THE DEVIL'S PARTY: READING AND WREAKING VENGEANCE IN *THE CASTLE IN THE FOREST*

FANNIE PECZENIK

> You don't know what it is to have six million of your people killed when there are only twelve million of them on earth. You don't know the profound and fundamental stunting of existence that got into the blood cells of every Jew after Hitler had done his work. (Norman Mailer to Jack Abbott, 18 April 1979)

When I heard that Mailer had written a fictional biography of Hitler, I made up my mind not to read it. The idea was offensive. At this late date, the life of Adolf Hitler did not merit another examination, least of all in a novel, which would entail an imaginative engagement with the Führer's private fears, desires, hopes, and dreams. Who wanted to spend time in close communion with that repellent psyche? Not I. Born in post-war Vienna to parents who were Holocaust survivors from Poland, I could say that I had already shared far too much of my life with Hitler.

Distaste is one thing, curiosity another. And I was just curious enough about *Castle in the Forest* to read J. M. Coetzee's essay in the *New York Review*. A review seemed like a good compromise: appraisal and analysis instead of direct contact. But as it turned out, Coetzee made such a strong argument for the seriousness of the enterprise that I reconsidered my opinion. The novel might have some merit after all. Yet I was in no hurry to read it. Months passed, and then one early spring day, as my husband and I were

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strolling through a bookstore, he picked a copy of *Castle in the Forest* off a shelf. "Here," he said, "I'll get this for you. It's a Purim gift."

This autobiographical vignette serves a purpose: there was uncanny prescience in linking Purim to *Castle in the Forest.* The holiday celebrates the salvation of the Persian Jews in the Fifth Century BCE from a plot by Haman, the king's evil advisor, to have the entire community slaughtered. The Book of Esther tells how, with the help of her kinsman Mordechai, she uses her wits and her beauty to foil Haman's plans. By the king's decree, victors and victims undergo a swift reversal of fortune. Haman's plot recoils back on him and he ends up on the very same gallows he had prepared for Mordechai. Meanwhile, the Jews of the realm, permitted to arm themselves, attack and kill Haman's followers. For the Jews, sorrow is turned to joy and a day of mourning to a festival.

The only boisterous holiday in the Hebrew calendar, Purim is not unlike Carnival in using masks and costumes and giving license to rowdy behavior. That the history of the Jews is replete with other plots against them that do not end so well does not diminish the festivity of Purim; perhaps it only increases it. Through the feasting and merrymaking, the retribution against Haman is reenacted as mockery. Most Americans in urban areas are probably familiar with the special Purim pastries, poppy seed or fruit-filled triangular tarts called *hamantaschen*, Haman's pockets, made popular by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. In the synagogue, the holiday is celebrated by a public reading of the Scroll (Megillah) of Esther, during which the congregation deploys noisemakers (called *greggers* in Yiddish) to drown out the name of Haman whenever it is said aloud in the reading of the text. As the Hebrew curse has it, Haman's name is blotted out —except to denote pastry. Among Ashkenazi Jews, the festivities traditionally included a *Purimshpil*, a folk play based on the Purim story or contemporary subjects.[1] Crossing genre borders, I now propose to read *Castle* as a type of Purim entertainment, a *shpil* in long prose narrative form that carries the heavy burden of invoking not a catastrophe averted but a catastrophe perpetrated.

First, a disclaimer is in order. *Castle* can be read in the context of the retributive charivari of Purim without exaggerating the novel's Jewish dimensions or Mailer's engagement with Judaism.[2] In fact, it is instructive to consider *Castle* in the light of a very different tradition, what one might call the *locus classicus* of retributive justice in Western literature, Canto 28 of Dante's *Inferno.* There the pilgrim-poet encounters Bertran de Born who,

having severed filial ties between a father and son, is condemned to carry his own severed head. Holding the head by the hair and swinging it like a lantern, Bertran offers a gloss on his gruesome condition: "*Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso*" (In me you may observe fit punishment).[3] While scholars disagree on the extent to which the penal code of hell is based the principle of *contrapasso*, it clearly underlies the punishment of Ugolino and Ruggieri in Canto 33.[4] Recounting how in life he and his sons were imprisoned by Ruggieri and left to starve, Ugolino implies that hunger drove him to cannibalize his children. So now in hell he is condemned to gnaw forever on the head of Ruggieri; the punishment is superbly efficient, at once echoing the crime and exacting vengeance for it. Dante's *contrapasso*, his vision of the precise and punctilious infernal justice of retribution, informs the *Purim-shpil* extravagance of *Castle.* Mailer's close examination of Hitler's life—the bibliography appended to the novel is extensive—puts mockery in the service of strict accounting, the measure for measure of condign punishment.

For fifty years he had been waiting to write about Hitler, Mailer said in an interview (Lennon 2007). During that time, as the Third Reich has been examined and reexamined and incorporated into popular culture, Hitler has become, for the general population, more a figure of speech than a historical reality. The psychic havoc (Mailer's term in *Advertisements for Myself*) caused by the Second World War has morphed into cliché with the concomitant psychic pall, and the condition extends well beyond the Jewish community. So as the historical Hitler dominated most of Europe and caused the deaths of millions, the figurative Hitler still has the power to thwart discourse—mention his name and it kills the conversation.[5] And in the bleak confusion and bold incompetence of American political life at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that name was invoked with alarming frequency (deployed, curiously enough, by both ends of the political spectrum).

Taking on the trope of Hitler, the aging Mailer returns to the prophetic mode of his younger self, who believed his vocation lay in becoming "*consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous, and more powerful*" (*Advertisements for Myself* 22). He remains a disruptive writer, making his readers uncomfortable. But ever the great experimentalist of the narrative voice, he chooses now to speak with the mellow cadences of folktale, telling how *das Waldschloss,* the castle in the forest, came to be where there was neither cas-

tle nor forest, but only the adamantine irony of inmates from Berlin imprisoned in a concentration camp where there had once been a potato field. We do not learn about this *Waldschloss* until the end of the novel, when we have already passed through the other adamantine irony of a tale told to avenge crimes committed more than sixty years before. The long delay has its advantage. As we know from an old adage invoked in Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*: "OSS working undercover in Italy, 1943, did encounter the following piece of Sicilian wisdom: 'Revenge is a dish that people of taste eat cold.'" (*HG* 813). The time is ripe for low temperature retribution.

Mailer's instrument of revenge is the novel's first person narrator, the gregarious, ingratiating, and ambitious devil, incarnated as Dieter the S.S. Officer (renamed D.T. during his residence in America—but of that sojourn we are told very little), who played a leading role in fostering, encouraging, and fashioning Hitler. While his boss, the Evil One, or Maestro, has turned his attention to modern technology, Dieter takes the opportunity to avenge a demotion by betraying the covert demonic organization that employed him and reveal how a boy born to an obscure Austrian peasant family became his most famous client. Barbara Probst Solomon has noted that, deliberately or not, in *The Castle in the Forest* Mailer "has turned the tables on Hitler. Hitler's demonic portrait of the Jews, his obsession with their bloodlines, their presumed inherited characteristics, had to be ingested from sources close to him. And Mailer hunts down Adi's family with the same obsessiveness and belief in inherited characteristics that Hitler did to the Jews" (225). Going far beyond subjecting the Hitler family to intense scrutiny, Mailer has contrived to give them an antagonistic writer of an unauthorized biography, a Kitty Kelley gone wild, or—the temptation to say this is irresistible—the biographer from hell. And so Dieter is.

Even earnest biographers run the risk of appropriating the lives of their subjects. For Dieter appropriation is the goal, as we learn from his teasing discussion of the narrative's genre: "It is more than a memoir and certainly has to be most curious as a biography since it is as privileged as a novel " (79). He may argue against the common belief that demonic possession is total but he can also boast of his mastery of the subject: "I live with the confidence that I am in a position to understand Adolf. For the fact is that I know him. I must repeat. I know him top to bottom" (9). On the basis of his successful cultivation of Hitler as a client of the Maestro, Dieter rose through the ranks of the infernal hierarchy, and in telling the story afterwards, the de-

moted (can we call him fallen?) devil is not about to give up his rights to the life of a celebrity. Hitler is still Dieter's intellectual property, one might say, but the vengeance is only incidentally his. Primarily it is ours.

Dieter's knowledge of his client is indeed extensive. He generously offers readers copious data accessible only to devils (and novelists) about Hitler's incestuous genealogy, odious conception, and bullied and bullying childhood. He takes pains to describe the workings of infernal plots and ploys to intervene in human life. Yet nothing about the information he imparts tells us why Hitler turned out as he did—why a dysfunctional family, nasty sibling rivalry, and a failed beekeeping venture, unpleasant as they are, should lead to dictatorship, world war, and genocide. For not providing an explanation for Hitler's evil, Mailer was criticized by some reviewers (Gross, for example). They missed the point, I believe. Such criticism presupposes that *Castle* should have offered the kind of catharsis-through-information that one finds in murder mysteries. Yet if we knew what caused Hitler to do what he did, would his deeds suddenly become less horrific?[6] It is worth noting that even in *The Executioner's Song*, where Mailer is dealing with a mundane criminal, there is also no catharsis-through-information. We wait for Gary Gilmore to explain his motive, to say why he murdered the two men he robbed. But he never does.

As though anticipating the objections of his critics, Mailer has Dieter tease us with details whose later historical echo is unmistakable. Relating how Alois Hitler's beekeeping mentor, der Alte, set fire to one of his hives, Dieter casually mentions that the young Adi happened to be present but takes care to describe the boy's sadistic excitement: "His toes tingled, his heart shook in its chamber, he did not know whether to scream or to roar with laughter" (263). Since der Alte burns the hive in obedience to instructions sent to him in a dream by the very same Dieter and the boy likewise has been instructed by dream to be at the old man's farm, can we conclude that this is a formative moment? The devil demurs with a shrug. He had just come back from creating mayhem in Russia, he tells us, and he was not up to the task of dealing with the mind of this particular six-year old (the six-year old who interests us more than the entire Russian royal family). If we were expecting to derive some intellectual or emotional satisfaction from that proffered datum about the young Hitler's fascination with fiery death and mass slaughter, we are disappointed. Dieter denies us the pleasure.

A balder instance is the large *Hakenkreuz* carved into the gate of the

monastery school the young Adi attends. At this point the swastika is not yet an abhorrent political symbol; it is merely the coat of arms of an Abbot von Hagen who may have enjoyed the punning allusion to his name. The gate is the scene of an episode in which the nine-year-old Hitler, caught smoking by one of his teachers who happens to be an important client of the infernal powers, has a chance to hone his skills in manipulation and gives up the idea of becoming a priest. Yet as soon as Dieter brings the tantalizing description of the school archway to our attention, he warns us against rushing to conclusions: "Not too much, I hasten to add, should be made of this. Von Hagen's swastika was subtly carved, and so offered no striking suggestion of the phalanxes yet to march beneath that symbol. Nonetheless, there it was, a crooked cross" (341-42). The carving is and is not significant; it does and does not foreshadow the goose-stepping hordes.

Although Dieter has a pronounced impish edge, he does not dangle provocative details before his readers merely to amuse himself at their expense. Ambiguity comes with the secret agent's territory. The nature of his work requires him to move from one blind stratagem to another, rely on sources of varying credibility, and grasp the opportunities that come with occasional bits of good luck. The outcome is always unpredictable and always obscure; cause and effect are blurred.

The infernal organization to which Dieter belongs is, after all, a literary descendant of the CIA in *Harlot's Ghost*, and it is instructive to remember Harry Hubbard's limited knowledge about the Company (as the agents call their organization) and its manifold machinations against its ostensible enemy, the KGB. Applying the same kind of intellectual limitations to his private life, Hubbard remains unaware of the state of his own floundering marriage. Wandering for decades in a maze of disguises, disinformation, cryptonyms, letters, messages, and fragments of poetry, he finally tries to extricate himself by writing a memoir in two disjointed manuscripts, Alpha and Omega (the other twenty-two letters of the Greek alphabet coming between them, it is unlikely the two parts will ever fit together). Hubbard's hapless ignorance is institution-wide. Hugh Montague may be the master of literary cryptograms, but his monologue after the Kennedy assassination reveals (in a moment of black humor) his true ignorance as he tries to cover his tracks without knowing precisely where his tracks are. His desperate self-vindication is worthy of one of Robert Browning's soliloquizing madmen. Always more vulnerable than his superior, Harry even worries that

through the convoluted webs of intrigue he has set in motion, he himself might ultimately be culpable.[7]

A supernatural veneer is, evidently, no protection against the ethos of ignorance inherent in covert agencies. Dieter is better informed than Harry only in that, Socratically, he knows how little he knows, admitting (while still status conscious): "I am about as much endowed beyond an accomplished scholar as he in turn is more knowledgeable than a clod from a poorly endowed school" (236). To the agent who must traverse the murky terrain of the human mind, that academic advantage counts for very little. And, again, like his human counterpart, Dieter is deliberately kept ignorant by his employer: "In truth, I do not know much about hell. I am not even certain it exists. The Maestro has kept us, after all, in enclaves. We are not supposed to know what we do not need to know" (385). Dieter must entertain the possibility that the Maestro is not even the Devil himself, but merely another one of the many infernal bureaucrats. Compartmentalization keeps the agents wandering in the labyrinth of their assigned enclaves.

Dieter is, then, no better than a CIA agent at charting his own success or foreseeing the future course of history (and perhaps the Maestro and his archenemy, the Dummkopf, are also limited in this respect). After the young Adi helps his father gas a hive of sick bees, the boy is sent a dream etching in which he is given an assignment to count the dead insects. Laying them out in rows, he takes pride in counting four thousand dead before the dream is interrupted. But again Dieter adds a caveat against hasty conclusions and reiterates the uncertainty of the outcome:

> Here, I would warn the reader not to make too much of the gassing nor the body count. It is not to be understood as the unique cause of all that came later. For a dream-etching . . . leaves but a dot upon your psyche, a footprint to anticipate a future sequence of development that may or may not come to pass in future decades. Most dream-etchings are not unlike the abandoned foundations one can see on the outskirts of Third World cities. Left to molder for lack of further funds, they lie there, excavations on a scraggly field. (201)

As spies plant information and pay informants, so devils etch dreams, but not all of their schemes come to fruition.

Christopher Ricks has noted that in the descriptions of Alois Hitler's attempts to become a beekeeper "there are glimpses of something that might have been other, a world of which one would not have had to despair" (208). The beehives are a vision not only of a naturally thriving world but of a communal life otherwise unavailable to the Hitler family. Beyond Alois's visits to the local tavern and, later, an occasional *Bürgerabend*, there is only hearth and home, subject to frequent changes of address. One might be able to consider the beekeeping episodes as a kind of counterplot (as Geoffrey Hartman called that sense of an omnipresent divine providence protecting creation in *Paradise Lost*, especially those redemptive images embedded in the pastoral similes in Books I and II) if, in the shadow of the Waldschloss, one could imagine good coming out of evil. But no, there is neither divine providence nor protection in this castle in this forest, even within the confines of a figure of speech.

If there is a counterplot in *Castle*, it tends toward retribution, not redemption. By modeling the structure of the Maestro's infernal organization on the CIA of *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer has assured that Hitler will be denied centrality in his own life story. He will be groomed, honed, tricked out for whatever task his handler deems necessary; he will be scrupulously manipulated; but personally he will matter not at all. It is consistent with the nature of Dieter's work that he should resist calling any episode in little Adi's life formative. Intelligence work is like that—uncertain and inconclusive. Dieter's caveats may give us, painfully, a glimpse of another world, one in which his schemes failed, but in our world, where they succeeded, the absence of formative experiences works towards the progressive diminution of Hitler. Very simply, if fashioning the Führer required hard demonic labor, then we can smile sarcastically along with Dieter as he listens to Himmler expound on Hitler's superhuman Will and Vision and the rest of the pseudo-political, pseudo-philosophical notions dear to Nazi hearts. Superhuman Will and Vision? Dieter must think the mortals fools. Does Himmler have any idea how many demon-hours (evidently the infernal clocks are not set by eternity) were required to make all those dream etchings (and some of them went nowhere) in Hitler's brain?

In that light, the coronation of Czar Nicholas II in Book VIII becomes a necessary detour away from rural Austria rather than a digression from Hitler's biography. In St. Petersburg and at Khodynskoe, the Maestro's agents are preparing the way for the Bolshevik Revolution and ultimately Stalin,

and one need not indulge in alternative history to see how Hitler's career depends on their success. The eastern assignment is evidently so important to the demonic designs that it boosts Dieter's career: "I can vouch that the eight months I lived in Russia from late 1895 to the early summer of 1896 became a prominent element in my development as a high devil" (213). But—more diminution—as the reader well knows, Dieter's Russian strategy also leads to the entry of the Red Army into Berlin and Hitler's suicide and fiery end.

The diminution of Hitler does not depend solely on future events. In his capacity as biographer from hell, Dieter works against his subject from the beginning, cutting Hitler down to size even as he narrates his life story. Narcissistic and reflexively competitive, Dieter does not gladly share the spotlight with his young charge and his contempt is palpable. (We already know from *Harlot's Ghost* that it is de rigueur for intelligence agents to despise the clients they cultivate). "I, too, am a protagonist" (*CIF* 213), Dieter is quick to remind us. He presents his client as a boy devoid of any admirable qualities, except a talent for war games, the skill that damns him by bringing him to the attention of the Evil One. Otherwise Adi is an unappealing, fearful egotist enamored of power and brute force. Moreover, he suffers from that traditional affliction of the Evil One's clients, a sulphurous smell. Every so often, Dieter reminds us that the little boy stinks; it is a gratuitous detail, mean and petty, but also funny. Adi is eventually shown to be completely loathsome in his jealousy (possibly murderous—Dieter hedges his bet here) towards his younger brother, the angelic Edmund whose death almost brings a smattering of human emotion to the demon. Compared with Adi, even Alois Senior and Junior, despite their crude appetites, cruelty, and violence, seem recognizably human.

If he demurs on the formative experiences in Adi's life, Dieter is considerably less reluctant to disclose the requisite personality traits he nurtures in him. He begins by feeding the boy's vanity, feeding it so well that every incident in his harsh, claustrophobic life is measured by an increase or decrease in his quantity of self-esteem. A stepbrother runs away from home, a brother dies, and Adi is chiefly concerned with his place in the family hierarchy, delighting when he becomes, first, the eldest son, then the only son. Through dreams, Dieter ensures that his young charge believes he has a special destiny, a belief completely contradicted by daytime evidence. The woozy nationalism of the late nineteenth century is seductive and, before long, the

boy links his desperate and defiant sense of personal destiny to that of the *Volk*. Following an adolescent outburst against both the prevailing prudery and his own sexual disgust, the young Hitler reads Treitschke in a school text and becomes mesmerized by a hyperbolic passage about the mystery and majesty of the German people. He barely understands the words but he is certain they are true. At this juncture, Dieter points menacingly toward the future: "We devils have known for a long time that a mediocre mind, once devoted to one mystical idea, can obtain a mental confidence well beyond its normal potential" (447). This is a contemptuous assessment from a biographer who thoroughly knows his subject—and a depressing thought, but true.

To complement his self-induced grandiosity, the young Hitler is schooled by Dieter in the fine art of data selection. When he receives failing grades at the Realschule, the boy convinces himself—with help from his handler—that his failure is actually a sign of intellectual superiority. In a compensatory fantasy, he envisions himself as a schoolteacher giving a lecture on the secret of true learning: "Do not try to remember all the facts of every historical event. . . . Most of the facts you have memorized are no better than debris which contradict other facts. So you will be in a state of confusion. . . . Select only those facts which clarify the issues" (419). This skill will obviously prove useful in Hitler's later career. It is, incidentally, worth noting that here Mailer has slyly summarized a basic tool of bad governance, popular with a great many leaders besides Hitler. (One would very much like to know where D.T., the American incarnation of the narrating devil who was once Dieter, would have directed his attention on this side of the Atlantic. But those episodes belong to a subsequent volume that Mailer did not live to write.)

By the time of the *Realschule* failures, Dieter has already used Adi's twin obsessions with primogeniture and patriarchy to prepare him for the apotheosis of data selection—a lifetime of mendacity. (Curiously enough, although he was once reviled by feminists, in *The Castle in the Forest* Mailer offers a stunningly cold dissection of patriarchy and its discontents.) When Alois Senior savagely attacks his eldest son, Dieter deploys his infernal machinations to make the terrified little Adi believe that he himself was the victim, and Hitler spends the rest of his life believing that his father almost beat him to death. Through the false memory, Dieter lays the groundwork for an entire edifice of lies: "this fiction would enable me to develop Adi's future incapacity to tell the truth. By the time his political career began, he was in command of an artwork of lies elaborate enough to support his smallest

need. He could shave the truth by a hair or subvert it altogether" (316). If it were any man but Hitler, the pathos of a bogus Oedipal struggle (a hated stepbrother acting as surrogate to confront the vengeful father where three roads meet) would merit pity.

Or, there would be pity, if the narrator were someone other than Dieter. Although he is an immensely entertaining story-teller, he *is* a devil, cut off from the full range of human experience, his emotional vocabulary accurate only when expressing combative, competitive egotism. It is useful here to remember how one of Dieter's literary ancestors, Milton's Satan, becomes so distracted by Eve's beauty that for a moment he loses his hate and envy and stands there, abstracted from his usual evil, "Stupidly good" (*Paradise Lost* 9. 465). Dumb passivity is as close as Satan gets to understanding Eden and prelapsarian experience; the local animals and even the plants have richer emotional lives than he does. For his part, Dieter is well-acquainted with envy, self-pity, ambition, lust, physical pain and pleasure. But compassion, longing, sorrow, remorse and love are unfamiliar to him, except in a reductive sense: "we do look for the lowest common denominator to any truth" (Mailer, Castle 99).

Dieter's truncated psyche gets him (that is, his S.S. officer incarnation) killed in the Waldschloss. As he tells it, the Jewish psychiatrist who interrogates him is upset by the pestilential effluvia and the shouts of the liberated prisoners and seeks out Dieter's company because they are both high-ranking officers. Dieter must have engaged in some extremely obtuse data selection because he has egregiously misjudged the situation. The American has just encountered immeasurably greater horrors than a few bad smells and as a Jew is probably taking the horrors personally. But empathy is so alien to Dieter that he makes the fatal mistake of pretending to be conscience-stricken. (An argument could be made that Dieter is clueless here because he has been wearing the S.S. uniform for so long that even the vestigial sensibilities of a demon have atrophied.) The sense that Dieter gets what he deserves is inescapable.

At that moment, we are abruptly reminded that Dieter is not an impartial narrator nor a reliable one, and we have been of (and at) the devil's party, amusing ourselves as we watch the heartless education of a wretched little boy in the arts of lying and self-deception. In 1940, in *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin imagined Hitler subsumed by a double, an anonymous Jewish barber. What Chaplin began before Hitler was fully yet the murderer he would be-

come, Mailer completes after the fact. Hitler is subsumed by his biographer, the slick Dieter, good at schmoozing and imprinting his own image on his clients. Significantly, Dieter appropriates the soul of the young Hitler without temptation, without the flattery and bogus promises of wealth, power, knowledge, or beautiful women that are the stock-in-trade ploy of the devil. It is possible a temptation scene might have figured in a later episode in a subsequent volume, but that is idle speculation. In the novel as we have it, Dieter so overshadows his client that he effectively blots him out.

As we know from Aristotle, history merely tells us what happened, poetry what might have happened. There is reason to believe (or hope) that if what might have happened is well told enough, the way we perceive what happened changes. Isn't Napoleon's invasion of Russia forever defined by Tolstoy and World War I by Hemingway? Then there is a chance—the odds unknown—that some years hence, the popular view of Hitler will be shaped by Mailer's novel. Hitler, the man of millennial urges who dominated the twentieth-century, reduced to a powerless stick figure—that would be exemplary *contrapasso*, retributive justice meted out by literature, as though *The Castle* were a *roman à clef*, albeit one written to redress historical rather than private grievances.

Meanwhile, for the present, does the novel-cum-*Purim-shpil* change anything? If Mailer was correct in his letter to Jack Henry Abbot and my existence was stunted by Hitler, am I less stunted for having read *Castle in the Forest*?

I resort to another autobiographical vignette.

Some months after my husband gave me *Castle* as a Purim gift, we were in a bookstore again, but not, as before, in a strip mall in Pittsburgh. This time we were in a shop near the chic Kärtnerstrasse, close to the street where I was born in Vienna. I had recently had a landmark birthday and it was my husband's idea that we celebrate it there. After a lifetime of ambivalence about my natal city, I had hesitated. But since he had never really seen Vienna and it has the reputation of being one of the most livable cities in the world, I agreed to go.

On a table, among the new selections, was a stack of books entitled *Das Schloss im Wald*. I picked up one of the books, thumbed through it, handed it to my husband. We exchanged sly glances. For my purposes, the timing of the German translation of *The Castle in the Forest* couldn't have been more fortuitous.

A clerk was watching us. He had that wonderfully welcoming face that so

many young Austrians have but I thought his expression implied more—a chance, perhaps, to discuss the new book with a couple of Americans.

The possibility of a literary chat was intriguing. Austria was late in addressing its Nazi past, but when it finally did, it undertook the work with commendable seriousness. I had just been to see the inverted blank concrete books of the Holocaust memorial on Judenplatz. It was, I thought, a solemn act of piety.

"*Nein, danke*," I shook my head and smiled at the young clerk. I didn't need any help.

And I didn't. I could forgo the chat. On the table in front of me I had everything I wanted. The desire for retribution is atavistic, unattractive, and yet undeniable. For the Austrians, concrete books, unwritten and unreadable, made a fit monument. But *Das Schloss im Wald*, Mailer's self-razing biography of Hitler, was fit for me.

Yes, Vienna was one of the most livable cities, as well as one of the prettiest. For the first time, I allowed myself to feel the familiar comfort of a childhood home and it was sweet, like *hamantaschen.*

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NOTES

1. For a study of the reception of a *Purim-shpil* performed in the aftermath of World War II, see Aronowicz. For a general discussion of the Yiddish folk dramas performed at Purim, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and "*Purim-Shpil*," *Encyclopaedia Judaica.*
2. For various and valuable insights into Mailer's role as a Jewish writer, see Bernstein, Cappell, and Siegel.
3. Dante, *Inferno,* 142. For explication and sources, see the commentary to 28. 142 in Hollander, *Princeton Dante Project.*
4. For a comprehensive summary of the issues involved in determining whether all the condemned souls receive condign punishment, see Armour.
5. For a concise exposition of still unanswered questions about Hitler's regime, see Lukacs, especially 86–108.
6. For an interesting perspective on the impossibility of establishing causal relations in *Castle* and elsewhere, see Fleming.
7. For the "radical indeterminacy" of *Harlot's Ghost*, see Anshen, 457.

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