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Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

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PART I

The literary canon

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Living in the metaphor of fiction

OPENING ADDRESS

J. P. STERN

Vielleicht auch siehet Gott an, dass ich das Schwere gesucht und mirs habe sauer werden lassen, vielleicht, vielleicht wird mirs angerechnet und zugute gehalten sein, dass ich mich so befeissigt und alles zähe fertig gemacht . . .

Perchance, too, God will this descry, that I sought out the hard and laboured with might and main, perchance, perchance it will be counted unto my credit and benefit that I diligently applied myself and strenuously wrought all to its completion.

So hab ich dem ungeachtet mich immerfort befeissigt als ein Werker und nie geruget . . . noch geschlafen, sondern mirs sauer werden lassen und Schweres vor mich gebracht, nach dem Wort des Apostels: 'Wer schwere Dinge sucht, dem wird es schwer.'

Yet aside from [all my sins] have I busied myself as a labourer does, nor rested nor slept, but toiled and moiled and undertaken all manner of hard things, following the word of the Apostle: 'Whoever seeks hard things, to him it is hard.'

(Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (1947), chapter 47, translation by the author)

With the appearance of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* in 1947, a period in the political, social and literary history of Germany comes to its conclusion. The famous lines I have just quoted many of you will have recognized, for they contain the main purport of Adrian Leverkühn's confession at the end of that book, the summing up of his life as he and his creator see it. But beyond that (it seems to me) these lines contain a summing up and motto of a whole epoch, an epoch to which Leverkühn belongs as much as does Thomas Mann himself, and which for Thomas Mann is not historical: by which I mean that he does not stand outside it.

I have tried to show in more than one place that the dominant values of this age – which I see as an age informed by a morality or moral theology of strenuousness – make their appearance in its politics as well as in its literature, and how difficult its greatest writers found it to move

* This paper was given as the opening address to the British Comparative Literature Association Conference, Warwick, December 1977.

beyond them, to a different vision of man and of what is of paramount value in him. Their attempts to do so have usually ended in bathos and literary disaster. Stefan George's Maximin, Ernst Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* or Hofmannsthal's 'Kinderkönig' – a sort of glorified head-boy of the Viennese Boys' Choir – are warning examples of what I have in mind.

Thomas Mann made no such awful mistake. Throughout almost his entire work he identifies himself with the ideology of strenuousness. He endorses Adrian Leverkühn's appeal to 'das Schwere'; he nowhere criticizes *this* aspect of his thinking and his work, nowhere renders its validity problematic. He cannot step outside the ideology and view it critically – and yet he, like Rilke at the end of *his* work, is vouchsafed a deliverance of sorts. But perhaps that is putting it too grandly. Perhaps it is better to say that at the end of his time, in *Felix Krull*, his last major work, Thomas Mann is able to cock a snook at the whole business of 'das Schwere' and the value-scheme of the 'dear purchase'. In doing so he is playing a sort of in-joke on Friedrich Nietzsche, the church-father of this theology of strenuousness. But the joke of *this* last joke is that the farewell to the ideology and temper of an age is enacted in *his* – in Nietzsche's – terms. These, I know, are dark words, and the rest of this paper is meant to elucidate them.

It was Nietzsche in whose writings this ideology of strenuousness was formulated for the first time and with a consistency of which he himself was perhaps not fully aware. Nietzsche, we know, meditated on and criticized the Christian commandments and morality, taking it together with certain Socratic injunctions to be a model of all other moral schemes and moralizings. Nietzsche's sustained attacks take as their object not merely this or that rule or law or commandment. He proposes to reject the whole business of making moral judgements and to 'unmask' it as a compensatory activity which is wholly based on feelings of inferiority and grudging resentment, and desire for revenge. All this to him are aspects of what in *Zarathustra* he calls 'der Geist der Schwere', which he identifies with the Second Reich, and with the Germans generally, whom he accuses of eating and drinking too much and of judging the quality of thought by the quantity of sweat it produces. But 'das Schwere' in German means not only heaviness and earnestness and gravity, but also a proud strenuousness and difficulty, and the exacting nature of intellectual and moral effort. In criticizing and repudiating this 'Geist der Schwere', this spirit of gravity, Nietzsche, and after him Thomas Mann, speak from a life-long experience of and belief *in* this spirit; they speak as men who believe that in the attainment of that spirit lies the moral and spiritual validation of their age. Both deeply believe

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in commitment to strenuousness as a sign of some sort of salvation or validation of modern man. From his earliest writings – that is, the second of his *Thoughts out of Season* of 1874 – to the last notes reprinted posthumously in *The Will to Power*, this is the cardinal theme of Nietzsche's philosophizing.

Thus, in the second of the *Thoughts out of Season* (1874), he exhorts his contemporaries 'to find an exalted and noble *raison d'être* in life: seek out destruction for its own sake! I know of no better purpose in life than to be destroyed by that which is great and impossible!' (II, §9) – as though its impossibility were what makes his 'ideal' great. Again, in the Wagner essay two years later, he commends the cultural and pedagogic function of Bayreuth and offers its tragic masterpieces as lessons to those who are 'preparing for death in the fight for justice and love' (IV, §4), as though only death could validate their cause. Youthful romantic rhetoric? The self-destructive strenuousness of this strange morality never changes. When Nietzsche writes (to Seydlitz, 11 June 1878) that he wishes his life to reflect 'my views about morality and art (the hardest things that my sense of truth has so far wrung from me)'; and again a year later (to Gast, 5 October 1879) referring to the conclusion of *Human, All-too-Human*: '[it is] purchased so dearly and with so much hardship that nobody who had the choice would have written it at that price'; when he proclaims, in the 1886 preface to that book, 'I now took sides *against* myself and *for* everything that would hurt me and would come hard to me'; when he insists (to Gast, August 1883) that the main achievement of *Zarathustra* should be seen as 'a victory over the Spirit of Heaviness, considering *how difficult* it was to represent the problems with which the book is concerned'; when, in the notes to *The Will to Power* (1887–8) he defines 'virtue' as 'the delight we take in opposition', adding that 'I assess the power of [a man's] will by how much resistance, pain and torment it can endure and turn to its advantage' (§382); when again and again he insists on the need to destroy all forms of positive faith and all comforting certitudes, emphasizing the value of scepticism and of despair itself in the battle against the living death of conformity; and when, finally, in *Antichrist* (1888) he roundly condemns every idea of a pre-established harmony between truth and happiness (or even plain utility), claiming that

the experience of all rigorous and profoundly disposed minds teaches the opposite. Every inch of truth has to be wrested from oneself. We have to surrender almost everything that our hearts, our love, our trust in life normally cling to. This requires greatness of soul: the service of truth is the hardest service. . . *Faith makes blessed*: therefore it lies. . .

(§50)

we are left in no doubt that ‘the experimental philosophy which I live’, unlike the other moral ‘experiments’, represents Nietzsche’s most intimate personal undertaking and purpose, and informs every phase of his creative life. Its fullest expression is to be found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that disastrous fiction on which he pinned his highest hopes.

This – the ideology of ‘the hardest thing’, of ‘the dear purchase’ – is one aspect of the legacy Nietzsche left to the twentieth century. But there is another aspect of this legacy, which is more specifically literary, and which is at odds with the ideology of strenuousness.

From his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* of 1872, to the end of his conscious life, Nietzsche is attempting to offer what he calls ‘an aesthetic justification of the world’ (by which, though he shunned the word, he really meant a kind of redemption). Finding life in the world intolerable, he – the great ‘Yea-sayer’ of the Zarathustrian affirmation – now wishes to present the world as a game or a play (the notorious ambiguity of the German word, ‘Spiel’, leaves the question open), as a spectacle for the gods; he hopes to fashion an aesthetic philosophy in which ‘the World and all being of man’ might be presented as free of the curse of moral value-judgements, ‘moralinfrei’, truly beyond good and evil. Here, from the book of that title, is one of the aphorisms in which this aesthetic ‘redemption’ is described:

Um den Helden herum wird alles zur Tragödie, um den Halbgott herum alles zum Satyrspiel; und um Gott herum wird alles – wie? vielleicht zur ‘Welt’?

Around the hero everything turns into tragedy, around the demi-god everything turns into satyric drama; and around God everything turns into – what? Maybe the ‘world’?

(*Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Beyond Good and Evil)* §150)

To grasp the full poignancy of this Nietzschean idea of the aesthetic we must bear in mind that it comes from a philosopher who is temperamentally incapable of making any statement, significant or otherwise, without subsuming it by a moral value-judgement of some kind – a philosopher whose countless attacks on Christianity and occasional admiration of Christ derive from the conviction that the religion and its church betrayed its founder, who lived and exemplified a life without judging. The further irony here is that Nietzsche’s idea of the aesthetic by definition excludes Nietzsche the thinker and inveterate moralist. And the poignant irony is that he knows it. In what must be one of his most deeply self-revealing reflections he writes: ‘How could it be other than obvious that this is the ideal of a heavy, a hundredweight spirit – a spirit of gravity!’ (*Der Wille zur Macht (The Will to Power)* §1039). Could he

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not encompass all life in a fiction? Indeed he could. Indeed, he could be bounded in a nutshell and count himself a king of infinite space, were it not that he has bad dreams, dreams of the death of God.

‘Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world and the being of man eternally justified’ – the sentence occurs three times in *The Birth of Tragedy* and he comes back to variations of it in almost every one of his later books. This search for an aesthetic theodicy accompanies the sixteen brief years of Nietzsche’s thinking; and just so does the search for the liberation through the genuinely funny fiction accompany the almost sixty very long years of Thomas Mann’s métier as a novelist. And an aesthetic redemption – aesthetic in the widest sense of the word – is what, at the end of Thomas Mann’s life, Felix Krull is vouchsafed.

But what does ‘aesthetic in the widest sense’ mean? A very short essay of Nietzsche’s of 1873, entitled ‘On Truth and Falsehood in an Extra-Moral Sense’ (it is the first of his purely philosophical writings) gives us an idea of what Nietzsche means by ‘the aesthetic’. Men, he says there, are constitutionally incapable of a true knowledge of the world around them. All their so-called truths about this world or any other are pure tautologies. (‘If someone hides a thing behind a bush, looks for it there and finds it, then this seeking and finding isn’t much to write home about; but that’ – Nietzsche goes on – ‘that is what all seeking and finding inside the realm of reason amounts to.’)

Well, we may ask, if man is entirely incapable of finding out the truth about the world, how then is it that he survives in this bleak unknown world of alien forms and shapes, to which he remains forever a stranger? To ask this question is to assume what Nietzsche is unwilling to assume, namely that the truth about the world is necessary for our survival in it. Nietzsche says the opposite: what makes life possible is the fact that the true nature of the world is hidden from us, that we are able to fictionalize the world as it really is. We create art in order not to perish of the truth (he will write fifteen years later); the conviction that we create the metaphors of myth in order to be able to bear the reality of the world is the foundation on which his entire theory of tragedy rests; and so the artistic activity becomes the creative, life-giving and life-protecting activity par excellence. Or, to put it in the terminology of that early essay, the way that man manages to negotiate and survive in the world is by forming metaphors about the world, and fictions are the most sustained of the metaphors he creates. Human language especially (Nietzsche continues) is totally incapable of saying anything about the real world (to which, he argues, language does not belong), but the relationship

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of language with that world is entirely imprecise, approximate, hap-hazard, almost random – indeed, its relationship is merely metaphorical:

Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass sie welche sind.

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified, became transposed and adorned, and which after long usage by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them. Truths are illusions which one has forgotten *are* illusions. ('Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn')

I don't propose to inquire whether this is a correct view of language (or, indeed, how a correct or true view of language could possibly be formulated if language is seen as such an arbitrary, shifting structure). But there is no doubt that this view represents consistently Nietzsche's own understanding of language throughout his life as a writer, and that this view says a good deal about his particular use of it – that is, about his predominantly and powerfully metaphorical style. The theoretical structure behind his style goes something like this:

Language is related to reality by nothing more precise than metaphor.

Metaphors are the only access we have to reality.

Metaphors are the creation of artists.

Therefore artists are the least misleading, least imprecise users of language; artistic activity is the paradigm or symbol of all positive human activity.

Art, in this argument of Nietzsche's, is not oblivion or even ecstasy (as it is in *The Birth of Tragedy*), but it is involved in the creation of that spiderweb of metaphors which alone makes life in the world possible: art is a creation, however, which is accompanied by at least an intermittent knowledge which those who merely *use* the metaphorical structure without creating it do not possess – the knowledge that the metaphors are not the real thing, that they are indeed only metaphors. Language, Nietzsche claims, cannot designate true causality. The world contains no truth and no undeflected communication; and there is of course no *real* freedom in the world either. Our only freedom is in the realm of 'as if': it is a metaphorical or aesthetic freedom – aesthetic in that wider sense that I have now described.

Thomas Mann is the principal heir of Nietzsche's bequest to our age: of *both* aspects of that bequest. Not only do the major figures of his

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fiction – from Thomas Buddenbrook through Tonio Kröger, Gustav von Aschenbach, Prinz Klaus Heinrich, Hans Castorp, the magician Cipolla, to Jacob and Joseph, the old Goethe and Adrian Leverkühn – embody that ideology of strenuousness which I have described; but all his life too, though intermittently, Thomas Mann hoped for a deliverance from that ideology, searching for a way out of this world of existential strain. Throughout his long career he hoped to write, not merely an ironical novel (he had done enough, and we might even think more than enough, of that: irony clearly offered no escape), not even a humorous novel but, speaking up on more than one occasion for the joys of slapstick, what he hoped to write was a funny novel. A novel which would suspend (I am desperately trying to avoid the villainous Hegelian pun: I mean *aufheben*) the weightiness of the spirit of gravity. And in finally achieving *Felix Krull* he had his life-long wish.

Now this is the point where a good many things might be said to characterize Thomas Mann's undertaking in the novel. There is, first and most obviously, its very rich autobiographical background – he began working on it in 1910 and the first volume, which is all we have, was not concluded until 1954. There is Thomas Mann's parodistic exploration of the *Bildungsroman*, its modification by the picaresque tradition, his treatment of that 'art *versus* life' theme to which he had devoted so many earlier works and which has been the standby of every modern language teacher ever since. All these topics have been discussed at length and there is no need to go over them again. Instead, I want to turn to another topic: the strongly anti-mimetic aspect of the work.

Whereas Nietzsche's idea of an aesthetic validation of the world remains a speculative proposal – a proposal to de-pragmatize, aestheticize or fictionalize the world – Thomas Mann turns the proposal into a reality, that is, into an elaborate fiction. Michael Beddow in a recent closely argued essay makes the point: 'The narrative pattern reveals a metaphoric determination of such sustained intensity that the text's ostensible claim to be the autobiography of an adventurer is undercut': or rather, that its credibility is seriously, and deliberately, impaired. Similarly, there is no satirical intention worth mentioning behind the work, and any attempt to see it as a socially conscious critique of Edwardian materialistic morality only shows what extraordinarily modest ideas of satire are entertained by some of our socially conscious friends and colleagues.

I think there is no point in beating about the bush. The hero whom Thomas Mann has created and whose device in life is a delightful ease,

a lightness of touch, a charming grace and an easy, all-too-easy conscience – that hero is a con man and good-for-nothing who will never pass the Leavisite test of mature adult responsible behaviour. And the novel in which he has his being is what Nietzsche said all life was: a highly immoral or, if you prefer it, *amoral* affair. I do not merely mean that trickery, lechery, mendacity, theft and deceit are rewarded by worldly goods and pleasure *and* an easy conscience, but that all these vices and villainies are metaphorized: presented to us under names and in forms which are designed to cancel out their viciousness. In other words, *Felix Krull* is a novel without any sustained or consistently held moral judgements, a story enacted in Nietzsche's 'moralinfreie Welt'. This is one of the sources and conditions of its humour: this cancelling-out of the grounds of moral judgements, the deliberate and consistent disappointment of our expectations is one of the major sources of fun in the book.

Similarly, the dominant tendency of the *Bildungsroman* to see the world in terms of a hero wholly concerned with *using* it, using it for the sole purpose of enriching his experience at the world's expense – this tendency is not criticized or discredited but geyed and carried to its logical conclusion by turning the hero into a confidence trickster and a thief. Felix Krull, with his magnificent egotism, becomes all the world's benefactor, for in the very act of exploiting and swindling and stealing from others he cannot fail to give them the benefit, the blessing almost, of his charming, easy, generous, uncalculating personality. He is indeed an artist and a virtuoso, but his instrument is life itself. And the women he plays along – from servant-maid to prostitute, to a fashionable lady novelist to, finally, a double affair with the wife and the daughter of a Portuguese anthropologist – have no complaint. Do we believe, though he says so himself, that he is a prodigious erotic performer?

Selbstverständlich scheidet hier jede Möglichkeit des Vergleichens aus. Meine private Überzeugung jedoch, die ich damals gewann und die weder beweisbar noch widerlegbar ist, geht unerschütterlich dahin, dass bei mir der Liebesgenuss die doppelte Schärfe und Süßigkeit besass als bei anderen.

Of course, any possibility of comparison is out of the question. But all the same, it is my private conviction, which can neither be demonstrated nor disproved, that with me the enjoyment of love was twice as acute and twice as sweet as with others.

(*Felix Krull*, chapter 8)

Does it matter whether we believe him? The erotic here is the pattern of Krull's attitude to the world at large: he gives pleasure by taking it, the giving and the taking are inseparable, even his boasting is not

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intended to put others out of countenance but to exhibit his own command of fine words. The words matter, not their truth.

The words – Felix Krull’s immense irrepressible grandiloquent flow of words – are not merely descriptive of something that happened in the glorious past (Krull the confidence trickster is writing his memoirs from gaol), they are in and by themselves (the Hegelian manner is catching) a consolation from that past and a continuation of it into the melancholy and grim present. The emphasis, throughout the novel, on Krull’s gift of the gab is wholly Wittgensteinian – I mean that it is intended to narrow the traditional distinction between words and world, to show words as active in, and a part of, the world.

The most brilliant example of this process of de-pragmatizing the world by converting it into words, and more specifically into metaphors which stand for other words, and thus for life itself is, of course, the farcical medical examination in the course of which Felix Krull feigns an epileptic attack and is turned down by an army medical board. The scene was written ten years before Jaroslav Hašek in *The Good Soldier Schweik* and forty years before Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* used a similar ploy – the ploy of showing a hero battling against a hostile army bureaucracy and winning the battle by vigorously identifying his own aim with the aim of the enemy. It is by using his own fabulous descriptive powers in order to arouse the army doctor’s contradictions that Krull makes him compliant with his desire to be declared unfit for military service, and it is by his constant indignant assurances that he is perfectly well and desperately anxious to become a soldier that Felix Krull eventually works himself into an epileptic fit which is genuine in every sense except the strictly medical one. His fit is the image, the metaphor, of a fit.

Indeed, so perfect is his imitation of it that the category of the ‘strictly medical’ becomes strictly irrelevant, and so does the idea of dissimulation. The real thing and the pretence or metaphor of the real thing become as one. And this, we now recall, leaving aside the question of intention, happens in several other important scenes in Thomas Mann’s novels. How ill is Hans Castorp, the hero of *The Magic Mountain*? How desolate and abandoned by all the world is Joseph when his brothers cast him in the well? How ill is Adrian Leverkühn, and what exactly is the origin and the nature of his disease; how much responsibility does he really bear for the death of his nephew, the little Johann Nepomuk?

All these questions are raised by Thomas Mann and left deliberately open, as though the figurative statement – the intimation of a refusal to