

The Dark Glass: Role of the Narrator Serenus Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*

- Arindam Maitra

Abstract: Narrative is the way a story is told and that very 'telling' implies a narrator. The role of the narrator is quite crucial in fashioning the simple elemental materials of a story into a new meaningful totality that is ultimately conveyed through that 'telling'. The voice, personality, angle of viewing and judging any event as well as even various limitations of the narrator, all become parts of what is being told, and as such leave contribution in shaping its meaning. In stead of simple representation of a mere sequence of various happenings thus what we get through a narrative is rather a strongly subjectivised version of the story, always betraying new perspectives and specific patterns. This is more so when the narrator himself becomes a character of his story and as such an inseparable part of what he tells. This paper seeks to study the role of the narrator Serenus Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's last major novel *Doktor Faustus*.

Keywords: narrative, narrator, mimesis, diegesis, homodiegetic novel, intentional and unintentional narration, interpolated narration.

Doktor Faustus, the last major novel of Thomas Mann, is often claimed to be his most overtly political novel, exploring the depths of the German psyche. But reading it, as anyone would confess, can hardly be called a very smooth and simplistic experience. It is both long and highly complex in structure. On the face of it, it is an attempted biography of a very talented composer Adrian Leverkühn. But the very phrase 'Mitteilungen über das Leben des ...' (9) itself, which literally means 'report on the life of ...', betrays that it is reported by someone and thus can hardly be a neutral objective account of events that occurred in the life of the hero. We witness the action, but only through the eyes of the narrator Serenus Zeitblom. He may himself apologise for bringing his own personality in the foreground (9), but we are to take him always as an integral part of what he narrates. Even the strange nexus between the life of the protagonist and the traditional figure of Faust, put forward by the very title of the novel, could not be established without the voice of the narrator. Thus to gain an access to the troubled personality of the protagonist, we must rely on what his biographer says of him, how he is seen by the narrator. This certainly demands due attention to be paid also to the role of the narrator. The narration begins after the story ends. Zeitblom begins to write on 23 May, 1943, more than two years after Adrian's death. Naturally, what he does is nothing but to traverse back down memory lane, to pick up different images as he can remember them and showcase them laboriously as well as his ability permits (on which, he repeatedly confesses, he himself has little trust), thereby presenting us a detailed picture of his venerated friend Adrian. But the

question is whether this picture is a detached one. The answer is obviously negative. Anyone having gone through the pages of the text will certainly affirm how deeply attached the narrator feels to his departed friend. He himself candidly admits: "Mir selbst ist jedes Wort brennend interessant, das ich hier schreibe ..." (45). He considers it a kind of a pious duty on his part to write this biography, so that the future readers may come to know of the gifted genius, to whom he was a life-long adherent. Certainly such a passionate attitude to one's subject matter is hardly apt enough to see and reproduce events as they were. What we readers get here from what the narrator tells is also an extremely subjective version, adding a personal hue to everyone and everything. Thus instead of any *mimesis* (showing), what we get here is necessarily a *diegesis* (telling), and that too of such a kind where the narrator remains quite involved in what he tells. He himself is not only a character in the story he relates, but also such a one whose presence is almost always felt. The very phrase in the title 'Erzählt von einem Freunde' (as told by a friend) itself indicates that in this homodiegetic novel everything is to be read as a personal version of a certain individual (the friend), and therefore the feeling, beliefs, personality and way of seeing and representing anything peculiar to that individual must be taken as an integral part of whatever meaning we extract through our reading of the text.

This is the primary reason why Serenus Zeitblom occupies such a central position in any attempt to interpret the novel. This middle class schoolmaster with his cool rationality and conspicuously strong emotion demonstrated particularly to his friend provides us the very glass, mirroring the complex personality of the hero as well as the entire action. So to try to do without him will result in nullifying the whole. Moreover, as any attentive reader of the text will agree, he provides us in a way a *Kontrastfigur* to the protagonist. We observe a host of easily noticeable complementary opposite features between the two: Zeitblom is rational, is fond of tradition and in general lacks humour. Adrian, on the other hand, is full of energy and creative imagination, is innovative and prone to convulsive laughter. The former's mediocrity, Catholic origin, choice of classical humanism as the subject of his study, stale married life, everything highlights this contrast to the very man he tries to depict. Putting these two contrasting figures together has naturally produced an additional effect in the narrative. The narrator has, of course, provided his own simple reason behind this: "Da überhaupt mein persönlicher Lebensgang sich mit dem des Meisters vielfach verschränkt, so wird es gut sein, von beiden im Zusammenhang zu berichten, ..." (14) [As my personal life is in many ways interwoven with that of the champion, it would be well to depict them both together, ...]. But Ilse Metzler in her dissertation "Dämonie und Humanismus: Funktion und Bedeutung der Zeitblomgestalt in Thomas Manns *Doktor Faustus*" is perhaps right in hitting a more significant point: "Man müßte sie zusammenfügen, um einen Menschen zu erhalten, in dem alle Wesenskräfte gleichmäßig zu ihrem Recht kommen." (Durrani 652) [One must put them together in order to get a complete human being, in whom all essential qualities reach their equal and right proportions.] What we readers should keep here in mind is that these complementary opposite figures are not merely

juxtaposed; we are to see and get in the life of one only through the eyes of the other. This naturally has its own effect in offering a new colour to the narrative.

There are two narrative strands that from the very first run together, giving the novel its structure. One tells us the story of writing the biography, which begins on 23 May, 1943 and covers roughly two years till the spring of 1945. The other is the life story of Leverkühn itself as it is depicted by Zeitblom, extending from the very birth of Leverkühn to his breaking down into the final mental collapse. These two time lines often cross each other, so that we get a kind of interpolated narration, in which the narrator, returning now and then from the story of the past to that of present, breaks down on one hand the even flow of narration and reminds us on the other of the very time when it is being told. This happens repeatedly in Zeitblom's narration, offering a new dimension to the novel. At the beginning of almost every chapter he returns to the present, expressing his doubt about his own competence for undertaking such a task (9), criticizing what he has just written (46-7), correcting himself (151), or drawing our attention to the length of the previous chapters (32) or similar stylistic features. These portions of the narrative may often seem tedious at first, but they also perform an important function as well. They keep the readers critically awake, making them aware of the limitations of the narrator. At the same time they remind us over and again that what we read is only one version of the story, seen from the perspective of a particular individual and thus should never be taken on its face value. This first time line of the novel, that is the story of writing the biography, no doubt provides here the frame narrative. But even any casual reading of the text is sufficient enough to reveal a much greater function it performs. Constantly it comes back to give us the details of the surrounding, the time, the very difficulties the narrator encounters in writing, his strenuous relation with his sons—details down to the making of the very morning tea by his wife, while he is reading the morning paper and a new autumn day outside briskly unfolding itself clearing away the mist of the night (232). All these are quite apt to create a verisimilitude, but at the same time it lets slip through his pen the events that were taking place in the *real* world outside. It was a historical period. After reaching its peak, World War II was then beginning to wind down, giving premonitions of an utter defeat and crushing destruction awaiting the whole German nation. Naturally that creates a harrowing effect, which by its constant presence in the background lingers over the whole novel. Here we also must keep in mind that the novel came out of press in 1947, just after the defeat really took place. After such a devastating experience of the real life world, even any mention of this was quite apt enough to make a chill run down the spine, especially when the reader is also a German. And just this happens when the narrator tells us “Das Vordringen der Moskowiter in unserer zukünftigen Kornkammer, der Ukraine, und das elastische zurückgehen unserer Truppen auf die Dnjepr-Linie begleitete meine Arbeit- oder vielmehr, diese begleitete die Ergebnisse.” (234-35) [The advance of the Muscovites into our future granary, the Ukraine, and the elastic retreat of our troops along the Dniپر line accompany my work -or rather, my work accompanies that

course of events.] A pessimistic gloom comes to overshadow the whole, establishing a subtle link between what the narrator intends to narrate and what he quite unintentionally lets slip through his pen. This pessimism, we understand, is quite natural for a person like Zeitblom. Neither his commitment to liberal humanism and classicism nor the dream he cherished so avidly of a heightened culture embracing a European Germany has anything to hope for in face of the Nazi rule. Instead there emerges in their hand rather a blatantly exaggerated and suffocating culture of a fiercely united Germanised Europe, which too is then on the very brink of its imminent collapse. Being a German he cannot help fearing the devastation and national disintegration awaiting the nation following the defeat of their troops. But, as he himself comments, "... was einige von uns ... mehr fürchten als die deutsche Niederlage, ... das ist der deutsche Sieg." (45) [what some of us ... fear more than the German defeat, ... that is the German Victory.] For in that case the existence of the suffocatingly narrow prison that the whole country has become for any liberal minded man will only be more prolonged, and the memoir he is writing can hardly see the light of day even in distant future.

But a sense of the uncanny is also in work at his other narrative - the story he consciously intends to tell - that of his gifted friend Adrian. As he introduces him in the very first chapter, the words that his pen betrays run thus: "... des verewigten Adrian Leverkühn, ... des teuren, vom Schicksal so furchtbar heimgesuchten, erhoben und gestürzten Mannes und genialen Musikers ..." (9) [... of late Adrian Leverkühn, ... the gifted person and musician of genius, whom the fate so afflicted as to lift up and so fearfully hurl down, ...]. With almost a spine-chilling shudder he recounts on the very first page of the novel, that is, before we have become well-acquainted with the figure of his hero except for his name, that at the end he went from the deep night to the deepest of all. This strikes the very key-note of the whole narration. Throughout it draws a close parallel with the self-destructive story of Faust, selling one's soul to the Devil in search of achieving something great, as a result thriving initially only to suffer horribly at the end, achieving the deserved death and eternal damnation. Everything is seen and narrated in the light of this old Faustian lore. A sense of something horrific and sinister is going to happen always accompanies the narration, the full knowledge of which makes the narrator often fumble, take the way of circumlocution in relating the story. The too personal nature of what he undertakes to narrate and his genuine sympathy for his departed friend often result in making him so tactless as to let drop some late information much earlier than when he himself thinks these were proper to be introduced. All these succeed in creating a shivering effect in his narration. The depiction of old Jonathan Leverkühn's (Adrian's father) study and little experiments with natural science took a form of 'speculation of elements' in the narration. Adrian's decision to study theology when he is still in the higher form of the school appears to his friend and future biographer as a shock, making him change colour (111). Theology itself is turned into 'Dämonology', the way Professor Schleppfuss is described to us, with his slight limping gait and tiny pointed teeth (135). The hero's decision to

return to music, for which, the narrator feels, he is foreordained, is welcomed by his friend with joy, but at the same time it fills him with terror (187). We are told of the hero's silent fascination with mystic numbers ('Zahlenmystik';151), a phrase that suddenly puts back a different light on the arithmetic diagram, the so-called magic square, hung on the wall above the piano in Adrian's room at Halle (127). It further indicates a bizarre though subtle link between magic and music that so troubles the narrator, as he witnesses a fascination to both in his friend. This connection between musical talent and the Demonical inspiration is repeatedly emphasized on by the narrator. In the young Adrian's knack in making experiments with musical problems on paper and inventing melodic lines by putting the chords together, his eyes see something uncanny (102). All these create the very ambience only in which we are introduced to the hero's coming in contact with the girl, Esmeralda in Leipzig- an incident that gravely perturbs Adrian's mind- and his long bizarre confession thereafter. It is this prevailing ambience that plays a crucial role in investing the both with a Faustian colour. The same thing happens as we are made acquainted with his last speech, introducing to a congregation of his friends his last musical masterpiece, the symphonic cantata "Dr. Fausti Weheklag". The speech, no doubt, betrays some kind of a resemblance to the last rambling speech delivered by the necromancer to a gathering of his students in the old sixteenth century chap-book, reflecting the very theme it deals with, but the parallel becomes at another level all the more obvious to us, the readers, because of the narration's so long dwelling on the same. As Zeitblom proceeds with the biography of his beloved friend, with the approach of these fateful events in the life of the protagonist his hand trembles. This trembling of his hand, we notice, comes back as a recurrent motif betraying the emotion of his throbbing heart, which accompanies his narration throughout in sharp contrast to his general pedantic cerebral style. But soon we understand his emotional perturbation is not the only cause behind this tremor of his hand as he is writing. The increased frequency of the allied air-raids and the massive explosions they cause very near his retreat also in their turn play a role behind this. Thus there we observe a constant quick shifting between the historical time and the chronicle time in his narration. He himself confesses this helpless journey to and fro between the time in which the narrative moves and the one in which the narrator, and expresses his wonder what may be the effect of that extraordinary interweaving of time-units on the readers he intends to write (338). He may continue to remain in the dark, but the effect becomes quite clear to us the readers. The en masse devastation of the war and a growing sense of finality it points to for the entire nation which he cannot help betraying, on one hand extends a gloom on the whole narration, and on the other his constant dwelling on the Faust theme while narrating the life-story of his hero reciprocally exerts its sinister mark over the historical time thus pushing itself into the foreground in his narration. This unintentional parallel between the Faust theme and the imminent fate the entire German nation was waiting for with a sense of almost freezing horror in the last days of the war creates veritably a new dimension in the novel. The narrator may

think these are quite irrelevant to the story he wants to relate, but his pen cannot help letting slip constantly the information of the ongoing war. He himself feels that the word 'historic' comes to fit with a much more 'sinister emphasis' to the time in which he writes than the one of which he intends to tell (339). The same feeling engulfs us too. As he expresses his feeling of relief that Adrian is safe from the terrific days they have to continue to live in, we cannot help turning our concern more to the destiny of the nation than merely retaining it confined to that of the protagonist. As the narration progresses, more gloom gathers. It rushes on to its end, as seems everything else. While the narrator is going to convey the last speech of Adrian, so pregnant with the Faustian motif, the historical time too surfaces itself, as Zeitblom betrays his feeling: "... in Endes Zeichen steht die Welt-steht darin wenigstens für uns Deutsche" (605) [... the world seems to stand at the sign of its end-stands there at least for us the Germans]. It is the end of April, 1945. Hitler is going to commit suicide, the Wehrmacht surrenders. At such a historical moment, when we are told that the thousand-year long history of Germany turns out to be unblessed and a road leading to nowhere, it betrays a feeling almost ubiquitous to every German national and thus the picture of Dr. Faustus, his hour-glass running fast out, gets aptly connected to this fate of the whole nation, whether or not it is so intended by the narrator. Thus the role of the narrator Serenus Zeitblom stands so crucial for any reading of the novel. His role is rather amplified and allotted a considerable space. With his feelings and reflections, fears and beliefs, apparent pedantic garb and hidden emotion, he stands as an integral part of what he narrates. Even his very ineptitude, lack of style and fumbling become part of his narration. The picture of Leverkühn as a modern Faustian protagonist is also in a way fashioned by him. He provides us the dark glass, through which we see everyone and everything. The apocalyptic impression with which the novel comes to its end obviously owes much of its gloom to the personality of the narrator.

Notes:

1. All the page references to the novel here refer to their occurrence in the edition of the novel published by S. Fischer Verlag in *Gesamelte Werke in Einzelbänden* (1981). See the Work Cited List for detailed citation.
2. The English translation would run thus: "To me myself every word that I am writing here is of burning interest ..."; translation mine.
3. One may consult Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* to have a detailed discussion on this distinction between the two. However, in Genette's view, since every narrative implies always a narrator, any narrative is necessarily *diegesis* (telling). It can attain no more than an illusion of *mimesis* (showing) to make the story real and alive. See the Work Cited List for detailed citation.
4. Osman Durrani has rightfully commented in this context: "Given this differences [between the two], it is not easy to see why they should seek out one another's company, except by virtue of their sheer incongruity" (Duranni 655). See the Work Cited List for full citation.
5. For the English translation of the original text of the novel I have consulted in general the excellent one done by H.T. Lowe-Porter. But as to impart the reader the sense of the original, she sometimes felt obliged to subtly depart from what one may call a word to word translation, for the sake of exactitude I have to rely on my own while giving translation of the sentences or parts of sentences I have quoted from the original text in this article. Translations that are put in square brackets are mine.
6. This long confession, written in a florid and old-fashioned language with a very small

rounded hand-writing in black ink on music notepapers, creates also in its turn a frightening effect in the narration, recalling in the mind of the readers the very language of Martin Luther and thus strengthening the parallel between the narration in the novel and the old Faustian lore. But the way it is introduced by the narrator as well as given the frame narrative also secures its such an effect on the reader which may otherwise well appear as a stylized account of the hero's dialogue with his own self. For the nature of the Archaic language used in this portion of the novel one may see the valuable article "The Archaic Language in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*" written by G. Orton. See the Work Cited List for full citation.

7. Osman Durrani (653) has used this phrase in a passing way to describe Zeitblom. But it seemed to me to be the aptest phrase describing his role in the novel.

References :

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008. Print.
- Durrani, Osman. "The Tearful Teacher: The Role of Serenus Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*." *Modern Language Review* 80.3 (1985): 652-58. JSTOR. Web. 5 April 2011.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. New York: Cornell University P, 1980. *Google Book Search*. Web. 6 June 2011.
- Guillemette, Lucie. "Narratology". *Narratology*. By Lucie Guillemette and Cynthia Lévesque. *Signo*. Dir. Louis Hébert, 2006. Web. 3 June 2011.
- Lowe-Porter, H.T., trans.. *Doktor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn As Told by a Friend*. By Thomas Mann. 1947. London: Secker and Warburg, 1949. Print.
- Mann, Thomas. *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn Erzählt von einem Freunde*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer-Verlag, 1981. Print. Thomas Mann: Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden.
- Orton, G.. "The Archaic language in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Mann*. Ed. Herbert Lehnert and Eva Wessell. New York: Camden House, 2004. 221-44. Print. Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*." *Modern Language Review* 45.1 (1950): 70-75. JSTOR. Web. 5 April 2011.
- Scaff, Susan von Rohr. "Doctor Faustus". *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*. Ed. Ritchie Robertson. Cambridge: Cambridge University P, 2001. 168-84. *Google Book Search*. Web. 6 June 2011.
- Vaegt, Hans Rudolf. "'German' Music and German Catastrophe: A Re-Reading of *Doktor Faustus*".



Silkworms

- Jasmine Anand

Many thoughts and hands
work behind you
silently
Dying in their own
wealth like a silkworm
While you bedeck
In the dearness of only
one!

