

MOMENTS OF METAPHOR IN MAILER'S CASTLE

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The Castle in the Forest

By Norman Mailer

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READERS FAMILIAR WITH THE TRADITION of American literature may associate Norman Mailer and Herman Melville by the opening lines of their respective novels. *Moby-Dick* begins, "Call me Ishmael." Mailer begins *The Castle in the Forest* with "You may call me D.T." Both writers announce, declaratively, the presence of pseudonymous narrators, yet these proclamations disclose strategic metaphoric gestures at least equal to their function as rhetorical devices of fiction. Their corresponding roles differ widely, of course, as they fade and emerge in the flow of the respective narratives. Yet they are more than fictional stratagems in the traditional practice of narrative exposition. They are complex metaphoric representations of face, mask, disguise. The technical term for this trope is *prosopopeia* (Gk: *pros-* + *pon*, face, from *ps*, *p-*, eye + *poiein*, to make; see). It is not possible to know a "stable" Ishmael or D.T. precisely because they are metaphoric creations, subjective to the conditions of our imaginations, necessarily fleeting. The ability to create figural richness, particularly in character, is a defining quality in Mailer's seven-decade stretch of literary magnitude.

In speaking of literary style, Aristotle says in his *Poetics*: "The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor.... [I]t is the mark of genius." Aristotle anticipated the literary genius of Norman Mailer. *Castle*, Mailer's most recent novel, employs an elaborate army of metaphors, infusing his narrative with complex layers of meaning. The metaphor of bee-

keeping, for example, represents, among other things, the national, cultural, and personal conflicts, along with their corresponding tensions, of the first half of the twentieth century. Sordid, soiled characters such as Der Alte, an ancient beekeeper and client of the devil, are metaphoric illustrations of degeneration, spiritual and corporeal. God and Satan are entangled macro-metaphors for ageless conflict, earthly and cosmic.

The craft of making metaphors has characterized Mailer's art and act of writing going back to his 1941 unpublished novel, "No Percentage." Over this incredibly broad sweep of time, Mailer has proved himself to be a literary genius, joining the half dozen or so eminent American novelists of the twentieth century, artists who have enchanted both popular audiences and the academy. Since the 1948 publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer has maintained major celebrity status over many decades by his prodigious output of nearly 50 books as well as an array of essays, short stories, drama, and poetry. Further, he has directed 4 films. Mailer has won a National Book Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award given by the National Book Award Foundation, two Pulitzer prizes, and in 2006 Mailer received France's most prestigious award, the Legion of Honor, for his literary works. The only major literary prize to elude him, at least so far, is the Nobel Prize for Literature. There is no retirement when one is a writer, as Mailer said recently in a televised exchange with Günter Grass. Fall 2007 will mark the publication of yet another book by Mailer—on the subject of cosmology.

At 84, Mailer has challenged us, once again, with one of his most ambitious books (no small undertaking considering that the narrating persona of *The Gospel According to the Son* is Christ Himself). *Castle* is a nearly 500-page novel that recounts the ancestry and youth of Adolf Hitler, chronicling the life of the future *Führer* until 1905 when Hitler is 16. The story is a complex, multigenerational weave of historical fact and fiction, told by first-person narrator and self-proclaimed protagonist, D.T. (short for Dieter), who is an assistant to Satan, referred to as Maestro. D.T. is both "spirit-agent" and corporeal figure, embedded in the body of an SS officer working under Heinrich Himmler in a flash-forward to the future. D.T. is an explicitly self-conscious "novelist," struggling with the challenge of telling the beginning of the Hitler story through the memory prism of his later experiences "living" in America. As a figure of *prosopopeia*, D.T. wears many masks. We learn this history at the outset of the narrative, which occurs long after the novel's main events. *Castle* is very much a novel of memory, re-

creation, and the “con-fusing” of events and their meanings, referring to effects of ambiguity as well as fusing.

If the storytelling machinery of *Castle* sounds complicated, it is indeed. One reason for the novel’s complexity lies in its dense tapestry of plot, theme(s), and character. The major character is Alois Hitler (Adolf’s father), who receives more ink than anyone else, yet we are constantly made aware that the novel is also about the dense and detailed embroidery of experience, circumstances, and mental machinations that constitute a dysfunctional family, over generations, culminating in the formation of the most infamously evil person of the last century. *Castle* is a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age chronicle describing strategic rites of passage, often traumatic, of young Adolf. Equally important, it is also the tale of the antecedent conditions and characters that forge the development of a “rogue” individual laden with contradictions, one who later horrifies the world by his unspeakable acts. Like most major characters, young Ali defies simple identification. His character, like his father, is one of tension, contradictions, and, at times, even one of sympathy when he is abused by his brother. It is not possible for Mailer to create significant characters that are “simple,” precisely because credible and interesting characters are composites of shards and shreds of desires, impulses, urges, righteousness, uncertainty, and much more. These human components are metonymies in motion, coming together or colliding apart in inexplicable ways to form human action (perhaps all action) in unpredictable ways. This characterization does not deny overriding or archetypal forces at work, metaphors themselves, tropes writ large. Maestro and *Dummkopf*, Mailer’s metaphor for God, are but two examples. D.T. and Adolf’s father occupy lesser but hardly insignificant orbits.

Alois Sr. lives a befuddled, besotted existence hounded by questions of his origins (is he a product of incest?) and ethnicity (is he a half-Jew?). In spite of a stable career (he works his way up the bureaucratic ladder as a customs official), he is a brutish oaf given to reckless sexual behavior throughout his adult life, continually abusing his wives and children, behavior well fueled by an unquenchable thirst for beer. Alois is a lout who mistreats nearly everyone—wives, mistresses, children, servants, and animals. He remains chronically dissatisfied with his middle-class existence and strives to become a “man of the land”—a traditional farmer first, and then a bee farmer. Alois proves to be a dismal failure in nearly everything he does and is. His influence on Adolf is immeasurable.

The family preoccupation with beekeeping (apiculture) is a dominant, strategic element of the narrative, taking up nearly half the novel. The business of bees is of special importance because it is through the master metaphor of bees that young Adolf comes to learn early lessons of life, including the frightening yet exciting realities of the “birds and the bees.” Born in 1889, Adolf begins to come of age in the 1890s, the height of the family’s bee business. The chronicling of the bees, intertwined with misadventures of Alois, wife Klara, Alois Jr., several other siblings and more distant relatives, and of course Adolf, reveals Mailer at his best in depicting the complications of life through the mundane, dreary duties of daily life, farming in this case. Family farming interactions are the context for motifs of love, hate, sex, desire, greed, doubt, anxiety, depression, and the eternal struggle to survive are but some of the themes informing *Castle*.

Mailer, like all writers, reveals much of his philosophy of human experience in his art. The world of Mailer is a world of conflict, intensified by opposing forces in tension with one another. These forces, and their various representations, are often fascinating and never operate outside the sphere of “rough equilibrium,” the only condition under which true tension and conflict can take place in Mailer’s cosmos. In *Castle* there are two competing forces: God and Satan, yet there is a third realm—the human—which is the Battleground between Satan and God. Mailer’s life work has explored the complexities and fascinations of scenes of contention, in this case, dueling cosmic forces. Final resolution of conflict, in the context of “winning and losing,” is never possible in the Mailer worldview. An honest writer describes, explores, and interrogates. Not coincidentally Ernest Hemingway held these beliefs and that may be one of the reasons Mailer has always held him in high esteem.

Does Mailer’s powerful novel about the tactical and strategic machinations of the nature of evil remotely suggest how one might live—characters and readers? Are codes offered that might thwart the forces of evil so they attempt to influence human events? No, clearly not. To “explain reality” is a redoubtable and impossible task for Mailer, as his more experienced readers well know. As D.T. (assistant devil *and* narrator) sums it up: “What enables devils to survive is that we are wise enough to understand that there are no answers—there are only questions.” This sensibility is clearly revealed in the texture of *Castle*. D.T. reveals himself to be both novelist and amateur philosopher, one well versed in the art of storytelling,

yet privileged to perceive human weaknesses and potential that are under constant search by the forces of E.O. (the Evil One). Yet God, too, plays a central role in a narrative that is not so much about realities of good and evil but rather how agents, opportunities, and circumstances bring about good and evil. The ancient Greeks called this emphasis on timing *kairos*, and *Castle* is rife with opportunities for the promotion of evil. “Timing is all,” said the Bard.

What makes *Castle* a powerful and seductive narrative is the compelling manner in which it unrelentingly reveals the twists and turns of life that are beyond human control. This revelation does not reject free will. Indeed, D.T. expresses frustration by human resistance to his manipulation. Humans do make choices (and devils do, too), always in the midst of the never-ending conflict between God served by angels (cudgels) and Satan (served by a hierarchy of assistants.)

Now well into his ninth decade, Norman Mailer has—once again and most aggressively—confounded, challenged, questioned, and pleased his readers, with hints of more to come. In a flash-forward moment referring to Hitler’s experiences in World War I, D.T. interrupts himself with a momentary slip of the tongue, “Too soon to speak of that, however.” A subtle foreshadowing by the literary Maestro that he may not yet be finished exploring the most enigmatic reincarnation of evil the last century has produced.

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