



*European
Literature
and Theology
in the Twentieth
Century*

Edited by David Jasper
and Colin Crowder

STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND RELIGION

European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century

Ends of time

Edited by

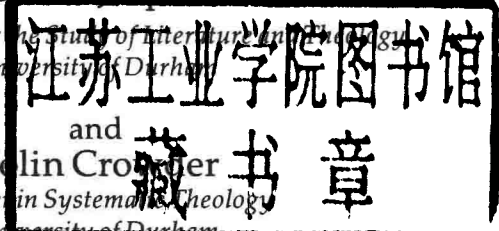
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First published 1990

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
WBC Ltd, Bristol and Maesteg

Typeset by Vine & Gorfin Ltd
Exmouth, Devon

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
European literature and theology in the 20th century:
ends of time – (Studies in literature and religion).

1. European literatures, ca 1850–1974. Special
themes: Religion – Critical

I. Jasper, David, 1951– II. Crowder, Colin III. Series
809'.93382

ISBN 0-333-51666-4 (hardcover)

General Editor's Preface

This collection of essays is very much of and for its time. It traces the literature of the twentieth century in Europe through modernism and postmodernism to the point when the crucial question cannot be avoided: how does theology respond to the moment of the apparent collapse of coherence in language, meaning and reference, to the denial of logocentricity and the radical suspicion cast upon the whole Western metaphysical tradition?

The essays are concerned with literature rather than with theological debate as such. They represent a wide spectrum of views and religious opinion. And if hell, madness and apocalypse are never far away, there also remains the vision of God and redemption, recognisable within the sense of endings and wasted time.

David Jasper

Introduction

The papers in this volume were read at the Fourth National Conference on Literature and Religion, held in Durham University, England in September 1988. Entitled *Where The Wasteland Ends: European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century*, the conference addressed itself to a number of themes arising from the cross-disciplinary intellectual and spiritual ferment of modern times.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

The opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* indicate the central themes of this collection of essays: the mystery of time, past, present and future, and the problem of redemption. Eliot's own wrestling with these questions, both in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* (and in an important sense, as Michael Edwards shows in his paper, in the transition between them), is intrinsically significant; but it is also a sign of the artistic and theological complexity of the twentieth century.

The modern struggle for a redeemed present, a centre that will hold, has demanded a strenuous grappling with both past and future: to settle accounts with literary and religious forerunners (as Eliot attempted to do), to appropriate their meanings in conditions which threaten to be meaningless, is to heighten the questions of future, of eschatology and apocalypse. Meaning seems to be endlessly deferred, yet the transcendent may continue to break in, or simply (like Lawrence's Great God) ever slip away below our horizon. Within the postmodern condition appropriation and apocalypse remain the guiding, mutually defining themes of this book.

In our own times we seem to encounter the ends of time. First, there is the concern with apocalypse – the apocalypse now experienced as the end of time, but an end which is also a beginning

in the realm of origins. Second, there is the sense – in postmodernism – of the end of ‘time’ as a governing idea, a traditional category lost but perhaps to be ‘refigured’: time redeemed in and through creative art. Third, there is the idea of time’s end as its *telos*, its purpose, its transcendent goal.

The collection maintains a dialectic between the closing of time – even of the concept itself – and its opening up, between *closure* and *disclosure*. And this dialectic pivots on the possibility of redemption: in, through, but especially of, time itself.

Colin Crowder
David Jasper

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1

Music, Madness and Mephistopheles: Art and Nihilism in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* GEORGE PATTISON

Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*¹ is the story of the German composer Adrian Leverkühn, a story which, as the title indicates, reflects that archetypally German story of the legendary alchemist who bargained away his eternal soul for the sake of knowledge and power. Leverkühn, at least at first glance, is more modest: he only requires twenty-four years of supreme musical creativity.

The twentieth century, of course, is not the Middle Ages and 'we moderns' no longer hold with poodles who turn into Princes of Darkness. The book's narrator, Leverkühn's humanistic friend Serenus Zeitblom, shares our aversion to medieval demonology and, as he introduces the dialogue between Leverkühn and Mephistopheles (recorded by Leverkühn himself on sheets of musical manuscript paper), he asks

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. . . . But if he was not there, that visitor . . . then it is horrible to think that those cynicisms, those jeerings and jugglings, came out of the afflicted one's own soul. (p. 215)

Zeitblom is well aware that the whole thing may have been no more (but also no less) than a figment of Leverkühn's diseased brain, the first sickly fruits of a venereal disease contracted through a brief liaison with a prostitute. The possibility of such differing

interpretations of this crucial scene raises one of the central questions addressed by the book as a whole: does Leverkühn's destiny, as a man and as an artist, stand under the sign of a maleficent superhuman power – or is his unhappy tale the result of an abdication of reason and humanity for which he alone must bear responsibility? Is his musical nihilism, a nihilism which reflects the dark destiny of his time and place, the work of Mephistopheles or of madness? This question in turn leads on to the further question as to what hope (if any) may be gleaned from this story of downfall and ruin.

Zeitblom's Christian (more specifically, Catholic) humanism, for which Mann has, obviously, a great deal of sympathy is, equally obviously, impotent in the face of his friend's and his nation's capitulation to inhumanity. Is art, then, our last solace, a last refusal of despair in the very jaws of hell? Zeitblom finds some such aesthetic consolation in Leverkühn's last, blackest work, 'The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus'. He acknowledges that 'this dark tone-poem permits up to the very end no consolation, appeasement, transfiguration', but, he asks, may it not also express a paradoxical

hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair – not betrayal to her, but the miracle that passes belief. For listen to the end, listen with me: one group of instruments after another retires, and what remains, as the work fades on the air, is the high G of a Cello, the last word, the last fainting sound, slowly dying in a pianissimo-fermata. Then nothing more: silence and night. But that tone which vibrates in the silence, which is no longer there, to which only the spirit hearkens, and which was the voice of mourning, is so no more. It changes its meaning; it abides as a light in the night. (p. 471)

Yet it is hard to be satisfied with such an elusive and minimal aesthetic hope when confronted with the horror of individual and collective damnation revealed in Mann's book. It is especially hard since Mann himself suggests that there is something nihilistic about art itself, that art itself is at least partially responsible for luring the human spirit into the abyss of modern nihilism.

But if reason and art both fail us in the face of final catastrophe, what other resources do we have? Religion? Perhaps: there is certainly a constant religious theme in the book. Leverkühn's

Lutheran faith is emphasised throughout, and we learn that his first study at university had been theology, a study which he renounced in order to pursue his musical destiny. In the figures of Zeitblom and Leverkühn, and in the playing out of the relationship between them, Mann gives plastic form to the choices we may make in the face of ultimate hopelessness: reason, art or faith?

Let us begin with the temptation scene itself. We find Leverkühn residing in Palestrina, birthplace of the composer, in the year 1911 or 1912. He is sitting alone, recovering from a bout of the migraine to which he is prone, reading Kierkegaard's essay on Don Juan. Later in the conversation Mephistopheles himself recalls that Leverkühn had been reading 'in a book by the Christian in love with aesthetics', (p. 235) and lends his indubitable authority to the view that this Christian did indeed have a true insight into the demonic potentiality of music, recognising it to be

the most Christian of all arts . . . – but Christian in reverse, as it were: introduced and developed by Christianity indeed, but then rejected and banned as the Devil's Kingdom – so there you are. A highly theological business, music – the way sin is, the way I am. (*ibid.*)

These remarks suggest that Kierkegaard's essay will help us to understand what is one of the central issues of *Doctor Faustus*, the relationship between music and the demonic. The essay, entitled 'The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or The Musical Erotic', is to be found in the first part of *Either/Or*, a book which bears comparison with *Doctor Faustus* both in terms of its brilliant and extraordinary construction, at once literary, philosophical and theological, and of the way in which it sets out the complex interrelationship between art, ethics and faith.² The first part comprises a series of aphorisms, essays, a review and a novella, 'The Seducer's Diary', in which Kierkegaard presents what he calls the aesthetic view of life, that is, the attempt to base life on aesthetic values alone. He distinguishes a sequence of stages in this aesthetic point of view, running from the naively innocent allure of erotic love through to the fully self-conscious state of damnation and despair which he portrays in the figure of Johannes the Seducer. Using the Hegelian vocabulary which on other occasions caused him so much amusement he described this as the movement from the immediate to the reflective forms of despair. Don Juan himself stands as the ultimate

form of the first stage of the series, the very incarnation of immediate sensuous passion.

Further light on this can be found in Kierkegaard's early *Journals and Papers* where we find the stage of the aesthetic life discussed in terms of what Kierkegaard calls the three representative figures of Don Juan, Faust and the Wandering Jew. He defines these as the 'three great ideas representing life in its three tendencies, as it were, outside religion'³, that is, sensuousness, doubt and despair. Kierkegaard sees these figures (or 'ideas') as stages in a process by which the consciousness of separation from the divine ground (concretely: from the Christian revelation and the Church) is intensified and internalised. He also regards them as historically determined, corresponding to the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the Modern period respectively. They also correspond, in his view, to particular forms of art: music, drama and epic. The increasing divergence of religion and culture which had been held together in the medieval synthesis thus works itself out simultaneously on the planes of history, consciousness and aesthetics. The Don himself, as the ideal representative of sensuous passion, and musical form are in this way both seen as instantiating the immediate stage of this process. In the essay in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard argues (on the basis of the principle that aesthetic perfection depends on the absolute congruence of form and content) that Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is the supreme and unsurpassable work of musical art. Music, he says, can find no more appropriate content than this, whereas all attempts to deal with Don Juan dramatically (as by Molière) or poetically (as by Byron) will fail, no matter how well executed. Don Juan is immediate sensuousness and music is the absolutely appropriate vehicle for the expression of immediate sensuousness. By way of contrast to Don Juan, Kierkegaard's Seducer represents the completely reflective pole of aesthetic self-destruction. Like Baudelaire, he is a man who never forgets himself, a man without immediacy.⁴ His seductions are not like those of the amorous Don – not the outcome, that is, of a sheer, overwhelming superabundance of sensuous passion, but are carefully planned, highly intellectual conquests, in which the interesting rather than the voluptuous, animal delights of seduction are what is sought.

There are both striking similarities and equally striking differences between Kierkegaard and Mann in all this. Whereas Kierkegaard identifies music exclusively with the immediate

sensuousness of erotic passion, Mann's musician, Adrian Leverkühn, is clearly no Don Juan. He is, in fact, much more like Kierkegaard's Seducer. He has qualities of intellectuality, irony and doubt which ought to exclude him from the field of musical expression, if Kierkegaard's definitions are correct (definitions which were, indeed, very much in accord with the general view of music prevailing in the nineteenth century). Like the reflective Seducer he holds 'interest' to be a higher motive than the warmth of merely animal sympathy (p. 70). Even his early works are plainly not effusions of youthful Romantic *joie de vivre*, nor even equally Romantic self-indulgent expressions of despair. They are instead characterised by a detached, critical and highly theoretical view of the nature and history of music. Although his first acknowledged masterpiece ('Ocean Lights') seemed to some to be a piece of orchestral impressionism in the mould of Debussy or Ravel, it was already regarded by its composer as out of date. Zeitblom describes it as a 'disillusioned masterpiece of orchestral brilliance' characterised by 'traits of parody and intellectual mockery' which are 'the proud expedients of a great gift threatened with sterility by a combination of scepticism, intellectual reserve, and a sense of the deadly extension of the kingdom of banal'. (p. 148) Even at this stage Leverkühn has no desire to carry forward the illusionism of late and post-Romanticism with its hypertrophied 'monster orchestra' (p. 147) but to return past Romanticism, past harmony, even past counterpoint to authentic polyphony. His intellectual conviction concerning the nullity of Romanticism is not, therefore, a sign of avant-gardism but of a tendency to regression, even to the point of barbarism. This tendency is also reflected in his fascination with ways in which music can be made to depend on linguistic and mathematical structures which are not in themselves musical. But what sort of sympathy or understanding can such a deliberate regression from the musical to the elemental expect to find? Granted, Leverkühn breaks through the sentimental lushness of late Romanticism; but breaks through to – what?

His father, we learn, had been an amateur chemist, delighting in experiments such as the dissolving of certain crystals in water-glass to produce eerie, colourful 'gardens' of chemical growths, resembling primitive plants such as algae but which are in fact totally inorganic. These 'osmotic growths', as Mann calls them, are used in the book as symbols of Leverkühn's own musical experiments, and are alluded to in the dialogue with Mephis-

topheles when Leverkühn remarks, 'I am to grow osmotic growths.' (p. 235) In other words, the music he is to produce will no longer be bound by 'the pretence of feeling as a compositional work of art, the self-satisfied pretence of music itself' (p. 234) but is to issue from that 'absolutely questionable' sphere where all differences between organic and inorganic, human and inhuman are blurred. Henceforth the conventions of music, and of reality, are to be regarded from the standpoint of irony, mockery and negation. 'Marvels of the Universe', one of the first works composed by Leverkühn after this demonic visitation, is pervaded by 'mockery . . . preoccupation with the immeasurably extra-human . . . a Luciferian sardonic mood, a sneering travesty of praise which seems to apply not only to the frightful clockwork of the world structure but also the medium used to describe it: yes, repeatedly with music itself, the cosmos of sound'. (p. 266) This is the art not of Don Juan but, in Kierkegaard's terms, of the Wandering Jew, a nihilistic art which, in the words of Kierkegaard's own philosophical mentor Poul Martin Møller, stands 'at the zero-point on life's thermometer', indifferent to the customary positive and negative gradations of good and evil which lie on either side.⁵

Leverkühn is no Don Juan in the personal sphere, either. The possibility that his descent into madness and despair is the result of syphilis does not indicate a life of sexual licence. It is, on the contrary, a unique event, brought about in Zeitblom's view, by Leverkühn's almost complete erotic innocence, his utter lack of experience and judgement in the things of the flesh. Normally protected by his armour of 'purity, chastity, intellectual pride (and) cool irony', (p. 144) Leverkühn is tricked into entering a brothel from which he flees as soon as he realises what it is. But before he can do so, one of the girls brushes his cheek with her arm. Zeitblom comments: 'His intellectual pride had suffered the trauma of contact with soulless instinct. Adrian was to return to the place whither the betrayer had led him'. (p. 145) Far from being indicative of habitual lust, the whole incident underlines and confirms Leverkühn's normal indifference to human relationships. Another example of this is his avoidance of the intimate form of address, *Du*, and his reticence in using the name of the person to whom he is talking. 'All about him was coldness.' (p. 12) The few relationships into which he is tempted end, like the scene with the prostitute, in disaster.

This aspect of Leverkühn's character can also be illuminated by

reference to Kierkegaard, this time to his discussion of the demonic in *The Concept of Dread*. The idea of the demonic presented here is not to be confused with the reckless sensuousness of a Don Juan, a drunkard or brawler. Its essential characteristic is what he calls 'shut-upness' (Danish: *Indesluttethed*). He distinguishes this from the way in which a poet or lover might be 'shut up' with the germ of a great idea or romance: 'The demoniacal does not shut itself up with something, but shuts itself up Freedom is constantly communicating . . . unfreedom becomes more and more shut-up and wants no communication'.⁶ This shut-upness is a specific form of dread, or, to use what has become an accepted English term, of angst, which Kierkegaard calls angst in the face of the Good. This Good is defined here as 'revelation',⁷ by which he means the self-knowledge and self-transparency in and through which a person is able to accept and affirm him- or herself 'before God', 'from whom', we may say, 'no secrets are hid'. Shut-upness, then does not mean merely a lack of sociability. It is rather something demonic because it is the refusal to recognise ourselves as we are in the sight of God, the refusal to reach out and make our own, in an act of fully self-conscious choice, the freedom and responsibility for which God has destined us. It is the atrophy of the personality, superbly described by Kierkegaard in his portrayal of the Emperor Nero. Nero, he suggests, is a man with the consciousness of a child, incapable of understanding, integrating or affirming his own personality. Trapped within the boundaries of a merely immediate existence, he is incapable of giving any kind of continuity to his life, and is consequently the victim of sudden moods of enthusiasm alternating with long interludes of vacuity and boredom, both, according to *The Concept of Dread*, characteristic of the demonic.⁸

The immediacy of the Spirit is unable to break through and yet it demands a breakthrough, it demands a higher form of existence . . . but it cannot attain (it), it is constantly disappointed, and he would offer it the satiety of pleasure. Then the Spirit within him gathers like a dark cloud, its wrath broods over his soul, and it becomes angst, which ceases not even in the moment of pleasure.⁹

Leverkühn, we have already seen, is no sensualist, no voluptuary like Nero, but Kierkegaard's account of the demonic shut-upness generated by angst in face of the Good applies as much to him as to

Nero. Like Nero he is constantly in search of a breakthrough to a different, higher level of being – instead he is constantly thrown back into himself and can only break through to the downward self-transcendence of regression to the inorganic and inhuman, the ice-crystal world of ‘osmotic growths’.

Although I have been speaking of Leverkühn’s character, it should be emphasised that he is, if anything, a composer first and a man second. It is precisely because of his destiny *as a musician* that he is unable to make the breakthrough from shut-upness, from the demonic, to freedom. In order to demonstrate this more clearly let us return to Kierkegaard’s essay on Don Juan, indeed to the very passage quoted by Mephistopheles himself.¹⁰ Here Kierkegaard argues that music does indeed involve the transcending of immediacy in the crude sense of a completely instinctual and unconscious life but is itself nonetheless essentially immediate and sensuous in relation to Spirit (that is, self-conscious subjective freedom). Only language, he claims, is able to function as a completely adequate vehicle for Spirit, that is, for the affirmation of ourselves as spiritual beings, endowed with freedom and responsibility ‘before God’. Only language enables us to express this responsibility in the literal sense of enabling us to answer for ourselves and thereby achieving revelation. Kierkegaard links the preeminence of language in this respect to Christianity, specifically to its triumph over the ideals of antiquity. In antiquity, he asserts, the sensuous and the erotic were not excluded from humanity’s spiritual quest, the goal of which was conceived of as the beautiful personality. Christianity, however, requires us to assume an absolute ethical responsibility for ourselves ‘before God’ which makes all sensuous and erotic considerations irrelevant. It is, then, from this standpoint (rather than from the standpoint of idealistic or Manichean asceticism) that the sensuous erotic principle is excluded from the central dimension of spiritual existence. It follows that since music is defined as the medium *par excellence* for the expression of this principle, music is also robbed of ultimate seriousness by Christianity. It is, in the Christian order, essentially profane, but, as profane, continuing to be determined by that power, Christianity, which excludes it and by this exclusion defines what significance it has for human adventure. It is therefore in this sense that Mephistopheles calls it ‘Christian in reverse’. ‘In other words,’ Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous essayist tells us, ‘music is the demonic.’¹¹