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Ramón J. Sender

## FAUSTIAN GERMANY AND THOMAS MANN



IN 1938 when the breezes of Europe were most propitious to the white and black flags of the Third Reich, a German writer exiled in Switzerland, Thomas Mann, continued in his review *Mass und Wurt* his admirable work. It was the epoch when Benedetto Croce tempered his old age in the resistance to Italian fascism, when André Gide foreseeing the catastrophe was preparing his literary quarters in North Africa, and when Miguel de Unamuno was dead in Spain. It was then, more than ten years ago, when the author of *Mario and the Magician* and of so many other subtle narratives came to America. With him came the myth of persecuted German liberalism. Liberalism means generosity. Thomas Mann, of conservative and conformist tradition, is liberal in the manner that the Renaissance humanists were liberals. Free from class and group interests, he saw the problems of our times *sub species eternitatis*, which is the only practical and realistic way of seeing them. That is why his testimony on the phenomena of German culture or barbarism is especially eloquent, and in this sense his last book, *Doctor Faustus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), assumes an enormous significance.

Those of us who have lived in Europe the first thirty-five years of this century harbor a certain feeling of culpability. Through commission or omission, the sins of each one assume in retrospect the value of determining acts in the catastrophe, and in a larger or lesser measure each feels himself responsible. Writers have perhaps an advantage over the rest; they can try to liberate

themselves through the written confession. When the time comes to confess, most of us do it in a direct and crude manner, without subterfuges, and above all without preoccupations of sumptuosity. Thomas Mann's case is different, however. The author of *The Magic Mountain*, out of reverence for culture and rhetoric, gives the impression of subordinating easily the needs of confession and confidence to preoccupations of prestige. The election of themes and myths and the formal concern with style dominate his "confessions" and impart to them the tone that in letters corresponds to what in painting is called "decorative." Is that a vice? Is that vice affectation? The German, granting that he has a rigid and stiff-collared attitude towards culture, cannot be said to be affected, because what in others may be affectation in the German character is natural. The *cult of Kultur* in Germany is part of the national pattern.

In the Spanish language we have a common term, *fausto*, *faust*, rarely used in English, which means *happy, lucky*. There is another word, *fasto*, that is to say *pomp*, and *external greatness*, though the word has no exact counterpart in English. Such word comes to mind by sympathy with the word that connotes the angular concept of German culture and which has its exact equivalent in English: *faustico*—*Faustian*—from *Faust*, the mediaeval hero of so many German and English authors, consecrated by Goethe and now resuscitated by Thomas Mann. Here is a myth treated with the concern for prestige. This type of literature is being left behind as a survival of times when the cultivation of "the prestigious" was easier because it had a foundation lacking today: a minimum of stability in the social conditions upon which culture rests. For writers like Mann this lack of stability must be especially dramatic. Such literature, aside from its interest per se, which can be a true one, fulfills a mission: it maintains and strengthens the respect of the *bourgeoisie* for literature. Whether or not that is an interesting fact when estimating true culture is a different problem.

It is customary for typical bourgeois men to distrust poetry, fiction, and in general all the arts of their times, in which they see imponderable dangers; though they regain their calm before a certain genre of books. I am sure that they consider themselves more enlightened with books like *Doctor Faustus* under their arms. Thomas Mann is contributing, then, to the formation or rather the consolidation of an atmosphere of respect for culture among the *bourgeoisie*.

In countries like Germany, however, the task of awakening this respect must be a difficult one. Not because the German *bourgeoisie* might be said to despise culture, but their natural attitude towards it is not really that of respect. It is an attitude of superstition. The danger of that superstitious attitude is that it does not suppose comprehension or identification, and that the occasional reactions of the superstitious man against the object of his superstition are wont to be heretical and blasphemous. In other countries where a natural respect for culture exists—France, for instance—the exceptions, when there are any, are usually only of indifference and atony. Whether in the history of civilization blasphemy is preferable to indifference is also a problem to be solved. A Faustian problem.

Who has not loved Germany and who does not love her still for one reason or another? I was there long before the Second World War. The Nazi sickness had not yet assumed epidemic proportions. In the country and in the cities I found an ingenious, sentimental, epicurean, and sensitive Germany, though the superstition of culture was present everywhere. For the moment superstition showed its idyllic side, but in any form of superstition—including this—there are dangers, and those dangers can develop and take on sinister proportions. I saw, or thought I saw, a vigorous and noble people, rich in imagination and will, though not rich in that capacity of comprehension which the Greeks and Latins identified with love. I also thought I saw in the Germans a lack of harmony between their emotional

life and their moral and mental life. This seemed to be no accident but, as the professors say, a "constant" in the Germanic character. They have evidently suffered from that weakness always and when it is most critical and threatening they try to conjure it away with aprioristic schemes. In the political field Nazism has been the most recent. One could say, nevertheless, that their fondness for such schemes keeps them from having a philosophy; that the superstition of culture keeps them from having a culture; and that the passion for the humanities—in no country is so much Latin and Greek studied as in Germany—keeps them from being simply and deeply human. Just as the delirium of aggression and conquest has kept them from having an empire throughout history.

They know this very well. Perhaps from the knowledge of that weakness is derived in part the feeling of inferiority attributed to them, and which seems to me justified. There is nothing easier to verify in a trip through Germany, either now or in normal conditions. And here is the latest proof. Germany fears criticism and endures it with difficulty. France, co-participant of the victory, is invading the world with sombre books in which she presents her own people in an awkward light, without hesitating at mockery or sarcasm. Georges Bernanos in his last years wrote terrible pages about the "debasement" of France. And nevertheless the conduct of France is easily defensible. Victorious England is losing her empire, and English authors are not wanting who in the midst of crisis devote themselves unblushingly to the pathetic confession of guilt. The American hero, whose glory no one disputes, occasionally writes bitter books filled with arguments against any form of Americanistic sentiment. On the other hand the Germans, guilty of everything, have not had a single voice recognizing that fact, or at least I have not heard it. There is not a German writer of importance who sheds any light on Germany's wretched state. At best, they decide to present the German case as a problem of high specula-

tion through the attenuating filters of *Kultur*. After reading *Doctor Faustus* some reader will say to himself: "How dramatic and moving the problem of a people who, unable to impose a new order on the cosmos, pushes it towards chaos, unafraid of also being imprisoned in the ruins." Yet the curious thing is that they themselves have never known in what their "new order" consists, because of their inability to discern between dogma and notion, superstition and conviction, and because of their incorrect attitude towards civilization. It is strange how an error of conception, an initial error of attitude, can break up the best constructed systems and lead them to ruin.

If we could fall for easy syntheses we would say that the Germans are the great sophists of blood. The dose of contradiction in their attitude is astonishing, and to a great degree it can be seen in Thomas Mann's book, which is more interesting as the confession of a distinguished Germanic mentality than as a novel, since the values of an emotional world projected or objectified do not exist there, or are secondary. Thomas Mann presents his Germany to us through two types: a musician and a humanistic philologist (the two "neutral" types who represent the most prestigious branches of knowledge in which Germany has distinguished herself). Here then is a summons favorable to "Germanism" and essentially reassuring for the Germans. The problem embodied in Adrian Leverkühn, the musician, is that of purity allied to genius and persecuted by fatality. All of this propitiated by a mysterious development with two culminating scenes, one near the middle of the book with the apparition of the devil, and the other towards the end with Adrian's madness, a transcendent and metaphysical madness. As for Leverkühn's biographer, Professor Zeitblom, he is a man who is fond of saying that philosophy is the queen of sciences and theology the queen of philosophy, but his theology infallibly tends toward demonology. With the devil appears the Germanic Faustus on whose back Thomas Mann hangs the vices, wretch-

edness, and shames of the German *bourgeoisie*. But that denouement does not convince and reminds us of the conventional happy endings of Hollywood. The two heroes, the musician and the professor, have in reality a very similar superstitious attitude towards culture, and they try to produce in the reader a confused state of mind to substitute or at least to compensate for reasoning and judgment, when reasoning and judgment are unfavorable to their designs. That intoxication—if one may speak thus—we find in the head of all Germans when they assume the attitude of cultivated human beings. The attitude of the German towards culture—and pardon this vulgar comparison—is that of the gypsy who wanted to learn to play the guitar and could not because, as he said, the “desire to learn went up to his head.”

The Faustian is confusion, a confusion that is not an impediment when creating lyric poetry. To seek it however as an argument with which to defend—even timidly—Germany's recent crimes is very risky. Faust is subsequent to Greek clarity and prior to the Renaissance. The *bourgeoisie* (the concept of bourgeois, as well as the word which expresses it, originated in Germany) of the old Hanseatic cities now abhors the world of reason, understanding, and tolerance of the Renaissance. It tries to find refuge in mediaeval demonology. Perhaps this movement has no other value than that of a snobbish tic. Adrian Leverkühn was educated like a young prince in a city called Kaiseraschen and he is full of those tics. He hates the expressions “art,” “artistic,” “inspiration,” “beauty.” Especially “beauty,” but when he describes his music, the music of which he dreams, it is difficult to follow him in his exaltation of a coloristic and vulgarly expressionistic romanticism. That is “artistic” in the worst sense. Another tic may be found in the cult for Albrecht Dürer, of whom a nationalist leader—with that also recognizable virtuosity so much in fashion in the European interval between the two wars—says that he establishes a kind of “knighthood between Death and Devil.” Adrian believes that music is a wedding of theology

and mathematics. As for religion, he worships the church in itself—the dogmatic and ritualistic ecclesiastical system—and distrusts inspiration, mysticism, which he regards as utter madness. All these attitudes were found generalized among the German and Austrian “artistic” groups who were devoured and digested by Nazism and who disappeared without leaving a trace—no other trace than the blood of their victims; or, in a few of the best cases, a secretly accusing passivity. At the end of all this a teleological and fatalistic attitude is to be expected. To put there the devil instead of God is only to try to apologize for the pig in the garden of Epicurus—a Greek pig without theology or theodicy.

The musician Adrian Leverkühn abandons himself joyfully to mediaeval suggestions in spite of his specious Lutheranism. His father is a rich farmer fascinated by the mysteries of cosmic life. The superstition of learning leads both of them to the threshold of poetry where they remain, without entering. They lack that communicative quality given only by love—intellectual *amor*. The father collects sea shells on which he sometimes reads prophecies or other magical messages, and is further obsessed by the mysterious nature of sound. He puts fine sand on a glass disc and observes the geometric figures formed by the vibration of the disc affected by a sound wave. The Goethian preoccupation with clarity in discovery becomes demoniacal superstition in the world of Adrian. To make the atmosphere more suggestive of mediaevalism, the musician becomes a recluse in a Bavarian farmhouse that had been a monastery, in whose refectory he has his metaphysical-acoustical orgies. Finally, the devil appears to Adrian, while he is in Italy reading an essay by Kierkegaard on Mozart's *Don Juan*. (Kierkegaard, Mozart, *Don Juan*—exalted myths.) Of course the devil is a German nationalist, and confesses it with a certain pride: “I am German. German to the core.” In this declaration, the terms of which we might be permitted to invert, I hear the good German bourgeois



saying, self-satisfied: "I am diabolical. Diabolical to the core." Maybe he succeeds in maintaining his pride, feeding it with a confusion of "cosmic symphonies," theology, gas chambers, crematories, and urban ruins under which he afterward makes his people perish in ignominy. But none of that helps us to understand. And what we would all like is for them to explain to us and to convince us, if that is possible—since the German case continues to be an enigma whose shadows vilify us all to some extent. Its rationalization on any plane would help restore our calm. The "poetical solution" that the author sometimes seems to be looking for, despairing perhaps of finding another, does not crystallize either, as we said before, and there lingers the sensation of malaise that accompanies idle effort.

The mystery is not where Thomas Mann seeks it. Neither blood, nor ruins, nor the devil, nor the nacre shells with cabalistic messages, nor the glass disc covered with sand, nor Leverkühn's madness are needed to propitiate true mystery. All the mystery of creation is found whole in the newborn child. So was it seen by those two Germans whom we love, Goethe and Schiller. Some will say that Goethe and Schiller are not genuine Germans. It is true that they did not dream of imposing "Germanic order" on the world, but until today German universality is represented by them. They are two of the few Germans who have conquered something worthwhile and lasting outside Germany.

In a newborn child all mystery is to be found. In a being brought—condemned, if one prefers—to the temporality of living, and saved at last from that temporality. Condemned and saved naturally—since Leverkühn speaks of theology—and natural salvation is the very essence of divinity. But divinity is not the antithesis of the devil, rather the impartial arbitrator without shadows or antithesis, of eternal struggle against nothingness in which we all participate willingly or unwillingly. One of the elements of that nothingness is silence—absolute silence

—the basis of all music, in the notion of which poor Adrian Leverkühn could have easily saved himself, and with no mystery. It would have been better for us as readers, and perhaps for German prestige, to see a Germany which can and must save itself, and see also the other Germany buried forever in the very chaos it unleashed. The perspective of the salvation of Germany would thus have been the same one the rest of us see in ourselves as the aftermath of our sins. Without any fatalism. And at bottom there would have been an attitude, or a possibility at least of some kind of solidary attitude.

But the sweet German *bourgeoisie* rejects the heritage of the Renaissance wherefrom such an attitude could come to them. It is a pity, for with it they would better understand that the *homo Dei* is not the flower of evil, as Adrian says, but an animal that can propitiate good and evil at will. Why do the cultured German people—essentially bourgeois and of the Renaissance—go back to mediaevalism? There must be some original error in it all. That error, perhaps, lies in the fact that the only German revolution, Lutheranism, came “too soon,” before the era of dark superstitions had been outgrown, when the white horses of their gods were still neighing in the forest of Silesia. Hence the superstitious attitude held by the German today when he deals with religion, with art, with law; that is, with culture and the state. For the Germans culture is an abstraction far away and high above them, which they venerate in their own way. The state and their dreamed superstructure, the empire, is also for them a similar abstraction. Just as a Frenchman knows that culture is he himself and that it lives in his manner of expressing an opinion or greeting a neighbor, and the Englishman knows that the empire resides in the ability and responsibility with which he carries on his big or little business, the German believes that the concepts of culture and empire are two other mysterious and distant deities that must be served with discipline and heroism, that is, militarily and bloodily. This men-

tality reveals an intrinsic incapacity for civilization—for social life in the modern city, which is at the same time the origin and the product of modern culture.

Tacitus says that German women love marriage more than their own husbands. He also says that the Germans fight for victory heedless of gain and that they are so sensitive to prestige that the fame, superiority, and grandeur of a neighboring prince can provoke war without any other concrete stimuli—not even the hope of loot. It is the same attitude they have today regarding myths: the myths of grandeur, of authority, and of glory. The objective of the German nationalists in the last two wars was to impose a “Germanic era” on the world, a “Germanic century,” as Professor Zeitblom says. But to create a Germanic era—which no one would oppose if it were justified in itself as no one opposed the Latin, the Spanish, the French or the English—it is more necessary to develop a sympathetic understanding of the world than a war machine. For understanding, love and creation are inseparable. There are in our history great examples of cultural eras founded without arms (the Christian era), but neither eras nor empires have been founded and consolidated without a moral structure. A moral structure that reflects humanity better than it was before, a structure which offers us the clear perspective of a goal closer to what culture recognizes as ideal reality—a stage nearer those values consecrated as supreme by innate human notions, especially the absolute notion of good.

The Germans of Tacitus were the only people in Europe who did not reckon their time by days but by nights, which seems symptomatic. And it is also significant that they held as shameful and deserving of scorn the obtaining by sweat and peaceful work what could be obtained by danger and the spilling of blood. Blood and night, two myths of “Germanic culture” still present. Why must they be diabolically fatal as Thomas Mann seems to pretend in his *Doctor Faustus*?

It is certainly true that the crimes of Thomas Mann's heroes

are not easily definable. They are "the crime of culture." But, what culture? The musician as well as the professor—and even the satanic violinist assassinated by his former lover—are types not incorporated into culture, types capable of excusing and understanding Rotterdam, Dachau and Guernica, and so many other barbaric deeds. They are superstitious and blasphemous beings, although they would protest if they heard themselves so called. They have around them a world of dogmas but they lack faith when they see those dogmas splitting and crashing by peripetias of history. They constantly speak of time and of eternity, forgetting that every moment of our existence we are faced with the necessity of choosing one or the other, and that this choice depends on us, on our simple and inalienable will. All the problems of our physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and spiritual life hinge on the interdependence of those two realities. The devil works in the temporal, his dominion, and in that sense Professor Zeitblom is more diabolical than the "bedevilled musician." When the musician says that the *homo Dei* is the *fleur du mal*, he refers to that *homo Dei* perceptible in time, whose only reality is the temporal, and he is right. But God—the metaphysical proprietor of man—is the very essence of the salvation of that flower of the relative which laboriously, but joyfully, tries to incorporate itself in absolute reality, in the perception and knowledge of which the last and highest aspiration of culture doubtless rests. We all know that in Germany there are professors and musicians and workers and peasants who sense this truth. And Stefan George and Alfred Mombert, the persecuted poets who died in exile, knew it better than we. And so did Ernest Wiechert, the admirable chronicler of the *Totenwald*.

Professor Zeitblom says that Germanism is implicit satanism, but Germanism is no more satanic than aggressive Britainism, Hispanism or Americanism. The Germans can never come to realize that when they attack their neighbors in order to impose

the "German century" on the world (the ten thousand Germanic years, as that poor devil Hitler used to say), the rest of the world resists them and counterattacks, but not in the name of the "American century" or the French or the English. The world resists and counterattacks for the sake of a peace which will allow the preservation of a spirit necessary to maintain a minimum of that sympathetic understanding through which lies the only approach to the absolute notion of good wherein God is found. Adrian or Professor Zeitblom would say "Germanically" that that is pharisaical idealism. But speaking thus they would reveal first that they are still trapped in the cage of words that symbolizes the Charlottenburg cafés (that is, Stalinism, Hitlerism, and a little bit of Machiavellianism in pocket editions)—a dead end that leaves them incapable of finding the mystery in the constant presence of the newborn child. Naturally in that mystery the desperate need of Faustian and demoniacal evasion cannot be satisfied. Perhaps Leverkühn and his biographer need to go on reckoning time by nights, the future by the rings in the trees of the sacred forest, and the value of achievement by blood instead of by intelligent effort and sweat. But all of this can bring only a pseudo-prestige, a despair and a delirium of *mismedad* (self-centrism). Such an attitude does not merit being considered except as a morbid accident of civilization. We are not proud of our civilization—as Professor Zeitblom is proud of the German "robot" who destroys London—but we prefer to use it as best we can in those intervals of our lives when it is possible for us to perceive from time to time something of the miracle of absolute reality. Because we also believe in miracles neither more nor less—perhaps more—than Adrian and Zeitblom, we expect enough light to avoid the apparition of the devil or, if he does appear, to see him as an intellectual reagent subordinated to our need of action and creation.

In *Doctor Faustus* there is talk of the sacred German soil, of the sacred heritage, and of many other sacred things, but the

only thing sacred in Germany, in Australia, in England, and Ethiopia is man. Respecting other men we respect ourselves, and destroying them we destroy ourselves. The recognition of Germanic barbarism and of Germany's retrogression to the dark ages would be more convincing if Professor Zeitblom did not express it with the accent of an immense resentment. He mixes in that hatred—in that sadness at the happiness of others—the most eloquent religious texts: Ezekiel, Jeremiah, St. Paul. He exalts the Middle Ages even though he knows that the return to that age will solve no problem, and he loves it only because in it—as he says—man could better exercise his imagination. (In demonology? In magic? In the delicious and rich theodicy?) Adrian declares to his friends that he has “wedded Satan”—a Faustian madness—and Professor Zeitblom says that he has dreamed of a “Ninth Symphony” by Adrian Leverkühn to celebrate a liberated Germany, but Leverkühn insists that the Germans will only have the *Lamentation of Doctor Faustus*—a work of the bedevilled musician, the “lamentation of the Son of Hell.” A *De Profundis* in which Faust rejects salvation, not only out of loyalty to the diabolic pact and because it is too late for him to back down, but also because he scorns the positivism of the world—a reaction of the superstitious man of culture. The last note of the *Lamentation* abides alone and high on the violoncello “as a light in the night.”

It is interesting to note that Professor Zeitblom says he could believe in Russia where man presents the same emotional, moral, and mental confusion and the same imperialistic delirium. For Zeitblom, enamored of the Middle Ages, Russia has the sad advantage of mediaeval misery, slavery, and ignorance. If we substitute for the cathedrals “eternally in construction” the factories eternally in the process of organization around which a humanity also suffering and without hope moves, the spectacle offers the same desolation. And yet in the Middle Ages there were forms of individual liberty impossible to find in Russia,

which gave birth to a Maimonides, a Raymond Lully or an Arcipreste de Hita. For Professor Zeitblom to incline toward Russia is to keep being faithful to the Faustian confusion and to the dark sophism of blood. The Russians of today, like the Germans, sacrifice their victims by the thousands on the abstract altar of a "form of culture" above men, and of an "imperial state" above culture.

Throughout that entire Faustian world the only thing left—with or without demonology, and theology, and music—is a concrete residuum of historical resentment. God grant that "world order" may keep the Germans from again staging the same resentment, and oblige them to withdraw unto themselves and to think about the true miracle that resumes all miracles, that of the interdependence of the temporal and the eternal, envisioned with a creative intellectual attitude. The best thing that could be done with the German people, if they are as presented by Thomas Mann, would be to compel them to remain enclosed in their narrow spaces for three or four generations, without any other possibility than contemplating themselves in the mirror of their actions until they succeed in tolerating themselves, in devouring themselves, in digesting themselves, and in reconciling themselves with themselves. This is indispensable if they are to find afterward some form of identification with the rest of the world. Watching over them, if necessary, so as to save them every time they wish to pact with the devil or the pig, who are wont to go together, as we see in *Doctor Faustus*.

By this time the reader will have realized that *Doctor Faustus* is not the book the Germans need at this moment to try to survive, or the one we need to try to understand. It is true that, as we all know, surviving and understanding are becoming more and more difficult. It is only with a natural disposition towards love—a disposition without extreme benignity or Pharisaism, capable of sacrifice and even of bloody miracles—that we can attempt to survive and understand.