Formative Fictions

Boes, Tobias

Published by Cornell University Press

Boes, Tobias.
Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24205

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=858266

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
On July 2, 1947, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung published a short essay celebrating the seventieth birthday of the novelist Hermann Hesse, written by his friend and colleague Thomas Mann. Mann spends most of his time discussing Hesse’s novel The Glass Bead Game, which had appeared in 1943 and to which Mann refers not only as a “work of old age” (Alterswerk), but also as a “late work of dangerously advanced spiritualization.” Such descriptions might appear cruelly inappropriate given the occasion, but it is important to remember that Mann ultimately always meant himself when he was talking about other writers. Indeed, seventieth birthdays formed a neuralgic point of sorts for the German author, who had once predicted that he himself would die at that age—and who almost seemed disappointed when the event came and went in 1945 without any attending fatal accident. It thus should have surprised no one when Mann, only a few months after his laudatory article, published his own “work of old age”: a “glass bead game played with black pearls,” as he inscribed his presentation copy to Hesse. The novel in question, of course, was Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn as Told by a Friend.

If Mann’s use of the epithet Alterswerk can be justified by pointing to the mature age that both Hesse and his reviewer had reached at this point in their lives, his

reference to a “dangerously advanced spiritualization,” operative not only in *The Glass Bead Game*, but also, one infers, in *Doctor Faustus*, seems to set up entirely different terms. Something larger is at stake here, something having to do with the spirit of the times, from which both of the modernist masters draw and which they, in turn, shape through their works. Thomas Mann’s exegetes were quick to pick up on this dimension. One of the earliest responses to his novel, Erich Kahler’s “The Secularization of the Devil” (1948), already refers to the “final chapter of a terminal oeuvre” and praises Mann for having brought the “representative symbol, not only of German but of Western culture, up to date.”

2. Georg Lukács and Hans Mayer, writing from the Marxist tradition, speak of an “epilogue to the whole [bourgeois] development after 1848” and of a book “that dissolve[s] the form of the bourgeois novel.”

These latter two formulations express a view of the modernist novel that already informed Walter Benjamin’s critique of Döblin, and that regards the increasingly digressive works of that period as a natural antithesis to the novels built around strong characters that were produced in the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* in particular. On this view, a view that continues to inform standard genre surveys, the novels of Mann and Hesse form the logical endpoint of the *Bildungsroman* tradition as a whole. And yet one need not turn to grand arguments about the rise and fall of bourgeois culture to understand that there is a more immediate occasion for the artistic endgame presented in *Doctor Faustus*: 1945, the year of Mann’s seventieth birthday, may have come and gone without his death, but it *did* see the demise of the Third Reich, an event that the author actively hastened through his work as a political essayist and broadcaster for the BBC, even as he looked into the future with skepticism and anxiety. *Doctor Faustus* again and again announces itself as a work that deliberates on the consequences of an absolute annihilation—not only materially, but also culturally — and inquires into the role that literary narration might play in circumventing this crisis. Serenus Zeitblom, wondering whether any of his manuscript pages will survive the aerial bombardment of the Allies, is a transparent cipher for Thomas Mann, not at all convinced that future generations will still turn to his stories, just as Zeitblom’s resolve to tell Leverkühn’s story despite the fact that nobody performs his compositions mirrors Mann’s unwavering fealty to German culture even in the face of its perversion through Hitler.

The basic dilemma that informed Mann’s thinking during this period—the realization that *everything* that presently existed in Germany would have to come

---


Conclusion

did so from exile and in full awareness of the fact that the Germany that Goethe helped build was lying in ruins.

A similar constellation of ideas, combined with an even more explicit appeal to Goethe and his legacy, can be found in yet a third book that an aging member of Germany’s intellectual elite concluded shortly after the end of the Second World War. Friedrich Meinecke’s *The German Catastrophe* (1946) was one of the first, and for many years the most widely read, analyses of Hitler’s rise to power, and it was written by arguably the last great practitioner of German historicist thought. Unlike the novels of Mann and Hesse, however, Meinecke’s treatise has not withstood the test of time, and today the explanations and justifications it offers ring hollow, as does its famous concluding call for the creation of nationwide “Goethe Communities” under whose guidance the Germans might be lead to once again embrace their humanist past. It is precisely these failures that can help a contemporary reader understand the difficult situation in which historicist thinking found itself during the mid-1940s, and thus also lead to a better understanding of the *Bildungsroman* at its frequently declared endpoint.

### The Crisis of Historicism and the German Catastrophe

The origins of the so-called crisis of historicism (to use a phrase coined by Ernst Troeltsch in 1922) reach back a quarter century before the publication of *The German Catastrophe* to the years immediately subsequent to another world war. Both Meinecke and Mann were participants in this earlier intellectual debate, Meinecke through his book on Machiavellianism, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (1924), and Mann through his lecture “On the German Republic” (1922). Both of these works set out to defend German intellectual life against charges of what Mann succinctly called an “inwardness protected by power” (*machtgeschützte Innerlichkeit*) that had supposedly been brought on in part by an excessive fealty to the historicist tradition.

One of the central tenets of historicism is that human beings who share a culture, language, or even just geographic location will frequently undergo the same formative process and thus find themselves on a communal journey through historical time. This formative process is best described with organic rather than mechanical metaphors, because its shape derives not from universal laws or first principles, but rather from variable local conditions. The twentieth-century “crisis of historicism” is, at its heart, the product of an increasing unease with the consequences of such an organic approach. If history does indeed manifest itself in a

---

5. This second point is the source of frequent confusion in English, where for many years the most influential text on the subject was Karl Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), which is actually an attack on Hegel’s attempts to elucidate a universal law behind the formative drive that was postulated by eighteenth-century historicism.
large variety of locally grown forms, influenced by a number of factors that would be impossible to replicate in different settings, then what is to stop historical contemplation from sliding into mere relativism? How, in other words, are historians supposed to derive prescriptive insights from an endless temporal flux? These questions proved extremely vexatious to a generation of scholars caught between a lingering philosophical idealism on the one hand, and the pressures of the nascent social sciences on the other. Men such as Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke sought to allay their unease with variations of what, in my discussion of Herder, I called the “panentheistic” approach to history—the belief, in other words, that while history is apperceptible only in the manifest form of various entelechies, various Bildungen, it nevertheless has an underlying universal character. Friedrich Meinecke, for instance, defined the “principle of historicism” as the recognition that “[historical constructs] are not merely recurring types subject to general laws, but also possess an individual and totally unique character, much like every person conforms to the general category of the ‘human being’ yet at the same time differs from all other people and is therefore an incomparable individual.”

As Georg Iggers points out, the 1920s marked a decisive break with this sort of panentheistic thinking: “The concept of Geschichtlichkeit (historicity), which began to dominate German philosophic discussion after the appearance of Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time, marked the negation of classical historicism. As a doctrine, Geschichtlichkeit assumes—as did historicism—that man has no nature, only a history. But it rejects the idea that history has objective existence of its own; rather it sees history as an inseparable aspect of man.” Central to the post–World War I debates about historicism, however, was a more practical concern sparked by the specter of relativism: if the conduct of states was to be evaluated not by their adherence to general laws, but rather by their conformity to national entelechies, then all too often history and philosophy became merely the handmaidens of established powers. If the German Empire, for instance, was more autocratic than most

---

6. Friedrich Meinecke, “Klassizismus, Romantizismus und historisches Denken，“ in Werke, ed. Hans Herzfeld, Carl Hinrich, and Walther Hofer, vol. 4, Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler Verlag, 1959), 265. In his study From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking, Carlo Antoni similarly explains how Ernst Troeltsch, influenced by his academic training as a theologian, “concluded, therefore, that in the apparent anarchy [of history] one could discover the ‘profound divinity’ of the human spirit, could discover that faith in God was essentially identical in all its forms, and could find that this faith progressed, i.e. gained in energy and purity, in the degree to which man became disengaged from his original bonds of nature (Naturgebundenheit).” Antoni hastens to add: “In so arguing, however, he did not mean to imply an agreement with the Hegelian concept of becoming. On the contrary, like Ranke, he wished to allow all of the historical formations to retain their individuality and peculiar value: succession ought not ‘mediate’ the individual, nor was it to be considered as a continuous and inevitable growth. Nor did the hierarchy of ‘formations’ coincide completely with mere chronological succession.” Carlo Antoni, From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking, trans. Hayden V. White (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 52.

other Western powers, then surely this circumstance could be explained by the fact that the German national character differed from that of England or France. To call for democratic reforms following the example of these other countries would therefore constitute a logical fallacy. Germany would have to follow its own path into the future.

In his early writings, Meinecke effectively arrived at a kind of feedback loop between spirit and power, the intelligentsia and the governing classes, in which the former propped up the latter for as long as power would, in turn, create and protect an environment in which culture might flourish. Mann articulated a very similar position in his *Confessions of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918). Following the cataclysmic defeat in the war, which revealed to all who were willing to pay attention the utter incompetence of the Wilhelmine establishment, such a position was no longer tenable; Meinecke’s book on Machiavellianism thus was an attempt to resolve a newly discovered tension between spirit and power through the conceptual category of the “reason of state.” Mann similarly groped for a new and more critical relationship between intellectuals and the state in his lecture “On the German Republic,” which attracted an audience of restless conservatives but proved to be a robust defense of the young Weimar Republic.

On the level of historical methodology, the most immediate response to the trauma of the war was Oswald Spengler’s monumental expression of cultural pessimism, *The Decline of the West* (1918). Spengler’s main thesis was that world history consists of the successive rise and fall of different cultures that each possess a distinctive morphology; as the title of his work already implies, the early twentieth century coincides with the decline of Western civilization. Spengler’s work illustrates yet another aspect of the intellectual crisis under discussion here, namely historicism’s reluctance to think across cultural boundaries—its inability, in other words, to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective. Troeltsch, for instance, much like Spengler, divided the civilizations of the world into a number of different “cultural circles” (*Kulturkreise*). Each of these circles possesses what Troeltsch called an “individual totality,” a spiritual reality that is uniquely and totally its own and could never be completely apprehended by somebody not born into it. There is an obvious paradox in the idea of a scholar who argues so vigorously that our upbringing imposes strict epistemic limitations and yet feels so confident in drawing up boundaries between foreign cultures, and as Carlo Antoni comments, “[Troeltsch] differs from Spengler and Keyserling, who penetrated into similar alien cycles, only in the consciousness of his incompetence, his prudence, or (if one wishes) his modesty. In reality, Troeltsch’s history of Europeanism is only a revision of that chapter in *The Decline of the West* which deals with our own civilization.”

In the context of the 1920s, however, methodological concerns coexisted with practical ones, and the more progressive among the Weimar intellectuals came

---

to the abrupt realization that the thesis that Germans would never be truly able to understand the French or the British—and would, in turn, not be understood by them—presented an obstacle preventing full integration into the new political order of Europe. In order to lead their country back into the house of civilized nations, Germans would need to not only talk to their neighbors, but also prove themselves willing to learn from them. The disjunctive “and” in the title of Meinecke’s early *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (1908) would have to be turned into a conjunctive one. Thomas Mann’s awkward speculations in his lecture “On the German Republic” regarding the elective affinities between Novalis and Walt Whitman, principal examples of what he four years earlier had still described in Manichaean terms as “German culture” and “Western civilization,” illustrate his newfound interest in cosmopolitan thinking.

This is the background one has to keep in mind when evaluating *The German Catastrophe* and its relevance for Mann’s own reengagement with historicism in *Doctor Faustus*. In many ways, the same issues that vexed the intellectual discourse of the Weimar years find a quickened expression in Meinecke’s attempt to account for Hitler. It is instructive here to compare Meinecke’s position to that of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who produced their own, now much better-known, theory of fascism almost concurrently (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* appeared in 1947). Horkheimer and Adorno, of course, were Marxists and thus naturally approached the totalitarian terror of the Nazis as the heightened expression of a tendency they proclaimed to be latent in capitalist modernity as a whole: that of driving the division between subject and object to such an extreme that enlightenment dialectically reverts into myth. They were also Jewish and had thus experienced at first hand the Nazi ploy to whip up a nationalist frenzy through the deliberate exclusion of an “enemy within” and the division of the German people into “Aryan” and “Semitic” races. Meinecke, by contrast, clung to the historicist belief that events as profoundly transformative as the rise of the Third Reich had to be an expression of an individual national entelechy. He also, though an unwavering opponent of the Nazis who retired from public life and moved into inner emigration after the Reichstag burned down, never relinquished his identification with the German people, to whom he always refers in the first person plural throughout his book.

The introductory paragraph of Meinecke’s study encapsulates his conflicted position:

> Will one ever fully understand the monstrous experience which fell to our lot in the twelve years of the Third Reich? We have lived through them, but up to now we—every one of us without exception—have understood them only incompletely. This or that side of our fate, to be sure, has stood before our eyes, often in glaring light, apparently free from any uncertainty. But who is able to explain completely how it all fits together and how it was interwoven with deeper causes; how the boundless illusion
to which so many succumbed in the first years of the Third Reich necessarily changed into the boundless disillusionment and collapse of the final years? German history is rich in difficult riddles and unfortunate turns. But for our comprehension the riddle that confronts us today and the catastrophe through which we are now living surpass all previous occurrences of similar kind.  

Any number of questions could be asked in response to this argument. To whom does the pronoun “one” (man) in the first sentence refer, and what is its relationship to the “we” that is used throughout the rest of the paragraph? Why does Meinecke not mention the millions of casualties that the twelve years of the Reich caused in Germany, or the many millions more who fell victim to its wars of aggression and to the Holocaust? Was Nazism truly “fated,” and, if it was, how does this fate relate to the “deeper causes” that Meinecke also mentions? Did “boundless illusion” really “necessarily” change into “boundless disillusionment” during the final years (or even months, or days) of the war? And to what “previous occurrences of similar kind” might this supposedly unique historical event be compared?

Meinecke’s struggle (a struggle that was also Thomas Mann’s) clearly lies in the attempt to reconcile his anti-Nazism with his German patriotism, all the while staying true to the historicist doctrine, which holds that historical events have an individual basis in the cultural bedrock from which they sprung, and that they cannot be explained away as the product of abstract processes like “modernity” or “capitalist rationalization.” His solution is problematic, to say the least. “[The] question of the German catastrophe broadens at the same time to a question which extends beyond Germany to the destiny of the West [abendländisches Schicksal] in general,” Meinecke argues. He continues: “Hitler’s National Socialism, which brought us directly to this abyss, is not a phenomenon deriving from merely German evolutionary forces, but has also certain analogies and precedents in the authoritarian systems of neighboring countries” (1). The key word in these sentences is “merely,” for Meinecke avoids the devastating conclusion that Nazism might indeed be the logical outcome of centuries of “German evolutionary forces” by instead attributing it to the interplay of what his chapter title already calls the “two waves of the age.” These two “waves,” we learn, are socialism and nationalism; the first is egalitarian, universal, and aims for a “millennial kingdom of human happiness” (tausendjähriges Reich neuen Menschenglück); the second is exclusive, local, and aims not for “a fundamental social revolution but the increase of the political power of the nation” (3). Both waves, however, are characteristic of the epigenesis of the West; unlike his colleagues in the Frankfurt school, Meinecke isn’t trying to work out a theory of modernity as a whole, but chronicling the fate of only one cultural circle.

---

Nazism can now be explained as a phenomenon that results from the particular way in which these two waves interacted in the German context. In Germany, Meinecke claims, the nationalist movement had seized a hold fifty years before the socialist one and had brought with it a new materialism and an obsession with power that stood in stark contrast to the idealism of Goethe’s generation. This “new realism,” which expressed itself most forcefully in Prussian militarism, found powerful amplification in the machine age and “put an end to the way of living aimed solely at the advancement and enrichment of one’s own individuality. It directed attention more to corporate living in masses, to the structure of society and to the nation as a whole” (9). As the nineteenth century progressed, the national movement thus focused less and less on the “nation” as a grouping of like-minded individuals, and more and more on the “mass” as a faceless, anonymous entity. Socialism, meanwhile, which originally took the proletarian mass as its basic subject of analysis, had moved more and more in the opposite direction, until it had come to focus on the nation in the works of the national-social (not to be confused with “national-socialist”) politician Friedrich Naumann in the 1890s. It is the interaction of these two larger tendencies—the renunciation of subjective idealism for base realism and power politics on the one hand, and the inability to formulate political utopianism in terms outside of the nation on the other—that according to Meinecke led to an eventual catastrophe during the Weimar years.

[We stood in 1914] at the main turning-point in the evolution of the German people. The man of Goethe’s day was a man of free individuality. He was at the same time a “humane” man, who recognized his duty toward the community to be “noble, helpful, and good” and carried out his duty accordingly. He lived and developed at first in the synthesis of classical liberalism and then of the national socialism of the Naumann stamp. He became ever more strongly bound with the social needs of the masses and with the political requirements of the state; that is, he became ever more tightly and concretely united with the community of people and state that enveloped him. (26)

Although Meinecke acknowledges the unique nature of the Third Reich, his insistence on telling the story of its rise as an interplay of larger forces lends his story a strangely abstract quality. “Socialism” and “nationalism,” in this account, are towering forces that stand both above and beyond German history, which merely provides the grounds for their local manifestations; the responsibility for the rise of Nazism thus somehow surpasses the country. It is surely no coincidence that Meinecke attributes to socialism the desire for a “millennial kingdom of human happiness” and thus subtly connects it to one of the best-known Nazi epithets for their

state. This abstract take on German guilt is also responsible for the passages of Meinecke’s text that are most liable to make the contemporary reader uncomfortable, namely his consistent treatment of Hitler as something external and foreign. The Germans, as Meinecke states quite clearly, weren’t responsible for creating the totalitarian ideology of Nazism, but only for foolishly succumbing to its virulent influence: “The German people were not fundamentally diseased with criminal sentiments but were only suffering for a while with a severe infection from poison administered to it” (95). This approach, in turn, allows Meinecke to maintain a pronounced victim’s mentality; his book focuses myopically on the destruction that the Third Reich brought on Germany without so much as commenting on either its wars or the Holocaust. Meinecke also ignores the simple fact that in Nazism, German citizens were exploited and killed because of their race, creed, political beliefs, or sexual orientation, perhaps because it casts serious doubts on his narrative of German history as a unified national entity.

This regrettable stance also colors the final prescriptive passages of The German Catastrophe, which today remain the best-known sections of the book. Meinecke wrote his book at a time when “re-education” and “de-Nazification” were the watchwords of Allied policy, and in 1948 accepted the call to become founding rector of the Free University of Berlin, which had been built in the western part of the city as a deliberate counterpoint to the former Friedrich Wilhelm (and future Humboldt) University in the Soviet Zone of Occupation. And yet Meinecke does not stake Germany’s path to reconciliation and recovery on renewed engagement with the Enlightenment legacy of the Western Allies. Instead, he calls for a return to the values of Goethean humanism—for a return, in other words, to German virtues as they existed before the dual waves of socialism and nationalism began to exert their corrosive influence. To this end, he proposes the creation “in every German city and larger village” of communities “of like-minded friends of culture which I should like best to call Goethe Communities.” To these Goethe Communities “would fall the task of conveying into the heart of the listeners through sound the most vital evidences of the great German spirit, always offering the noblest music and poetry together” (120). It is a telling solution, in which masterpieces of culture are enlisted to distribute the Pentecostal message of the great and undying “German spirit.”

In Meinecke’s defense, his project intends to do more than merely burnish the legacy of the past in the hopes that its glory will outshine the crimes of the present. He also aims to reintegrate Germany into a cosmopolitan dialogue of cultures:

---

11. At a much later point in the analysis, Meinecke will also draw a comparison to the “millennial kingdom” of the Anabaptists in Münster in 1535. This reference is surprising, especially as it is simply made to illustrate Meinecke’s uncharacteristically pathos-laden assertion that there is no “great, new, existence-changing idea . . . in which Satan has not insinuated himself both as driver and as beneficiary” (The German Catastrophe, 71). But this only heightens the intriguing parallel to Mann’s Doctor Faustus, in which a similar comparison is drawn between the fanaticism of Hitler and that of Martin Luther.
“Four decades ago, in the field of political history, I tried to show that cosmopolitanism and the modern idea of the national state were not originally rigid contrasts, but existed together for mutual enrichment. . . . Today, after a generation of the most tremendous revolutions, let us recognize that for Occidental cultural life a similar dialectic is applicable” (118). In outlining the details of this dialectic, however, Meinecke maintains a somewhat one-sided focus on Germany’s export contributions to what for him is an exclusively Western marketplace of ideas, and he also insists that all genuine masterworks have to meet the standards of national purity first: “What is more powerful than Goethe’s Faust and how powerfully has it cast its radiance upon the Occident! Whatever springs from the very special spirit of a particular people and is therefore inimitable is likely to make a successful universal appeal. . . . In order to exert a universal influence, [however,] spiritual possessions of this kind must always blossom forth naturally, uniquely and organically out of any given folk spirit” (118). Hybridity, adaptation, or collaborative exchange across national borders are clearly unknown entities to Meinecke, whose understanding of culture remains as rigid and monolithic as his conception of the German people and the uniform fate that has supposedly befallen them.

Zeitblom and the Burden of History

Meinecke’s essay represents one possible response to the end of the Third Reich, a response in which the values of historicism align with those of the inner emigration to chart out a path toward redemption that simultaneously leads back to a lost cultural heritage. Doctor Faustus is obviously a very different book from The German Catastrophe, and yet Mann grappled with many of the same problems as his slightly older contemporary. Indeed, Serenus Zeitblom, the retired schoolteacher who narrates the novel, at times sounds a lot like Meinecke. In sentences that could easily be borrowed from The German Catastrophe, Zeitblom waxes about the “spirit and claims of our historical development,” and he too is fond of words such as “becoming, development, destiny.” Zeitblom furthermore has difficulties reconciling his strident anti-Nazism with his love of country and seems uncertain whether to pray for the victory or the defeat of the German armed forces. He also persistently speaks about Germany in the first person plural, even though it is clear that the reigning powers have driven him into inner emigration, and that his sons would not hesitate to turn against him should they learn about the book that he is secretly writing. Like Meinecke’s The German Catastrophe, finally, Zeitblom’s biography of Adrian Leverkühn is a Janus-faced work that looks with uncertainty into the future even as it tries to account for past evils.

As an etiology of Nazism, however, *Doctor Faustus* suffers from serious problems, problems that to some extent also parallel those of *The German Catastrophe*. First, the equation “Leverkühn = Hitler Germany” seems to slander the dodecaphonic technique that ranks as the fictional composer’s greatest achievement, by comparing the move away from tonality to a departure from the principles of liberal democracy. This may appear to be a fairly esoteric matter, but Arnold Schoenberg’s virulent reaction to what he regarded as an instance of plagiarism and character assassination on Mann’s part demonstrates that it can nevertheless have serious consequences in the real world. Inversely, the retelling of the German move toward Nazism as a lone composer’s descent into madness might be taken to trivialize acts of almost unspeakable horror. Finally, and perhaps most seriously, the central conceit of Mann’s story, namely the pact with the devil, once again implies an externality of evil. Leverkühn, and by extension Germany as a whole, can certainly be declared guilty for signing the infernal contract, but the source of the evil lies elsewhere. Indeed, Meinecke’s own formulation of a “severe infection” that befell a German people who were nevertheless “not fundamentally diseased” finds an uncanny echo in *Doctor Faustus*, in which Mann’s hero finalizes the pact by voluntarily contracting syphilis.

In short, Zeitblom can plausibly be faulted for fleeing from collective historical responsibility into the comforting realm of myth. As critics have noted, the same charge could be levied against many other novels (especially by authors from an older generation) that were published during the immediate postwar years. After all, Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* also tends toward the mythical, even if here the myth is disguised as a futuristic fantasy. Zeitblom, however, is precisely *not* Mann. In a letter to Paul Amann, Mann instead described his character as “a parody of myself,” and in his long essay “The Creation of *Doctor Faustus*” he further ruminated on the ways in which he employed Zeitblom’s humanist style “only in parody.” Indeed, Mann himself on several occasions confirmed that he had put as much of himself, if not more, into the character of Leverkühn as he had into Zeitblom. Much like Gustav Aschenbach or Hans Castorp in earlier tales, Zeitblom thus is a distorted mirror image of his creator, to be treated with some sympathy, but also to be held at an ironic distance.

The exact nature of this parody is complex. Mann obviously pokes fun at his own love of sententious phrases and sometimes unquestioning reverence for the traditional humanist canon. Beyond that, however, we can also see in Zeitblom a sophisticated critique of historicist thinking. That the “crisis of historicism” formed an important part of Mann’s intellectual formation and occupied him especially


during the years leading up to the composition of *Doctor Faustus* has by now been fairly well established in the critical literature. Birger Solheim, for instance, argues in a comprehensive study that “[when] he wrote the *Confessions of a Nonpolitical Man*, Thomas Mann’s thought was under the spell of historicism in a number of ways,” and goes on to list no less than twelve such identifying characteristics, including a tendency to relate individual phenomena to more holistic categories, such as “state,” “people,” or “nation,” and a preference for monadic conceptions of history, in which little or no room is allotted to intercultural communication.\(^\text{15}\) According to Solheim, Mann broke with historicism shortly afterward, when he read *The Decline of the West* and came to the conclusion that the only appropriate response to Spengler’s characteristic fatalism was precisely parody and ironic self-distance.

Evidence uncovered by Martin Travers, however, suggests that Mann’s personal debate over the uses and abuses of historicism continued well into the 1930s and 1940s and was far from resolved after the encounter with Spengler. Travers identifies two quite diverse influences on Mann’s thought during this period but does not fully consider the obvious tensions that result from them. The first such influence is the aforementioned historian Erich Kahler, with whom Mann carried out an intensive correspondence that lasted from 1931 to the novelist’s death in 1955. In his very first letter to Mann, Kahler speaks of his ambition “to undertake an elemental rethinking of the essence of Germanism. I don’t mean a ‘German History’ or a ‘Psychology of the German’, but a graphic summary of what we can call specifically German.”\(^\text{16}\) Mann was at first noncommittal, but he took notice when Kahler published *The German Character in the History of Europe* (1937). However, parallel to this fructifying relationship ran a second influence, which Travers locates in Mann’s study of *Heritage of Our Times*. In Bloch, Mann encountered the notion of the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” as an antidote to historicism.

The conflict between these two very different interpretations of the German character greatly contributes to the parodic dimensions of Mann’s novel. Zeitblom is from the beginning committed to providing not merely a biography of Leverkühn, but also an entelechy. When he describes the early music lessons that he and his friend received from Hanne the milkmaid, for instance, Zeitblom isn’t content to merely record that the rounds that Hanne taught them awoke in his friend an appreciation for music as the artistic organization of time. He also has to add: “None of us was aware that under the direction of a milkmaid we were already moving on a comparatively high plane of musical culture, a branch of imitative


polyphony, which first had to be discovered in the fifteenth century before it could provide us with amusement.” And he concludes: “In recalling Adrian’s burst of laughter [which the rounds elicited from the boy], I find in retrospect that within it lay knowledge and the initiate’s sneer” (32). That the two young students could not possibly appreciate the complexity of what they were doing is irrelevant; Zeitblom is showing his readers that the first musical lesson that Leverkühn received was already a lesson in polyphony, and thus in the particular technique that he would later revive and lead to new heights in works such as the *Apocalipsis*. A dual optic is at work here, and a gaze that sees in events only their surface meaning (a child’s burst of laughter) combines with one that reinterprets these events in the light of later experiences (the burst is actually an initiate’s sneer).

Given the parameters of his own narrative, it is thus all the more telling that Zeitblom shows such reluctance in acknowledging the devilish nature of Leverkühn’s pact. What vexes Zeitblom—the dignified philologist who believes that “in the worthy realm of the humanities one is safe from all . . . spooks” (23)—isn’t merely that a medieval legend should suddenly turn out to have a modern and all too real counterpart, but also that Leverkühn’s bargain imputes an inevitable nature to all that he has done. Tellingly, Mann has chosen an organic metaphor: Leverkühn’s creative career begins when he willingly contracts syphilis, and his accomplishments grow at the same rate that the bacteria spread in his brain. The composer thus merely acts out what the devil has already planted within him; he cannot depart from the path that will lead him into madness by, for instance, saving the life of his nephew Nepomuk Schneidewein. Zeitblom’s reluctance to confront the demonic pact head-on even though he subscribes to a similar fatalism provides a neat compression of the same dilemma that also plagued Friedrich Meinecke. Like Meinecke, Zeitblom arranges past experiences according to a set heuristic, and also like Meinecke, he shies away from the full extent of the damning conclusion to which this heuristic would seem to commit him.

This damning conclusion, of course, is not only that his old friend has sold his soul to the devil, but also that the German nation may have done likewise. Indeed, Zeitblom has consistently drawn parallels between Leverkühn’s career as a composer and the state of his country. The two men’s early disagreements over whether the libretto for Leverkühn’s opera *Love’s Labour’s Lost* should be written in German or English, for instance, occur simultaneously with the heated debates about Germany’s place in Europe that divide the members of their student fraternity at Halle. And Leverkühn’s fateful turn to the “barbarism” of early modern polyphony in the *Apocalipsis cum figuris* coincides with his membership in the protofascist “Kridwiss circle,” whose intellectual leader, Chaim Breisacher, extols the virtues of the primitive, including those of theocratic government. Leverkühn’s aloof nature forestalls readings of men like Breisacher as straightforward influences on the composer; instead, they formulate social and political views whose basic structure uncannily mirrors that of Leverkühn’s advances within music theory.
Mann’s diaries make clear that he partially patterned Breisacher on Oswald Spengler, and indeed Breisacher displays both the intellectual range and the cultural pessimism of his model: “He was a polyhistor, who could talk about anything and everything, a philosopher of culture, whose opinions, however, were directed against culture insofar as he affected to see all of history as nothing but a process of decline. The most contemptuous word from his mouth was ‘progress’” (295). Breisacher’s preferences for the primitive, the unadulterated, and the strong are also rooted in Spengler, as are his polemics exalting Mosaic Law over the New Testament. These opinions simultaneously mark the point, however, where the developmental logic of historicism (even if the development in question here is an inverse one, a devolution) yields to something else altogether. Breisacher has formulated the operative logic of fascism, whereby the productive forces of modernity are harnessed through the structuring intervention of myth: a controlled recourse to the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous.”

The description of the Kridwiss circle thus forms a pivotal moment in Mann’s text. It marks the point at which historicist thinking, hijacked by the cultural pessimism produced by a lost world war, turns cynical and abandons its own basic commitment to temporal continuity. Instead, the past is to be brought into the present so as to better control the future. Unlike traditional conservatism, which simply believes in the persistence of core values throughout time, the Kridwiss circle is open to radical change in the areas of political and social organization. It merely believes that such changes should be dressed in the rhetoric and the symbolism of the past so as to make them more palatable to the gullible masses.

The same turn toward cynicism and myth can also be found in the form of Zeitblom’s narrative. In many critical summaries, Zeitblom’s habit of showing how early episodes in Leverkühn’s biography already carry within them the seeds of later developments has simply been filed away as an example of the leitmotivic technique that Mann first developed around the turn of the century and had already applied with great success to artistic biographies in works such as Tonio Kröger (1903) and Death in Venice (1912). To some extent, of course, this is true. But a leitmotif is unthinkable without the notion of temporal growth or development, and without what I have earlier called a “dual optic” employed by the reader. In order to become a “motif,” an idea needs to have a discrete identity and be recognizable as merely one more variant of a larger ideational cluster that gains in complexity over time. In addition to the many motifs that are undeniably present in Doctor Faustus, however, Zeitblom is also battling with an entirely different form of temporal emplotment in which individual instances of “motifs” seem entirely identical to one another and thus suggest stasis rather than development. This second form of emplotment is foreshadowed rather early, when Zeitblom describes

17. See, for instance, Kahler, “The Secularization of the Devil,” 32–33, as well as Bergsten, Thomas Mann’s “Doctor Faustus,” 168–78.
Leverkühn’s native farmstead, Buchel, near Kaisersaschern and mentions that it included a “massive old linden tree” of some significance to the family history: “This beautiful tree, fixed forever in my memory, was somewhat in the way of the wagons maneuvering in the courtyard, I suppose, and I have heard that as a young man each heir would argue with his father that common sense required its removal, only later, then, as owner of the farm, to defend the tree against the same demands from his own son” (14).

It is perhaps idle to speculate about whether any relationship exists between this linden tree and the one that acquires such significance as a symbol of German destiny at the end of *The Magic Mountain*. In the context of Buchel, at any rate, the massive trunk clearly represents an obstacle to the rationalization of work processes (even if only in the most primitive sense) and also acquires a kind of talismanic significance by which the natural succession of generations is turned from a course of rebellion to one of stasis. A similar turn from successive change to stasis is effected in Zeitblom’s shuddering realization that Adrian’s later domicile at Pfeiffering “very strangely resembled, even replicated, the framework of his childhood” (29), which, he believes, “says something unsettling about a man’s inner life” (30). The analogy that Zeitblom chooses to support his displeasure is telling as well: “It reminds me, rather, of a man of my acquaintance who, although externally robust and sporting a beard, was so high-strung that whenever he fell ill—and he tended to be sickly—he would only allow a pediatrician to treat him. Moreover, the doctor into whose care he put himself was so short that he, quite literally, could never have measured up to a medical practice with adults” (30). Hitler, after all, was also known for his short stature.

In moving from a leitmotivic technique that stresses growth and development to one in which continuities between earlier developmental stages are privileged, Zeitblom is giving a narrative shape to the essential fatalism that underlies so much historicist thought during its late phase in the twentieth century. In connecting Adrian’s conscious choice of a residence that closely resembled his childhood home to the story of the man who required help from a pediatrician, he is furthermore emphasizing the intellectually infantilizing implications of this fatalism, and possibly also giving it a political subtext. In *Doktor Faustus*, the plot of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist performatively enacts the nation’s voyage into an open future, hence gradually yet inevitably modulates into a different dynamic, in which the protagonist allegorically acts out an inevitable destiny. Through the means of literature, then, Thomas Mann illustrates how historicism, the mode of thought that stood behind the traditional *Bildungsroman*, can easily slide into something altogether darker. After all, every entelechy is premised on the idea that complexly developed forms contain within them the residues of earlier larval stages. All that is required to move from an optimistic celebration of open development to a pessimistic embrace of cultural determinism is a slight change in optic, a change that was all too commonly performed in Germany during the interwar period.
Dodecaphony and Antihistoricism

Leverkühn’s compositional technique takes this impasse of historicism as its starting point. With his archetypal German composer, Mann created a vehicle through which to contemplate the possibilities of an antihistoricist style, a way of arranging narrative elements in time that avoids the dynamic of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Leverkühn’s turn toward polyphony and his later invention of dodecaphony take aim against homophony as the organizing principle of musical development—and, by extension, also against history. In his various theoretical pronouncements, the composer frames this struggle as one of barbarism versus culture, myth versus enlightenment, and identifies Beethoven as the pivotal figure who stands between the two. He inherits this thought from his teacher, Wendell Kretzschmar, who argues in one of his public lectures: “[Beethoven] had been the grand master of a profane epoch of music, in which art had emancipated itself from the cultic to the cultural” (64).

Leverkühn at once admires and detests Beethoven, an ambivalent relationship that is best summarized through his various pronouncements on the Ninth Symphony. He admires Beethoven because the older composer raised music from mere craftsmanship into a spiritual vehicle; at the same time, however, he also detests the romantic genius, whose elevation of “mere musicality” into “the realm of general intellect” (152) went hand in hand with a congruent elevation of human freedom into the noblest goal of musical expression, a shift best expressed in the triumphant “Ode to Joy” that concludes the Ninth Symphony. The Ninth Symphony breaks with the sonata form that had governed symphonic writing during the classical period, and instead recasts its materials in the form of a developmental narrative. This is evident in at least two different ways. First, the symphony opens in an indeterminate key on an empty fifth chord; it concludes, in an equally unprecedented manner, with a grand choral movement. As Nietzsche might say (and few other people influenced Mann’s understanding of music as profoundly as Nietzsche did), the symphony thus celebrates the triumph of Apollonian *logos* over Dionysian *mythos*. Second, the final choral movement recapitulates the structure of the previous three movements in miniature, thereby giving the symphony the shape of an entelechy, in whose final flowering can still be found the remnants of earlier developmental stages.

According to Leverkühn, “culture” as it expresses itself in musical romanticism in general, and in Beethoven in particular, thus differs from the “cultic” in two important ways. First, it no longer contents itself with the mere craftsmanship and musicality that characterized the music of the classical period, aiming instead for a general celebration of the human spirit. Secondly, it elevates freedom—and with it inventiveness and human subjectivity—into the vehicle through which this celebration will be achieved. Nineteenth-century compositions reach for such freedom by dispensing with the “strict style” of earlier periods and focusing instead on
development through variation: “Development had been a small part of the sonata, a modest refuge for subjective illumination and energy. With Beethoven it becomes universal, the center of the entire form, which, even where it remains given of convention, is absorbed by the subjective and newly created in freedom” (204). Musical “development created in freedom,” however, is but one more instance of a Bildung or entelechy, for “freedom becomes the principle of a comprehensive economy, which allows music nothing accidental and develops the most extreme diversity out of materials that are always kept identical. Where there is nothing unthematic left, nothing that might not prove it has been derived from a single abiding constant, one can scarcely still speak of a free style of composition” (204).

The influence of Thomas Mann’s musical adviser, Theodor W. Adorno, hangs heavy over these lines, which essentially propose that culture and freedom, when pushed to their extreme, are bound to dialectically revert into cultic control. Leverkühn’s own compositions can be interpreted as an ongoing effort to come to terms with this paradox, although his solutions become ever more extreme as his syphilitic infection progresses. Early on—in a phase that reaches from roughly 1910, when he moves beyond his early experiments with musical impressionism, to 1919, when he concludes the Apocalipsis—Leverkühn seeks to improve on the polyphonic tendencies of Beethoven’s late works by leading them back to a more rigorous application of counterpoint: “True counterpoint demands the simultaneity of independent voices. Counterpoint designed as melodic harmony, such as that in late Romantic works, is none at all” (204–5). Already in the Brentano cycle, however, he grasps for a more radical solution, which will eventually lead to his implementation of dodecaphony in his final work, The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus. This symphonic cantata, in which human voices are drowned out by the music of the orchestra, is conceived as an explicit antithesis to the “Ode to Joy,” as Leverkühn confesses:

“I have discovered that it ought not be.”
“What ought not be, Adrian?”
“The good and the noble,” he replied, “what people call human, even though it is good and noble. What people have fought for, have stormed citadels for, and what people filled to overflowing have announced with jubilation—it ought not be. It will be taken back. I shall take it back.”
“I don’t quite understand, my dear fellow. What do you want to take back?”
“The Ninth Symphony,” he replied. And then came nothing more, even though I waited. (501)

It is clear that Leverkühn’s compositional struggles carry a significance that reaches far beyond the musical arena. At stake here are such deeper questions as the meaning of culture and the importance of freedom in ensuring human development. And the “late romantic” solution that Mann’s composer rejects is in many
ways similar to the historicist thought of Meinecke and, by extension, of Zeitblom. It seeks to cast human thought into the shape of an ongoing development that at once gives and obeys its own laws, thereby stressing the underlying thematic unity behind a seemingly free and entirely subjective process. Leverkühn’s experiments with polyphony can consequently also be interpreted as an attack on historicist thinking; his demand for a “simultaneity of independent voices,” for instance, represents a break with the monadism of orthodox historicism. More importantly, his turn backward toward early modern compositional devices negates the notion of artistic progress. This final impulse leads eventually to his invention of the dodecaphonic method, which not only eliminates all subjectivity from music but also turns an inherently time-bound art form into what is, on at least one level, an expression of intellectual stasis. In the “strict style” that Leverkühn describes to Zeitblom (and later implements in the *Lamentation*), all musical materials are simple variations (derived through the three basic operations of transposition, retrograde, and inversion) of an unchanging underlying tone row.

Mann himself was the first person to recognize the obvious similarities between Leverkühn’s endeavors and the art of fellow modernist writers, or at least a certain critical view of those writers. His English wasn’t good enough to read *Ulysses* in the original, and he apparently did not have access to a German translation in America, but in “The Creation of *Doctor Faustus*” he quotes a sentence from Harry Levin’s *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (1941) that made a deep impression on him just as he was struggling with the twenty-second chapter of his novel, in which Leverkühn first describes the dodecaphonic method: “The best writing of our contemporaries is not an act of creation, but an act of evocation, peculiarly saturated with reminiscences.” 18 Levin’s salvo against artistic creation echoes T. S. Eliot’s insistence, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), that a great writer must first develop the feeling that “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” 19 Levin, furthermore, called *Ulysses* a “novel to end all novels” and joined Eliot in arguing that Joyce had ended literature’s subservience to subjective individuality by creating an impersonal “modern epic.” Leverkühn’s dodecaphonic compositions are “epic” in this specialized sense of the word as well. Joyce’s Odyssean parallels, which force artistic inventiveness into a strictly pre-given frame, correspond to Leverkühn’s all-powerful twelve-tone rows. As a result, neither *Ulysses* nor *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus* can be unambiguously read as the product of an individual creative mind; in both works, furthermore, the forward drive of conventional narrative and music is subordinated to the “simultaneous order” of myth.

---

From here it was just a short step—first taken by Erich Kahler but most influentially repeated by Gunilla Bergsten and Hans Mayer—to the argument that *Doctor Faustus* itself is an example of a modern epic. This argument in turn implies a decisive break not only with nineteenth-century realism, but more specifically also with the *Bildungsroman* tradition. If Leverkühn’s actions are already predetermined by mythic correspondences, then there can be no free development, no *Bildung*, and thus also no *Bildungsroman*. Serenus Zeitblom’s worst fear, namely that beginning and end of his tale might become coterminous in the moment of apocalypse and thereby imply that Leverkühn’s destiny was inevitable, would thus have come to fruition.

There is reason to be skeptical about such a reading, however. Mann’s self-identification with Joyce was superficial at best and seems to have arisen mainly out of a need to reassure himself that his work was still relevant, that it hadn’t succumbed to tepid traditionalism and vulgar populism. In the very same breath in which he praises Joyce, he also once again stresses his own parodic ambitions, thereby highlighting that his gaze was turned backward, toward tradition, even if his basic intent was to subvert it. And surely it could not have been otherwise, for like Friedrich Meinecke during these years, Mann was entirely preoccupied with the etiology of the “German Catastrophe.” The enormity of the events that were unfolding before his very eyes prevented him from taking refuge in the formal experiments of the avant-garde.

More important than these biographical considerations, however, are certain formal ones that arise from the conclusion of *Doctor Faustus*. Immediately before the masterful description of Leverkühn’s symphonic cantata, in which the principles of the “strict style” are fully realized for the first time, Mann has his

---

20. As Hans Mayer argues, “The epical works of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, and Musil correspond as epics to the process that Adrian Leverkühn’s music passes through in the Faustus-novel. That is the reason why the Faustus-novel itself had to take on a new form as an epic picture. In the same way in which the Faust problem represented a ‘taking back’ [Zurücknahme] of Goethe’s world tragedy, so both its outer composition and its inner form represent a ‘taking back’ of Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship.” Hans Mayer, Von Lessing bis Thomas Mann: Wandlungen der bürgerlichen Literatur in Deutschland (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), 403.

21. As Ritchie Robertson writes in this context, “Modernism is an art of fragmentation. But what does the artist do when faced with real, physical fragmentation? In the period from 1943 to 1945, when Mann was writing his novel, he was aware of fragmentation in space: the destruction of German cities, the division of its territory among four invading armies. And he was also aware of fragmentation in time, since recent German history seemed to consist of alarming discontinuities: defeat in 1918, the establishment of a fragile democracy, and its transformation into a Fascist state resting on mass support and committed to brutal internal repression and external aggression. Modernism by itself could neither register nor explain the enormity of these events. If he was going to explore the origins of the German catastrophe in its cultural and intellectual history, Mann needed an art of continuity” (“Accounting for History,” 128). Somewhat strangely, however, Robertson goes on to argue: “For a novelist like Mann, Germany’s history could only be grasped by a device foreign to both Realism and Modernism, namely myth,” as if modernism and myth had never been related to one another by figures as diverse as T. S. Eliot and Theodor W. Adorno.
composer deliver a final defiant address to the devil, the import of which calls into question the gravity of what is to come. Certain that he himself will go to hell, Leverkühn nevertheless consoles himself that his nephew Nepomuk Schneidewein will just as certainly be saved: “And may eternities be rolled twixt my place and his, I will yet know that he is in the place from whence You, foul fi lth, were cast out. And that will be the cooling water upon my tongue and a hosanna to mock You in my foulest curse!” (500). Human freedom thus asserts itself at the very moment in which predetermination appears to be the strongest.22 The most interesting thing about these lines, however, is that they do not simply negate the allegorical correspondences that have progressively subverted the novel’s claim to be a Bildungsroman, but rather turn them inside out. Indeed, Leverkühn’s final act of defiance even as his mind caves in to madness also has an allegorical correspondence, but this one not from the medieval Faust chapbook, but rather from Goethe’s Faust, Part I, which concludes with the redemption of Gretchen. In the end, then, “strict style” finds its nemesis in Goethe’s romantic celebration of unfettered personal striving. Leverkühn’s challenge to the devil consequently suggests what Mann’s audience in 1947 already knew to be a fact: that a time would come when the Ninth Symphony would once again replace The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus as the most appropriate spiritual expression of the German people.23

Georg Lukács provides an alternate reading of Doctor Faustus that stresses the novel’s continuities with, as well as its departures from, the classical Bildungsroman tradition. In his essay “The Tragedy of Modern Art,” he argues: “Even if we understand form in the widest possible sense there is nothing in common between [Mann’s Doctor Faustus] and the Wilhelm Meister novels. . . . Despite the similarities in the problem and certain individual incidents it bears no resemblance to Goethe’s works. The parallel is rather one of inner development which, translated into form, appears as an antithesis.”24 For Lukács, the outward differences in form are caused by material differences between Goethe’s early and Mann’s late bourgeois societies. Here, however, I wish to suggest that they result instead from a changed relationship to the legacy of historicism. Just as Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, which moves beyond the eighteenth-century novel in its depiction of a hero who changes in dynamic accord with a changing world around him, gave a form to the “temporalization of history,” so Doctor Faustus, which threatens historical movement with apocalyptic simultaneity, gives a form to the “crisis of historicism” of the mid-twentieth century.

22. Compare also the words that Leverkühn speaks a little later at Nepomuk’s deathbed, drawn from the conclusion of Shakespeare’s The Tempest, when Prospero releases Ariel from bondage: “Then to the elements. Be free, and fare thou well!” (503)

23. It is interesting to remember in this context that in the first years after the war the “Ode to Joy” was frequently intoned on public occasions as a substitute national anthem.

24. Lukács, Essays on Thomas Mann, 50.
Like Meinecke, then, Mann ultimately looks back toward Goethe in an attempt to find a remedy for troubled times. The similarities end there, however. Meinecke’s own position was one of full identification with the German people, mixed with the conviction that Nazism had been an external evil imposed by world-historical forces on an otherwise sound nation. As a result, his appeal to Goethe took the form of a true return to origins, and he regarded classical German humanism as an uncorrupted good. Thomas Mann, influenced in part by the dialectical thinking of his musical adviser, but more importantly also by his own exile experiences, thought very differently about the matter. Deprived of his citizenship, forced to live in hotel rooms and depend on private, institutional, and governmental patronage, he quickly acquired a much more conflicted understanding of what it meant to be German, an understanding perhaps best expressed by his famous statement in the *New York Times* of February 22, 1938: “[Exile] is hard to bear. But what makes it easier is the realization of the poisoned atmosphere in Germany. That makes it easier because it’s actually no loss. Where I am, there is Germany. I carry my German culture in me. I have contact with the world and I do not consider myself fallen.”

In an ingenious move, Mann simultaneously declares the duality of German culture (a “poisoned atmosphere” back home versus a redemptive version inside him) and its unity, because the inner Germany is the only one that matters. In a move that should be all too familiar by now, Mann here decouples national culture, which is portable, from the state institutions that attempt to control it, and unconsciously reproduces Goethe’s formula for world literature. He remains defiantly German but understands this identity as the product of a cosmopolitan exchange of art and ideas.

Over the following years, Mann would significantly deepen his reflections on the contemporary meaning of German identity, first in the essay “Brother Hitler” (1938) and then in his masterful address “Germany and the Germans,” delivered in Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress on May 29, 1945. The latter in part resembles a reader’s guide to Mann’s as-yet-unfinished Faustus novel and is thus particularly suited to shed light on the compositional mysteries of this work. Mann’s concluding insight follows:

There are not two Germanys, a good one and a bad one, but only one, whose best turned into evil through devilish cunning. Wicked Germany is merely good Germany

---

25. As Jürgen Scharfschwerdt argues, “Viewed from [the perspective of the Bildungsroman critic], *Doctor Faustus* contains the question of a different future. When Leverkühn compares himself to Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, for instance, he thereby not only highlights the fundamental difference between his own situation and that of Wilhelm Meister, but by the specific nature of this correspondence also indirectly and in a very general fashion poses the question of a new future for the *Apprenticeship*, i.e. he interrogates the historical reality that gave rise to Goethe’s novel and Wilhelm Meister’s formative development” (*Thomas Mann und der deutsche Bildungsroman*, 244).

26. The phrase “Where I am, there is Germany” occurs in a number of Mann’s writings of this period. See in this context Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 450–51.
gone astray, good Germany in misfortune, in guilt, and in ruin. For that reason it is quite impossible for one born there simply to renounce the wicked, guilty Germany and to declare: “I am the good, the noble, the just Germany in the white robe; I leave it to you to exterminate the wicked one.” Not a word of all that I have just told you about Germany or tried to indicate to you came out of alien, cool, objective knowledge, it is all within me, I have been through it all. 27

While Thomas Mann, much like Meinecke, thus fully identifies with the German people, he also goes one courageous step further by accepting responsibility for the evils of Nazism, acknowledging that they have undeniable roots in German nature. At the same time, however, he resists the notion that Nazism was the inevitable product of a fundamentally diseased national character. Instead, “wicked Germany” is “good Germany gone astray, good Germany in misfortune, in guilt, and in ruin.”

A similar dynamic is also at work in Doctor Faustus. Serenus Zeitblom and Adrian Leverkühn represent antithetical outlooks on life (humanistic culture versus cultic control), they formulate antithetical compositional principles (freedom in development versus “strict style”), and they summarize antithetical positions vis-à-vis history (historicism as an expression of creative striving versus historicism as the cause of fatalist resignation). And yet Mann neither takes sides with one of these positions, nor does he pit them against one another in a relentless struggle. Instead, as his “The Creation of Doctor Faustus” reiterates again and again, he approaches his novel under the guiding light of parody: a style of writing, in other words, in which utterances relentlessly foreground their own significance and, precisely in so doing, revert to their opposite. Zeitblom’s attempt to portray Leverkühn’s life through the form of the Bildungsroman, in which mature achievements can be traced back to earlier immature expressions, eventually modulates into the timelessness of allegorical correspondence. Simultaneously, Leverkühn’s attempts to circumvent individuality and historicity through a modernist “strict style” guided by myth lead him to the greatest myth of them all: the romantic myth of human freedom.

Transposed to the level of genre analysis, these parodic reversals reveal Thomas Mann’s struggles with the narrative form that for 150 years had been the single dominant vehicle by which German poets reflected on their place in history. Cognizant of the “crisis of historicism,” Mann gave a powerful literary shape to his fear that a narrow-minded allegiance to the notion of national entelechies could lead to unspeakable evil. Equally cognizant, however, that the modernist ambition to replace development with myth as a structuring narrative principle had dangerous political implications, he rejected the “strict style” that he himself described so well.

as a possible solution for his “work of dangerously advanced spiritualization.” *Doctor Faustus* remains, in the end, *The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. After reading it, however, the simple notion of the integrity of a life, so fundamental to the more ambitious construction of the German *Bildungsroman*, is called into question. In more ways than one, *Doctor Faustus* really is what Thomas Mann said it was under the pretense of delivering a verdict on Hesse: a “work of old age” and a “late work of dangerously advanced spiritualization.” It is, in short, a novel apocalypse: the moment in which the *Bildungsroman* submits to a final judgment—but also the moment in which it is resurrected in the ultimate act of redemption.

The Fiction of Closure: Some Reflections on Allegory and World Literature

Thomas Mann marks the endpoint of most traditional surveys of the German *Bildungsroman* just as surely as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe marks their beginning. My own study repeats this basic structure not because I believe the *Bildungsroman* to somehow come to a conclusion with Mann, but rather because *Doctor Faustus* explicitly returns to the historicist roots of the genre and thereby allows me to claim for my work the semblance of closure and totality that the novel of formation perennially undermines as mere fiction. History, in truth, always goes on, and so does the history of the *Bildungsroman*.

In this last section of the book, I nevertheless want to return to one of the methodological premises with which I began my study, and ask whether there isn’t something final about *Doctor Faustus* after all, something that marks an irrevocable turning point in the formative tradition. I have in mind here the relationship between normativity and performativity, between theories that treat the *Bildungsroman* as an allegorical vehicle for the revelation of some essential trait (be it “national character,” the “symbolic form of modernity,” or “humanity as such”) and my own approach, which sees the genre as an attempt to impose narrative meaning on the basically random movements of a larger collective through historical time. *Doctor Faustus* is, as the preceding sections have shown, an allegorical narrative. Adrian Leverkühn isn’t just any random character; he is Germany, in the sense that specific episodes in his artistic biography can be mapped onto equally specific episodes in German history.

At least two problems immediately arise in this context, however. The first is that Mann’s allegory is undeniably polysemous, pairing each signifier with a number of different signifieds. Thus Leverkühn’s life can be matched with concurrent events in German intellectual culture between 1900 and 1933, but also with events in Nietzsche’s biography during the late nineteenth century and with broader epochs in German history from the Middle Ages to the present. Fredric Jameson has even applied the early Christian model of a fourfold exegetical scheme to *Doctor Faustus*, thereby refuting the necessary link between Leverkühn’s biography...
and the development of “modern society” that is demanded by Jed Esty’s notion of the “soul-nation allegory.” Indeed, how precisely would one measure such a social trajectory? Over the span of a thousand years, as is suggested by the equation drawn between Leverkühn’s childhood home at Kaisersaschern and the figure of Otto III, Holy Roman Emperor from 996 to 1002, or just over the span of fifty, which is roughly the period covered by the novel? Related to this is a second problem, namely that *Doctor Faustus* breaks with the “aesthetic ideology” supposedly at work in the classical *Bildungsroman* by not moving toward a vision of plenitude and fulfillment, but rather one of madness and catastrophe. Mann’s novel presents an etiology of fascism, and thus ultimately of a modernity that (to borrow from Horkheimer and Adorno) has turned in on itself, collapsing into its opposite. The same problems that Jeffrey L. Sammons uncovered at the heart of the formative tradition, leading him to declare the *Bildungsroman* a “missing genre,” render this particular text a literary triumph.

*Doctor Faustus* thus represents an unusual form of allegorical narrative, one that attacks the very notion of a referential stability on which allegory is originally founded. And yet I would nevertheless argue that this novel, far from representing merely an extreme example of modernist literary vertigo (another sense in which we might read Mann’s reference to a “late work of dangerously advanced spiritualization”), actually succeeds in articulating a cogent critique of the peculiar conditions that would come to dominate literary production in the second half of the twentieth century. *Doctor Faustus* does not merely diagnose a lacuna at the heart of traditional historicism; it also looks as resolutely into the future as any other *Bildungsroman* did before it.

To understand why this is so, it is necessary to delve even further into the perplexing layers of allegorical meaning that structure this novel. According to Jameson, the narrative level that we would ordinarily associate with the “literal” or “referential” in conventional texts, namely the biography of Adrian Leverkühn, should actually be read as a first layer of allegory. The only thing that is literal in the novel is the account of its own creation, namely Zeitblom’s bracketing narrative about his authorial struggles in Freising near the end of the Second World War. The reason for this is that Zeitblom was rarely actually present during the most important formative episodes of Leverkühn’s adult life. He is thus forced to abandon the mimetic pretensions of traditional realist narrative (according to which the descriptive sentences possess a kind of indexical force, rendering a true and literal representation of what was actually there) and substitute for them a series of “just-so” stories that logically and consistently represent how events could have been.

It is possible to translate Jameson’s insight about a fundamental shift from mimesis to diegesis in *Doctor Faustus* into the vocabulary of theatrical representation,

---

and to thereby connect it to my understanding of the Bildungsroman as a “performative” genre that does not merely aim to represent, but rather strives to construct an ordered historical reality. Indeed, Zeitblom’s constant assurances and disclaimers about what he did and did not witness bear a distinct resemblance to the antitheatricality of much modernist drama (and of Brechtian “epic theater” in particular), which also tries to assure the audience of the meaningfulness of what it is about to enact even as it abjures the conventions of traditional “realist” staging. In other words, unlike traditional allegorical narratives, which simply demand to be taken at face value, Doctor Faustus reminds its readers of the performative character of what is about to transpire, and thereby emphasizes that meaning is something to be created rather than merely revealed over the course of the narrative.

Jameson further points out that Zeitblom’s remove from the narrative is fundamentally also that of Thomas Mann as he tried to narrate the historical destiny of the German people from the vantage point of an émigré in Pacific Palisades. Mann ultimately, and perhaps somewhat naïvely, sought to cut through this Gordian knot of entwined allegories with the declaration “Where I am, there is Germany.” But merely by making such a statement, Mann already testified to a condition that is now widely recognized as one of the distinguishing features of world literature in the late twentieth century, namely the increasing dual remove between writers and the national communities for which they purport to speak on the one hand, and between writers and their intended audience on the other. Over the last half century, it has practically become a norm for writers, especially those who hail from developing countries or from linguistic groups that aren’t large enough to sustain an independent publishing industry, to write not for a national community, but for an amorphous international audience. At the same time, censorship, political oppression, or simple poverty frequently makes it impossible for many national communities to read the novels in which their own historical trajectory is ostensibly depicted. Thomas Mann, celebrated in America as the cultural ambassador of a nation that could, in turn, listen to his words only in the form of “enemy broadcasts,” is perhaps the first fully formed example of this intellectual condition, just as Doctor Faustus is the first mature literary reflection on it.

Roughly twenty-five years ago, in an address written to celebrate the birth of the literature program at Duke University, Fredric Jameson faulted previous students of what he called “Third-World Literature” for their tendency to reducively interpret foreign national traditions according to a simple allegorical schema based on the protagonists’ efforts to acquire an education under conditions of colonial domination. 29 Doctor Faustus, on the other hand, suggests a different way in which we might conceptualize the relationship between allegory and the novel.

---

of formation: not as a means to render visible what Jameson called the “life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism,” but rather as an attempt by deracinated writers to draw attention to the performative nature of their own literary activity. The contemporary global *Bildungsroman* insists on its poetic fidelity to the historical rhythm of the community from which it has ostensibly sprung, but in the very act of this insistence also acknowledges the quite different conditions under which it was actually created and will inevitably also be consumed. In this way, nationalism and cosmopolitanism become one and the same, and the *Bildungsroman* affirms a place in world literature that in reality it possessed all along.

---
