

CHRIS BUSA AND
THE MAILER REVIEW

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THE LIVES OF NORMAN MAILER AND CHRIS BUSA INTERSECTED, mainly in Provincetown, MA. A member of the Executive Board of the Norman Mailer Society and the Editorial Board of *The Mailer Review*, Chris was a preeminent presence in the Provincetown arts scene—especially at *Provincetown Arts*. Others will pay tribute to those various roles; I would like to focus on his scholarship and his contributions to *The Mailer Review*.¹

Among the many tributes to Norman Mailer found in *The Mailer Review* vol. 2, no.1, Fall 2008, I remember reading this article from Chris, “This is a Town Worth Digging In and Fighting For.” Reading it again, with a pang of recognition I came across this beautiful paragraph,

‘Form is the physical equivalent of memory,’ Norman had said, describing the attributes of a piece of driftwood he found on the beach in Provincetown.² I was astonished at the lessons he learned from little things. The fact had become the artifact. The knots and missing limbs, the burns, scars, and patinas, encoded how it became what it is. This seemed to me to be Norman’s philosophy of artistic form, and it could only be accessed by the memory of a person. Thus the role of the narrator, whether fictional or a self-conscious alter-ego, becomes crucial to understanding Mailer’s narrative strategies, the way he goes about telling a story. (90)

A dozen years later, I am still impressed by this insight from Chris, bouncing off Norman’s wise and seminal sentence. Chris fuses the artist’s eye with

the writer's ear, showing a relationship between narrator and memory. In that article, while there were tales of Norman and Provincetown, that paragraph stood out.

Busa had a gift for finding the right phrase and for discovering a larger artistic context. In his review of Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 5, No.1, Fall 2011, Chris began with Saint Augustine's words, "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist" (440). Chris comments, "This commingling of antagonistic forces may be the fundamental inspiration for art to absorb evil into the fuller context of human affairs" (440). A little later, he writes,

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. (442)

What a phrase to conjure with—"Hitler wounded the soul of the last century." *Google* gives us only one citation, that of Chris Busa in this 2011 book review.³ Certainly, this man could turn a phrase! Turning to Mailer's complex narrative strategy, he writes,

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 . . . (443)

Those "reaches" would include—says Chris—Dante, Milton, Goethe, Nietzsche, Blake, and Melville, indeed an "immense range and depth." Inevitably, we are drawn in by the disturbing narrative voice of DT, "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" (443).

Any personal philosophy worth its name has to reckon with the singularity of Hitler's evil. Mailer realized that; he knew that he *had* to write *The Castle in the Forest*—his final novel. Busa recognized in *Castle* a major theme of Mailer's life and work, the battle "between three players: God, the Devil,

and each individual human being” (449). In an interesting passage, Busa writes,

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. (449)

In modernist writing, we have become used to unreliable narrators, but in *Castle* Mailer took it to a whole new level. Earlier in his review, Chris wrote this,

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. (441)

The same Fall 2011 issue of *The Mailer Review* with Busa’s review of *Castle* was primarily dedicated to Norris Church Mailer, who had died in November 2010. Among many tributes was one from Chris, entitled “The Norris I Knew.” He articulated concisely what others have said before,

In her thirty years of marriage to Norman, Norris integrated the chaotic legacy of five previous marriages and several broods of children suffering from shell shock of the cultural wars between their sequences of parents. She became friends with former wives, and found a zone of comfort by “avoiding” past mistresses. (33)

In *The Mailer Review* Vol. 7, No.1, Fall 2013, Chris Busa has an excellent article, “Mailer’s *Tough Guys*: Novelist Invites his Characters to Dance,” and another one, “Norman Mailer and *Provincetown Arts*” in *The Mailer Review* Vol.10, No.1, Fall 2016. His final article, “Norman Mailer: on Vitality and Morality,” in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 12, No. 1, Fall 2018, was on the six marriages of Mailer and the “enduring emotional bonds with his lovers” (171).

However, the article that I want to conclude with is “Why an Echo is the Shadow of a Sound: The Resonance of Metaphor in Mailer’s Writing,” found in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2014. Here, I believe, Chris was dealing with some of the hardest philosophical and ethical issues facing humanity. Chris begins with Aristotle, “If Aristotle is correct in observing that the mark of genius lies in one’s mastery of metaphor, then Mailer’s richness of metaphorical thinking qualifies in abundance” (313). He discusses the phenomenon of synesthesia, “where our five senses can be combined, involuntarily, in what we call our ‘mind’s eye,’ summoning experiences that may not be directly experiential except through the addition of our imagination” (314). Returning to *Castle*, Chris writes,

The Castle in the Forest, Mailer’s final major work, is the summa of his mastery of metaphor, going beyond all intermediaries voicing the nature of evil to voice all that opposes evil. This book deserves to be studied for raising questions that make the question obsolete. (316)

So what is Chris saying here? I agree that *Castle* is a crucial Mailer work, and that both metaphor and the demonic DT as narrator are at its heart. But reviewers—however valiantly they try—find it hard to explicate very much further.

The very first issue of *The Mailer Review*—Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 2007—had four excellent reviews of *The Castle in the Forest*.⁴ Re-reading them, I was struck by this gem from Robert J. Begiebing,

As if covering his bases, Mailer makes the narrative function on two levels—the metaphysical and the mundane. Such bifurcation is not new territory for him, but it is important to understand that to Mailer the metaphysical represents the metaphorical and the archetypal, a way of embodying in fanciful prose narrative the deepest machinations of our conscious and unconscious psyches. (216)

Bob Begiebing has put his finger on a crucial but difficult question. How do we make sense of evil’s “modern face?” (216). What do these categories of good and evil actually entail? Is evil—the singularity of what Hitler wrought

in the real world, for instance—an issue of metaphor or of ontology or both? If evil is a metaphor, what is the underlying reference point, or is the metaphor as far as we can go?

Physics has its metaphors, certainly, but it can also be encoded in mathematical language and has birthed our modern world. Physics can produce artifacts that work. Yet it cannot be denied that the modern world includes the evil of Hitler, who manipulated rhetoric, metaphysics, and physics alike to seduce Germany and the world. In so doing, in the powerful words of Chris Busa, “Hitler wounded the soul of the last century. His deeds invade our nightmares.”⁵ In his scholarship, Chris did not and could not “explain” it all—for here we all falter before the dark mysteries of life.

But Chris took the risk and attempted the task. He did the work. So, we applaud his willingness to bring an artistic perspective and a powerful intellect to these great questions of life. His quiet presence enlivened our Conferences; his intellectual contributions made *The Mailer Review* a better journal. Losing him, we are the poorer. Yet, having experienced his friendship, we are also the richer.

Raymond M. Vince / 6 July 2020

NOTES

1. There are articles or book reviews by Chris Busa in seven issues of *The Mailer Review*: Volumes 2 (Fall 2008), 3 (Fall 2009), 5 (Fall 2011), 7 (Fall 2013), 8 (Fall 2014), 10 (Fall 2016), and 12 (Fall 2018).
2. Mailer’s phrase, “form is the physical equivalent of memory,” first appears in his *Cannibals and Christians* (1966). Chris Busa has a longer discussion of the phrase in his article “Why an Echo is the Shadow of a Sound: the Resonance of Metaphor in Mailer’s writing” in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2014.
3. A *Google* search for the phrase “Hitler wounded the soul of the last century” gave only one example: Busa’s article in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 5, No.1 (*Google* search, 25 June 2020).
4. The four reviews of *The Castle in the Forest* in the first issue were by Christopher Ricks, Robert J. Begiebing, Barbara Probst Solomon, and Phillip Sipiora (206–233).
5. “Hitler wounded the soul of the last century. His deeds invade our nightmares. Psychiatrists prosper because people’s wits are twisted” *The Mailer Review* Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2011, 442.