

IMAGINING EVIL:
THE SARDONIC NARRATOR OF
MAILER'S LAST NOVEL

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The Castle in the Forest

By Norman Mailer

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READING SENTENCES IN *THE CASTLE IN THE FOREST* is a fascinating pleasure, interrupted by involuntary eruptions of hilarity. Amusement does not depend on a lurid interest in Hitler's perversities; rather it is won by the reader's attention to the narrator's measured, balanced, and calculated control of *presenting* Hitler's perversities: scornfully cynical, derisively sneering, mockingly malicious, disdainfully disparaging, bitterly caustic, and acidly snarky. Mailer makes wickedly funny fun of woefully wicked people. He plants the seeds of bad deeds; he incites quarrels; he belittles and badmouths; he expands disconnections, facilitates discord, and enhances vanity, greed, envy, lust—and the rest of the “sacred seven” sins upon which the narrator concentrates.

Saint Augustine declared famously in his *Confessions* that “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist.” This comingling of antagonistic forces may be the fundamental inspiration for art to absorb evil into the fuller context of human affairs. The narrator of *Castle* offers understandings yoked to a pair of opposites, as if the ox of evil and the ox of good were pulling in unison a cart we call history.

Mailer's narrator, “without salient personality,” is possessed of the negative capability to dwell within some man or woman's body, because “a man

or woman's presence is closely related to their body, and so offers a multitude of insights." Dramatic tension is maintained by the squeezing and releasing of the flow of information, which the narrator reveals in successive approximations to the reader's growing understanding. The act of the narrator in writing his own novel utilizes petty dilemmas as a means of comprehending a much vaster subject. His existential act of revealing the Devil's trade secrets is a singular betrayal. Writing about Hitler was Mailer's last temptation—the occasion to test the power of imaginary characters to function as agents of reincarnation, and there is a Keatsean hint of a living hand holding forth, speaking from beyond the grave. Mailer speaks in an echo chamber of eternity, living *sub specie eternitatis*, a common post-traumatic afterthought resulting from boredom of political banter in the everyday press. Today, if you are a Republican, the Devil is a Democrat. If you are a Democrat, Republicans are forces of evil.

Mailer's copious descriptions make real the sordid circumstances of Hitler's family, and they prepare the reader for the plunge into the murky slather of intimate juices that is the future Fuehrer's conception in the womb of his mother, his father's own niece, and possibly his own daughter. In adopting the witnessing voice of a German SS officer, Mailer has found a persona in which he can whisper in the language of the enemy and gain subtle access to our consciousness. The narrator explains how he came to be present at the primal scene of Adolph's conception, observing the act like a gynecologist performing artificial insemination.

Some readers may notice that I first spoke of that exceptional event as if I were the one in the connubial bed. Now, I state that I was not. Nonetheless, in referring to my participation, I am still telling the truth. For even as physicists presently assume to their scientific confusion that light is both a particle and a wave, so do devils live in both the lie and the truth, side by side, and both can be seen with equal force.

The narrator demonstrates ability to live in duality, showing awareness that most decisions in life are closely akin to choices not taken. Any decision is laden with existential memory of times when there was a forty-nine to fifty-one percent split.

Evil entered Hitler's being at the moment of conception. Mailer's impish

conceit (not infrequently uttered provocatively in the presence of women) is that two great births occurred in history: Jesus Christ and Adolph Hitler. The mass of women lived lives of less exaggerated glamour than either the immaculate Mary or the soiled and common Klara. Mailer extracts the lesson that every mother bears a genetic responsibility for the good or evil that manifests itself in their children—mothers pass on what was planted in them. Jesus was born from the seed of God, not that of her husband Joseph. Hitler was born of woman, but his mother, Klara, was suspected of being his father's daughter. Complicated inbreeding influences the way psychic conceptions are read and remembered. These divergent conceptions occurred almost two thousand years apart; yet, they are linked by a Western consciousness capable of sustaining awareness of moments spread over a spectrum of time.

In *Mein Kampf*, dictated while in prison early in his life, Hitler concluded that his life was and would be a "struggle." He wrote in the first paragraph of chapter one: "Today it seems to me providential that Fate should have chosen Braunau on the Inn as my birthplace. For this little town lies on the boundary between two German states, which we of the younger generation at least have made it our life's work to reunite by every means at our disposal." Reunification was achieved in the phoenix nest of the funeral pyre of the Holocaust, a crazy paradox that yet animates the dynamics of regeneration from burned bodies.

Mailer draws hugely upon history, myth, and legend, combining these elements uniquely into a book that embodies the lingua franca of contemporary cultural memory. Hitler wounded the soul of the last century. His deeds invade our nightmares. Psychiatrists prosper because people's wits are twisted.

Let us hear a string of utterances that summon the voice of the German intelligence officer, narrator of *The Castle in the Forest*:

"Intelligence work can be understood as a contest between code and the obfuscation of a code."

"Prevarication, like honesty, is reflexive, and soon becomes a sturdy habit, as reliable as truth."

"He could shave a truth by a hair or subvert it altogether."

“My art was to replace a true memory by a false one [like] removing an old tattoo in order to cover it with a new one.”

“If I draw upon reserves of patience, it is because time passes here without meaning for me.”

Metaphoric dazzle drives the narrator’s thinking, strangely animating the banal lives of the novel’s characters. In his opening line, the narrator establishes immediate ease with the reader, offering his nickname, and suggesting that he be considered a friend in need of understanding how to accomplish the complex task of plausibly telling a story that is, so frankly, based on the fiction that the narrator is an agent of the Devil costumed as a person, rather like an actor playing a role.

Using the creaky, horse-drawn carriage of an omniscient “nineteenth century novelist,” the narrator assumes a post-modern authorial voice of immense range and depth, on a scale that speaks across reaches of time and knowledge to Dante’s use of citizens from Florence as characters in the *Inferno*; Milton, whose concept of evil was embodied in God’s finest angel and glamorous rebel; Goethe, whose Faustian pact with an eminent scholar made us understand the temptation of yearning for greatness; Nietzsche, whose psychological superman was warped into Nazi war slogans; Blake, who said, “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse an unsatisfied desire; and, in America, Melville. It is as if Melville had begun *Moby-Dick* with a diminutive of Ishmael’s name—“Call me Izzy.” If Melville commands, Mailer invites us to listen, and this intimacy of the narrator, always in the reader’s ear, makes the experience of reading an act of complicity. We are not asked to identify with Hitler or the Devil, but with a narrator whose relation with the reader becomes, by the book’s end, “as alone with each other as two souls out in the ocean on a rock not large enough for three.”

The question Mailer leaves us with in this farewell volume is *curious*, and I use this open-ended word because Mailer’s narrator, having completed his European duties in shaping the first sixteen years of Adolph Hitler’s life, has been “demoted” to assignments in America, which he calls “this curious nation.” Following the time that the narrator has been “installed” in the “human abode” that was Dieter, an eerie voice speaks to us, the voice of the novelist speaking of his character in the past tense: “I was not without effect. Dieter had been a charming SS man, tall, quick, blond, blue eyed, witty. To

give a further turn to the screw, I even suggested that he was a troubled Nazi. I spoke with a fine counterfeit of genuine feeling concerning the damnable excesses that were to be found in the Fuehrer's achievements." How subtle is the slither of this last snaking sentence!

A high-level counterpart to Dieter—an "American Jewish psychiatrist"—is assigned to interview Dieter as a war criminal. Even though a revolver sits on the table while they talk, the narrator suggests the doctor has little familiarity with firearms: "Sequestered in the depths of the average pacifist—as one will inevitably discover—resides a killer. That is why the person has become a pacifist in the first place. Now, given my subtle assault upon what he believed were *his* human values, the American picked up his .45, knew enough to release the safety, and shot me."

In an earlier aside, the narrator prepared us for his casual way of sounding cruel: "If it is discomforting to the reader that I usually present myself as a calm observer, capable of a balanced narrative, and yet am also able to abet the most squalid acts without a moment of regret, let it not come as a surprise. Devils require two natures. In part, we are civilized."

Yes, and so adept at glimpsing truths that obviate our belief in any truth that does not contain the memory of all that for which it is not true. The narrator's tone navigates the most spontaneous kinds of sardonic irony, causing unbidden laughter verging on the death-causing convulsions resulting from eating the plant, grown in Sardinia, which gave sardonic laughter its name and a definition more deeply unsettling than mere sarcasm.

Dieter, speaking as a German, indicates how voice is visceral, and produced by the body:

If you are German and possessed of lively intelligence, irony is, of course, vital to one's pride. German came to us originally as the language of simple folk, good pagan brutes and husbandmen, tribal people, ready for the hunt and the field. So, it is a language full of the growls of the stomach, and the wind in the bowels of hearty existence, the bellows of the lungs, the hiss of the windpipe, the cries of command that one issues to domesticated animals, even the roar that stirs in the throat at the sight of blood. Given, however, the imposition laid on this folk through the centuries—that they enter the amenities of Western civilization before the opportunity passes away from them altogether—

I did not find it surprising that many of the German bourgeoisie who had migrated into city life from muddy barnyards did their best to speak in voices as soft as the silk of a sleeve. Particularly, the ladies. I do not include long German words, which are often a precursor to our technological spirit today, no, I refer to the syrupy palatals, sentimental sounds for a low-grade brain. To every sharp German fellow, irony had become the essential corrective.

Mailer connects character to the intimate feeling of how the organs and chambers of the body produce the unique inflections that are ultimately articulated when air is shaped by the muscles in the lips. Mailer emphasizes the mouth-washing compulsion Hitler suffered from most of his life. He became a vegetarian because he was disgusted when he chewed sausage, which so reminded him of his childhood abuse by his father's forced fellatio.

Even more curious is why Mailer should end his life writing about a tyrant who sickened his mother's stomach, when he was a nine-year-old, while she listened to radio reports from Germany, during the prelude to the war. She could picture the trouble from far away because she had lived in Russia and had experienced the conditions that now frightened her more than if she had been in Vienna in the spring of 1938, when Germany "united" Austria by annexing it against the will of its most prominent citizens, mostly Jews like herself. Quite likely, Mailer's mother saw shocking photographs published in the Brooklyn newspapers. And Mailer, early in *The Castle in the Forest*, evokes the fading newsreel of this blurred black-and-white humiliation, where he imagined his kin on their knees—using a most diminutive tool to wash away anti-Nazi graffiti: "I remember on the first morning after the Brown Shirts marched into Vienna, that a squad of them—beer-hall types with big bellies—collected a group of old and middle-aged Jews, and put them to work scrubbing the sidewalk with toothbrushes. The Storm Troopers laughed as they watched. Photographs of the event were featured on the front pages of many a newspaper in Europe and America."

Mailer's narrator guides the meaning of what he shows in detailed scenes depicting three generations of the Hitler family. The skeletal family tree that spawned Adolph Hitler is fleshed out with more fullness than simple entry into adolescence; Mailer's silence on the Holocaust makes kitchen table mutterings meaningful. In particular, Mailer explores the father/son relation-

ship of Alois and Adolph to the extent that Alois' lifespan is completed before Adolph's life begins in earnest. The penultimate Book (Mailer's chapters appear as books) is titled "Alois and Adolph"; the father's concern is to pass on a career direction for his son. Adolph wants to be an artist, but his pictures of buildings, when he puts people in them, show people out of scale to their surroundings, in incorrect proportion to the buildings behind them. To make sure that Hitler would be rejected from art school in Vienna, Dieter induced a most severe migraine to the teacher assigned to assess his entrance portfolio.

Hitler's father's, born a bastard first named Alois Schicklgruber, was legitimized as the son of his uncle when the uncle died, leaving his property and surname to Alois Hitler. Alois married Klara Poelzl, his niece, when she was in her twenties, giving sanction to their sexual relationship, which began when she was nine. At the time, the age of consent in Germany and England was nine, yet people whispered.

The narrator, wryly, repeatedly, casually, charmingly explicates the very scenes he creates, irradiating them with insights achieved, seemingly at will, via metaphoric connections between the base and the noble. He shows by the telling of the teller that the most important connection between Mailer's practice as a novelist and as a nonfiction writer is his utilization of a pseudonym. *The Armies of the Night* exemplified his use of the third-person as a stand-in for the first person, and the lesson of entering history via the mind of a novelist might prove useful to future historians and biographers of Hitler. Mailer raises questions that far transcend the issues he exposed in *The Naked and the Dead*—concerning the fascist aspect of a military hierarchy, where the tyrant is armored, and unreachable.

Mailer has always maintained that the first duty of a novelist was not to write about himself, but about the other self with whom he feels "comfortable inhabiting." The author of *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Ernst Kris, observed, "The absolution from guilt for fantasy is complete if the fantasy one follows is not one's own." Mailer's personas reveal his acting aspirations, and root his experience in theater as a key source in his novel writing. Mailer's scenic sense is displayed in the block-by-block developments so keenly integrated into ordinary life that good and evil seem tainted with each other. Dieter, who follows Hitler's father into bee keeping, gives credit to honey as a medium for absorbing a dose of his dark syrup: "We have

among our gifts the power to invest many a substance with a trace of our presence.”

The novel’s Epilogue fast forwards through the rise of the Third Reich, skipping the Holocaust, and returns us to April 1945, forty years after the narrator’s duties attending little Adolph were completed. Germany has just been defeated. Dieter is present at a nearby concentration camp, which has just been liberated, called “The Castle in the Forest” or as the German translation of the novel has it, *Das Scholss Im Wald*. Mailer’s title is pointedly ironic, since the “castle” is nonexistent, and the “forest” is a patch of barren land.

Dieter has nearly finished his book, and he considers the accumulated resentments that triggered his desire to write the book we are reading. Indeed, the narrator’s talents have been so aptly demonstrated by his success both in Germany and Russia—creating mischief most serious. The Devil has suppressed Dieter in order to take Hitler on as his exclusive client. The explosive situation made me think of the killings of U.S. Postal workers by fired employees. Mailer’s narrator absorbs primal rage, and uses it to fuel and authorize audacious inquiries into human psychology, and make real how blood is thicker than literature.

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In the novel’s “Epilogue,” the narrator once again addresses his motivation for writing his book: “Can it be that the Maestro, whom I served in a hundred roles while holding on to the pride that I was a field officer in the mighty eminence of Satan, had indeed deluded me? Was it now likely that the Maestro was not Satan, but only one more minion—if at a very high level?” This confusion opens up the possibility, Mailer suggests, that we have been reading “the sardonic insights of one more intermediary.”

When Mailer’s narrator is “shot,” the narrative voice persists in speaking, persuasively, in the ambiguity of history, showing self-doubt about his loyalty. The penultimate sentence of the novel is an ode to the author’s endurance: “I have come so far myself in offering this narration that I can no longer be certain whether I still look for promising clients or search for a loyal friend.”

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Mailer makes clear from the restrictions of his consistent choices that the roots of the man are fertilized by the dirt, soil, scraps, shames, shivering fears, which remain unforgettable, whatever disguises the adult fashions for mature identity. In a *Provincetown Arts* interview with J. Michael Lennon, following publication of the novel, Mailer said—echoing Wordsworth’s child being “father of the man”—“The man is in the early material.”¹

The Hitler clan, its emergence, malignant flowering, and destruction of its illusion of power are absorbed into a balanced purchase upon which the narrator tells his story of the most diabolical of offspring. In Mailer’s density of detail, turbulent with sensations that are recurrently reconsidered in the fresh circumstances of later chapters, the organic connections of the Hitler lineage, so deeply imagined from mere hints in historical sources, will be read by future historians of the Holocaust for new directions in research. Mailer delineates who begat who with the scrupulous accounting found in biblical genealogies, where daily records become Holy Scripture—etched in memory.

In Mailer’s previous novel, *The Gospel According to the Son*, Satan is smooth, polite, dripping with deviousness in offering to share a meal with Jesus, which He refuses. On parting, Satan asks permission to touch Jesus, and the son of God, accepting the Devil’s embrace, feels a “shudder of knowledge.” He knows He has been altered by this encounter and that knowledge of evil has lodged in his being.

The novel ends with Adolph entering the sixteenth year of his life, a confused adolescent. The conversation with the Jewish American psychiatrist and Dieter serves to isolate the bitter end point, embellishing the period with the ultimate defense against the futility of war: sardonic irony. As Paul Fussell showed in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, irony became a mode of remembrance for events too terrible to recall without a divergent refraction of consciousness. Hitler remains Hitler, a mystery, and remains “unexplained”—to refer to Ron Rosenbaum’s book *Explaining Hitler*, which so influenced Mailer to think of Hitler free of some definitive human flaw as the cause of the Holocaust. Rather, evil is a concept, not a person. The “I” of the novel is an imaginary force opposed to God, and its forces are mustered within a hierarchal system offering the military apparatus that insulates the tyrant’s power.

Mailer does not try to explain Hitler’s evil as a consequence of incest, his deformed testicles, or the brutal beatings of his father. Evil instead becomes

fragmented into the dazzle patterns of camouflage, so the formal outline of the enemy is broken up and integrated with the background. Throughout, every event is measured for spiritual cost, calculated against future cost—weighing, balancing, comparing, assessing, and debating the fine equilibrium that is upset when games of random chance are played with loaded dice. The narrator ponders the natural division of human gender into male and female, and the random divisions offer a lesson in Mailer's notion of "divine economy," functioning as a kind of invisible hand regulating the free market of good and evil by analyzing the equation between risk and gain.

Mailer created an uncanny narrator who is also an active character; his protagonist, Dieter, at will, has the power to switch the narrative point of view so that antagonist and protagonist may appear as the other. In scene after scene, the reader witnesses sharp refractions that resonate with connections between sensations in the body and thoughts in a shared consciousness. In *Castle*, the battle is between three players: God, the Devil, and each individual human being. Each possesses equal, if divergent, powers. The novel's nodal point is positioned midway between three points of a triangle, and Mailer must have thought at least once about the CIA's method of "triangulation" for sounding out the truth—taking the lies of three spies and finding the element of truth equidistant from each liar.

Speaking with a German journalist following publication of the novel, Mailer, a converted atheist many years ago, said just before he died, "Our existence on earth is much easier to explain if we use a creator." This is what I call a "utilitarian" theory of religion.² Here is a revision of the paragraph, paraphrased without a quotation:

Speaking with German journalists following publication of the novel, Mailer reflected on how his early atheism made it very difficult for him to explain how we came out of nothing. Existence was easier to understand if a creator existed. This is what I call a "utilitarian" theory of religion.

Let us close with a connection with Freud, the German thinker who charted individual evolution from infantile anality, through the lessons of the mouth in eating and speaking, to genital maturity. Mailer told his assistant, Dwayne Raymond, that he wanted the archway depicted on the book cover to be "symbolic for the birth canal. I know this absolutely," he said, "because I sat with him while he did the actual color drawings, and these drawings—and he said it bluntly—were pictures of a vagina." The stone arch that is pictured, however, is more labyrinth than labia. It was taken from a

composite of the arches of a church and a school familiar to Hitler—arches that Hitler, and many others, passed through into darkness. “Darkness is large,” Mailer said in his introduction to a book of Provincetown photographs taken at night in low light with long exposures, allowing the camera to see what is invisible to the human eye in low light. In darkness, we cannot see color because the rods in our retinas can only see in black and white, and in low light they function more effectively than the cones that see color so well in daylight.

Freud considered religious thinking to be primitive—and that our conscious understandings would replace a dwindling mysticism. He predicted in one of his last books, *The Future of an Illusion*, “Where id was, there shall ego go.” Mailer’s ego was enlarged by his confrontation with amoral impulses, the cause of so much human misery and so much damage. Irony seems always to be associated with injury: Octavio Paz said, “Irony is the wound through which analogy bleeds to death.”

Would this be why the banality of evil must be lacquered with irony—evincing the antique aspect of memory, which is essential for our belated understandings?

NOTES

1. The *Provincetown Arts* interview of Lennon/Mailer appeared in Volume 22, 2007 on page 92 under the title “Hitler in My Mind: The Roots of *The Castle in the Forest* / An Interview by J. Michael Lennon.”
2. www.digitaljournal.com/AgingMailerRecognizesGod.