THE HITLER FAMILY: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO NORMAN MAILER

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NORMAN MAILER'S *The Castle in the Forest* is a special experience for an Austrian. In his latest book in the *Henry Bech* series, John Updike has his Jewish author-protagonist say on the occasion of a visit to Czechoslovakia: "Hitler. To come to Europe is somehow to pay him a visit." In his latest book, Norman Mailer has paid a visit to the two Austrian regions which are home to the Hitler family.

On one level, *Castle* is a book about life of the lower classes of the German-speaking section of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and about one man, Alois Hitler, who manages to rise above the humble origins of his family. It looks at the daily life of the peasants, the education of their children, their sexual relationships, and their sometimes desperate attempts to improve their limiting life conditions. But the family that is followed in this novel in great detail on almost five hundred pages is not an ordinary family. It is the family of a man who would fatally change the course of history—causing a catastrophe whose terrible consequences we are still far from having overcome.

Norman Mailer has written another novel which functions very much the same way. In *Oswald's Tale* (1995), he and his collaborators have sifted through and generated an incredible amount of material relating to Oswald's time in the Soviet Union, his wife, Marina, and her family and friends. Reading through the hundreds of pages of this book, one comes to understand the tragic history of the Soviet Union and the way this history has shaped her citizens. Although readers are at times lost in the wealth of this material, at

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no time do they forget that the whole book has one focal point, namely the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963 in Dallas. From *none* of the many things we find out about Marina and her development can it be excluded that it may have influenced her in a particular way which may have contributed to the negative development of her marriage with Lee, and thus to Lee's frustrated megalomania—or whichever else formative characteristic—which ultimately *may* have caused the murder of Kennedy. "This is," says Mailer, "after all, a book that depends upon the small revelation of separate points of view. We are, in effect, studying an *object* … as he tumbles through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. It is as if by such means we hope to penetrate into the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald."

In readers' minds, the massive quantity of information *Castle* provides concerning Hitler's family and early childhood is equally focused on a later historical development, although in a much different manner. The catastrophe is not the murder of a man with large possibilities and the meaning of that death for his culture, but rather the extinction of a whole culture itself, a genocidal horror unequalled in human history. Mailer, by focusing on Hitler's family and early life, seems to suggest that there must be *some* explanatory potential here for what happened later on.

One approach to this novel, though tiresome and uninspired, would be to look at the sources Mailer himself has used and listed in his bibliography and investigate where his narrative intervenes into the Hitler story using the fictional, novelistic mode. Clearly, this is not what this paper can or wants to do, although it would be of some interest if one wanted to look at Mailer's strategy of fictionalization. There is one major theme of the novel, however, where a comparison with the sources in order to understand their significance, namely that of incest.

In the past quarter century, Hitler research has found a consensus regarding the much debated question of the identity of Hitler's unknown grandfather. The father of Hitler's father, Alois, was neither the fabled "Jew from Graz," Frankenberger, nor the later husband of Hitler's mother, Anna Maria Schickelgruber. Rather, it was, as Mailer has his narrator, devil Dieter, find out—with the help of the "Maestro" himself—the brother of Anna Maria's husband, Johann Nepomuk Hüttler, in whose house Alois grew up for parts of his life. As Adolf Hitler's mother, Klara Pölzl, was in fact a daughter of Johann Nepomuk Hüttler's daughter Johanna, Alois has married his niece. Whereas this constellation has become historiographically accepted,

although it has never been exhaustively proven, Mailer intensifies and expands this incestuous condition by making Alois, Adolf Hitler's father, the illegitimate father of his later wife, Adolf's mother Klara, by creating an incestuous affair between Alois and his half-sister Johanna. Alois thereby becomes both Hitler's father and grandfather.

Thus, compared to the extant historiography, which took long to become convinced of even the now-accepted incest thesis, Mailer's book introduces a much larger incestuous network which becomes one of the dominant themes in his book. Incest had interested Mailer very early on—witness a famous statement in his *Advertisements for Myself* (1959)—but it took some fifty years to make it the key moment in one of his novels novel. By having devil-narrator Dieter explain incest as a key to this extraordinary personality and by assigning to Hitler's family at large so much importance, it seems to me that a look at *Castle* from a relational angle is called for. In fact, there *is* a book by a German, American-trained, family therapist, Helm Stierlin, *Adolf Hitler: A Family Perspective*, published in German in 1975 and in English one year later, but it is not included in Mailer's bibliographical listing and had probably not been consulted by him. This seems consistent because Stierlin's book does not address incest as relevant to Hitler's story, even though the model of family therapy out of which it grew is very strongly concerned with incest.

Contextual family theory and therapy, as developed in the United States by the late Ivan Boszormeny-Nagy (a native of Hungary), looks at the world as a network of relationships.[1] With its model of transgenerational ledgers or accounting systems that record acts of giving and receiving or care and exploitation among members of a family unit, it provides an intergenerational relational context for understanding human behavior. If an individual does not receive appropriate care and attention by his or her parents, this person then may turn to his or her own child in order to be compensated, at the detriment of the child, of course, who will in turn have to come to terms with this behavior. The child thus assumes the function of his own grandparents; in the language of contextual therapy, he or she is "parentified." A parentified child is one who lacks the care and attention it deserves and instead is required to extend care, attention, and protection to a needy parent, thus entering a cycle of relational deprivation. In this cycle, one generation borrows resources from the next to rebalance what is missing.

This relational deprivation sets in motion a destructive entitlement. Indeed, the whole world can become the substitutive context for working out destructive entitlement issues in the family of origin. In this way, this model of family therapy also explains the frequent occurrence of similar behavioral patterns in a family.

Incest, especially, has the habit of recurring in the history of a family and it is not surprising that the historically established incestuous relationship between Hitler's father and mother as uncle and niece has a parallel down the line in the equally historically validated relationship between Hitler himself and his niece Angela Raubal, nick-named "Geli," which was an important focus of the sequel to *Castle* Norman Mailer had been considering.

From the point of view of contextual theory, victimization of family members is rooted in an intergenerational matrix of loyalty. In the case of Hitler, according to Mailer, the explanation might run something like this: Alois is the son of a father who could not nor would not openly recognize his paternity in an illegitimate relationship with another woman, Alois's mother, Anna Maria Schickelgruber, a poor farmgirl. Alois later enters into an illegitimate sexual relationship with his half-sister Johanna (doubly illegitimate because Johanna is married to farmer Poelzl and because she is blood relation) and then, on top of it, marries the daughter that comes out of that relationship. In this way, he twice compensates for his lack of recognition by his father and his lacking care, which would normally be provided by a family. Klara, then, is a double victim of incest.

It is characteristic that in the novel, the protagonists never talk openly about the topic of incest. They are aware of its existence—or at least of the possibility of its existence—but they are not willing to disclose that hidden story:

> Alois twisted in the discomfort of considering that guilt might be real. It gave too much dignity to all the weaklings who huddled in churches. They traveled around with a stone in their stomachs and a bigger one up their ass. But now, he did not know if he could scorn them any longer. For he had committed incest. If he had made love to all three of his stepsisters, that was not incest, no, not unless their father was his father. But had he not known that Johann Nepomuk was his father? Of course, he had always known it, although he had chosen not to. It had been the

> sort of thought he had always swept to the rear of his mind. Now it was in the forefront. Worse. If Klara was not the daughter of Johann Poelzl, then she had to be his child.... God Almighty, what if there was a God who knew about things like this?

Situations like these, where his "guilt" becomes half-conscious, are rare with Alois, who in my view is one of Norman Mailer's most formidable protagonists. Having become aware of his own incestuous involvement, he is now looking for them in his own children:

> By morning, he was thinking like a policeman again. When an officer of the law detects a vice in himself, he knows enough to start looking for its presence in others. Soon enough, he began to worry about Alois Junior and Angela. Was there something unworthy going on in that quarter? (305)

This aura of concurrent secrecy, suspicion, and policing—characteristic for families of incest where one is constantly confronted with loss or abandonment—pervades the novel. It destroys any potential trust the members of the family can hold for each other. The beatings Alois inflicts on his sons, in Mailer's novel possibly transcending the intensity and extent of the biographical sources, are an expression of the father's frustration with himself and his situation. He is trying to hold back and inhibit in his son what indeed he is at the same time delegating, in the language of contextual family therapy, to his children, especially his sons. No wonder that his children break down as a consequence of these conflicts. His son Alois, Adolf's half brother, runs away having burned the beehives which are so sacred to his father; Adi rebels by refusing to perform adequately in secondary school. Self-destructive behavior is a signal of major loyalty conflicts; a conflict between self interest and care for others. The characters in this drama are parentified in close relationships and destructively entitled in the "world" which is held captive. *The Castle in the Forest* is an apt title, also, from this perspective.

The victim, Klara, Hitler's mother, in *Castle* is similarly, though much more dimly, aware of her origins. Whereas it is suggested that to her, the many versions of anal and oral sexuality Alois subjects her to—at least one of which young Adi is witness to—are evil; it is really the implicit or semi-

conscious knowledge of the incest condition which makes her so sexually defensive. In an early sexual situation and in a very Mailerian and very un-Austrian line, this connection is made quasi explicit: "Maybe I call you Uncle," she said, "because you are such a big, healthy fellow of an uncle." (129) But it takes devil Dieter to explain the mechanism of this transference in great clarity:

> Most men and women are incapable of facing unpleasant truths. They have what can only be a God-given ability to conceal themselves from themselves. So I could appreciate how Klara was full of unadmitted worry over Alois junior and Angela and never spent a moment pondering whether her husband was not her uncle but her father. (266)

Having lost three children at a very early age, topped by the future loss of a fourth, Klara is extremely anxious about the well-being of young Adi. But of course the motor of all of her maternal care is her secret guilt and it will, again according to Dieter, result in the opposite:

> [A]n incestuous procreation followed by swarms of mother-love will offer rich possibilities.... Even the noblest, most self-sacrificing and generous mother can produce a monster. (74)

This leads us to Dieter, the object of criticism by several reviewers who are sceptical of Mailer's latest novel and indeed question a mysterious character, although a central agent in the novel. In the German translation of Mailer's work, the word "client" Dieter uses for those individuals the devils have recruited for their interests, is translated as "Mandant," metaphorically translating the relationship between devil and customer into a legal context. It seems to me that some American critics have also read the meaning of client in this legal framework. My own reading, however, evokes more the therapeutic context of this word. Dieter is, after all, the one who breaks through the secrecy, who is willing to discontinue the silence; the—as quoted above—"God-given ability [of human beings] to conceal themselves from themselves."

Whether this is of any help in explaining Mailer's possibly strangest narrator, a lower-rank renegade devil embodied in an SS officer, is question-

able. Especially, it does not explain the devilish input at Adolf Hitler's birth, unless we take this to be the incestuous legacy itself, which finds its ultimate expression in this mating of father and daughter. But there is a devilish dynamic here, including the approximation of the devil's work to that of the novelist, which provides new insight into a still largely incomprehensible phenomenon.

Obviously, through his fictional analysis of Hitler's family, Mailer has not fully explained Hitler's further development. In the rural regions of Austria, as elsewhere, incest was rampant and thousands of children in similar situations have *not* become monsters. But Mailer has described a situation that would favor such a development and at the time of its publication, he was, after all, not yet done with Hitler. What he has done in this "high risk" novel as it has been referred to by one critic, is to look at the Hitler phenomenon outside of an explicitly moralistic discourse. This is a relatively new mode in the discussion of Naziism—which, incidentally, does not deny the continued necessity of the moral discussion. That he has achieved this by introducing a devil as a narrator is maybe the most surprising and highly ironic moment of this remarkable novel.

NOTE

1. I would like to acknowledge the input and help of my friend Margaret Cotroneo, family therapist and Professor of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania, for this paper. Some of the concepts discussed here are elaborated on in Margaret Cotroneo and Helene Moriarty, "Intergenerational Family Processes in the Treatment of Incest" (Burgess, 293–305).

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