

# Mirror of the German Soul

## Thomas Mann Closes an Account

CLAUDE HILL

THOMAS MANN'S new novel "Doctor Faustus,"\* like most really great works of literature, can be interpreted on different levels. Loaded with a spiritual cargo that ever seems to outweigh the penetrating mental struggles of "The Magic Mountain," the book floats like a gigantic intellect-laden vessel in the shallow waters of current world literature; its readers can be compared to watchmen on guard who, according to their position on the shore or the strength of their telescopes, may get varying glimpses of the slowly drifting craft. A full view, however, will be afforded only to the faithful who have forgone impatience and have learned to focus accurately.

The subtitle of the novel: "The life of the German composer Adrian Leverkuehn," suggests a book about music. The title itself calls Goethe to mind. "Doctor Faustus" is a modern prose version of the old German folk-book and of Goethe's dramatic poem. The word "German" implies German background. And, indeed, the novel is about Germany. Knowing Mann's symbolism as evidenced by the life-transforming magic of his mountain sanatorium or by the myth-pregnant world of Joseph, one may expect a symbolic treatment of music, art, and intellect in our time. The book is just that. As a matter of fact, "Doctor Faustus" is all that and yet more. In a world that has long ceased to be simple and easily intelligible, the novel as the most modern and integrated form of literature must, of necessity, reflect the highly complex and technical aspect of our time; the traditional plot structure of nineteenth-century fiction has become obsolete—unless it be degraded to mere "entertainment" à la Hollywood.

Without attempting to do justice to "Doctor Faustus" on all of its many levels, this writer believes that the key to the novel is to be found in the word "German" of the subtitle. It is the German author Thomas Mann who tells the life of the German composer Leverkuehn, setting it against a German background, and borrowing the hero of a German legend for his title. And who does not immediately think

of music when he speaks of German achievements? It would thus appear that the man whom destiny has burdened with the thankless position of *praeceptor Germaniae* in our time has finally written his long-awaited discussion of the German problem. The author, who shied at the physical homecoming after the war—for reasons only too justified—has spiritually returned to the country of his origin once more. Not to stay, to be sure, but to close an account that was long overdue, and to fulfil a mission that only he could fulfil: to hold up a symbolic mirror to the Germans in which they might recognize themselves.

Even before Oswald Spengler coined the adjective "faustian," which became almost synonymous with the peculiarly German quality of boundless striving, Faust had generally been accepted as a valid symbol for the

German character. When Goethe hit upon the old legend of the magician and charlatan Faustus, who made a pact with the devil in order to receive all knowledge and worldly treasures in exchange for his soul, he was fully aware of the symbolic possibilities inherent in the folk tale and puppet play. It is surely not accidental that Germany's greatest man of letters worked on his tremendous Faust poem all his life; and the unique popularity of the completed work is ample evidence that the Germans have identified themselves with the fate and aspirations of the never-satisfied doctor who wished to know and to see and to accomplish everything under the sun.

ACCEPTING the thesis that Faust is a German symbol to a high degree, Thomas Mann has undertaken the rather pretentious task of increasing the symbolic validity. He has added where Goethe seemed to fall short: his Leverkuehn is not a medical doctor or a philosopher or a magician; ~~he is a musician, a composer.~~ Music, according to Mann, is demonic territory; modern anthropologists and psychologists, from Nietzsche to Freud, would seem to bear him out, considering the musical origin of dance and



**THE AUTHOR:** Sizing up the world today from his pale yellow, modern house in Pacific Palisades, California, Thomas Mann paints a broad, dark canvas. "We are living at an end time in the midst of a process that is about to dissolve bourgeois culture and society. War could only hasten that dissolving and revolutionizing process in a most catastrophic manner, and everybody ought to understand that the American way of life, in defense of which that war would allegedly

be waged, would certainly perish in it without leaving as much as a trace." Until 1933, when he went to Switzerland to finish the first volume of the "Joseph" tetralogy, his life was happy—compounded of wealth, social position, fame, and a large, devoted family. With the success of his first novelette, "Gefallen," in 1894, written surreptitiously in an insurance office to which he was apprenticed, he gladly quit business for study and a carefree year in Rome. There he began "Buddenbrooks," whose inspiration was his big childhood home in Lübeck. It sold more than 1,000,000 copies, was widely translated, and finally burned by Hitler. A Davos sanatorium, where he stayed briefly with his amanuensis-wife in 1912, inspired "The Magic Mountain," completed in 1924. Meanwhile "Death in Venice" appeared—like "Tonio Kroeger," in 1903, and the current "Doctor Faustus," an analysis of genius. World War I provoked "Reflections of a Non-Political Man," a role he held to until 1936 over protests of his clamorously anti-Nazi brother Heinrich and eldest children, Erica and Klaus. His denunciation of the Third Reich that year cost him his German citizenship and an honorary doctorate. He responded with fire in "An Exchange of Letters." Migrating here in 1938, he spoke earnestly for democracy. "For reasons of power politics," he now says sadly "official America has ceased to consider Fascism an enemy but, rather, a potential ally against Communism . . . a most unfortunate constellation, which must be held largely responsible for the overall failure of our occupation policy."

—R. G.

\*DOCTOR FAUSTUS: *The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuehn as Told by a Friend.* By Thomas Mann. Translated from the German by H. T. Lowe-Porter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948. 500 pp. \$3.50.

drama and its connection with early religious rites and tribal customs. Music is anti-rational, morally indifferent. Goethe, representative of the German spirit as he may be in other respects, was not very much interested in music; and, since music undoubtedly constitutes the most overwhelming and characteristic German achievement, Goethe and his non-musical Faust are not entirely representative of the German character. In his speech on "Germany and the Germans" (1945) Thomas Mann said: "It is a great fault of the legend and poem, that they do not link Faust with music. He should be a musical person, a musician."

In a world as complicated and specialized as ours no man can hope to branch out in as many fields and activities as Dr. Faust has done. Goethe has often been called the last universal mind of the Western World, and the catalogue of Faust's deeds is, indeed, well matched by his creator's activities. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have forced professional limitations on man without which even the most gifted genius would remain an amateur. It is a life job in our days to know one's field fully. Consequently, Thomas Mann—who, unlike Goethe, is not a prime minister or a theatre manager or a scientist—has made his Leverkuehn a musician and nothing else—except perhaps an unusually intelligent and mentally alert musician whose mind explores the limits of our modern physical experience. Leverkuehn is as much interested in unknown organic ocean life as in the astronomical facts of the universe, just as Faust would be if he were to explore the macrocosm today.

Martin Luther threw his ink-well at the devil and Goethe's Mephistopheles put in a very real physical appearance, but Leverkuehn's pact with the devil is, of course, an affair of his mind, a day-dreaming feat recorded in a letter, and entirely within the limits of modern psychology. The pact is not a real pact either; it is only the confirmation of the composer's previous determination to forgo human relations such as warmth and love for the sake of creative inspiration. No doubt this is only a new variation of Mann's old artist-bourgeois conflict, most eloquently voiced by Tonio Kroeger in his desperate perception that, in order to create, he would have to stand aside and let life go by. "Thou shalt not love!" is the price Adrian Leverkuehn is ready to pay, in return for which he is granted twenty-four years of the most exalted musical creation conceivable. Eleven compositions are the fruits which, incidentally, parallel in masterful fashion

the whole development of modern music, from the first impressionistic orchestra piece, "Phosphorescence of the Sea," to the last oratorio, significantly named "Doctor Faust's Lament." Having completed his last and most monumental work, Leverkuehn pays the price: the devil takes him, i.e., his latent insanity violently breaks out, and, after being temporarily confined to an asylum, he lingers on as a human wreck until his physical death in 1940.

If one concedes the demoniacal character of music as such, the conclusion is inescapable that a nation which has given the world its greatest music is more threatened by demonic forces than any other. As Thomas Mann would put it, such a nation must pay for its achievement in another sphere. It is the social and political sphere that suffers most. And is not Germany's history, with her abundance of brilliantly creative minds, a sad example of her equally characteristic inability to compromise in life and to get along with others? When Germany surrendered to Hitler and his loud-mouthed promises for world domination, did not the devil take her soul? When Leverkuehn renounced human warmth and affection in order to enjoy the most exalted creativeness in arrogant isolation, was he not symbolic of a nation that forfeited in a blind stupor of intoxication the love of all other countries in order to dominate the world? Is not Leverkuehn Germany?

THAT Adrian Leverkuehn should really represent Germany, something else is needed besides modernizing Faust's pact with the devil and making him a musician. He has to be tinted with the iridescent and seductive color of romanticism. To be sure, at the beginning of the last century, there was a wave of romanticism all over Europe, and the trend was by no means restricted to Germany. Yet the Germans have always considered it their most characteristic invention—not without reason, because in no other country has the anti-rational, death-celebrating movement of romanticism left so deep and lasting an imprint. The untranslatable quality of German *Innerlichkeit*, for instance, the lyricism and musicality of the German soul, the longing for death and inclination toward suicide, in short, everything that seems so unmistakably German, is it not in the last analysis romantic? The great Germans of the last hundred years—Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, Freud, Mann—are they not deeply rooted in romanticism? Does not a direct road lead from the superman of Nietzsche to the master race of Hitler? Was not

## My Current Reading

Thomas Mann, whose "Doctor Faustus" will probably soon be on everyone's reading list, has on his own desk:

DICHTUNG UND WAHRHEIT, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

SOME PLAYS, by William Shakespeare

GREGORIUS AUF DEM STEIN, by Hartman von Aue

THE KING AND THE CORPSE, by Heinrich Zimmer, edited by Joseph Campbell (Pantheon)

APE AND ESSENCE, by Aldous Huxley (Harper)

TOWARD WORLD PEACE, by Henry A. Wallace (Reynal & Hitchcock)

THE ROOSEVELT I KNEW, by Frances Perkins (Viking)

THE PLAGUE, by Albert Camus (Knopf)

A LITTLE TREASURY OF AMERICAN POETRY, edited by Oscar Williams (Scribner)

MUSIC HERE AND NOW, by Ernst Krenek (Norton)

the latter, incidentally, an ardent admirer of that other great post-romanticist, Wagner?

One knows that the German dictator used to visit Nietzsche's sister in Weimar and, although it is extremely questionable that he ever read or comprehended the life-glorifying works of the sick philosopher, the affinity of Nazism to misunderstood Nietzscheism is a matter of history. In short: Nietzsche is not only the most potent heir of the romantic spirit in modern times but his very personality is representative of the German character; to know him means to understand Germany. And this is the reason why Leverkuehn must be Nietzsche, too.

In a speech on "Nietzsche in the Light of Modern Experience" (1947), Thomas Mann has masterfully evaluated the influence of the German philosopher. Delivered after the completion of "Doctor Faustus," the speech is in several respects a commentary on Leverkuehn, too:

In the last analysis there are but two mental and inner attitudes, an esthetic and a moral one, and Socialism is a strictly moral way of looking at the world. Nietzsche, on the other hand, was the most complete and unredeemable esthete known to the history of the human mind, and his premise which contains his Dionysian pessimism, i.e., that life can be justified only as an esthetic phenomenon—applies most exactly to himself, to his life, and to his work as a thinker and poet.

Leverkuehn is an artist, a musician,