

“THEIR HUMOR ANNOYED HIM”:
CAVALIER WIT AND SYMPATHY
FOR THE DEVIL IN *THE CASTLE*
IN THE FOREST

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—“Himmler subscribed to the theory that the best human possibilities lie close to the worst.”

THERE IS A JOKE ABOUT ATTORNEYS that goes like this: lots of people were on a boat, which sank in shark-infested waters. It was horrible. The sharks were tearing all the passengers to pieces as they tried to make it to shore. All the passengers were dying. Except one passenger, who was an attorney. He swam right to the shore. As he was shaking himself off, the bewildered people on the beach asked him, “How come the sharks did not eat you?” He said: “Professional courtesy, I suppose.” We don’t like attorneys, such a joke conveys, because they are not like us. They are like sharks, and we are like people. We laugh at the joke, if we do, to commune in our fantasy-rejection of lawyerly cruelty. But Mailer’s last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, is organized around a very different sort of humor. Instead of laughing at lawyers to confirm our fantasy that we ourselves are not sharks, Mailer shocks readers, methodically and skillfully, with the knowledge that they are intimately involved with so much of what they—we, I should say—resoundingly reject. The undertow of laughter in this novel won’t necessarily drag you out to sea, but it will make you ask if you share qualities with what is being held up for laughter and judgment.

Mailer's narrator in *The Castle in the Forest* speaks with courtesy and intelligence.¹ He calls himself "Dieter" (though it is not clear what he means to "deter"), and he has been a witness to the formation of Adolf Hitler. Dieter explains to the reader that he has been a functionary in the Third Reich, but he has been—long before he came to work for Himmler—part of the Devil's bureaucracy, with young "Adi" as his most important case. In this way, Mailer manages to bring together the bureaucratic "banality" of evil with the attractions and powers of evil that the word banality cannot subsume.

Mailer's final novel (2007) is a concatenation of aesthetic shocks that tells of the formation of Adolf Hitler's character, beginning with the incestuous influences of his grandfather (about the identity of whom there has been much historical speculation), and continuing through his schooling. Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler* can fruitfully be read as a companion-text to Mailer's novel; its central question is "When and how did Hitler become *Hitler*?" Mailer's novel affirms the idea that Hitler developed sociopathic tendencies by his early teens and that these were the foundation for the subsequent obsession with eliminationist anti-Semitism that would come later—but this evolution in Hitler's darkness is not central to Mailer's novel. Mailer builds a Hitler to explain a person attracted to murder and deceit, but anti-Semitism is not the driving force of the life Mailer imagines. Mailer does not at all exclude the idea that everything in the novel is tuned toward the Holocaust. The title "The Castle in the Forest," Dieter tells readers in the final pages, is the translation of a death camp called "*Schlossimwald*" by those inmates who would not, even in the face of ultimate pain and evil, surrender their sense of irony (465). That *irony* would remain a prized possession under such circumstances will shock some readers, since the phenomena of Hitler and the Holocaust are for many the very limit of irony. In the Rortyean, postmodern, and thoroughly ironic world in which we live, the Holocaust cannot be reduced to a contingent phenomena whose meaning is entirely dependent upon the subject position of the perceiver. Such a way of thinking will earn a comparison with Holocaust deniers. Mailer not only concludes with an homage to ironic camp inmates but also has Dieter-the-demon tell us that the Devil (whom he calls "the Maestro") is a connoisseur of irony: "All this was uttered by the Maestro with characteristic irony. We never know how serious he might be when he speaks to our mind's ear. (His voice is a cornucopia of humors.)" (78). Mailer might even be describing himself in this passage.

A *New York Times* article paused to note that a number of recent novels had the odd feature of including bibliographies. The bibliography of *The Castle in the Forest* is rich with entries on bee-keeping. Readers of the novel know it is a richly over-determined metaphor, combining elements of modulated brutality and great technical skill. Bee-keeping is perhaps the central metaphor of the novel, and Mailer's bibliography lists half-a-dozen or so specialist books on the subject. Bee-keeping signifies social order, but order as understood from an awful height, that of humans looking down on potentially profitable insects, or that of God looking down on mischievous creation. The bees themselves are ruthless at maintaining order, and they eliminate all threats to the hive without hesitation. Mailer's Alois Hitler is presented as a dedicated bee-keeper, and the narrator Dieter—while perhaps disingenuously or even seductively warning readers not to make too much of such events!—presents several scenes in which hives are gassed or burned. Readers might wonder how exactly they could ever make “too much” of such a parallel.

As important as bee-keeping is to Mailer's larger narrative loops, it competes in the reader's imagination with a theme that is given equal air-time but which etches the memory more ruthlessly moment for moment and image for image: transgressive sex. Mailer stays true to his fascination with the idea that God and the Devil partake in human lives through dreams and sex acts. The reader must consider a Freudian primal scene in which young Adolf witnesses Alois and Klara in the sixty-nine position, and witnessing the fictional event makes the reader equal, in some imaginative sense, to demons like Dieter who enter minds and bodies in the most intimate situations imaginable.

Mailer's innovative device of having a mind-entering demon narrate backgrounds denied to us by the enclosures of history allows Mailer to conflate the epistemological realism of first person narration with the omniscience of third person. By “epistemological realism,” I mean that we can only experience our own minds directly, unless we have supernormal powers, and furthermore we can only draw inferences about other minds.² So first-person-singular narration is as close as fiction can get to what an individual person without telepathic skills can really know. Yet our success in the world depends entirely on having confidence in inferences drawn about other minds, and to develop this confidence we need to develop exactly the sort of imagination found in a convincing social novel. But in *The Castle in*

the Forest, Mailer's narrator is a demon from hell who takes pride in his work; the associative connection Mailer develops at length does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that all human knowing is damned, but we are privy, as it were, to the intrusions of devils much, much more than we are, in Mailer's fictional rendition, to the mind-intrusions of angels.

What are we to make of a carefully wrought fictional scene in which the Hitlers, before young Adi even comes into the world, adventure past ordinary naughty sex into pedal-to-the-metal analingus? In foregrounding sex acts of this sort in a book purportedly about radical evil, Mailer risks being discussed in terms of radical eccentricity.³ Or, one could say that approaching radical evil through sexual obscenity is artistically obscene. However we put it, the novel intentionally jars the reader just as much as *Ancient Evenings* (1983), and the central narrative device of *that* novel was an act of fellatio between two ghosts in a tomb. Here is the sex act between Alois and Klara that Mailer's young Hitler witnesses:

We may remember that the last time we saw Alois, he was burying his nose and lips in Klara's vulva, his tongue as long and demonic as a devil's phallus. (Be it said: we are not without our contributions to these arts.) Alois was certainly being aided by us. Never before had he given himself so completely to this exercise, and quickly he had become good at it, and so quickly that no explanation is possible unless we are given credit as well. (Which is why we speak of the Evil One when joining in the act—we do have the power to pass these lubricious gifts to men and women even when we are not attempting to convert them into clients.) (98)

What shall we make of this? One possible response will be to link Mailer's use of the Holocaust with that of Sylvia Plath.⁴ One could say each author uses the pain of others to provide historical ballast to pain that is really individual. It would be the height of egotism to use the deaths of six million in order to hide the idiosyncrasy of one's pain or the eccentricity of one's ideas.

Mailer's Hitler novel recapitulates his karmic unified-field theory of life in a number of ways. He consistently presented himself as an author with an

important vision, one worthy of “the mind of Joyce” or Melville, since the mid-1950s, and critics debated whether he ever wrote his *Ulysses* or *Moby-Dick*. Mailer’s personal ambition, however, was never in question.

The cosmological vision has been reiterated in all of Mailer’s major works, including *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *Harlot’s Ghost* (1991), and *The Gospel according to the Son* (1997).⁵ In each of these novel’s (if we allow for *The Executioner’s Song* as a “nonfiction novel”), the struggle between divine forces explains the relation between apparently insignificant actors in ways that factor out what Mailer calls “the Absurd.” The divinity potential of quotidian existence is the binding material in Mailer’s cosmos, with “divinity” meaning extraordinary, magical, and foundational. The experience of the divine overlaps with the extraordinary in the manner of aesthetic wonder, and this commonality allows Mailer to find God in the aesthetic aspects of sexual experience, but the divine must be more than *merely* extraordinary. The experience of divinity, which some people achieve and many do not, transcends ordinary experience, meaning that, in Mailer’s Romantic articulation, there is a hierarchy of knowing, and that only some (heroic) persons are able to glimpse the magical foundations of being. Such a vision requires huge risks, which explains why many would prefer not to see what Mailer’s heroic seers may encounter, and those who take such risks are not necessarily good people.

In *Ancient Evenings*, which was composed during the Carter presidency, the weak, vacillating pharaoh Ramses IX must decide whether or not to trust the protagonist Menenhetet, a figure who has earned scorn in his attempts to accumulate visionary power through experiments with scatological ceremonies and incest. In this novel Mailer stages his idea that we must make “bargains with evil” into a historical setting that could be called “Before Good and Evil.” Mailer’s setting predates the monotheistic moral codes that undergird our language of morality, thus showing the Eurocentric view to be, in Chakrabarty’s terms, “provincial.” This incarnation of the Mailer vision is, then, radically Manichean, since the Egyptian gods are not centered by a transcendent notion of the Good, against which an evil force defines itself. One could, through cosmological backformation, interpret the theomachy between Osiris and Set as a war between good and evil. In any event, the nature of goodness is never really in question. Artistically modulated growth—a middle way between stagnation and the uncontrolled growth of cancer—has always been the sign of health in Mailer’s universe.

Mailer's praise of Osiris resonates exactly with the adaptations of John Dewey's "live creature."

The existential mystery animating Mailer's visions has to do not with the existence of good and evil but rather with knowing which is which. Rosenbaum gives a name to the tendency to ground our moral awareness in a false absolute: *argumentum ad Hitlerum*. When we can no longer endure uncertainties, when we have run out of negative capability, we appeal to Hitler to end the argument: *Hitler* was evil. The seduction of absolutist thinking, as Mailer shows in his Cold War articulation, is that we name the world in terms of Good and Evil and then proceed to identify our own actions and interests with the Good in self-interested and thus delusory ways:

"There is no emotion on earth more powerful than anti-Americanism. To the rest of the world, America is the Garden of Eden. Unmitigated envy, the ugliest emotion of them all."

"Yessir." (*Harlot's Ghost* 340)

As George Bush put it in the wake of the 9/11 (2001) attack on the World Trade Center, you are either with us or you are against us. You are either with God or the Devil. The tendency and aim of such a formulation is to make everyone into a "yes-man," just like the CIA analyst in the quotation above who quickly says "Yessir" to Harlot, Mailer's architect of American postwar paranoia. In *The Gospel according to the Son*, Mailer resists the equal-and-opposite fallacy, *argumentum ad Jesus*, in which one identifies self-with-Jesus-with-Goodness. Mailer despises the ways in which the Bush White House rolls together what Dieter of *The Castle in the Forest* calls "cheap patriotism" and "cheap prayer" (386), but in *The Gospel according to the Son* Mailer wishes not to attack a "cheap" Jesus but to imagine an authentic one.⁶ Mailer's authentic Jesus (as opposed to the authentic Jesus of mainstream Christians) is one who cannot know for sure what the effects of his actions will be. Though Jesus narrates his own gospel, Mailer denies us a text on which to build a fundamentalist worldview. Here is how Brian McDonald presents the narrative uncertainty in "Post-Holocaust Theodicy, American Imperialism, and the 'Very Jewish Jesus' of Norman Mailer's *The Gospel according to the Son*": The story, Mailer's Jesus reassures us, "is true," but like a careful witness testifying under oath he is quick to add the caveat, "at least to all that I recall" (*Gospel* 2).

Mailer's critics ravaged him for presuming to write in the voice of Jesus, and Mailer clearly anticipates the charge when he has *his* Jesus say with nice condescension that the four synoptic gospels were good as far as they went, but they went too far. Mailer's novelistic hubris, if it should be called that, is in presuming to know the views of God and the Devil and everything in between, but it is presumptuous of the critic to assume that Mailer is ever unaware of the effects of ego, as it is an important theme in all of the "epic" works here discussed:

[W]hen one has become an overseer of death who holds the power to liquidate masses of people, one is also in great need of a very hard shell to the ego in order to feel no intimate horror over the price to one's soul. Most statesmen who become successful leaders of a country at war have usually risen to such eminence already. They have installed in themselves an ability not to suffer sleepless nights because of casualties on the other side. They now possess the mightiest of all social engines of psychic numbification—patriotism! That is still the most dependable instrument for guiding the masses, although it may yet be replaced by revealed religion. We love fundamentalists. Their faith offers us every promise of developing into the final weapon of mass destruction. (405–406)

Dieter provocatively ranks Hitler as a "statesmen," thus restating the A. J. P. Taylor argument that Hitler would have been counted a great statesmen if only he had died at the right time, but the honorific word is inverted when we see, in context, that the necessary condition for being a statesman is an ego, a psychic callous to protect one's sleep from meaningful knowledge of one's actions.⁷ When Dieter stirs in "patriotism" and fundamentalism, it becomes clear that Mailer's Hitler has been used as a "cudgel" to beat George W. Bush, a president who has been most politely described as "incurious" regarding the facts of the world.⁸ "Cudgel," in *The Castle in the Forest*, is the name devils such as Dieter give to the Angels, who cause beings pain in their sleep when their actions are hateful rather than loving.

Antithetical elements call attention to one another, reminding readers of nothing so much as the presence of the author himself. Think back to Mail-

er's character Roth in *The Naked and the Dead*, and of Stephen Richards Rojack walking the parapet in *An American Dream*. Mailer's writings are full of intentional impasses and voracious chasms. Readers who cannot make the leap will quickly fly from the page and declare Mailer unreadable. How are we to make the leap from the pure (if uncertain) speech of Jesus back to the vulva of Hitler's mother? Mailer's narratives are visionary landscapes designed to engulf some readers while allowing others the chance to develop in admittedly idiosyncratic ways—but it is a mindless response to note Mailer's stylistic self-reference without noting the antipodal contextualization of his stylistic "egotism."

Mailer shows every awareness in his artful rendition of the Devil's shaping hand that *ego* is one of the Devil's most important tools, but then, most shockingly, he will put in a narrative turn that does nothing so much as foreground the author. Authorial egotism comes into the foreground of Hitler's mind when he chooses among intellectual influences:

He certainly rejected Goethe and Schiller. Their humor annoyed him. It was too personal—as if they were much too pleased with what they were saying. Not serious enough, Adolf decided. The other two, Kant and Schleiermacher, he simply could not read. After Jahn, his highest pleasure came from the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers. That had also been assigned to his class. Those were good stories, and deep! (377)

Adolf uses the stories of Grimm to terrorize his younger brother Edmund, whom Mailer imagines as Hitler's first murder victim: in a variation of the killing of Abel, jealous Hitler intentionally passes Edmund the measles that will kill him. This passage is one of a dozen or so highly literate moments in *The Castle in the Forest* in which Mailer positively revels in the ironies that were once so properly shocking, those attaching to the apparent incongruity of Nazis who loved Beethoven.

But not all writers and not all ironies are the same—it is not as if Mailer is inviting plague on all the literary houses. Mailer, if I read him rightly, mocks the rectitude with which we have sometimes allowed ourselves to think that literature as such was a proof of superior humanity, when much more is required. Hitler's literary tastes give some hint of his taste for cruelty, as his sadistic use of the Grimm stories suggests, but even more impor-

tant is his impatience with queer, unsettling humor, that of Goethe and Schiller. Their humor annoyed him? Mailer's humor here is profound: he knows—has known since he meditated on the career of Henry Miller in the mid-1970s—that his own unsettling humor would “annoy” many of his readers. Merely to make oneself an antipode to Adolf is the laziest move imaginable, but this is not at all where Mailer leaves the matter. He goes on to reveal why Goethe and Schiller annoyed Adi: they reminded him too much that they exist.

It cannot be said that this humor is inherently ethical. The freedom of humor (and it is this often disappointing freedom of the other to disappoint you that proves that the other is not a function of your own fantasy) has its horrible uses. Hitler's *literary* torture of Edmund is one of the most grimly funny moments in a novel replete with dark humor. Young Adolf has been reading Edmund terrifying Grimm stories:

“Do you want another story?”

“Maybe not.”

“This one is the best,” said Adolf.

“Is it truly the best?”

“Yes.”

“Then maybe I don't want to hear it.”

“It's about a young man who is ordered to sleep with a corpse.

In time to come you, too, may have to sleep next to a dead man.”

At this point, Edmund shrieked. Then he fainted. (379)

In genuinely frightening ways that inter-leaven the literary and the wicked, Mailer exacerbates our moral consciences; American literature has not been as darkly funny since Twain's *Letters from the Earth*. Twain's and Mailer's are good stories, and deep!

Mailer's laughter in *The Castle in the Forest* is not the raucous, adolescent laughter of America's 1960s black humor fiction, a laughter that is always implicitly the laughter of an overly stable know-it-all *we*.⁹ We laugh at the bureaucrats in *Catch-22*. There's an unsettling oddity to Mailer's style, though, an awareness that, like Dieter's, Mailer's humor is both on the mark and a bit to one side of the main stream of events. Mailer does not pretend to be in the ethical center, and the rude, cruel, and invasive qualities of his “diabolical” narrative technique are, he will not let us forget, essential ele-

ments in our own conventional mind-set. The castle in Mailer's forest, the redemptive beauty that makes the pain and failures of such unappreciated masterpieces as *Ancient Evenings* and *The Castle in the Forest* bearable, is always a repetition and ever-free variation of a cavalier wit. As it is in the moment in which Adolf tortures his brother with literature, Mailer's humor is genuinely funny and, at exactly the same time, resoundingly grim. Putting his own idea that our best is often closest to our worst into the mouth of Himmler, Mailer turns into the pain of his own humor and allows—encourages, actually—the nasty identifications his harshest critics made of himself and his work, that he was violent and cruel and “patriarchal” in the sense in which patriarchy is a synonym for Fascism. We cannot make sense of the last two decades of Mailer's writing career without paying attention to this cavalier wit, which is, at its heart, almost invariably *alone*.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Both Steven Poole in his *New Statesman* review, “Sympathy for the Devil” (19 February 2007) and John Freeman in his *Independent* review “Sympathy for the Devil: Norman Mailer on His Satanic New Novel” (2 February 2007) connect Mailer's novel and the Rolling Stones' song in their titles. The Jagger/Richards song, which first appeared on the 1968 album *Beggars Banquet*, is a dramatic monologue in which Lucifer brags about his achievements, insists on commonalities between himself and his listeners, and demands courtesy if met: he is a “man of wealth and taste,” after all. All criminals are cops, all sinners are saints, and we all killed the Kennedys. (See <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2007/02/norman-mailer-hitler-novel> for Poole and <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sympathy-for-the-devil-norman-mailer-on-his-satanic-new-novel-434647.html> for Freeman. Both accessed 2 August 2008.)
2. I am not using “epistemological realism” in the standard way, which refers specifically to the form of objectivism in which objects exist independently of one's own mind in support of a correspondence theory of truth. Such objects would then, presumably, be available for apprehension by subjects from various perspectives, ameliorating the ways in which contemporary, post-Nietzschean perspectivism subverts assertions about an objective world. Mailer's attraction to what I'm calling “epistemological realism,” on the other hand, finds ways of conflating first- and third-person perspectives—such as by resorting to the epistolary novel in the omega manuscript of *Harlot's Ghost* to ensure that all perceptions are grounded in the first-person-singular perspective—precisely because Mailer's fictions do not construct worlds out of a comfortable, objectivist epistemological realism.

3. Ron Rosenbaum, author of *Explaining Hitler*, warns Mailer against pursuing, in a rumored sequel to *The Castle in the Forest*, a sexual explanation of Hitler's evil. See his essay "The Last Temptation of Norman Mailer" for a convincing admonition about the limits of psycho-sexual explanations of Hitler.
4. See Gubar for a discussion of attacks on Plath for reducing the Holocaust to a metaphor.
5. See Lennon's "Mailer's Cosmology" for a discussion of Mailer's cosmological foundation, which is relatively stable across the decades from the mid-Sixties through Mailer's final work.
6. See *Why Are We at War?* if you doubt Mailer despises the mentality and policies of the Bush administration.
7. Readers would be wrong to assume that Mailer is agreeing with A. J. P. Taylor. It is part of Dieter's worldview and it is in his personal interest to defend the kind of egotism that is an insulation against subtle awareness of the feelings of others. Lest we think—as his typical detractors certainly would—that Mailer is defending egotism of this sort, we should recall the image of Ramses II after the Battle of Kadesh, the pharaoh taking care to heft every single amputated hand of the vanquished Hittite soldiers while the rest of the army enjoy the spoils of war in the most libidinal way. Mailer's Ramses II is, in this one respect at least, the ethical antipode to contemporary leaders who, according to Dieter's own political realism, must *necessarily* shield themselves from awareness of the consequences of their actions.
8. Cenk Uygur, a blogger from *The Huffington Post*, has entitled his column on President Bush's lack of curiosity "The Incredibly, Unbelievably, Stupendously, Incurious George Bush."
9. One could say that Yossarian is a character who must act from isolation even when he crucially chooses to act for the sake of others, but I would still characterize the laughter aroused by the novel as more social. This *we* carried over quite smoothly from the novel to the film *M*A*S*H* and to the buddy-scenarios of the television version as well. Consider the narrative situation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo narrative: however iconoclastic and anarchic the voice of Raoul Duke, this road novel depends for its effects on internalizing the "we," so Duke is accompanied by Dr. Gonzo, his Samoan attorney (who is based on Oscar Zeta Acosta, the Mexican-American political activist). If we look through *Castle* carefully, we will see that Mailer has, again and again, done without the protections of an imaginary men's club.
10. None of this article could have been written if I had not been told the joke about lawyers and sharks by Professor Winfried "the Hun" Schleiner of UC Davis twenty years ago.

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