(Im)material Devils: The Question of Responsibility in the Holocaust in Thomas Mann’s <em>Doctor Faustus</em>

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“…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 gone astray, good Germany in misfortune, in guilt, in ruin.”

During the sixteenth century, along with the rise of Lutheranism, a story arose about a man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and adventure beyond human limit. This story of Doctor Faustus, written by an unknown author, was simple, direct, and unquestionably moral. The devil was an actual, embodied creature, the pact explicit, and Faustus’ end, detailed and horrible. Since the original chapbook was published in 1587, multiple treatments of this theme have appeared, sometimes to send the same message, sometimes to portray something quite different. Perhaps the most well-known are those by Christopher Marlowe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Thomas Mann. While all of these accounts offer rich materials for contrast and comparison with the original story of 1587, it is Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* that will be considered.

In Mann’s version, the devil is no longer a distinctly external and independent being from Faustus, but rather is (most likely) an internally existing devil, a product of the main character’s own mind. This seemingly minor change in the original plot has a significant effect on the overall theme and message of the novel. Mann uses this mechanism to send a message about the issue of responsibility by the educated classes for the Nazi rise to power and the abuses it inflicted. For Mann, their lack of involvement, or even concern for, Nazi oppression is an implicit acceptance. It is easy to blame those who had a direct hand in the atrocities: Goebbels, Himmler, Eichmann; the guards, soldiers, and secret police carrying out orders on every level, etc. This amounts to an explicit pact with the devil himself in the form of Adolf Hitler. However, according to Mann, responsibility also lies with those of the educated classes who felt themselves above involvement in and concern for social and political matters. This separation of the cultural and political, Mann indicates, had deadly consequences. They, too, had a pact with the devil, but one that had to be characterized in a different way.

In order to elaborate on the question of responsibility and the pact, one must first understand both the parallels between Mann’s version and the original chapbook of 1587, as well as the ways in

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which they diverge. That Mann aligns his *Doctor Faustus* with the tradition of the 1587 chapbook and not with that other monument of German literature, Goethe’s *Faust*, is clear. Besides the fact that Mann takes on the Latinized version of the name for his title (the chapbook is titled *The Vita and Historia of Doctor Faustus*), many other striking parallels exist. For example, the main characters, Adrian Leverkühn and Johann Faustus, have several characteristics in common. Referring to Doctor Johann Faustus’ parents, the unknown author of the chapbook says, “When they later perceived in Faustus his excellent *ingenium* and *memoria*, it did most assuredly trouble them…” The Faustus of 1587 had a quick, intelligent mind, and had begun studying theology, but he had “laid the Holy Scriptures behindst the door and under the bench,” turning to magic instead. Leverkühn is described in almost the exact same words. During his conversation with Leverkühn in *Doctor Faustus*, the devil says to him,

> From early on we had an eye on you, on your quick, arrogant head, your mighty *ingenium* and *memoriam*. They have made you study theology, as your conceit devised it, but you would soon name yourself no longer of theologians, but put the Good Boke under the bench and from then on stuck with figures, characters, and incantations of music, which pleased us not a little.⁴

These comments in both versions indicate that while they were extremely intelligent, this intelligence had a diabolical undercurrent or direction. Both figures have a tendency toward theology, but in both, this later turns into a tendency toward speculation, toward examining and participating in that which lies beyond the boundaries of man’s God-given capabilities. For Doctor Faustus, it is magic and sorcery; for Leverkühn, it is music. While music may initially seem an odd replacement for magic, Mann explains the connection in the following way:

> Music is a demonic realm…Music is calculated order and chaos-breeding irrationality at once, rich in conjuring, incantatory gestures, in magic of numbers, the most unrealistic and yet the most impassioned of arts, mystical and abstract. If Faust is to be the representative of the German soul, he would have to be musical, for the relation of the German to the world is abstract and mystical, that is, musical…⁵

There are multiple other parallels, such as the fact that in both versions, the terms of the pact indicate that the characters will have a period of twenty-four years to enjoy their diabolically enhanced existence. One other striking parallel is the speech that each character gives as he nears the end of his twenty-four year period. Both Leverkühn and Faustus gather their friends about them for the purposes of explaining the means by which they have made such extraordinary achievements: their pact with the devil. The purpose seems to be both a confession and a warning.

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³ *ibid.*, p. 23.
⁵ Mann, Thomas. “Germany and the Germans.” P. 5.
That Mann chooses to take on the structure of the 1587 chapbook rather than that of Goethe’s *Faust* is significant. It brings the reader back to a very important period in German culture, one which Mann indicates is the beginning of the German struggle which culminated in Nazi Germany, the beginning of that fatal separation between the cultural and the political. He wants to make an explicit connection back to the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation. He does this not only by taking on the structure of the chapbook, but also by making numerous references throughout the novel back to the sixteenth century, drawing an even tighter parallel between the time in which his story takes place and the Reformation. In his speech entitled, “Germany and the Germans” Mann says of Luther, “He was a liberating hero,—but in the German style, for he knew nothing of liberty. I am not speaking now of the liberty of the Christian, but of political liberty, the liberty of the citizen—this liberty not only left him cold, but its impulses and demands were deeply repugnant to him.”

While Luther was a great activist for Church reform, resulting in an entirely new sect of Christianity, he refused to support the Peasant’s Revolts because he “saw in it nothing but a distortion of his work of spiritual liberation…” and because he relied on nobles for their protection and support of his religious crusade. This major cultural event in German history in some sense set Germany up for the political failure it was to encounter in the twentieth century. It was the beginning of a certain aspect of the German spirit, what Mann calls, “German inwardness”:

> Or take that quality of the Germans which is perhaps their most notable one, designated as ‘inwardness’, a word that is most difficult to define: tenderness, depth of feeling, unworldly reverie, love of nature, purest sincerity of thought and conscience,—in short, all the characteristics of high lyricism are mingled in it, and even today the world cannot forget what it owes the German inwardness: German metaphysics, German music, especially the miracle of the German Lied—a nationally unique and incomparable product—these are the fruits of German inwardness. The great historical deed of German inwardness was Luther’s Reformation,—we called it a mighty deed of liberation and, as such, it was obviously something good. But it is evident that the Devil had his hand even in that deed.

Referring back to the time of the Reformation brings the reader face to face with Luther and his accomplishment. Mann has shown us in “Germany and the Germans” that this time period, this national phenomenon, changed Germany in many ways, and not entirely for the better. It was the “great historical deed of German inwardness,” and we see all of the other incredible cultural achievements which also have come from this particularly German trait, yet Mann leaves us with a feeling of unease about it, that this “German inwardness” has its feet planted not entirely with good or with evil, that it seems to share in a little bit of both.

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7 ibid., p. 8.
As for Goethe, Mann says of him that he “…represents well-mannered, civilized strength and popular robustness, urbane Demonism, spirit and blood all at once, namely art… With him, Germany made a tremendous stride in human culture—or should have made it, for in reality she was always closer to Luther than to Goethe”\(^9\). Goethe, like Luther, is a major figure in German culture, yet Mann chooses to tie his *Doctor Faustus* to the 1587 version as opposed to Goethe’s version. Obviously, as mentioned above, Mann wanted to point to this trait of inwardness which, if not originating with, at least came out most significantly in, Martin Luther. Goethe, while very German and indeed a precursor of that most German of movements, Romanticism, had something else about him that comes out in his *Faust*. Mann says of Goethe,

> We know how mild he was, how tolerant, what universal benevolence he possessed. We know his lifelong wish, ‘to do good to men,’ ‘to teach them to live’; we know his confession, that after every flight into solitude he needed but to see a human face ‘to love again.’ And the man of Faustian strivings and efforts, he too is ‘a good boy.’ Just as he means well by himself, and feels that he can be saved, so also he means well by humanity: he wants it good, would have it assisted, positively, lovingly, reasonably; would not have it bewildered, would have it satisfied.\(^10\)

This seems to demonstrate that Goethe, and in turn his Faust, have a certain worldliness about them, a sense of connection to others. Goethe and his Faust accomplish great intellectual deeds, but also have a need to return to the company and concerns of others. This is the very thing that seems to be lacking in Luther and in many other cultural idols and members of the German educated classes. This seems to be what Mann means when he says that “in reality she was always closer to Luther than to Goethe.” There are perhaps other reasons as well, but this connection to, rather than separation from, others in Goethe and his *Faust* seems one of the most significant.

This trait of inwardness plays an important role in Mann’s novel, indeed in many of his works. Art, genius, the intellectual and creative; for Mann, these have a taste of death to them. Again and again, throughout his body of works, Mann associates creativity and genius with decay, disease, decadence, and the diabolical. In *Doctor Faustus*, Serenus Zeitblom (our narrator) states that,

> Now this word ‘genius,’ although extreme in degree, certainly in kind has a noble, harmonious, and humane ring…. And yet it cannot be denied (and never has been) that the daemonic and irrational have a disquieting share in this radiant sphere. We shudder as we realize that a connection subsists between it and the nether world, and the reassuring *epitheta* which I sought to apply: ‘sane, noble, harmonious, human,’ do not for that reason quite fit, even when…they are applied to a pure and genuine, God-given, or shall I say, God-inflicted genius, and not to an acquired kind, the sinful and morbid corruption of natural gifts, the issue of a horrible bargain…\(^11\)

The artist, the genius, walks a line between life and the abyss, between order and chaos, and,

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from time to time, falls over that edge. He delves into that which has not yet been discovered, which lies latent in nature or in the mind of man, and tries to give it Apollinian form. As a result, not only is he often associated with the diabolical, he is also often cut off from human relationships—and thus from social and political concern for his fellow human beings.

What does all of this mean? What does it have to do with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust? We must now consider the major point of divergence between Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* and the original chapbook: the figure of the devil. Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator of the story, before recounting for the reader a written conversation between the main character (Adrian Leverkühn) and the devil, says of the exchange,

> A dialogue? Is it really a dialogue? I should be mad to believe it. And therefore I cannot believe that in the depths of his soul Adrian himself considered to be actual that which he saw and heard—either while he heard and saw it or afterwards, when he put it on paper; notwithstanding the cynicisms with which his interlocutor sought to convince him of his objective presence. But if he was not there, that visitor—and I shudder at the admission which lies in the very words, seeming even conditionally and as a possibility to entertain his actuality—then it is horrible to think that those cynicisms too, those jeerings and jugglings, came out of the afflicted one’s own soul….”

What becomes clear from Zeitblom’s statement, and from his reproduction of Leverkühn’s conversation with the devil, is that it is unclear whether this devil has objective presence or is merely a product of Leverkühn’s feverish mind. In the 1587 chapbook, the devil has an external presence, is conjured by Doctor Faustus, and presents the terms of the pact at the same time as Faustus signs and enters into it. In Mann’s novel, the devil is most likely internal, or if not, is only able to be seen as a result of Adrian’s illness. In addition, he does not appear until at least five years after Adrian has entered into the pact (by deliberately infecting himself with a venereal disease) to discuss the terms. Connecting this back to the points concerning knowledge and German “inwardness,” the reader sees that Mann is accounting not for the responsibility of those obviously responsible for the rise of the Nazi party, but for that of the people less explicitly implicated: the educated class, the intelligentsia.

What an internal devil does is raise the possibility of a latent predisposition towards evil, as well as to hold responsible those at whom it is not so easy to point a finger. This “inwardness,” characteristic of the educated classes and of cultural geniuses such as Luther and Nietzsche, serves as a predisposition. The devil exists not externally, in the body of one or another person, but internally, in the hidden potential of an individual. The pursuit of knowledge and creativity in general, and in Germans in particular, has a tendency to separate one from his or her fellow human beings and human concerns. This separation leads to a lack of concern for or participation in politics, whether intentional

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12 Mann, Thomas. *Doctor Faustus.* P. 221.
or not.

The question of responsibility comes in when one realizes that Mann sees lack of action or concern as a way of condoning something—"To be apolitical simply means to be anti-democratic; but we scarcely realize, save in a crisis, what a suicidal position the mind has thus taken."[13] For Mann, the separation of culture from politics, of the intellectual from his fellow humans, has dire consequences, and is one of the main contributing factors to the rise of the Nazi party. Many, such as Leni Riefenstahl, claim that the artist has nothing to do with politics, yet Mann gives an interesting argument for this. He states in “The War and the Future,” “If politics had nothing to do with art, art nothing with politics, should I be here today? I should be in Germany, in my house in München; and the Nazis would let the German public read my books…”[14] Written in 1940, this lecture was given around the U.S. after Thomas Mann moved there permanently and became a citizen. In his novel, these ideas of inwardness and of responsibility come out in a striking way.

Throughout the novel, the life and fate of Leverkühn unquestionably parallels that of Friedrich Nietzsche. Specific episodes in Leverkühn’s life, such as when a porter in Leipzig takes him to a brothel rather than a restaurant and Leverkühn plays a few bars on the piano before fleeing, are lifted directly from the life of Nietzsche. In addition, the reader must note the physical suffering of Leverkühn, both his migraines and retching as well as his “infection” from a prostitute, closely resemble those of Nietzsche himself. Despite their physical suffering, both Leverkühn and Nietzsche were prolific geniuses, experiencing periods of incredible creative production. Neither had many strong social ties; Leverkühn’s friend, Rudolf Schwerdtfeger, steals the woman he planned to marry, just as Paul Rey married Lou Salome despite Nietzsche’s love for her. Lastly, both men were insane for the last ten years of their lives. Mann struggles to deal with the Nietzsche question, with the question of to what extent he is responsible for the effect of his philosophy on politics, throughout the novel and in several essays. The problem with Nietzsche (and with many others in the early twentieth century) is that he, like the men of the Kridwiss circle (representative of the German educated classes in the novel), did not examine the potential political implications of his ideas. Mann states in “Thinking and Living” (1941) that,

The most ‘desperate’ of all is Nietzsche; and he had good ground for it, for where is there a clearer case of the fatality hanging over Germany and her ways of thought, the inclination towards the intellectual abyss, at whose edge there fails all sense of the responsibility of thought for its consequences in the actual and human? Nietzsche was the creator of the most fascinating and colourful, philosophical or lyrical-critical invention of our time...But

in heroic self-contradiction he developed a frenzied anti-humane doctrine full of cherished concepts like power, instinct, dynamism, superman, blond beast; a naïve ferocity, an a-moral, triumphant ‘life-force’.\textsuperscript{15}

By embodying Nietzsche in the figure of Leverkühn, Mann can ask the question of his responsibility. Leverkühn as a result of his \textit{ingenium} and \textit{memoriam}, his intelligence, has a predisposition toward the diabolical. He is curious, a knowledge-seeker—he tends toward the abyss and away from human relation. This “inwardness” is handed down to him culturally from the time of Luther, and throughout the novel, Leverkühn notably has very few close associations. His deliberate infection serves as the signing of the pact, and adds to his already-frail constitution, linking up, once again, disease and the diabolical with creative genius. Out of this, he creates original compositions whose musical ideas push against the limits of the known and acceptable. At the same time, his own achievements, periods of ill health, and eventual permanent decline mirror the events happening in Germany during the time of which, and in which, Serenus Zeitblom writes. In this way, a connection is made, although indirect, between his own activities and the fate of Germany. Thus, just as his pact and the devil itself lack a certain tangibility, so does the impact of his work on the political situation.

Turning back to Nietzsche, this characterization of the pact and the devil work well to illuminate the question of his responsibility, and of the responsibility of intellectuals in general. He, too, tended toward the abyss, toward giving form to new ideas, and thus was in a great sense separate from humanity. According to Mann, he never thought about the potential political implications of his philosophy. Thus, his deal with the devil was indirect; he had no explicit hand in Nazism (unlike his sister). His devil was not Hitler or Goebbels or his sister; it was himself and his genius. His lack of concern for the political amounts to conspiring with the enemy (the Nazis). While he never could have known the ways in which his philosophy was to be exploited by the Nazis, it was still there to be exploited.

To say that Mann outright condemns Leverkühn, Nietzsche, and the intellectuals of Germany, however, I think would be false. For Leverkühn, the reader feels pity rather than condemnation. He suffered greatly in his life for his gifts, and one can assume he will suffer only more so after his death. Several times in the novel, he seems to seek some way of redeeming himself, as when Zeitblom says, “Art is mind, and mind does not at all need to feel itself obligated to the community, to society…Doubtless that was also the natural opinion of Adrian. But it pleased him to deny it…If only there had not been that trembling in his voice when he spoke of the need of art to be redeemed, of art being \textit{per du} with humanity!”\textsuperscript{16} In the case of Nietzsche, Mann does condemn him for the role his


\textsuperscript{16} Mann, Thomas. \textit{Doctor Faustus}. P. 322-323.
writings played in National Socialism and the Holocaust, but he also sees another side of it:

We should not let ourselves be deceived: Fascism as a trick to capture the masses, as the ultimate vulgarity and the most miserably anti-cultural loggerheadedness that ever made history, is foreign to the very depths of that man’s spirit for whom everything centered around the query: ‘What is noble?’; fascism lies completely beyond his power of imagination, and that the German middle-class should have confused the Nazi assault with Nietzsche’s dreams of a barbarism to renew civilization, was the clumsiest of all misunderstandings.

This reflects in Mann also a sense of Nietzsche’s lack of responsibility, and perhaps can be extrapolated to apply to the educated classes in general.

Mann speaks of this issue as a purely German one, the result of a particular mindset and a tendency to separate the cultural from the political. Leverkuhn (and especially the devil) is distinctly German in his background and in the relationship between the course of his life and the fate of Germany, as well as Nietzsche’s personal fate. Mann also speaks in the particular context of the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust. Yet, what, if anything, can we take from this? It cannot be that the intellectual must consider the political implications of his work before creating it; to do this would be to limit it. It is impossible to know how one’s work will be taken, whether it will be distorted or preserved or misunderstood and misapplied. Had Nietzsche never written because of the potential results of his words, the world also would have missed out on much that was great and life-affirming. But not only is the devil outside of us, it is now also inside, a latent potentiality, a tendency toward the divorcing of culture and politics and thus the intellectual from the human. Maybe it is going too far to suggest that the great cultural figures of our time should not produce what may have a negative political effect. But it does seem reasonable to suggest that culture is no higher than politics, that politics can no longer be regarded as beneath the educated classes. Mann reminds us of “…a Germany which in the end has not been saved by all of its music and all of its intellectualism from surrender to the lowest form of worship of power”.

\[17\] ibid., p. 95
\[18\] Mann, Thomas. “Culture and Politics.” P. 229.