THE DEVIL ONLY KNOWS

CHRISTOPHER RICKS

The Castle in the Forest
By Norman Mailer
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WILLIAM BLAKE IS ONE OF THE FORERUNNERS and one of the forefathers of Norman Mailer, another radical conservative who takes the greatest liberties and who seeks to liberate us from body-forged as well as "mind-forged manacles" (Blake, as it happened, deleted "german" from that line of his), seeks even to liberate us from such sentimental hopes of liberation as "the sexual revolution." Blake, searching within one of his forefathers, famously and infamously averred that "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." The proposition, as so often with Blake, is at once direct and equivocal. A true Poet is of the Devil's party: fine, and now (as always) is the time for all bad men to come to the aid of the party. But is a true Poet *of-the-Devil's-party-without-knowing-it*, or was it just that Milton was one who didn't know it? Is *not knowing it* a condition of being it, or was it rather that, with Milton, etc.?

Milton's aspiration was to "justify the ways of God to men." Mailer's latest ambition is to imagine how the Devil might justify to men his ways to men—and his ways to God. "An honest man's the noblest work of God": at least, such was Robert Burns's hope. Samuel Butler's was a tersely perverse reversal: "An honest God's the noblest work of man." As for Mailer, he sings along with Rowland Hill: "He did not see any reason why the devil should have all the good tunes." Rowland Hill shares a column with Adolf Hitler in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

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Without knowing it: Mailer is a great writer—a true novelist and more—partly because he knows that, for a man of his convictions, there is no substitute for knowledge. Self-knowledge, for the start. (Achieved at some pains to the man.) Knowledge of the world. (Achieved at some cost to the world.) Knowledge of the ways of God to men, and of the ways of men to God. (Achieved at some risk to the soul.)

Oh, and knowledge—including carnal knowledge—of the Devil or a devil, the traitor-narrator of this life of the young Hitler, The Sorrows of Young Adolf. (*Of*, being those sorrows that are inflicted on him and those that he inflicts.) All this sad variety of woeful knowledge, plus knowledge of other men's knowledge. The five-page bibliography at the end of *The Castle in the Forest* precipitated some numbskull head-scratchings in the reviewers. Was Mr. Mailer showing off, reeling off all these Hitlerian sources? Was he ducking the charge of plagiarism, somehow pleading the Eighth Commandment? Was he being a bit of a tease? None of these impertinences, as the pertinent paragraph by Mailer makes clear:

> Some of the books now listed in this bibliography have been given an asterisk for their historical or thematic relevance to *The Castle in the Forest*. It should be unnecessary to add that the other works cited also enriched many a fictional possibility. Those titles to which an asterisk was attached did provide me, however, with a bounty of factual and chronological references that a novel in this form can never ignore. With all else, character is sequence.

There is no substitute for knowledge, then, with this taking a different form when the novel is a historical novel, needing to explore the facts without being exploitative when it comes to what the abstraction-lovers may dub facticity. How factually responsible is such a book? Or, the prior question, what does such a book claim as to factual responsibility? Is the alternative the merely factitious? What exactly is it, to enrich a fictional possibility? How much store should we set by fidelity? *Semper fidelis*, really *semper*? Is that what we want of our translators, including those who translate veracity into verity, who realize—on our behalf—historical facts as the force of fiction? We readers can proliferate such questions with the blitheness that comes from our having no intention of answering them. The

novelist stands differently to them. He might urge that there be less reading between the lines, more reading of the lines.

Knowledge, in its turn, is no substitute for countless other things, preeminent among them imagination and sympathy (unexpectedly bent where it might seem unbecoming), along with such an arching of one virtue against its complementary virtue—say, *compassionate, dispassionate*—as T. S. Eliot valued in one of his respected novelists. There were very few of these, but one of them was Charles-Louis Philippe (1874–1909), himself something of a proto-Mailer in the conjunction of valor and squalor. Eliot ended his preface to *Bubu of Montparnasse* in terms that Mailer might judge worthy of respect:

> There have been many novels of low life, of metropolitan vice and degradation. Novels of sentimentality, novels of satire, novels of indignation, novels of social reform, novels of prurience. *Bubu de Montparnasse* succeeds in being none of these: emphatically not the last. Philippe certainly disturbs any lingering complacency that we may feel towards the world as it is; but he has no cure to advocate. He is both compassionate and dispassionate; in his book we *blame* no one, we blame not even a "social system"; and even the most virtuous, in reading it, may feel: I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed.

The application of such praise to *The Castle in the Forest* would be a delicate matter, but then Mailer, for all the indelicacies that he refuses to avert our eyes from, is in certain respects a delicate writer. It would be perverse to claim that a book about the young Hitler blames no one, or to praise Mailer for having brought about such a thing. But this is a book that might give pause even with so heinous a monster. Robert Lowell, who reciprocated Mailer's respectful wariness of him, could urge, with a certain kind of desperation, "Pity the monsters"—a desperation that derived in part from Lowell's sometimes being diabolically possessed by Hitler. *The Castle in the Forest* does not suppose that it can explain Hitler; only that we may have to cry "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" None, it may well be. For this is not—far from it—*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*—a lavishness that G. K. Chesterton, for one, branded the Devil's sentimentality. It was bad enough when Ron Rosenbaum published, in 1998, *Explaining Hitler: The*

Search for the Origins of His Evil (yes, it is in Mailer's bibliography). Some of us judged this to be a responsible investigation, much of its sense of responsibility deriving from Rosenbaum's explicit respect for all those who judged that even to think in terms of explaining Hitler was to collude with evil. But for many, the book was an affront, and the dustjacket photo of Hitler's childhood innocence of face a disgrace.

One form that the charge of blasphemy might be prompted by, in our day, would be some such sense of outrage.

Blasphemy: Profane speaking of God or sacred things; *b. figurative* (against anything held 'sacred')

Explaining Hitler? Seeking to comprehend what his early years, his family fatalities, might have done to him?

Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

W.H. Auden didn't suppose that this exonerated evildoers, and he didn't suppose that the sole reason why people do evil is that evil has been done to them. But he wanted us to think seriously, even as Aeschylus had thought seriously, about *in return*.

In such an intersection of blasphemy and evil, Mailer has been anticipated (not last-trumped) by T.S. Eliot, whose *After Strange Gods* (1934), with its collaboration with anti-Semitism, became for Eliot himself something of a blasphemy (he was to bar its re-issue, and is said to have said that he was sick when he wrote it):

> One can conceive of blasphemy as doing moral harm to feeble or perverse souls; at the same time one must recognise that the modern environment is so unfavourable to faith that it produces fewer and fewer individuals capable of being injured by blasphemy. One would expect, therefore, that (whatever it may have been at other times) blasphemy would be less employed by the Forces of Evil than at any other time in the last two thousand years. Where blasphemy might once have been a sign of spiritual corruption, it might now be taken rather as a symptom that the soul is still alive, or even that it is recovering animation: for the perception of Good and Evil—whatever choice we may make—is the first requisite of spiritual life. We should do well, therefore, to look elsewhere than to the blasphemer, in the

> traditional sense, for the most fruitful operations of the Evil Spirit today.

The Forces of Evil, the Evil Spirit today (1933): these capital charges of Eliot's were contemporary with Hitler's world, and would be at home in Mailer's world. *The Castle in the Forest* is an appalled summoning of "the most fruitful operations of the Evil Spirit," operating by, and with, and through, and (yes) upon Adolf Hitler.

Readers of *The Mailer Review* will not need to be told what *The Castle in the Forest* is about. Many of them will already have read the book; all of them will have read a great many reviews of it, with the reviewers taking very different sides when it comes to this many-sided book. It is, in its way, a family romance, with all the romance taken out of it. It brooks comparison with *Buddenbrooks* in its dire wealth of Germanic family circumstance, its evoking how hungry generations have trod, have trodden down, have been trodden down. Down from the grandfather, down to and through the father who is the uncle too, there is the young Adolf, "Adi," seen through the coarse course of his deformative years, rising to and falling into an adolescence that promises so much more than—and so much that is more hideous than—trouble. The sibling hatreds, the corporeal cruelties, the sick and sickened and sickening fantasies: these are the purulent matter of the book. Yet purulence is not all. If there is a hideous arching of putrefaction against petrification, there are glimpses of something that might have been other, a world of which one would not have had to despair. Crucial to such hope, and then to the dashing of such hope, there is an extraordinary account—rightly thoroughgoing and thoroughly engrossing—of the attempt by the father, Alois, to become a beekeeper. He is the heart of the book, and what a black heart he mostly is. Yet here the narration has a love of detail, of due expatiation, that is at once visionary, horrific, politically far-reaching, and poignant—in short, that has the power of Virgil's *Georgics* (hauntingly captured by the poet David Ferry, in his translation, *The Georgics of Virgil*, 2005, and—with a very different power—by Peter McDonald in his new book of poems, *The House of Clay*, "The Bees").

Hear how Mailer evokes the currents and crosscurrents of feeling, of such different kinds of attention. He is in Alois's head, and in reach of his heart, and this, oddly, by courtesy of the devil (and yet this consideration

can be deferred for a while, rather like the great moment in *Paradise Lost* when Satan abstracted stood from his own evil). Alois has been at the tavern.

> On his return, Alois may have been staggering now and again, but he was also feeling too alive to enter his house. Instead, he sat by the hive boxes and fished out a rubber tube he had been keeping in his pocket. Next, he placed one end of it against a wall of the Langstroth and thereby was able to listen to the thrumming of the tenement dwellers in his little city. A fine sound was there, almost a tune, rich little swells of contentment. But then, why should his bees not be content? Come morning, hundreds, then thousands would be in a cluster ready to suck on the mesh cloth of the wide-mouthed jar, gorging on honey-and-water. So, in this dark and nicely drunken hour, separate thoughts passed through Alois like horses on file, one large thought at a time. He tried to count how many bees might be inhabiting the box. No matter how drunk, he could still make an intelligent guess. Call it twenty thousand. That was bound to be the answer. Despite himself, knowing he should not really disturb the hive, he knocked sharply on the side. Because then, through the tube, he could listen to the shift in sound. Were they issuing alerts? The calls had gone up in pitch. Like the strings of a crazy violin. Then, quiet again. Soft. Like cats who sheathe their claws. Purring while asleep.

How lovely this sounds, how attentively it evokes what it is to hear, what it is (not the same) to listen, and how the shifts in sound can bring home how strange a home a hive is, intimate and alien all at once. In this novel Mailer continues to be what he has always been, a man who knows a smell when he smells one, but he is newly sensitive, or so it seems to me (perhaps not newly, only differently), when it comes to knowing something when he hears it, the versification that is diverse forms of life. He has always had Shakespearean aspirations—the widest possible constituency that can constitute his art—and when Alois meets Alois's bees, we hear a Shakespearean music. "The singing masons building roofs of gold": a singing line, it is to be remembered, not (as it might sound) from the Sonnets of Shakespeare but

from "a fictional possibility" which is a work of European history and of European war: *Henry V*.

The frighteningly musical love that Alois bends upon his bees is not cancelled, though it is hideously scored and scored through, by what soon enters "by way of the rubber tube." For half a dozen pages later, Alois is persuaded where his duty lies. The tube lets him hear a new sound, "a great deal of restless humming in this second colony." Sulphur (the devil's tang, unforcedly enough) enforces "necessity, the tyrant's plea" as it had done for Milton's Satan. "The entrance was plugged, the hive lid at the top was laid on again, and the gas did the job quickly."

For this, "He chose a Saturday." A Just So story.

But the bees themselves live along a diabolical axis. In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, the devils throng to Pandemonium, their new home, where they

> Thick swarmed, both on the ground and in the air,
> Brushed with the hiss of rustling wings. As bees
> In spring time, when the sun with Taurus rides,
> Pour forth their populous youth about the hive
> In clusters: they among fresh dews and flowers
> Fly to and fro, or on the smoothèd plank,
> The suburb of their straw-built citadel,
> New rubbed with balm, expatiate and confer
> Their state affairs.

Mailer has the great works of literature not only in his head, in his ears, but in his blood and in his bones. *The Castle in the Forest*, though its final destination (off the end of the book), is "state affairs," is a work, less of *whither*, than of *whence*. Of the young Hitler, and of his imaginer, it may be said "Still fled he forward, looking backward still."

But then if the bees may be devilish albeit pitied, so may they be an intimation of something divine. Illusory, perhaps, but a rebuke to human fretfulness. Samuel Beckett, a novelist of a different color or a horse of a different collar, was tempted to expatiate even into joy when his man Molloy contemplated the dance of the bees:

> And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand. And all during this long journey home, when I racked my mind for a little joy in store, the

> thought of my bees and their dance was the nearest thing to comfort. For I was still eager for my little joy, from time to time! And I admitted with good grace the possibility that this dance was after all no better than the dances of the people of the West, frivolous and meaningless. But for me, sitting near my drenched hives, it would always be a noble thing to contemplate, too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood. And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body.

The hive itself, in Beckett's novel no less than in Mailer's, is doomed.

The reviewers of Mailer have made too much of the devilry, as though the narration were throughout colored by its perpetrator. For Mailer, whose God is less than omnipotent and less than omniscient, doesn't suppose that the Devil or the devils are any more so. The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman, or at any rate he isn't always kicking up an ungentlemanly row, and one of the novel's many wise decisions is to let the narrating devil recede into the story for long stretches of what happens. Every now and then, the devil can't keep himself out of the goings-on, but a shrewd devil knows the appalling truth that even a devil's company can pall. Moreover, a devil doesn't know it all. The pages at the center of the book devoted to the Coronation of Nicholas II have been found by some reviewers to be wantonly off the point. But they have many a point, one being that we may need to ponder not only whence Hitler came but whence Stalin came, and another being that we would do well to remind ourselves not only that even a devil can't always be in two places at once (*chez* Nicholas he hankers to know exactly what is going on *chez* Hitler), but that the devil only knows so much. God only knows.

Or doesn't, if you see what Mailer sees, the struggle as between potencies that are not omnipotent. Interview, *Boston Globe*. "Do you believe in God?" Mailer: "I believe God is a great artist, a great creator, and is doing the best that he or she can do against serious odds. And these odds are embodied by a concept or an element called the devil." (Delicious, that "he or she," Mailer revelling in not being true to type—while, a rogue gentleman, perfectly prepared not to insist that the devil, too, may be a he or she, the devil and all her works.) Mailer, who delighted in anagrammatizing the name

"Marilyn Monroe" to lay bare that MAILER lurked within her, has long understood that his first name (his Christian name, one might almost say) lends itself less to such an epithet as Normal than to Normanic and Normaniacal, must be aware that the strongest claimant is increasingly becoming Normanichaean.

The architecture of this novel is high over-arched, its gargoyles gargantuan. Which is why the review of it that most intrigued me is the one in *The Guardian* by Beryl Bainbridge, whose *Young Adolf* (1978, all but thirty years ago) practiced those different virtues, of spareness, sparseness, and constraint. "Electrifying and peculiar," "this unforgettable novel by a master of prose": these were the handsome truthful terms in which she of the young Adolf praised Mailer of the even younger Adolf.

As for me, my praise of Mailer is the one that I never weary of, the application of Robert Browning's exuberant astonishment. Yet once more:

> As long I dwell on some stupendous
> And tremendous (Heaven defend us!)
> Monstr'-inform'-ingens-horrend-ous
> Demoniaco-seraphic
> Penman's latest piece of graphic…

As to "Heaven defend us!", Abandon hope all ye who either enter or don't enter here. But the monstr' and the demoniaco-seraphic (the Angels as Cudgels) combine—yet once more, again—to create this penman's latest piece of graphic, something long, and something long to dwell on.