the manners of radicalism.

The seriousness with which he faces up to his personal demands on this society—and with which he is therefore able to count their cost to the soul—is not merely a matter of bravery (though it is a measure of the corruption of thought and feeling just how brave a man has to be to get down to things so self-evidently simple as wanting to be a member of a world championship). Partly Mailer's daring has to do with something not, I think, sufficiently taken into ac-

count about him, and for which *The Presidential Papers* brings massive evidence. And that is how *American* he is. By “American” I do not mean anything literary-metaphysical. I mean quite simply that he owns America. He unquestioningly and unambiguously belongs here; and the whole country gives itself up to him in a range of natural assumption and reference that seems, in its ease and artlessness, quite unavailable to the rest of the special community he inhabits. The America of the essay on Kennedy is not a thought-out or striven-for place but an experienced one, geographically, socially, and culturally. It is a country which by virtue of its solidity, rather than its abstractness, lends itself to subtle analysis—and by the same token, to real subversion. Probably a lot of this has to do with the fact that Mailer as a very young man experienced an enormous American-style success, virtual movie-stardom. But whatever the reason, one thing is clear; he has not the slightest doubt, and therefore needs not the slightest justification, of his right to be important. He calls himself an existentialist, but he is no snob of existences. If he is alienated (sanctified condition), it is an alienation from within, the kind one suffers in relation to one's family rather than to one's neighbors. The difficulty, of course, is that his own family has the power to make even the soberest and most mature of men misbehave. But on the other side, no one can have more power than he to hit them where they live.

THIS FREEDOM to take for granted the terms of his own culture without flinching has made of Mailer a very earnest man. He forever takes one by surprise with his earnestness. It is a quality not much associated with sophistication or subtlety: passion, yes, and even a capacity for murderous reductio—but not the kind of dogged, megalomaniacal earnestness that was meant earlier by the word “childlike.” In this book, for example, the Devil, plastic, and

cancer, his three main symbols for the totalitarianism he maintains is threatening to swallow up man's being, are not interesting or illuminating metaphors for evil; they are the actual, material conditions of evil. The God described by Mailer as dependent for his continuing sovereignty on the strategic successes of his human troops is the living God in Mailer's firmament. The waste that results from people's inability to make heroic acceptances and undergo heroic assimilations is—their excrement. At least half of *The Presidential Papers* is taken up directly, and the rest indirectly, with relating these conditions to a varying group of subjects (one should really say objects): from Fidel to birth control to Hasidism: sometimes with blinding brilliance; sometimes with great wit and spirit; sometimes with the kind of clumsiness that comes with bearing down too hard on one's words and being too solemn in one's soul. Only a very reckless man would be in such a hurry to convert his images into new categories of thought. And only a very generous one would leave it so obvious where these categories do and do not work.

I think it is safe to assert that Mailer will not, at least in his own terms, win all. No one less than a major philosopher could succeed in synthesizing what are so far only the bits and pieces of the revolution he means to achieve. And Mailer is no philosopher: his "philosophy" is poetry, requiring always his discrete and precise perceptions of the moment to persuade us. Partly from intellectual brashness and partly from a novelist's habit of thought, he is in the end not sufficiently respectful toward the history of man's difficulties with the problems raised in this book. When he writes discursively of the possibility that there are extraneous connections between natural phenomena, for instance, he manages only to convince us of how sincerely he believes in them. But when he works his willingness to consider the power of magic against something he has actually

seen or known—when, in short, he acts the observer he supremely is—he is able to provide all the evidence needed for the truth and rightness of his own sense of things. His COMMENTARY column on dread and the absolutely breathtaking description of Patterson's defeat are examples of how Norman Mailer can illuminate those things on heaven and earth our philosophy has not lately bothered to dream of. The man in the state of existential dread and Floyd Patterson are not appropriate figures for a universal discourse, but they are, inescapably, one's fellow Americans. Whatever else Mailer may have failed to do, he has, by a grand fidelity to the character of his own perceptions, given these men's experience a necessary new dimension. If he has not earned the right to deal with the universe, natural or otherwise, no one is currently telling us more about the United States of America.

RISING EXPECTATIONS

INVISIBLE LATIN AMERICA. By SAMUEL SHAPIRO. *Beacon*. 180 pp. \$3.95.

Reviewed by KEITH BOTSFORD

I SEE a grim period ahead, in which all good Americans, God save us, are going to have to worry about Latin America as we were once taught to worry about the starving children of China. There are people who sincerely believe that the southern part of our hemisphere is the key to the world's future. Without going as far as Mr. Bundy—who (when asked why he thought Latin American Studies was a second-rate field in the United States) once disconcerted a Harvard audience by answering that he expected it was because South America was such a second-rate place—I think we are, thanks to Cuba, greatly exaggerating its importance. Latin America has become like an unfaithful mistress to a middle-aged man, the test of our potency.

As Mr. Shapiro rightly points out in his useful little guide to economical and political Latin America, we once had the illusion of omnipotence; and now, though some of our legislators and a strong delegation at the White House are not aware of it, we no longer wield the same power, or on the same basis. We are feeling the chilling fears of advancing age: we begin to worry whether we are presenting ourselves well and whether we're generous enough, or whether the young lover will carry off the bride. If you want to know exactly why we're suffering these pangs of doubt, fear, or loss, and how we feel them, from a liberal, fair, and objective point of view, Mr. Shapiro's book is an excellent though very brief guide. It avoids the dullness of the academic centers of Latin American Studies and the bias of most journalism on the subject. In addition, it has a pleasantly modest and sincere tone. Mr. Shapiro is young and ardent; he believes what he says and has the good scholar's virtue of so ordering his material that the reader who does not know much about the continent can absorb and profit from what he says.

Basically his theses are two. The first is taken from his title, itself derived from that eminent Colombian German Arciniegas: the key to Latin America is its dormant mass, the sleeping volcano on which, unaware, unheeding, and complacent, the precarious superstructure of civilization that is Latin America rests. This mass is poor, abused, and exploited and some day, if we do not take up our version of the White Man's Burden, it will do us all in. His second thesis is that United States foreign policy toward Latin America, due in major part to business pressures, has been singularly blind and obtuse, not to speak of uncouth, immoral, and profitless.

WITH NEITHER of these theses could anyone quarrel. The first is an observable fact; the second a national shame. His argument is clearly stated in a series of essays