Doctor Faustus Short Guide

Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann

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Contents

Characters

D octor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn as Told by a Friend is written in the form of a biography and attention naturally centers around Adrian Leverkuhn's life. Only the decadence of bourgeois circles in Munich temporarily assumes center stage, with the composer barely more than an acquaintance to some of the melodramatic histrionics which Mann drew with merciless accuracy from his long years of residence in that city.

Next to the hero, the most interesting figure is his fictional biographer Serenus Zeitblom, the kindhearted childhood friend of Leverkuhn. Zeitblom is in love with the values of classical humanism and becomes a professor of Greek and Latin at a German gymnasium, a position he voluntarily relinquishes when Hitler comes to power. Not without sympathy but also in full recognition of his friend's highminded corruption, Zeitblom draws the sad conclusions from Leverkuhn's disastrous entanglement with the forces of evil. In his own timidity towards the spreading barbarism, the well-meaning professor is of course a representative of many decent but regrettably ineffectual intellectuals in Germany.

Social Concerns

Written between 1943 and 1947, Doctor Faustus expresses its author's shock and grief about the political, cultural, and moral corruption of his native Germany under the impact of a seemingly unforeseeable resurgence of wholesale barbarism. As in previous novels, Mann is primarily interested in the ideological changes that precede and motivate social action. The artist, once again, is perceived as the conscious and often unconscionable perpetrator of crucial reversals of value without which neither a Goebbels nor a Himmler could have assumed their cruel hegemony. On this level, Doctor Faustus is a bitter indictment of Germany's creative elite for its self-serving experiments with anarchic powers that were to destroy not only the elite itself but also the society for which it should have felt responsible.

Techniques

As in The Magic Mountain (1924), expositions and discussions of ideas dominate Doctor Faustus. This time they are concentrated in the areas of theology, political theory, and, above all, musicology. Mann, a devotee of music but no musicologist, trained himself in the company of composers like Arnold Schonberg and Igor Stravinsky, musicians of the stature of Bruno Walter and Arthur Rubinstein, but relied most specifically on the advice of the noted philosopher of music Theodor Adorno.

The resulting analyses of real and fictitious musical compositions probably constitute the most sophisticated treatment of music in any work of literature. Much of it is unfortunately pitched at such a level of technical expertise that even the well-educated reader must feel excluded.

In his delineation of characters, Mann used the principle of historical montage more than in any of his other works. Leverkiihn's life and work are to hint at such disparate figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Hugo Wolf, Arnold Schonberg, Peter Ilich Tschaikovsky, and even Jesus Christ. Other characters bring to mind Martin Luther, Joseph Goebbels, Oswald Spengler, Jacob Burckhardt, Stefan George, and Albert Schweitzer. Mann incorporated even the fate of his immediate family to a degree unknown since Buddenbrooks (1901).

The introduction of a fictional biographer serves Mann in two ways. Having the demonic story told by a person temperamentally as unsuited to its subject as is Zeitblom gives Mann the necessary ironic distance. In addition, Zeitblom is encouraged to arrive at conclusions which would have sounded unnecessarily confessional and didactic in the mouth of his creator.

Themes

In Doctor Faustus, a composer tries to overcome the merely imitative and parodistic quality of his creations by immersing himself in a primitive irrationalism out of which he hopes to shape works of demonic beauty. He finally achieves true creativity, but only in the expression of his own despair about the destruction which his creativity has brought upon himself and upon those around him.

This modern artist's satanic experiment with the dehumanization of art is closely tied to the culture of his country through a network of historical and symbolic connotations which lead most directly to the age of Faust and Luther.

In its conscious break with the forces of European humanism, Luther's Reformation represented for Mann Germany's first programmatic contribution to a tradition that continues to pride itself on its scorn for the civilizing agents in life and society.

Literary Precedents

With the choice of his title, Mann consciously placed himself within the long tradition of Faust literature. Thorough as usual, he studied this tradition by immersing himself in treatments of the theme that reached from Christopher Marlowe's Renaissance play to Heinrich Heine's Romantic ballet.

Among all of these, only the chapbook Doctor Faust, first published in Frankfurt in 1587, exercised any direct influence on Mann's novel. Besides taking over certain elements of the plot, Mann frequently imitates in word choice and syntax the archaic style of his source and at one point actually allows Leverkuhn to take leave of the world in the precise words of the chapbook.

Some critics of twentieth century literature have spoken of the "terminal" novel as a distinctly modern creation in which authors have set out to take stock of Western man's cultural universe with an ultimate seriousness and an unmitigated pessimism. Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past (1913-1927), Andre Gide's The Counterfeiters (1926), Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea (1938), Franz Kafka's The Castle (1926), and Hermann Broch's The Death of Vergil (1945) have often been mentioned as falling into this category.

Mann's Doctor Faustus clearly belongs among these novels of final reckoning, a judgment Mann seems implicitly to -have sanctioned by declaring the novel, although not his last, his final word as a writer.

Written at about the same time as Doctor Faustus, Magister Ludi (1943) (also published as The Glass Bead Game, 1969), which claimed the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946, is the culmination of Hermann Hesse's lifelong personal and literary search for self-identity. Where, in his earliest novels and tales, that include Demian, Narcissus and Goldmund, and The Journey to the East, Hesse was concerned exclusively with the emancipation of self, he later achieved acceptance of self. These steps have led progressively to Magister Ludi, in which one finds a certain justification of self. It is not that each book along the way deals conclusively with a single facet of self-realization; rather, each delineates a struggle from the beginning and ends with no sure resolution. What is different about Magister Ludi is that it offers a design for society and it is set well into the future.

Europe has entered a period characterized by widespread ignorance and lack of progress after a series of utterly devastating world wars. In a remote mountain retreat community called Castalia, young Josef Knecht joins a group of scholars dedicated to playing an immensely complicated, mystical game, best described as a universal intellectual language containing all knowledge. Knecht achieves the ultimate honor: that of Magister Ludi, or Teacher of the Game. Yet he eventually leaves the community, in response to conscience and in search of the true task of the intellectual. He discovers it is in maintaining contact with the common man. Hesse sees danger in a world dominated by an elite group apart from the day-to-day activities of average citizens.

And, he implies, when that group manipulates a mathematically devised, abacuslike gamemachine, humanity is in for considerable trouble. The foreshadowing of the present-day obsession with computers is obvious.

It is altogether appropriate that Hesse's magnum opus should deal with the future while containing familiar real-life people from Hesse's past and present, for the suspension of actual time was an ideal sought by Hesse.

Readers of Hesse have met most of these characters before, as people from the past. Now that they are people in the future — people to come, as it were, people recommended by Hesse — they become archetypes and form the matrix of the newly designed world of tomorrow. It is not important to trace every character back to an actual person in Hesse's circle; in fact, it would take some searching in a biography. Some connections are more obvious than others — Thomas von der Trave is Thomas Mann, for example; what matters is the cumulative effect.

Hesse is spinning out his life once more, and all these characters in his book, with their shades of change, add up to a new and different Hermann Hesse and Josef Knecht. It is not that Hesse's chronic discontent with life has been reduced; it is that his dream of a better reality has persisted and been enhanced.

In Castalia the search for "wholeness" is undertaken in the hope it will lead to an "awakening," a serenity transcending worldly values. To achieve this, man must become innocent, as in Peter Camenzind; he must experience despair and guilt, as in Steppenwolf; he must put together again the pieces of his shattered personality and move upward and outward, as in Magister Ludi. This stage-like movement is part and parcel of ancient Indian writings, but it is also Faustian that Knecht should be true to his name and serve humanity.

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