

CASTLE MAILER

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The Castle in the Forest

By Norman Mailer

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IN THE UNPUBLISHED PORTION OF A 1983 INTERVIEW, Norman Mailer stated that trying to understand Nazism was “one of the great questions” of the twentieth century. “No one is rewarded for approaching that question,” he explained, “because those horrors are in all of us, and there to be tapped. We draw back from that as a conclusion about human nature. We don’t really want to know the answer ... because the answer may be terrible.” Norman Mailer, at 84, survivor of World War II, of the American Century, and more recently of heart surgery, has, it seems, decided to tackle the big question, perhaps by now mellow in the knowledge that he shall not be rewarded for doing so.

His last novel, *The Gospel According to the Son* (1996), sought to understand the childhood and early manhood of Jesus, survivor of King Herod’s holocaust. Mailer’s new novel *The Castle in the Forest* (Random House, 2007) creates a sort of diptych by attempting to understand the childhood of Jesus’ messianic obverse, Adolf Hitler. “I think he [Hitler] saw himself as a world leader,” Mailer told William F. Buckley Jr. in 1979, “and thought that he was bringing some kind of salvation to the world.” How did Hitler become the megalomaniac who fought to march humankind into the new world order of a fascist millennium? That is the underlying question of this provocative, complicated, digressive, sometimes frustrating, yet ample novel.

To answer that question, the novel takes us on an arduous journey of research and speculation, of empirical detail and metaphysical fancy that only

Norman Mailer would dare to compose. His stylistic quirks and rhetorical marks, his curious hobbyhorses and obsessions, his excremental vision, his Manichaeian dualisms, his plumbing the unconscious infrastructures of his characters, his bold metaphorical vision—all are still intact as he continues to explore ancient horrors: the face of Evil as it battles God by insinuating its indomitable Will through human history.

Evil's modern face comes to us through our reader-friendly narrator by way of a first-person-omniscient-demonic point of view: one D.T. or Dieter, a lesser devil in the service of Satan ("the Maestro"), incarnated as an S.S. officer working directly under Heinrich Himmler and disembodied as a Satanically empowered evil spirit whose subversive "unpublished" memoir (against the Maestro's wishes) we find ourselves reading. D.T., mind you, has been assigned by his Master to the Hitler family and to the demonic nurturing of young Adolf, in particular. 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. How the farthest reaches of the human mind work individually and collectively (whether for destruction or regeneration) on the harsh ground of history has been Mailer's exploration through the thirty or so permutations of his *oeuvre*.

This metaphysical dimension of the novel will, no doubt, give his readers and reviewers the most trouble. That is the dimension I will describe somewhat further before turning to the physical, to the historical and even to the familial mundane. The battle between God and Satan (Possibility and Entropy) that Mailer has been positing for decades as a means of approaching the inexplicable is here presented with biblical, even Miltonic, assumptions about the struggle of supernal powers in our cosmos and, on earth, through human beings. The suspension of disbelief required is audacious. If fundamentalists of various religious traditions should have little trouble accepting such ultimate contests between forces of Light and Darkness, twenty-first century materialists, corporatists, technophiles, and rationalists of every stripe are asked to climb a steep mountain of disbelief indeed.

The human beings depicted in the novel are rung around by "directing devils" like D.T. and "guardian angels" (or "Cudgels"). These spirits operate among human beings and their conflicts like the warring, self-regarding gods

and goddesses of ancient epic. This “medieval nonsense,” D.T. tells us, he here puts in the service of our coming to understand “the most mysterious human being of the century,” his “client” little Adolf, “from infancy.” We demons, D.T. confides, look to enter at the “points of human excess” of every kind, “good or bad,” but “we move slowly,” observing and waiting for “exceptional potentiality.” Not average persons, complacent in their modest earthly roles and rewards, but those willing to “transgress a few large laws ... whether social or divine” are the vessels of demonic development through every means, not least of which is “dream etching,” or the subtle manipulations of the transgressor’s deepest psychic (hence divine/demonic) roots. It is above all *ambition*, “the appetite for success,” that “most powerful ... and most unstable” of human emotions—one dangerous reward of the Free Will God has granted to humanity—that makes a person a likely target of demonic impulses.

The novel traces all the workings of Adolf’s guardian demon through the boy’s childhood until graduation from *Realschule* and a short time thereafter, where Adolf’s frustrated ambitions to be an artistic genius will become one thread of motivation in his turn toward demonic leadership as the Great Father, or *Führer*, to the adoring and manipulated Teutonic masses. But from Adolf’s very conception, the Maestro has had his eye on the child. If that conception is grossly carnal, it nonetheless takes on the aura of an Annunciation: “*Sie ist hier!*” Indeed, the embodied Anti-Christ will soon arrive, born of the incestuous juices of the father Alois and his wife Klara Hitler, assiduously attended by our narrator the guardian demon, a sort of Whitmanesque-Satanic overseeing soul. “I was there with them, I was the third presence, and was carried into the caterwauling of all three of us going over the falls together.... Even as Gabriel served Jehovah on a momentous night in Nazareth, so too was I there with the Evil One at this conception ... nine months and ten days before Adolf Hitler would be born on April 20, 1889.”

If readers are asked to believe Mailer’s analysis through fiction, they might reasonably ask in what way the metaphysical meets the physical, the fantastic the rational. One theme in the novel that serves to pull those strands together is presented through Mailer’s biographical detailing of Adolf’s dubious lineage. For there is incest in the family at least two generations back and none more outrageous than his father Alois and his third wife Klara Poelzl (Adolf’s mother), who happens to be Alois’s niece and blood daugh-

ter as well. We have arrived at the very center of incest and “apocalyptic intercourse,” D.T. tells us, a dark, debauched roiling of Germanic Blood that fascinated the Nazis, none more than Himmler. It is out of such “exceptionally similar genetic ingredients” that the miraculous child of peasant stock will attain his “superhuman achievement” of the Nazi state through his “genius and Will.” Biographical data endeavor to anchor the metaphysical, and Mailer is hesitant to leave us stranded on the farther shores of speculative fiction. He labors mightily to ground his novel in the massive detail of historical and biographical research, the testament of which he offers in the end by way of a lengthy bibliography of sources and influences (as he did in *Harlot's Ghost*, 1991, and *Oswald's Tale*, 1995).

Nowhere are we given more detailed grounding than in Mailer's depiction of the dysfunctional Hitler family. As if to appease the sociological and clinical impulses of his twenty-first century readers, Mailer expends more pages on the family life, especially on the father Alois, than on any other topic. The child Adolf often is missing from many pages and entire chapters while Mailer substantiates the familial case history—father, mother, brothers, sister and all their sorry interactions. It is the father who serves as a model within the confines of the nuclear family for the violent, rapacious, manipulative, and vain *Führer*-figure.

The first law of the Hitler family (echoing Christian doctrine) is “to honor and fear” (*die Ehrfurht*) the infallible father. The first law, Adolf will come to believe, of the nation-family is to honor and fear the Great Leader, the nation's infallible Father. The ultimate demonic aim, D.T. tells us, “is to destroy civilization as a first step to obviating God.” Civilization is replaced by Fascism. And the Will of the *Fuhrer* replaces God. Just as he controls his children through trickery, perversity, violence, and every paternal excess, Alois is the domineering husband who controls his wife through priapism and vanity: “The excrementitious exchanges of any marriage are heightened in this one.” But Alois ultimately loses Alois Jr., the runaway son, as well as Adolf, who will be bent not into the bureaucrat his father would have him be but into the powerful narcissist whose own twisted nature will twist in turn the deepest nature of his multitudinous compatriots. Against his father's excessive control, and by the example of another father figure, the blacksmith Preisinger who is in love with Klara, young Adolf will learn to forge his “will of iron.” “The humiliated wretch has now acquired the power to humiliate others.... That is the demonic power.”

A novel's digressions, Mailer appears to believe with Laurence Sterne, "are incontestably the sunshine." Perhaps the novel's most frequent digressions are upon apiculture. Alois trains his sons in beekeeping, and their fascination with beekeeping becomes throughout much of the novel a metaphor, a voluminously detailed conceit, for the Fascist state, for the abdication of Free Will. The boys learn the wondrous nature of beehive social structure: the unquestioned necessity of sacrificing many lives for future generations, the blind trust in the value of the collective over the individual, and the rigorously maintained social divisions of queens, workers, and drones into a colony that expunges any variant from the conforming mass. "Our bees, all these bees, do their work by obeying the rules," Alois tells his son. "They do not have patience with those who are weak or lazy. Or too selfish to remember their duties." That, Alois has earlier assured Adolf, is "the one law" they obey—the survival of the perfect colony with "no good Christians" and "no charity whatsoever."

Mailer specifies other mundane influences on the young Hitler. Adolf learns that he can marshal and lead other children as "generalissimo of the forest" while they play military games and build imaginary castles. Through his reading and education Adolf finds sympathy not with the philosophers of reason—Kant, Goethe, Schleiermacher—but with Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, whose book posits the need for "a Fuhrer cast of Iron and Fire" whom "the people will honor ... as a savior and forgive all his sins." The Grimm brothers' tales move Adolf's fantasy life into the world of child mutilation, cannibalism, necrophilia, harsh discipline, and absolute authority. Sibling rivalry leads young Adolf to take revenge on his brother Edmund through a species of fratricide (a kiss tainted by measles) and by growing his "dark little daub of a mustache," a spiteful conflating of a glimpse of his sister's incipient pubic hair and the assassin Luigi Lucheni's little mustache affixed to his lip. And so on.

Mailer piles it on like a clinical psychologist probing the family and cultural life of young Hitler across the nearly 500 pages of his novel and extensive bibliography. But if readers begin to understand something of the cultural influences and family dysfunctions that shaped the monster, perhaps we, like Mailer, begin to run out of data sufficient to explain the grand and global catastrophe of Adolf's life. As even D.T. tells us, a Freudian (merely clinical and reductive) approach can never be sufficient. "Indeed, we smile at the superficiality of so many of Freud's

analyses. That is his fault. He wanted nothing to do with angels and demons.”

There must be, we come to feel in spite of the vast data of the case history, something more going on in Hitler's century, something not only personal but extra-personal as well. Whether that something which might help us understand the Nazi cataclysm is, even in part, supernatural, or whether it is something more rooted in the deep tribal, evolutionary (hence collective) recesses and excesses of our brains—something more akin to a Jungian explanation than a Freudian—will probably depend upon the predilections of the reader. (But it is worth noting that Carl Jung's work merits an asterisk signifying usefulness in Mailer's bibliography.) It begins to feel as if Mailer has provided us with not two but three occasionally intersecting tracks (perhaps three novels in one) on which to test the limits, the capacities, of our understanding: the fabulous tale told by a clever demon, the tale told by the reductive clinician got up as the dutifully researching author, and the more insinuated tale, mediating the other two, of archetypal shadows (the melding of the personal and the impersonal)—shadows from which humanity cannot escape but against which consciousness, civilization, and vigilance are required to avoid total destruction by our own hands. The demon D.T., whose metaphorical existence feels quite real and torturous in hours of national and global destruction, may be less a creature of Satan than of humanity's deepest psyche—the rapacious vanities, needs, insecurities, and desires of the personal and collective Shadow self. The country of the Shadow self is no doubt the territory D.T. refers to in his epilogue as “the psychological ventures we Nazis had taken into uncharted waters.”

D.T., whose black humor suffuses the novel, tells us that this rapacious self is the instrument upon which all manner of destructive demagogies, zealotries, and fanaticisms play us like unthinking violins. “Cheap prayer ... we encourage,” the demon says. “We see all that adding to the Dummkopf's [God's] Fatigue, to the Dummkopf's Indifference. Cheap prayer wearies Him. Cheap patriotism enrages Him. (Cheap patriotism is, after all, one of our most useful provenances.)” And again: “Statesmen.... 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.”

The merging of religion and state is, of course, the psychic birthing ground of fascism—the very extremity of social order. If *Ancient Evenings* (1983) explores the merging of our most primitive religious impulses with the state through Pharaonic totalitarianism, *Castle* explores the modern face of ancient religious impulse yoked to the collective state through the Fascist Hero/Messiah. Father Alois, the devoted bureaucratic servant of the state, sees “government ... as the human fulfillment of divine will ... exercised by scrupulous officials like himself.” Mailer’s enormous digression on the Coronation of Nicholas II is D.T.’s own meditation on the lessons to be learned in manipulating the will, rapacity, and passions of others: the lessons of Russian Grand Dukes, tycoons, royal families of Europe, Rasputins, and those who would do their bidding—from “nouveau riches [who] lay before us [demons] like open whores” to government ministers and secret police. The Devil’s army does its work across Europe, as that army and that continent develop into a sort of religio-corporatist state. All demagogues, like Adolf himself, must develop that authoritarian leader’s “incapacity to tell the truth.” As D.T. says of Adolf’s future, “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.” No less than the Maestro Himself has taught his army of devils that “there is no better way to usurp the services of a high political leader than by this method. They must not be able to distinguish certain lies from the truth. They are of considerable use to us when they do not even know that they are lying because mis-truth is so vital to their needs.” One is reminded of the existential struggle of Mailer’s Jesus in *Gospel*. Jesus, the counterpoise to D.T. and his ilk, brings the unwelcome sword of truth to a people of lies and falsehoods. “Where there is truth there will be no peace, where peace abides, you will find no truth.” Falsehood is the mother of regimented order; the greater the falsehood, the greater the order—and the closer to the Fascist state. “I came to bring not peace but a sword,” as Jesus puts it.

One of the most astonishing things about this book is that it has all the marks of the opening salvo of a trilogy. Or perhaps Mailer secretly sees *Castle* as his third book of a trilogy about the nature of greed and power in the human psyche from ancient Egypt, to the Middle East of the Roman Empire, and all the way to Europe’s twentieth-century Fascist juggernaut. But I suspect, on the other hand, that this new novel is our redoubtable octoge-

narian's first of two or more on the "great question of the twentieth century"—not only the mysteries of the rise of Adolf Hitler, but by extension of the conscious and subconscious nature of political-religious fundamentalisms that continue to threaten civilization and human sustainability. "If the act of betraying the Maestro does not succeed in obliterating me," D.T. tells us in his epilogue, "perhaps I will be able to go back someday to a further account of my share in the early career of Adolf Hitler..." Even those who do not like this novel, or who cannot climb the required mountain of disbelief (or more accurately of metaphorical belief), will probably have to admire still the sheer audacity of the limping old lion as he contemplates in the very face of his own mortality, and with little promise of reward, the next phase of a massive project.