

Dr. Faustus

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(Feb 14) August 9 - September 22, 2005

Back at home we had Dr. Faustus in a Swedish translation. I recall that my parents complained that the first sentence of the book covered half a page. The conclusion was that they had never gotten further. This intrigued me a lot. Was this not the kind of book I longed to read once my childish period was over? I was fascinated by books that provided a great many details. However, child as I was, I did not at the time consider reading it.

Almost fifteen years later I heard the book being praised to the skies by an East-German room-mate in Cambridge Mass. In particular he vividly described how the protagonist of the book, fearful of having contracted syphilis, seeks out his doctor, only to find the latter's office emptied, curtains blowing in the wind by the open windows, escaping the scene in terror. A few years after I bought it in an English translation, and read the initial chapters in my first Columbia apartment. I recall a lengthy description of the life-like behaviour of crystals, which seemed to play no particular role in the plot of the novel, maybe only to show off the erudition of the author. An even less charitable, if excusable, explanation, is that Mann has just read up on something, and is eager, like the good school-boy, to present to the world what he just recently has learned but not yet fully digested. Repeated instances of the same is to be found in many of Mann's novels. But the book itself I did not tackle in its entirety until a few years later, when I a year or two after my father's death, borrowed my mother's copy. From that reading I recall very little, except the first few chapters, and the scene that had so vividly been described to me many years before. And of course the general impression that without a knowledge of Nietzsche's biography, much of the point of the novel would be wasted on the reader. Thus when I recently decided to read it in its original, in many ways it became a matter of reading it as if for the first time. How come that your retention is so weak?

Mann has a reputation for *Gründlichkeit*. His prose is elaborate, with many subordinate clauses, and thus slow to read. But it is also precise and transparent, with few word-plays and frivolous constructions, that might exclude the foreign reader. All this points to a serious and systematic methodology of Mann, approaching the writing of a novel as if he was a scientist. In many ways one may detect a certain repressed envy towards the scientist, which may also explain the interludes referred to above. His descriptions are very thorough and precise, bestowing even on minor characters a richness of characterization, visual and mental, which appears to be a self-indulgence that goes way beyond the necessary. Such almost pedantic attention to detail (and I recall once again the praise of my East-German informant, who relayed how thoroughly Mann studied a particular locale, before committing it to his writings) has its inevitable charms, not unlike the way a genre painting delights when it allows us to appreciate the variety of the quotidian objects lovingly depicted therein. Just as a conventional appreciation of a painting relies on its ability to show us a slice of real life, as noted just above, a similar ambition is implicit in the writing of a novel although it is far more difficult to actually achieve. But of course all such sincerity runs the risk of becoming slightly ponderous if not downright ridiculous, necessitating a certain ironic detachment. Technically this is

accomplished in this novel, by letting it take the form of the notes compiled by a certain naive and pedantic school-master, whose very name - Serenus Zeitbloom, is meant to inspire laughter. In this way the omniscient narrator becomes part of the plot himself, and can as such be disavowed, if necessary by the author, hiding behind his mask. Technically the solution has its inevitable shortcomings. The naive narrator produces long stretches of text not consistent either with his limited view as a compiler of an incomplete *Nachlass* nor as an uninspired stylist. This is of course a shortcoming so prevalent among writers of fiction as to become an accepted convention by itself, on par with the suspended judgment any work of fiction demands from its readers. How often are not illiterate characters made to make statements of wit and literary sophistication, way beyond their avowed limitations. But just as unedited speech is painful to read, artistic license has to separate a work of art from the reality it is ostensibly meant to mirror faithfully.

Dr. Faustus has been seen as an indictment against the German spirit, written as it was just after the war. It is not clear how this is to be interpreted. The chronicler of the work, concerned with three levels of time as he remarks in an aside - the actual time of the events described, the time of the chronicling, and finally the time of the reader; displays a conventional ambivalence towards the Third Reich, which I suspect was quite representative. On one hand, although decrying the barbarity of the regime, he is proud of its military successes testifying to the inherent superiority of the German culture and spirit on the other. Consequently the bitter feelings against the regime, never mentioned by name, just as its leader is only referred to circumspectly, is not primarily inspired by the atrocities perpetrated, but by the catastrophe it has brought upon the homeland itself. With horror he relates how the barbarian hordes from the east sully the sacred ground, and resents how the powers of the west make common cause¹. The chronicler is thus impelled by the author to express his self-pity as everything around him crumbles as he slowly and painfully moves his writing project to its conclusion.

The subject of Mann is, as in almost all his books, that of Culture, especially solid German burgeois culture, with its deification of Goethe and its worship of classical music. The conflict between the artistic ambition and its concomitant temperament and the solidity and constriction of burgeois life is of course a *Leitmotiv* in most of Manns writing. Clearly both are in need of each other. The artist would be nothing unless surfing on the waves of Burgeois cultural appreciation and erudition, and conversely without artists, there would be no culture to appreciate and embrace. In fact without this conflict there would be no market for the kind of books Mann loves to write. In Dr. Faustus, the role of Faust is played by the musical genius Leverkühn, who is described as a most fastidious character, stand-offish (a case of *Noli me tangere*) and thoroughly devoted to what he sees as his ambition in life. He is of course too good for this world, denied the general public success, only appreciated by a narrow elite. Clearly a key episode in his life, and hence in the book, is his encounter with the devil, obviously to elaborate associations already implied by the title. How literal one is to take this encounter is of course up to the naivety of the reader, but the encounter is described rather far into the novel, so it is unclear whether it had this decisive impact its nature naturally demands. Maybe I nodded

¹ Such an attitude is probably quite consistent with that motivating the unsuccessful plotters against Hitlers life, and who have lately been seen as heroes of defiant resistance.

while reading, and the episode referred to is placed way before it is being brought up by the chronicler, so that it after all coincided with the protagonist rise to excellence.

The book is generously endowed with intellectual discussions, be they of music² or philosophy. The general set up of the book encourages such diversions, whether they be set during the student days when Leverkühn, frivolously one assumes, follows a theological study, or in the salons of his Munich days. Many of those discussions are fascinating when being read about, like the case whether evil is as necessary as good in this world, and that its progeny may actually be the same as that of its opposite; but inevitably fade in memory afterwards. But the novel also has its share of dramatic action. There is a suicide, a proposal by proxy (Leverkühn finding himself falling in love with a young beautiful woman entrusts his most trustworthy friend, a violinist, with the delicate mission of finding out whether he has a chance, leading to a predictable disaster as the friend is not altogether impervious to her charms either), an actual murder by a jilted lover on a tram of that trusted friend after a celebrated performance of the same. And then of course the tragic death of a nephew, a young child of five, from meningitis, that pushes Leverkühn over the edge.

The parallels with the life of Nietzsche are very obvious for anyone in the know, and do provide as such, one of the charms of the novel. Nietzsche is reported to have visited a brothel in his youth contracting the syphilis that supposedly did him in. It is also reported that once in such an establishment of ill-repute, he headed straight for the piano, as being the only object around being alive, pounding furiously at its keys. This may be anecdote, but Mann turns it into 'truth' by letting Leverkühn, the composer, submit to the same experiences. Similarly the repeated migraines and stomach ailments of the protagonist, obviously mirrors those of Nietzsche. One may also see a parallel to the love-triangle of Nietzsche, Paul Reé and the Russian beauty and groupie Andreas-Salome in Leverkühns own hapless amatory diversions. Whether Nietzsche ever had an encounter with the devil is moot, whatever it is not part of the mythology surrounding him. But the protagonist also has a breakdown at the very same age that Nietzsche suffered his on an open street in Turino. And like Nietzsche his final act before descending into unconsciousness, is to embrace. In case of Nietzsche a horse that is being flogged, in the case of Leverkühn, his piano. The ten odd years that followed by Nietzsche confined to the care of his mother and sister, is being directly mirrored by ten years of Leverkühns imprisonment in his mothers home before succumbing. The protagonist presents a pitiful spectacle, with a habit of turning his eye-balls upwards and downwards in their sockets. When the chronicler meets his gaze, he is amazed at its depth, further enhanced by his bushy eye-brows, only momentarily to be reminded, by that obnoxious habit, that there is nothing behind it, only an empty shell, which once housed the spirit of his beloved friend. Those allusions to Nietzsche are too obvious to be explicitly pointed out.

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² and here one wonders to what extent they would make sense to a musicologist, and if they do, how much Mann has actually lifted those from the works of actual musical thinkers, one of them - Schoenberg, actually being explicitly acknowledged at the end of the book