THOMAS MANN AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN ART*

By R. B. FARRELL

IN an article[1] published in 1953 the critic Erich Kahler notes that the novel today is displaying a tendency to turn into a series of essays in which the artist becomes the critic. Of few works is this judgement more strikingly true than of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus,* with the curious sub-title: The Life of the German Tone-Setter Adrian Leverkühn, Told by a Friend.[2] Tone-Setter in English is only slightly less unusual than the German original "Tonsetzer", which Mann deliberately uses instead of "Komponist", the normal German term for "composer". It is mainly about this remarkable work that I want to speak this evening. Mann began writing it in 1943 in America, completed it in 1947, and it was published in 1948. It deals with a fictitious German musician, one, moreover, whose style is presented as distinctly modern. In fact, he is made to use the twelve-tone system, an item of the invention which provoked the creator of this system, Arnold Schönberg, to the scathing comment[3] that Mann understood only as much about it as Dr. Adorno had passed on to him and Dr. Adorno in turn only as much as he, Schönberg, had told his pupils. Perhaps the main cause of Schönberg's resentment was that Mann's composer, Adrian Leverkühn, in whom we are to see a parallel to Faust, makes a pact with the devil, the central ingredient of all versions of the legend.

The theme of this extraordinary work is the sterility of music and, with wider reference, of art in general in our times. It not only tells the story of Adrian's life, from his birth in 1885 to his collapse into madness in 1930 and death in 1940, but gives so elaborate a description of all his fictitious compositions that one wonders why some ingenious music scholar or Thomas Mann himself has not attempted to write down the score. These compositions are discussed technically and also interpreted in human terms. In this type of content we have just one example of a virtuosity which makes the whole book a tour de force — a characteristic of not a few modern works. But you may feel initial surprise that a writer such as Thomas Mann, who was an

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[1] Erich Kahler, "Untergang und Übergang der Epischen Kunstform", in *Die Neue Rundschau,* Heft 1, 1953.

[2] Doktor Faustus — *Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde* (1948). Mann subsequently gave an account of the origin and growth of the work in *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus — Roman eines Romans* (1949).

[3] In *Saturday Review of Literature,* 1 January 1949.

émigré to America for political, not racial, reasons and in these years used his pen in numerous articles and essays to denounce Nazi Germany, should have found time to write a novel of 773 pages about an imaginary German composer. There is an explanation. Adrian Leverkühn's life and art are brought into an intimate association with the social, political and cultural atmosphere of Germany, not only with the phenomenon of National-Socialism itself, but with the events and the mental climate that preceded it, in fact long before the establishment of the Bismarck Reich: since Luther's Reformation in the sixteenth century. *Dr. Faustus,* as Thomas Mann has told us, was written in sorrow and anger at Germany's criminal lunacy in unleashing the horrors of National-Socialism on herself and on the world. Mann, who like Nietzsche had given much thought to the problem of what is German, began in shocked despair to ask himself whether National-Socialism was not in the last analysis simply an extreme manifestation of constant German characteristics. If this were so, it would involve him, too, in a relentless examination of himself and of all those other Germans who had opposed Hitler. Such was the state of mind that prompted the novel and in fact suggested the particular subject-matter. Germany makes a pact with the devil just as modern art does.

But, you will ask, why did Mann make his main character, who apparently in some way is to stand for Germany, a musician? Surely it is fanciful to suggest that Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were among the spiritual progenitors of National-Socialism or expressed its character. Mann has an answer. In an essay delivered as an address just after the end of the War in America and entitled *Germany and the Germans*[4] he maintains when analysing the nineteenth century that German literature of this period did not produce the great social novel in the sense that France, England and Russia did and that the great German artistic achievement of the age was Richard Wagner, i.e. in another art, music, which has its being in a non-social sphere. Always a deep lover of music, Mann in a number of earlier works had given descriptions of musicians and musical compositions. Wagner had been for him a profound experience. But as the years passed he began to feel misgivings about the value of music as a cultural and civilizing force. By the time he came to write *The Magic Mountain*[5] he viewed it with suspicion in terms recalling Nietzsche's "cave musicam". The musical mind now seemed to him incompatible with political sense, in which the Germans by and large have been notoriously deficient, and so lacking in ethical and social responsibility. Mann had moved from a position as champion of a non-political culture,[6] as which he had

[4] *Deutschland und die Deutschen,* 1946.
[5] *Der Zauberberg,* Berlin (1924).
[6] During World War I Thomas Mann, unlike his brother Heinrich, had been an eloquent apologist of Germany's cause, playing off unpolitical German culture against Western civilisation, in the political awareness of which he saw only political agitation. His thesis is presented in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen,* 1918.

presented Germany during the First World War, to a view of culture which demanded political awareness no less than art as integral parts of the truly human. The shift in his thought first found expression a few years after the conclusion of peace in an essay called *On the German Republic.*[7] After the catastrophe of Nazism any figure representative of what is German had in his eyes to have some intimate relationship with music. This view is brought out clearly in the essay, *Germany and the Germans,* where he states that Faust in order to be a representative German should be a musician. None of the various versions of the Faust legend, certainly not Goethe's, had made the hero a musician and none, either, had consciously made him a symbol of anything German, though indubitably in time the figure came for many to have something peculiarly German about it. This lies perhaps in the deep-seated restlessness which causes Faust to want to break through the bonds of our human limitations, even if the devil's help has to be invoked in order to do so. But you may at this stage be objecting: what has all this to do with the crisis of modern art? It is a crisis not only of German but of Western art generally. Mann, you will be saying, by making Adrian Leverkühn a symbol of what is German and at the same time of the modern Western artist has involved himself in hopeless confusion in as much as what is German (at least in the Nazi sense) seems to have been the antithesis of what is western and indeed locked in a deadly struggle with it. But how Mann deals with this difficulty I must reserve for a later stage of the argument.

Although my central concern is Mann's view of the crisis of modern art, I must explain to you a few further features of this remarkable book if you are to grasp Mann's meaning. Leverkühn's life is related by a friend, i.e. Mann makes use of the narrator technique. He does this with a brilliant display of virtuosity. The narrator, a friend of Leverkühn's, i.e. in so far as the latter is capable of friendship, is his antithesis. A humanist, unlike the demonic Adrian, whose inspiration, we are asked to believe, comes from a non-humanist realm, he is a school-master, a teacher of Greek and Latin at a classical "Gymnasium". He represents a civilized Germany, a role which in itself means that Mann's conception of Germany was not a simple one; he is mild of manner, sane and reasonable, though he is attracted to the demonic in Adrian at the same time as he fears it. The fiction is that Serenus Zeitblom — for that is his name — begins to tell his story three years after Adrian's death, i.e. in 1943, at a time when Germany was entering on a succession of military retreats and defeats, and ends it in 1945 as the victorious American armies are advancing on Munich. With the composition extending over the last two fateful years of the War, Zeitblom's mind naturally dwells on

[7] *Von deutscher Republik* (1923).

contemporary events. He is out of sympathy with Hitler, though his own sons are ardent supporters, and has for this reason resigned from his schoolmaster's post, but, like so many other Germans of his kind, his dislike is ineffectual and active opposition is far from his thoughts. His apparent digressions to the contemporary scene are of course in reality thematically relevant: we are meant to relate the predicament of art to the state of society. Germany's collapse in ruin and despair in 1945 is a parallel to Adrian's collapse in madness in 1930, the reason for this date being probably that it could suggest at a moment before Hitler had come to power that Germany was already inwardly doomed, that her development had been false and that she was heading for the abyss.

In such details and many others Mann has made an extensive use of symbolism. This sometimes goes to remarkable lengths. Adrian's life is in many essentials that of Friedrich Nietzsche, without Nietzsche himself ever being mentioned — from the early infection with syphilis and fantastic details of the scene in the brothel to the final madness. Nietzsche is evidently considered as one of the spiritual forebears of National-Socialism by reason of the confusion into which he plunged many minds with his demand for vitalism, strong instincts, even if the spectacle of what was being done in his name would have made him turn in his grave. Again, the devil appears to Adrian at the address in Rome at which Thomas Mann himself stayed for a considerable time as a young man. As the devil promises Adrian intensification of his creative genius, this can only mean that Thomas Mann is saying that his own art was made possible with the devil's help and that he is pronouncing judgement on this art. But the most daring example of this kind of symbolism is the one on which the whole work is constructed: the intended parallel between Adrian Leverkühn and Faust, whose name is never mentioned apart from the title of the work and that of Adrian's last composition, but whose presence pervades the whole. It most obviously does so in the scene of the pact with the devil, here, in keeping with a modern work, a figment of the fever brought on by Adrian's disease. As in the original 16th century version the devil promises to increase his powers for a period of twenty-four years, at the end of which period Faust shall be his victim. And just as the original Faust[8] calls his companions together and addresses them before his soul is borne off to hell, so Adrian summons acquaintances to hear him perform and explain his last composition, *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus,* during which he collapses into madness. The grotesquely gruesome nature of the scene is intensified by Adrian's use of sixteenth century German to address his audience, the language of the original Faust book and, moreover, of Luther. Adrian has in fact amused himself earlier by writing and speaking

[8] In *Das Volksbuch vom Doctor Faust* (1587).

in this idiom, e.g. in his account to Serenus Zeitblom of the incident in the brothel. The Faust book of the sixteenth century is the story of one who wanted both knowledge and power not granted to mortal man, at least not at that time. The author very definitely takes the side of Luther against Faust. In Goethe's Faust the position has entirely changed: Faust at the end is saved by virtue of his striving.[9]

Germany of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is evoked in all sorts of ways, by the theological element (Adrian is first a student of theology, which, we are told, had really become demonology), further by making his father "speculate the elements" in the manner of Faust himself. His hometown, a synthetic creation called Kaisersaschern, is set in central Germany in Saxony near Thuringia. Its description not only makes it look like Nietzsche's birth-place, but it is situated in the area of the Reformation, the Luther country. In its present-day appearance, Mann says, can still be felt something of the frenzy of the waning Middle Ages, something of their "latent epidemic of the soul". All this makes the Faust parallel credible, but might strike us as somewhat laboured if Thomas Mann had not drawn this period of European history directly into his theme. This theme we must now attempt to describe more fully. Mann regards our present age as the final stage of that order which emerged with the Renaissance and the Reformation, socially speaking the bourgeois era, which has produced our modern world. The point of view of the novel is that we are now nearing the end of this cycle of civilization and culture; the bourgeois era is in its decline. Mann is at pains to indicate this development over the centuries, and it is part of his thesis that the end of an age in some ways reverts to its beginnings. Apart from the sphere of art, about which more will be said later, he is thinking particularly of the frenzied burst of irrationalism, of "the epidemic of the soul" as the old struggles against the new. Before the new can fully emerge, the end-stage will always throw up types who look backwards to the beginnings, in political terminology reactionaries. Thus his canvas is really the four to five centuries since the Middle Ages waned.

He concentrates, it is true, on the final stage, making us feel it as a result of what has preceded it. To understand the novel in general and in particular the situation of art both discussed and suggested in its pages we must realize that it conjures up the atmosphere of an end. All the phenomena of the end of an area of civilization are introduced, not only mass hysteria but the forms in which the end affects intellectuals. Here Mann gives a synthetic version of various types and circles that could be found in Germany before and after the First World War. The portraits are bitterly satirical.

[9] Striving is not to be interpreted in terms of moral betterment but of expanding contact with life and deepening sympathy with it.

In particular, his bitterness is directed against those who derive pleasure from their own cleverness in seeing the future, the period of barbarism which is approaching, and who profess to believe that this must be the right thing simply because it is coming. This and many other related attitudes of intellectuals Mann castigates as socially irresponsible, as typical phenomena of the final stage of a civilization.

Adrian and Zeitblom, each in his own way, are also, typical of the end stage of a civilization. The characteristic which above all places Adrian in this category is his aloofness from society, his loneliness, the atmosphere of coldness that emanates from him. His is the typical alienation of the modern artist from society, while his art bears all the marks of his retreat into a private world. From the beginnings of his career as a writer Thomas Mann had dealt with the antagonism of art and life, of the artist and the bourgeois; the tension at first being conceived as absolute and eternal, but later with a growing realization that it is a special problem of our own age. Society itself, it seems, is responsible for the anti-bourgeois attitude of the artist, its loss of genuine life has driven the artist in upon himself. Adrian's laughter is not that of one in love with life, but of one who despises the life he sees about him. He is completely lacking in a community sense, including the perverted form of it which National-Socialism was to bring to birth and which he looks on with contempt. But his isolation is the condition of his genius no less than it determines the particular character of this. In the conversation with the devil the latter tells Adrian that he cannot transform him into anything new but that he can intensify his potentialities; on one condition, however, namely that he must not love. This means that he must not seek to belong to a community of human beings, in other words that the price of artistic creativeness in our age is spiritual exile. Adrian in his later years does make two attempts to find the way to society, first in an abortive marriage proposal, then in the development of affection for his five-year-old nephew, who dies of cerebral meningitis, leaving Adrian in a deep despair which prompts the composition of his last work, *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus.*

With this characterisation of Adrian we have at last reached a point from which to attempt an analysis of his music. As a composer he is not concerned with trying to express anything, i.e. any human feeling such as e.g. Beethoven did. Entirely dedicated to composition, he conceives this and is absorbed in it exclusively in technical terms, as puzzles to be solved by calculation, in the manner of a mathematician. But at the same time he perceives that art in our age has become too difficult. It is in consequence threatened with sterility. What then can an artist of our day do? The musical forms of the past are outworn, the life has departed from them. The only course open now to the artist, as it seems to Adrian, is to parody these. Thomas Mann, incidentally,

has repeatedly referred to his own work as parody. What Adrian is rebelling against in particular is nineteenth century romantic music, which for his ear had exhausted itself and become trite, sentimental. He talks with disdain about the "cowlike warmth" of such music. In this he is rejecting music which seeks to suggest human emotion. At bottom he is rebelling against an older mode which romantic music further developed, namely harmony or vertical as opposed to the still older polyphony or horizontal style. In preferring polyphony he is not thinking of the counterpoint of Bach and Händel, which he sees as already invaded by harmony, but of an earlier, purer and stricter form, the polyphonic writing of the Renaissance period. What has happened to the harmonic style is that it has become too free, its inherent freedom has in fact degenerated into subjectivity, which means arbitrariness, licence. The parallel to certain doctrines of the State which maintain that political freedom has degenerated into subjectivity is evident. To Adrian's mind any kind of order, even a foolish one, is preferable to disorder, and in this, too, we see an obvious parallel to a German political attitude. Strictness, discipline of form, then, is Adrian's remedy for the ills of music. It is a remedy which sends him back to early music of the kind mentioned. He resolves to compose "the strict movement", in which there would be no free note as made possible by the harmonic style, but in which everything would be part of the thematic material, in other words, the development of a few basic notes. Such a composition must perforce be very short, a song. Adrian writes in fact a song based on the notes—in German notation—H — E — A — E — ES (in our notation: B — E — A — E — E Flat). For a longer composition, however, more notes would be needed, and it is for this purpose that he resorts to the twelve-tone system, as I have indicated before, the Schönberg system. Transferring these principles to Mann's own literary style, but without pushing the analogy too closely, we find that despite the length of his novels he writes a closely woven style in which everything is strictly functional, nothing is free. In concrete terms this means that there is no free description of background, but that everything has direct significance in relation to the theme. In other words, the characters, incidents and details are symbolical and, as such, direct revelations of the theme. As with Adrian's music everything is calculated, constructed, but also, as with Adrian's music, nothing comes fully to life. Perhaps the marvel is that this method can create any semblance of life at all.

That Adrian, despite his absorption in technical problems, is not unaware of wider cultural implications that may be associated with his musical method is amply demonstrated in his conversations. He is prone, however, to misinterpretation. When he remarks to Zeitblom that the aim of his style is "to dissolve the magical essence of music into human reason", the latter objects that he is really doing the opposite, that his music has more to do with magic

and astrology than with reason dealing with real material. We have here a comment on Adrian's return to the past, to the archaic, to the primitive, which will later turn out to be the barbaric merely concealed by the strictness of form. The political parallel with Germany is once again patent; also the stricture on the numerous irrationalist views of life in twentieth century Germany which saw the root of the evils of modern civilization in the critical, rationalist intelligence and sought to revitalise man through contact with the elemental, thus pre-disposing many unworldly and unpolitical minds to accept the crude doctrines of National-Socialism. In Adrian's theorisings on the general cultural significance of music he gives much attention to Beethoven. In his works he sees the culmination of free music, of music as expression. Here, he says, "the fugue has emancipated itself from cult into culture". And something like this has been the line of development of art: from service to God or man to autonomy, to being a substitute for religion. It is, we are told, as if Beethoven, aware that music had gone too far in the direction of freedom, were endeavouring in his last works to lead it back to stricter forms.

Adrian returns to these stricter forms of the past. There is much talk of this during his encounter with the devil, who holds out to him the prospect of something better than mere parody as a fruit of this return. It is the elemental for which Adrian has always had a secret hankering, as an escape, it would seem, from the barrenness of society. The elemental turns out to be the barbarous, as the devil states quite plainly. "Not only", he says, "will you break through the paralysing difficulties of the age; the age itself, the epoque of culture, that is, the cult of this culture you will break through and make bold with barbarism, which is so in a twofold sense because it comes after the most radical treatment conceivable and after bourgeois refinement." Here again, the political parallel hardly requires comment. After this meeting with the devil Adrian's powers are intensified. He eventually composes his *Apocalypsis cum figuris,* the title of which shows what his music was now striving to say. Then we come to his final work, *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus,* written under the impact of his little nephew's death and just before his own loss of sanity. It is composed with the express aim of "taking back" Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, of "cancelling" it. This he explains as taking back "what people call the human, although it is good and noble". He will take back the "Hymn to Joy", which is the title of Schiller's poem that Beethoven uses for the choral part of this symphony. In doing this Adrian is cancelling a whole world of culture and civilization. He is cancelling, too, Goethe's *Faust* just as Mann does through the whole idea of his *Doctor Faustus.* Goethe's *Faust* is a picture of modern man as he emerges from the Middle Ages and devotes himself to an exploration of this earth, striving to find a meaningful existence which is without faith in any Beyond but, far

from resting satisfied with material welfare, clings to an ideal element in experience. In his restless striving to transcend the present moment he seems to have some affinities with the modern idea of progress. Goethe takes his hero through various phases, through e.g. the attempt of the Western world to absorb into itself the spirit of classical antiquity, a phase which no less than others has to be transcended, and shows him at the end in a contemporary, i.e. early nineteenth century setting performing practical tasks for the benefit of humanity. The work as a whole may be looked on as a hymn of praise to the spirit of man and by implication to the goodness of the universe, the essential positivity of life. But as the nineteenth century ran its course this spirit of free enterprise, this striving degenerated, Mann believed, into selfishness and all its attendant evils. Society has been poisoned by the worsening relations between men. The result is in Mann's view Fascism and catastrophic wars. His *Doctor Faustus* is a picture of the explosive end of this development, damnation and descent into hell. Adrian's lamentation is a denial of the positive spirit of life enshrined in Goethe's *Faust* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

Mann's meaning might, however, remain somewhat obscure if he did not indicate, at least in general terms, what the art of the future will be when the present crisis has been overcome. The character of this art he allows Adrian to glimpse under the growing stress of his loneliness. He does not see it — significantly enough — in technical, but in human, terms. It will be an art rooted in friendly relations with humanity, it will bridge the gulf between the learned and the popular but without becoming vulgar. In other words it will imply that the artist belongs to a community in a meaningful way, but it will be possible only when society has transformed itself and become healthy. Then it will cease to be esoteric, to create private worlds. Instead, in a positive spirit it will reflect social reality.

It does not require much reflection to perceive where social salvation lay for Thomas Mann. In a socialist order of society. Only socialism, he thought, could create the economic democracy with which political democracy must be combined if democracy is to have real meaning. No doubt the support given Hitler by German capitalists helped to turn him towards socialism. It is understandable, too, that communist critics, e.g. the eminent Hungarian communist critic, Georg Lukács,[10] hailed this work as an exposure of the evils of modern art and of Western society. Modern art had already been officially condemned in Moscow and socialist realism prescribed, a demand that in practice means the extolling of communist achievements. Dogma requires that everyone in a communist state, if he is a true communist, be happy, free from

[10] Georg Lukács. See *Thomas Mann,* 5th ed., Berlin (1957), in particular the chapter, *Die Tragödie der Modernen Kunst.*

neuroses, integrated into society, so that there can be no spiritual, emotional problems. Either man is integrated in this way and eager to go forward to further socialist achievements or he must be a wrecker. Literature in a controlled society can do little else than portray the one or the other. Thomas Mann's solution is certainly naive and springs from his single-mindedness in branding capitalism as the sole cause of the state of our culture and particularly of art today. After the prodigious amount of subtlety, sophistication and constructedness (if I may be allowed the term) in *Doctor Faustus* the simplicity of the solution leaves us feeling quite flat. Mann, it is true, does not refer in this work to socialism, but from his other writings we know unambiguously what he meant by being on good terms with humanity. The work implies, too, that the distinction between Nazi Germany and the West approaches vanishing point, so that the thesis of distinctively German characteristics can hardly be upheld. The confusion in Mann's position is further illustrated by the fact that Nazism no less than Communism was implacably opposed to modernism in the arts and demanded a literature that would show man rooted in a community, but a community which, unlike Communism, is based on the conservative forces of blood and soil. Russian artists, significantly enough, when they break free show modernist tendencies — evidence that the malaise and alienation of spiritual man has not been cured by socialism.

In searching for the cause of the malaise the artist feels in the presence of modern society, Mann ignores the increasing spiritual superficiality in the midst of material affluence brought about by industrial technology. And he gives no thought to the fact that this material progress, in which Communism sees a nostrum for all ills and which Nazism with an inherent contradiction was forced to affirm as the only guarantee of its power, is the child of the scientific and rational mind. This attitude of mind, in itself most valuable as it has enabled us to free ourselves of error, has at the same time indirectly bred an age of "facilities" (as Goethe foresaw), a press-button civilization in which we can use things we do not understand and have not made part of ourselves. It has also brought about a habit of remote control, an abstractness which has now invaded the totality of our relations with the world and which is no doubt responsible for the lack of sensuousness in art (so roundly condemned by Nazism and Communism alike). Rationalism and science have fostered an attitude of mind which on the one hand wants to unravel and to control the mysteries of life and of the universe and on the other to enjoy material benefits instead of feeling integrated into, bound to the world in love — the spiritual climate from which art formerly drew nourishment. This then is the crisis which many have seen without being able to find a convincing solution for it, the situation to which the modern artist has reacted. If Thomas Mann in his political obsession has reduced this deep-lying crisis to one between capitalism and socialism, he has nevertheless

vividly shown up in this novel the character of modern art, its leaning towards private worlds and symbols, and, flowing from this, its recondite allusiveness, its constructedness, its way, Narcissus-like, of taking itself as its subject-matter, all ultimately a reflection of the artist's alienation from life. And if we think of this novel in terms of Thomas Mann himself, we see in it, despite its wrong-headedness in many things, a moving testimony to his desire to submit himself to a rigorous self-examination. For in writing *Doctor Faustus* he has wittingly offered a trenchant criticism of his own art.