“His perfect sense of the other”


We had thought that by this time we would be immune to being surprised by The New York Times Book Review. We have often had occasion to criticize that mighty organ of literary celebrity, as much for what it neglects to review as for what, and how, it does. (About the former: we predicted some months back that Mark Steyn’s America Alone, one of the most important books to be published last year, would not be reviewed in the Times: so far, its only appearance in the Times has been on its bestseller list.) Yet in its issue for January 21, the Book Review did it again: we frankly acknowledge that we were … well, surprised doesn’t cover our reaction to the front-page, 6,200-word encomium about Norman Mailer’s new novel, The Castle in the Forest.

Six-thousand-two-hundred words. A long review in the Times is 1,500 or 1,800 words—a full page. “Maestro of the Human Ego,” as Lee Siegel’s exercise in sycophantic rehabilitation is called, starts on page one and then continues inside not for one or two pages, nor even for three full pages: no, the editors have seen fit to accord, in addition to the snippet on page one (under a large photograph of the Maestro in question), four full pages to Norman Mailer’s latest advertisement for himself. Perhaps there is a precedent, in length, for this review: if so, we cannot find it. For sheer unctuousness and cringe-making hagiographical bombast, there may be no equal.

We know that, half a century ago, some people took Norman Mailer seriously as a novelist. There were even a few—we know it seems incredible now—who took him seriously as a thinker. That was long ago, before Mr. Mailer’s embarrassing book about Marilyn Monroe, before his even more embarrassing book Ancient Evenings, before his silly though malevolent essays about race, women, and “hipsters,” and such outrages as stabbing and nearly killing one of his multitudinous wives. It has, we believe, been two or three decades since Norman Mailer has been regarded by most people as anything other that a rather pathetic, blustering figure, wallowing in self-infatuation. For sheer credulousness, then, Lee Siegel deserves some sort of recognition. He actually believes—at least, he actually writes—that Mr. Mailer is “a novelist fanatically committed to the truth” who has “always insisted on true art as a form of honest living.” The Castle in the Forest is about the young Adolf Hitler (well, really, it is about Norman Mailer, like all of his books) and so it seems appropriate to recall Hitler’s advice that if you are going to tell a lie, make it a
whopper. That way you stun your audience into submission. Confronted with an outrageous untruth, most people are too polite to say (as they should), “Balderdash. What rubbish.” At first, anyway, they make excuses: “Why would someone say that?” they think. “Maybe there is something to it?”

Reading Mr. Siegel’s paean to Norman Mailer produces such vertiginous feelings. It is so wildly at odds with reality that one blinks in disbelief. Consider, to take just one example, Mr. Siegel’s discussion of “The White Negro,” Mr. Mailer’s notorious 1957 essay glorifying violence. You remember: this is the essay in which Mr. Mailer praises the “hipster” who has the “courage” to “beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper” because by so doing “one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one’s life.” No doubt. Mr. Mailer goes on to explain that “at bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love.” Not, however, “love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him.” How do you spell drivel? According to Mr. Siegel, though, far from “trying to shock the bourgeoisie with a sympathy for violence,” Mailer “was doing something else: trying to shock the respectable class with an imaginative inhabitation of the violent. Rather than advocating murder, Mailer was exercising his perfect sense of the other.” “His perfect sense of the other”? Right. And you, Dear Reader, are Marie of Roumania.

If there were a menagerie for literary curiosities, we suppose Mr. Siegel’s effusion would occupy an honored place. It did occur to us, briefly, that his essay was tongue-in-cheek—or possibly that the editors of the Times Book Review were demonstrating a sly if overbearing sense of humor in publishing this preposterous bouquet to one of America’s most preposterous writers. Alas, it is all too clear that both Mr. Siegel and the editors were in earnest—which is itself a kind of comedy, though the joke, unfortunately, is on us.