

MAILER'S CHOICE

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The Castle in the Forest

By Norman Mailer

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IN AN INTERVIEW I DID WITH NORMAN MAILER for *New York Magazine* about his novel, *The Gospel According to the Son*, he had reminded me: "You remember those attitudes prevalent about 30 years ago, that God is dead? Well, the Holocaust is a direct precursor of those attitudes." I remembered our talk as I was reading *The Castle in the Forest*. Many of Mailer's most fervent admirers seem to be at a loss when dealing with God and the Devil, as they must, when giving a serious reading to this novel. It seems that it is okay to write about religion, say, in the high-minded way that Harold Bloom does, which is more about the history of religion rather than dealing with God and the Devil as active players and in the gauzy Hollywood movies that mix the theological with the ultimate in sound effects, but apparently it is less okay when our favorite heroic novelist puts God and the Devil on center stage. Dieter, the SS man in whose body Satan has housed his emissary, and Dummkopf, the weakened God, tend to get skipped over by uneasy politically correct critics, the way one averts one's gaze from a blemish on the face of a loved one.

I, like many of Mailer's admirers, come from a secular background, and was therefore somewhat surprised when the feisty critic Lionel Abel, several years before he died, remarked to me in that thinky way his crowd of New York intellectuals had, "Religion was a big idea—Marxism was a big idea—what have we now to equal the power of those beliefs?" I mulled over what he said, and it struck me how, in one way or another, the writers I most

admire, the big ones intent on creating an entire universe in their work, tend to have a roomy view of the world, leaving space for forces beyond rationalism. In many ways they should be part of the dialogue about *The Castle in the Forest*. Borrowing a bit from Tom Stoppard's habit of reassembling writers arguing with one another, as their views are part of the twentieth century dialogue that formed us, specifically in regard to the Holocaust, I let their voices filter through my head in my head as I pondered Mailer's choice to use God and the Devil as part of the central cast in *Castle*.

Saul Bellow, always exasperated with the narrowness of intellectuals, commented to me: "There is a huge subject of what personal intelligence has done to transform life.... It is very weird because we live among products of the mind, these are objects of human imagination, without any more understanding of them than primitive man would have had. This bothers me, it's my own private project to get to the bottom of this thing. There's nothing we can do about it. In the end it comes down to a mystery. Freud was a biologist, and he put all his chips into human reproduction. I'm grateful to him, but he shuts out certain questions—his religion is just sublimation, what does it mean, that religion is just sublimation? I've always been interested in the ideas of Rudolph Steiner because he paid attention to things that most human beings don't pay attention to—the fact that we have souls, or spirits, and that there is no proof that death is the end. But people consider it a kind of pampering for a writer to take an interest in these things" (*Reading Room*/3).

As Mailer noted in the *New York Magazine* interview, he had paid little attention to the importance, the power of religion, before his 1984 trip to Russia. There he saw a country where people had retained all through the years of Stalinism and post-Stalinism their beliefs—"Those Russians were ready to die for their religion. Those people really put their bodies on the line, which is what spirituality is all about." He seemed to have experienced a spiritual epiphany in that trip (perhaps one of the reasons he doffs his hat at Russia's turbulent history as a sort of historical novel within a novel inside *Castle*), and most of Mailer's work has always been threaded with his concerns with God, and a search for a spiritual dimension.

Though Dummkopf and Dieter are in a Miltonian struggle, and Mailer deliberately casts Dummkopf as the weak one—the reference to Adorno's lament is clear, that God died at Auschwitz, Mailer also needs God to be fallible, because Mailer the moralist insists that we must accept moral respon-

sibility for our acts. And, in calling him by the familial German pejorative “*dummkopf*,” Mailer may be signaling a second purpose, perhaps to be expanded in the next volumes of the trilogy. The Nazis were contemptuous of God—they defined themselves as being their own *über* religion: Jews, gypsies, Seventh Day Advents, Catholics, all were to be annihilated.

Certainly well before *Gospel*, in *Picasso: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one of the most underrated of Mailer’s books, and one of the best and most succinct portraits of the social and artistic changes that took place in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century, which entailed both the tremendous suffering and the rebirth of a country with a memory of a grandiose empire that had sunk into decay, Mailer was thinking about God. In his study of the artist he intuitively wrestled with Picasso’s fear of God’s wrath, his terror of “divine and demonic punishment,” and his equal fear of revealing the hold that religion had on him when living among the sort of French who took for granted their laicism. Oddly enough, our liberal intellectuals generally so squeamish about mentions of god and the devil, to my knowledge, never questioned Günter Grass’s use of the tin drummer (to my mind a sort of Tyl Ulenspiegel character), who permanently remains three years old, and is the off-stage conceit that holds *The Tin Drum* together. Perhaps we should have questioned, as younger generations of Germans have criticized Grass for writing about Germany during the Holocaust without mentioning it; now that we know Grass had joined the Waffen SS in the final stages of the war, the illusion of innocence created by the passive troll-like drummer seems particularly disconcerting. But Mailer isn’t a product of historic European amnesia—like the marvelous novelist/detective that he is, he wants to get to the root of things, and Dummkopf and Dieter will help get him there.

As I mulled about Lionel Abel’s remark, I reminded myself of the obvious—throughout history every culture has had its own form of religion. Call it a fear of death, call it whatever, awe at that universe, Mailer-esque awe at the universe, has always been with us. And it is an abiding mighty presence in writers from Milton, to Dostoevsky, to Tolstoi, to Joseph Roth, to Adorno. Proust cautioned his liberal aristocrat friend, the Marquis de Lauris, against pushing too far the anti-clerical laws in France, of creating a too stringent laicism. Proust (he was half-Jewish) in this letter refers to himself as a Jew, and acknowledges that “we” (the Jews) have suffered from certain elements in the Catholic Church, goes on to say: “I have no idea what you want. Is it to create *one* France?” His fear was that the anti-Semitic condi-

tions which caused the Dreyfus affair would proliferate among the radical right, not the Catholic Church, and that some space had to be allowed for the spiritual to flower. Proust, so often celebrated as the novelist who released the past, has rarely been given due credit for his sharp political sense, for predicting the future, the circumstances leading to the Holocaust.

But, how to write about the Holocaust? I tried to imagine the way that *Castle* formed in Mailer's mind and his simple answer to Charlie Rose on his program struck me as right. From an early age Mailer knew that Hitler and the Nazis killed Jews because his mother told him that the Nazis killed Jews. In the end, by the time Mailer was a soldier in the South Pacific, they were to have such obscenely murderous power that the Holocaust was to become the central experience of the twentieth century—thus it was inevitable that Mailer would write about it.

So, how were American Jewish writers to address it? As a group they emerged from that war with an oddly split psyche. On one hand they had claimed their American identity, which made them the triumphant victors of the world, on the other, as Jews, their kind had been victims of genocide, and were nearly extinct in Europe. The Holocaust was deep in the Jewish soul, yet, at the same time, certainly as writers, we were visitors to it. At times, almost trespassers. Its true literary witnesses, to name just a few, were Jean Amery, Primo Levi, Jakov Lind, and Anne Frank. Indeed, until Andre Schwarz-Bart published *The Last of the Just* in Paris in 1959 there was a certain lack of ease about writing about the Holocaust, the subject (again, Adorno's cry, that poetry died at Auschwitz) was too fresh, too sacred, for us to intervene. Meanwhile this new generation of Americanized Jews claimed their new territory, creating a new language out of the synthesis of the Jew as the ultimate American. Bellow's Augie March defines that joining: "I'm an American, Chicago born...." At the end of the big, lusty novel Augie sees himself as a sort of Columbus discovering America. In *The Ghost Writer* Philip Roth as Nathan Zuckerman imagines falling in love with a reincarnation of Anne Frank. More recently and less successfully, Roth writes *The Plot Against America*—less successful in my mind because it is such a reversal of history—the Nazis didn't take over America, but they easily took over first Germany and then nearly all of Europe.

How was Mailer to deal with the essential truth that his mother had drilled into him in his early childhood? In dealing with Hitler rather than his Jewish victims, I feel that Mailer made the sensitive decision. In addition to

thus allowing the victims the respect, the privacy, that is their due, Hitler is a better subject for Mailer's talents. Jews were humiliated and annihilated, and I feel that those emotions don't best suit Mailer's gifts, while a pugilistic battle between good and evil does. Who were the Jews? Among them were poets, bankers, mothers, children, whores, cheats, the ill, the rich, the hurly-burly mix of whomever people are. What was exceptional was their fate, not who they were. In this very crucial way Mailer is right in turning Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil on its head—it was the evil, and the power of that evil, that was exceptional. By focusing on Hitler's childhood, and disconnecting him from the Jews, Mailer is doing something very important philosophically.

Whether or not deliberately, and I've not discussed *Castle* with Mailer, he has turned the tables on Hitler. Hitler's demonic portrait of the Jews, his obsession with their blood lines, 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. There is incest, they are seen surrounded by insects, bees, bad smells, bad excretions, indeed their *Waldschloss* is a simile of a concentration camp. Mailer wipes away common irrelevant speculations—had the Jews in Germany become too rich? Were they too timid? Was the Versailles treaty the root of it all?—to deal with the real question, what combination of circumstances near at hand in Hitler's early life accounted for his later inventions, which he then projected onto the Jews?

Arendt never disentangled herself emotionally from Heidegger, her former love and mentor, and, when covering the Eichmann trial, seized upon the fact that Eichmann's German accent was lower class. She made fun of him, referred to him as merely banal, an ordinary type. When Heidegger was asked after the war why he had joined in a banquet for Julius Streicher, the publisher of the virulent Jew-hating propaganda newspaper *Der Sturmer*, he dismissed the charge and tried to distance himself from Streicher by calling the newspaper low-class pornography, totally unaware that his presumed intelligent upper-class status made him more culpable, not less. Arendt, continuing this bizarre line of thought, seemed to feel that by demoting Eichmann to the lower category of a stupid man, she had found a way of wistfully endowing her former *intelligent* lover with a pass. She then made more of a muddle by nosing about, discovering Jewish failures, which was as beside the point as rummaging about discovering the failures of the Resis-

tance, the gypsies, and the civilian population of most of Europe—it took the combined armies of the United States, England, Russia with some help from France to rid Europe of the Nazis.

That said, what makes *The Castle in the Forest* an amazing accomplishment is the way Mailer has braided together different tonalities—the essential historic and philosophical questions of how and why Hitler became Hitler with a compelling narrative, made more vivid by the special music of the Mailer language, the beat and rhythm of his poetic sentences. The claustrophobic reality of Adi, Klara, and Alois are captured in the very real stinky atmosphere of rural Austria—Mailer doesn't let us forget that pagan Central Europe was exceedingly smelly, the water cultures were the Nordic countries and the Mediterranean regions where the Arabs, like the Jews, worshipped water and bathing. But then, as Mailer once remarked to me, he has a dual heritage—he is the descendant of rabbis and butchers. And so we should perhaps not be surprised at the variousness of talents contained in this amazing novel which demands more than one reading and considerable thought in order to be grasped.