

THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT, by Norman Mailer. Penguin Books, 300 pp., \$1.30.

THE VIETNAM MORATORIUM invites the famous American author, Mr. Norman Mailer, to attend the September demonstration. Would he mind sharing the platform with Jane Fonda and dear old Dr. Spock, hero of the *Woman's Day* set, toilet-trainer extraordinaire? How about a dash of Dr. Cairns to top it off? And will Norm write a book about it — about the demonstrators, and his role in the whole deal, and how the *Daily Telegraph* misrepresented him, and the relationship between shit and Dr. Spock, and some insights into the psychology of Jane Fonda, *Time* pin up girl? And what will he say about poor old Jim . . .

We could find out, one day, perhaps. In the meantime however we have *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer's account of the Washington anti-Vietnam demonstration of October 1967. It's more than an account of a political demonstration, it's a deep and tortured look at a sick society; "America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin."

Mailer is a complex man. He's been to the further shores of Hell, and back, stabbing one of his wives, consuming drugs and alcohol, burning holes in his brain until, in his words, his head had taken on "the texture of a fine Swiss cheese". Yet he has retained a hold on life and not slipped off the razor's edge. This he achieved via writing — novels, journalism, essays, poetry — putting into words his own concept of life and the truths that have been revealed to him.

An egotist to be sure. Mailer is the hero of this work. But he deals with himself in the same tough-minded sharp way that he deals with others. He catalogues his hang-ups. He likes

his sex to be guilt-ridden; he is a neo-Victorian. And if he's cruel to others then he's cruel to himself as well. It's a kind of existential therapy. Just write it like it is.

He blasts his way through the American Peace Movement, past the liberal academic opponents of the war whose only quarrel with the Great Society is that they think it temporarily deranged, jabs a couple of Oscar Wilde rights to left personalities like Paul Goodman, Dwight Macdonald, frames the American Communist Party in a brief few lines, the spiritual deadness of its dull old manipulating calculations, and dashes on commenting left and right, the New Left, sex, Black Power, morality, tactics, revolution, violence, television, history, American life, values, cops, Vietnam . . .

"The death of America rides in on the smog". This is also what Mailer writes about; the death of America, the death of the society that set out to be the new Jerusalem, "the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power . . ." And it's dying in a schizophrenic frenzy where hate and power come together, where war and sex meet, becoming interchangeable; and the Vietnam war becomes the huge production of Christianity gone wrong and its aberrations (the twisted napped kids, the frightened young men shooting at the shadows of dark trees in the darker jungles) are the manifestations of sex gone sour in a society that's shot holes in the minds of its children, stifling them, crippling them, showing them reality in the TV commercial. This is what Mailer's about.

And the real hero of it all is not Mailer but the dissenting people of America of which Mailer is part.

R. J. CAHILL