

## **Last Works: The Late Life Creativity of Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse**

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In this essay I discuss the lives and creative works of Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann in their later years as an example of late life creativity. I treat Mann and Hesse as members of a generation born circa 1875 who went through midlife during the First World War and late life in World War Two and after. I also present some generalizations about later life creativity and its significance.

Age, creativity, death, midlife, Glass Bead Game, Doctor Faustus

“Creativity doesn’t protect us from life; it helps us engage more fully in it, and helps us develop the opportunities inherent in life’s challenges”-Gene Cohen<sup>1</sup>

### **Hermann Hesse**

Hesse’s last novel was called *The Bead Game*. This work was as implicated in the historical changes of the nineteen thirties as Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* was to be of the nineteen forties. Hesse considered his new novel a contribution to a cultural and political critique, yet he was careful to retain its distance from contemporary fact. His alternative to the Nazi regime, which he had to accept while refusing to come to terms with it inwardly, was a utopian civilization he called Castalia. Using many of the themes and places of his childhood he invented his own alternative world to supplant a disintegrating culture

The Glass Bead Game itself is the cleverest and most original invention of the book. Conceived four years earlier, while he was still at work on *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the virtue of the game is that it is plausible even though it can never really be described. The nearest analogy is chess, but figures and moves are given various complex meanings which ultimately amount to a lingua franca that encompasses all human knowledge. It therefore simulates the creative activity of the mind in the process of cognition itself, yet, being a game, it is objectified. In describing the game, Hesse brought up many antecedents and analogies: the Pythagorean 'music of the spheres'; scholastic systems of philosophy; eighteenth century concepts of universal language; and especially music itself. Indeed, in the hierarchy of Castalia music is only one step below the Bead Game in the order of things and the Old Music Master one of his most touching figures. The protagonist

Knecht, the province of Castalia that is his realm, and the Bead Game as a symbolic construct reflect each other. Each is subject to hierarchies, each is designed to bring together disparate elements, each must arrange them in a pattern that reflects the image of the human mind in an objective setting.

Outside Castalia lay the world and a civilization with greater color than Castalia could display, but dedicated to its own destruction. Castalia, like Hesse, resisted the incursion of history, the European disaster, by creating its utopian antithesis. A counterpart of 'life' is retained. The utopia, Castalia, as an 'island,' required the outside world as its opposite. And in a strange ending Knecht became a renegade who exiled himself from that utopian 'island' he himself had administered brilliantly, entered the actual world by becoming the tutor of his best friend's son, and died in an ice-cold mountain lake.

The contradictions and uncertainties of Hesse's life were at least potentially resolved in his magnum opus. Contemplation, the secrets of the Chinese *I Ching*, and Western mathematics and music fashioned the perennial conflicts of his life into a unifying design. Hesse had formerly presented himself primarily as a man of feeling, yet in his old age he constructed a citadel of the intellect which contradicted this image.

The serenity Hesse found in his old age, with the help of Bach and Lao Tse among others, was therefore more than merely a bulwark against the incursions of history; it was also an attempt to find a nonsensual and hence unifying formula for precisely those antitheses in his thinking, writing, and conduct for which he has been both lauded and condemned.

*The Glass Bead Game*, published in 1943, was Hesse's last novel. However he continued painting and writing poetry and many letters until his death on August 9, 1962 at age 85. Among his correspondents was Thomas Mann, who nominated him for the Nobel prize for the *Glass Bead Game* and his other books. Hesse admired Mann very much and felt close to him although they were quite different as personalities.

### **Thomas Mann**

A great turning point in Mann's life came when the Nazis came to power in 1933 and he and his family went into exile in Switzerland to save their lives. One of the first people Mann contacted in Switzerland after he arrived was Hermann Hesse, who helped Mann and many others go through the difficult transition of exile.

In *Doctor Faustus*, begun May 23, 1943 at the darkest period of the war, when Mann was sixty-eight, he wrote the most directly political of his novels. "I was imposing upon myself to write nothing less than the novel of my era, disguised as the story of an artist's life, a terribly imperiled and sinful artist."<sup>2</sup>

Mann had finished the Joseph novels and was searching around for a new subject, but he had doubts about his capacity for further work. “Do I still have the strength for new conceptions? Have I not used up my subject matter?” He read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with his thoughts fixed on the Faust subject. “The whole thing has something forbidding about it; the difficulties seem insuperable, and it is possible that I shrink from the undertaking because I have always regarded it as my last.”<sup>3</sup> He realized he was

“right about the lineage of the barely definable idea, whose long roots reach far down into my life—and right that in my life plan, which was always a plan of work, I had from the start kept the treatment of this idea for the end. To myself I had called this work...my ‘Parsifal’. Strange though it seem that a work of old age should be placed on the agenda in youth—it was so. It is likely that there is a connection between this and my conscious interest, expressed in many a critical essay, in the late works of artists—Parsifal itself, the second part of *Faust*, the last works of Ibsen, the prose of Adalbert Stifter and Theodor Fontane in the latter years of their lives. The question was whether the hour had come for this task so long ago though so dimly sighted. Clearly, I felt certain instinctive scruples, reinforced by the premonition that there was something uncanny about this subject and that it would cost heart’s blood, a great deal of it to whip it into shape...how everything in it would have to be carried to extremes..This whole thing could be comprised in the cry ‘Let me try something else first!’ The something else which had the merit of putting off the other project for a good long time was to pick up and complete the fragmentary novel I had set aside before the First World War, *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*.<sup>4</sup>

He received a proposal from Bermann Fisher, his publisher, that he write a book on “Germany its past and its future.” Mann felt he would meet this demand differently from the way asked. He reflected that

the central idea of the Faust book was the flight from the difficulties of the cultural crisis into the pact with the devil, the craving of a proud mind, threatened by sterility, for an unblocking of inhibitions at any cost, and the parallel between pernicious euphoria ending in collapse with the nationalistic frenzy of Fascism.<sup>5</sup>

Mann decided not to write it as a novel but as a biography.

Assuredly, recollection of the sham autobiography of Felix Krull influenced me here. Besides this strategy was a bitter necessity in order to achieve a certain humorous leavening of the somber material and to make its horrors bearable to myself as well as to the reader.<sup>6</sup>

He decided to entrust a harmless and simple soul, well-meaning and timid, with the recital of the story. This was in itself a comic idea. But above all the inner position of the narrator made it possible to tell the story on a dual plane of time, to weave together the events which shake the writer as he writes with those he is recounting, so that the quivering of his hand is ambiguously and yet obviously explained both by the vibration of distant bomb hits and by his inner consternation.

That Professor Zeitbloom begins his narrative on the same day that I myself put the first lines on paper is characteristic of the entire book, of the curious brand of reality that clings to it which seen from one aspect is total artifice.<sup>7</sup>

It is the life story of a German composer, Adrian Leverkühn, born in 1885, who dies in 1940 after 10 years of mental alienation. A solitary, estranged figure, he “speaks” the experience of his times in his music, and the story of Leverkühn’s compositions is that of German culture in the two decades before 1930—more specifically of the collapse of traditional humanism and the victory of the mixture of sophisticated nihilism and barbaric primitivism that undermine it. With imaginative insight Mann interpreted the new musical forms and themes of Leverkühn’s compositions up to the final work, a setting of the lament of Doctor Faustus in the 16th-century version of the Faust legend, who once, in hope, had made a pact with the Devil, but in the end is reduced to hopelessness. The one gleam of hope in this sombre work, however, in which the personal tragedy of Leverkühn is subtly related to Germany’s destruction in the war through the comments of the fictitious narrator, Zeitblom, lies in its very grief.

Mann drew his inspiration for his interpretation of Schönberg’s twelve tone theory from T.W.Adorno.

What I appropriated from it in order to portray the whole cultural crisis in addition to the crisis in music, was the fundamental motif of my book: the closeness of sterility, the innate despair that prepares the ground for a pact with the

devil...I felt clearly that my book itself would have to become the thing it dealt with: namely, a musical composition.<sup>8</sup>

The composition of the novel was fully documented by Mann in 1949 in *The Story of a Novel. Doktor Faustus* exhausted him as no other work of his had done, and *The Holy Sinner* and *The Black Swan*, published in 1951 and 1953, respectively, show a relaxation of intensity in spite of their accomplished, even virtuoso style. Mann rounded off his imaginative work in 1954 with *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*, the light, often uproariously funny story of a confidence man who wins the favor and love of others by enacting the roles they desire of him.

Mann's daughter Erika, recalled that

Once, when we were still living in California, he said to me 'When one is old and due to die, there's so much that oppresses one. A great cloud of anxiety and melancholy overshadows my latter days.' That is what he said once, but latterly... the cloud of apprehension dissolved and lightened as the evening mist dissolves when the sky and the night have made friends. No longer did we hear him quote Prospero's dreadful words: 'And my ending is despair,' which used to pierce his heart when he thought of his own ending.

Death was gentle with him, and the last year of his life was illumined and warmed by grace... This grace was visible. Anyone who saw him toward the end of his life ...must have perceived the radiance that issued from him and illumined all his endeavors. He was, as is known, an accomplished speaker, a performer of the highest rank. Yet it is neither his talent nor his technique, nor the sum of both, that can explain the rare emotional force that emanated from him, especially toward the end. What touched and almost invariably captivated his audience was his personality, with all its secrets, its heights, and its depths, which, when one thinks of them in connection with a man of eighty, can only be called the hallmarks of grace.<sup>9</sup>

Mann died August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1955. In his funeral address Hesse said:

In deep sorrow... I bid farewell to the dear friend and great colleague, the master of German prose, who despite all his honors and triumphs was misunderstood by many. The

qualities that underlay his irony and his mastery of technique - his great heart, his loyalty, his sense of responsibility, and his capacity for affection - were for decades completely misinterpreted by the German public, but those are the qualities that will keep his work and his memory alive far beyond the span of our perplexed age.<sup>10</sup>

### **Mann and Hesse**

The correspondence between Hesse and Mann reveals their common mission as co defenders of the humanistic tradition in German culture. The two writers were well past fifty before they recognized their common mission and undertook a systematic correspondence.

By 1947 the superficial differences between the two writers had largely receded in the face of their fundamental similarities. Assured in the integrity of their own personalities and in the achievement of the work each was able to appreciate the life and accomplishments of the other without that personal and professional tension that had often disturbed their earlier contacts. To their critics they pointed to their underlying similarities their aesthetic playfulness and their mutual concern for the problematic condition of man in a world of shattered values. To those who objected to Mann's calculation and detachment Hesse stressed his personal loyalty and above all his capacity for love. To those who denigrated Hesse Mann cited the universalism of Hesse's culture, the humor of his style, and the perceptiveness of his mind.

Their last letters reveal the ultimate *coincidentia oppositorum* in two great writers who overcame extremes of background and temperament to embrace a humanism that acknowledges no arbitrary differences of class or ideology and which respect only the integrity of the free individual. Their sense of irony must have appreciated the fact that the two of them coming from opposite corners of Germany to lead such utterly different lives spent their last years sharing the common ground of neutral Switzerland.

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes the best comes last. Verdi wrote Falstaff when he was eighty and that opera is in many ways his best—certainly very different in style than anything ever written before. Sophocles wrote Oedipus at Colonus when he was ninety years old. Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens when he was seventy-eight; Frank Lloyd Wright completed the Guggenheim Museum, one of his masterpieces, when he was ninety-one and Michelangelo was painting the frescoes in the Pauline chapel of the Vatican at eighty-nine. Vaughan Williams went on to write a ninth symphony. He had his next symphony in mind, as well as a host of other ideas, when he died. Georgia O'Keefe also remained a font of energy, until her body finally

gave out at age ninety-eight.

Some writers may actually postpone their swan song. For example, Thomas Mann postponed writing “Dr. Faustus” for many years because he thought it would be his last work. However, later, after writing it, he lived longer than expected, and then wrote “The Confessions of Felix Krull.” Indeed, many long-lived creative artists have had more ideas, experiments, and projects in mind after completing what they originally thought was their final work

As Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse aged they both suffered from arthritis, sciatica, and other complaints and they shared these in their correspondence. Hesse was also troubled with declining eyesight. He gave up on novel writing after he finished *the Bead Game* at age 64. Mann continued writing right up to his death at age 80.

Later works tend to be more introspective, focusing more on inner emotions and experiences than on outer world scenes and events. Some observers note a greater attention to themes of aging and issues of death in late life works. Hesse and Mann transformed the crises of their last years into symbolic forms. So although performance in many areas of life may indeed peak in the twenties, the attraction to change media or domain, and thus contribute to society, may actually increase in later years.

There is no denying that health complications are a part of life for many older people and that risk of chronic disease or disabilities increases with age. But all around us, throughout history and today, there is evidence that the creative spirit can find expression despite age, obstacles, grief, and loss, and sometimes more powerfully in the process. Sometimes the best does come last.

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<sup>1</sup> GD Cohen, *The Creative Age. Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, Quill, New York, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> T. Mann. *The Story of a Novel. The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1961, p.38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.19

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.30

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.31

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.31

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.65

<sup>9</sup> E Mann, *The Last Year of Thomas Mann*, translated by Richard Graves, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958, pp.8-9

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.39

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