

*Translating Thomas Mann*

I

*Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit*, he writes, and looks at the sentence, clears his throat, and grins as he feels the tide beginning to well up behind the six words. It is the onset of that thorough and entire throat-clearing which he will later call simply *Hoellenfahrt*, Passage to Hell, the fifty page introduction to his longest book.

It is truly a passage to hell for the innocent reader.

*Deep is the well of the past*, I write, and my troubles begin, for my translation has killed the melody. *Brunnen* has two syllables, *Vergangenheit*, the German word for *past*, has four, and the line is a loose iambic pentameter. But meter is less worrisome than the music of association. For *Brunnen* can mean one of two things, *well* but also *spring*, and so it carries the burble of a running stream in its initial *br* and its tripling *n*'s, even when it stands, as it does here, for a partially filled shaft of still water, sunk into an arid hill above Hebron in Canaan, while *Vergangenheit* expresses the complexity of completed process, not our blunt and noncommittal *past*; *gangen* means *gone*, and the entire four-syllable package something like *finished-having-gone-itude*. His next three sentences are each as long as the one I've just written, and he is only warming up, for his second page has no periods in it at all; unlike Faulkner's monsters, though, this one has grammatical bones and indeed, an articulated ceremonial structure; it is an invocation, an incantation to Joseph, and gives the writer, composing it, that surge of self-admiration, those passionate yet mischievous giggles that will cause him to write, later, to a friend, that he has never enjoyed work as much as *this* "work of playful science," as he calls his biblical epic, alluding, almost certainly, to Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom," which is, in turn . . .

Take a deep breath.

*Deep is the wellspring of the long-forgotten* preserves the meter, and something of the elegiac, rhetorical tone, but *forgotten* is wrong; the past is not simply or entirely *forgotten*; it persists in its depth, a brown, indistinct residue at the bottom of the sunk shaft, a coin of

obscurity in the wrong end of the telescope. I can feel it within me, pinching somewhere in the alimentary canal, after all these decades not entirely digested and absorbed, and certainly not successfully eliminated: a speck of ash, a mnemonic sediment of shadows, Nazis Jews and Commies, cigars and nylons. When I wake from a nightmare I sometimes hear myself yelling in German, the velars and gutturals bursting in my throat. "We carried you out of Paris when the Luftwaffe was in the skies, I carried you in my arms through Spain and Portugal," I know, mother, I know. And now I am sitting, not at the well, but at an Atlantic Ocean of time, a continent away from the sun and surf of California. I'm a puny figure on the wet sand, waving, waving for a boat to take me home, a perpetual beginner despite all that "growth." Tired of my "retirement,"—this playpen for perpetual students—I have prayed for a ferry back to that Old World seriousness.

Take me back just one more time.

The boatman came in the most improbable form: as an elderly homosexual, an establishment icon, a stuffed-shirt warrior of the smoke-filled room, who wore a coat and tie to breakfast every day of his life, and could not express one simple thought clearly to save his timorous and ravaged soul.

He came in the form of Thomas Mann, and I have been obsessed, in the past half year, as never before by any author. "Where are my rhythms? Where are my melodies?" he would sigh, coming out of a session with Knopf's Helen Lowe-Porter, who produced the English versions; he yearned then to be a "real composer," writing in the one language that never needs translation. After reading *Dr. Faustus* in German I found myself tasting the first page again. "Just to review the beginning," I told myself apologetically, and went on to reread the whole diabolic thing, another hundred-hour ride, and not idling in a mental armchair, either, for I could not tolerate interruptions ("Please! I'm in the middle of one of Thomas Mann's sentences!") Reading a book twice in a row struck me as a shameful indulgence at first; later it came to seem inevitable: a Mann book simply requires two readings, and it would need many more to fully master its conceptual meshwork of living parts—themes, allusions—all the while munching sweets on the trees of language, mouth-watering delicacies, parts in which the whole is reflected, recursions to infinity, mirrors of calm water where one wants to

linger in the tepid violet air—for reading never gets better than this. And a hundred times I caught myself, in spring, summer, fall of 2003, mouth fixed in a silly smile, eyes nailed to some especially outrageous page, and those little tremors traveling up my spine. *Verdammt noch Mal!*—he’s done it to me again.

So I began reading hours of my favorite chapters onto cassette, learning how to let the prose work my tongue and throat and voice-box instead of merely my brain: an hour of that is a fine session, draining one’s energy and drying one’s spittle. Then I would listen to the tapes, often in the car, so that poor Joseph, thrown into the pit by his angry brothers, has become associated with a certain series of curves on Highway 17, on the approach to Silicon Valley, and an off ramp taken by mistake, the driver engrossed in winding tortuous ruminations on the self-limiting nature of human suffering, until brought to an abrupt halt in the delivery area of a Safeway store. I was expected at the airport. What am I doing . . . here?

And, finally, translation. It began with grimacing at Lowe-Porter, who, when she was not producing ugly English, seemed to be ironing out the great German’s verbose convolutions instead of trusting American readers with them. “I can do better!” Tackling my first paragraph cured me of that hubris, and taught me to respect her labors. Balancing faithfulness to the original with clarity or at least readability demands an agonizing decision on every line. Even the rate of 200 words an hour feels like an irresponsible rush. Yet the payoff is a hands-on grappling with the text, compared to which mere reading has come to seem like a spectator sport. Now I am smelling the bad breath of the words themselves, sweating with them, climbing up and down the ladders of dependent clauses, slipping over the alliterations, insisting, always insisting, for you can’t translate it if you understand it only vaguely yourself.

Rereading, declaiming the rhetoric with full throat, to the occasional snickers of my family (“there’s Dad, doing his Adolf imitation!”) and translating the untranslatable, I burrow deeper into the dark residue, the underworld where my own root-hairs still thirst for water.

*In the middle of the journey of my life, said Dante, I found myself lost in a dark wood.* It happens. The moment of coming to one's senses, and admitting that one has lost the trail, can be darkly memorable. But for many a pilgrim a much later moment comes when, after years of uphill, on many paths or on no path, but always with the view obstructed by brushwood, he breaks past timberline, and sees the valleys of origin spread out far below. Looking at the bigger picture, in this sudden sunlight, he may laugh and weep, seeing too clearly where he came from, and how disturbingly he has been changed by his blind, moment-by-moment pushing through time.

The biblical Jacob lived to be 106, in Thomas Mann's version. But his life was long not only in years; it was thick with significant event. When the patriarch, leaning on his staff, fell into a brown study, and his tender eyes, with the bags of jellied skin underneath them, seemed to be gazing into a distance too great for the comprehension of those around him, they would nudge one another reverently, overcome with awe. "Look! Jacob is meditating upon his stories!" At the young age of eighty he could already look back upon his flight from the cheated Esau, upon his twenty-five years of servitude under Laban, arriving in Charran as a penniless refugee and leaving, heavy with wealth, at the head of herds of cattle, sheep, and servants, four wives, and twelve sons; look back with pride and shame upon famous tales of war, trickery, massacre and sexual intrigue. Yes, he had groveled at the feet of Esau's son Eliphaz; but he had also been granted a vision of the actual staircase between earth and heaven. He had wrestled all one long night with an angel come down those jeweled steps, all night without being thrown, coming out of combat with an injured hip and exaggerating that limp, in his fine vanity, the rest of his life. He had loved young Rachel hard enough to incur the jealousy of his God, who is the only God, and then repeated the mistake with his favorite son Joseph, who had inherited her notorious dark eyes. God had wrathfully taken both, but there was much history yet to come, and Jacob's body knew it although his mind did not: that he would journey to Egypt to meet the gifted one, the miraculously resurrected Joseph, "my son Joseph, who is now 'Provider' for the Pharaoh" . . .

Stories! Layer upon layer of stories, lovingly researched and retold by a German whose Egypt, as he ruefully remarked, was the USA.

In Pacific Palisades, California he finished the colossal *Joseph and His Brothers* when, like the old Jacob of the first volume, he had already earned the right to ponder what he called “the torment and the glitter” of his vita, throwing back his head and staring into an inner distance with moist gray eyes: the distance from high school dropout to Nobel laureate; from the monarchist who welcomed the Great War of 1914 as a “glorious national cleansing” to the fervent enemy of fascism who finally deigned to cheer for democracy and even to give socialism a fair hearing; from his early infatuations with male . . . lovers? Companions? . . . to the respectable bourgeois patriarch and father of six, never really giving up the boys, either, but the closet so securely locked that his most passionate moments were in fantasy and dream . . . yes, he could look back, with Jacob, on exile, on a life of wandering in the service of an idea: driven from his native land as “un-German,” he will be driven from the US as “un-American,” McCarthy and Hoover doing the job once done by Heydrich and Goebbels. Meanwhile he enjoys a Venice Beach in the Golden State that knows no history, where sunburnt Tadzios body-surf, immune to death.

Here he writes his hottest, coldest work: the flaming, freezing *Dr. Faustus*.

What we offer you is *time*, the apparition tells Adrian Leverkuhn.

*Hot time*, he rhapsodizes, intoxication, we’ll put the red tingle of the sacred into your veins, but, of course, cold time as well, detoxification, gray melancholy, dry rot. Ups and downs, *you* know the story. You will have so much time, he promises the young composer, that you won’t be able to see the end of it—although it is a finite amount—and it is certainly too soon to consider the end that will come; in fact, you will never be quite certain when to begin to prepare to think about *that*. Here the scoundrel laughs raucously, as though he’d made a joke that he, only, can understand. Later, he says. Worry later. Look at the hourglass: almost all the sand is still in the top funnel. And see how very deliberately the rearranging grains release themselves into the thread-thin narrow, one by one.

Adrian shivers constantly during the interview, for his visitor is a chilly scholar. Yet the bait he holds out to the soul is *hot time*. Fastidious Adrian, freezing in the scorn of his own intellect, will buy passion from this doctor—the passion without which he cannot create.

I shiver too, each time I sit in on this scene, located in the dead center of the book. The uninvited guest is a cynical and educated demon, most invigorating to the intellect of his victim, who flushes hungrily, excited even by the cold core of despair out of which the taunts come. Worry about the schedule later, says the old warlock. Later, says time's pimpmaster. Look how slowly the grains are trickling now down the constricted throat of glass. Later, of course, it will seem that it has all emptied so very rapidly, and the end come so soon. What will the lived life look like then?

### III

It is this moment—when a man, past his prime, is revisited by his youthful hopes that seem so absurd in their presumption, so small and naked to his mature disillusionment; when some fatal juxtaposition gives him a shattering realization of what has become of him—that many of Mann's novels build up to, or place a magnifying glass upon; and like a Mann sentence, in which the author fully indulges the German language's tendency to withhold a predicate during a whole series of interpolated clauses, some of which themselves possess a considerably complex internal structure, asking the reader to hold the first half of the incomplete thought in mind until its postponed closure finally arrives, a Mann novel often requires an analogous willingness to hold a long breath, while a thousand pages set up, prepare for, and withhold the culminating moment, the moment of shocked reevaluation of all that has gone before. A short sentence is then like a thunderbolt. I have seen . . . this. Seen the way that time has changed me. And seeing this—that I am no longer the same—changes me, fundamentally, yet again.

Can this "prose" be translated? Making adequate concessions to what contemporary readers will tolerate in English—to the shortness of their syntactic breath, in other words—deprives them of a stylistic feature that is not incidental to Mann, but at the heart of what he is doing with those sentences. They are as much part of the landscape of time, with its thickets, marshes, and windy hills, as the plot structure of the novel we are reading, and the labor of climbing through pedantic qualifications, unnecessary rephrasings, and other redundancies that any American editor, schooled in Strunk and White, would red-pencil, gives us the very flavor of time's languor, and its tedium, and its thick, syrupy riches, so that participating in

the journey toward what I have called that “moment” of reckoning provided by the greatest literature—Marcel’s last party at the Guermites, Lear’s final meeting with Cordelia, Odysseus’ return to Ithaca—gives the reader of Mann what Proust, Shakespeare and Homer gave him by other means: his own visceral sense of having taken the medicine, paid the dues, traversed the time and earned what the protagonist has earned, leaving me wondering whether our shortness of syntactic breath does not correspond to a lack of stamina over the long haul, an inability to defer gratification long enough to see what can be seen at the eventual summit, where the exhilarating wideness of the view compensates, if anything does, for its sadness, its annihilating sadness.

That ecstasy of disenchantment comes in the form appropriate to each protagonist. Eastern thinkers talk of “karma” here: we get what we deserve. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the lion-king of German literature, ate his heart out for Charlotte Buff when they were both very young. It was hopeless. He had a law degree; she was a girl “of the people,” and long engaged to a very appropriate partner. The three endured a precarious and intense triangular “friendship” for several months, until Goethe abruptly departed. Two years later, in 1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* became an all-European best-seller. Literary sleuths soon identified the fictional Lotte with the real Charlotte, the oldest girl in a large household, who takes such loving care of her siblings. Miss Buff suffered considerably from the unwanted publicity. Goethe had idealized her as an angelic and virginal mother; in his novel, Werther shoots himself when he realizes that he can never have her.

But Goethe did not shoot himself after leaving Charlotte and her fiancé. He preferred to go on to become Germany’s foremost man of letters. With his fabled energy, he dabbled in science as well, all the while occupying an important political position at the court in Weimar. In 1816 the chief of his household staff brought a note from a certain Charlotte Kestner, née Buff. Could she possibly have an interview with him? The court was already buzzing with the gossip: “Werther’s Lotte” had come to see the old Goethe.

The widow and the widower had not seen each other in 44 years.

It is this reunion that Mann imagines in *Lotte in Weimar*. The title needed no translation, but Knopf translated it anyway, for market-

ing purposes, as *The Beloved Returns*. But not even a sultry cover could have given American readers easy access to what one reviewer called “the most boring of Mann’s novels.” The original title would have triggered associations as rich as our “Kennedy and Marilyn” in the readers Mann had in mind, who, in schooled reverence to their classic author, could rattle off lists of the famed womanizer’s mistresses, relating each of them to the works that she inspired. *Lotte* is one of the few novels in which Mann adopted the Joycean “stream of consciousness.” We listen in on old Goethe’s mind as he wakes, one morning, with an erection, of course, and reviews his celebrated career, floating for a while in the kelp beds of memory. The list I began, of the books I would have to read to get an inkling of what is going on, never got finished. Mann’s work is parasitic on previous culture, “culture” in the elitist, not in the anthropological sense; his stories are hothouse blooms grown from a compost of learning. His was a sedentary life, in which the most vivid experience was study. The average reader is faced with an access problem which mere translation cannot solve. A Mann book sends you to other books, which in turn . . . and Thomas, who intended to become the Goethe of his age, seems to have read all of them.

But when Charlotte sees what has become of her gallant, who once sat so well on a horse, and when this portly, wigged dignitary sees his angel with a Parkinsonian tremor in the dignity and indignity of her age, their meeting at that fatal dinner made me sag with the impact. There was much I did not understand; whole systems of allusions to other classic authors were lost on me. Like Joyce, like Milton: you do not have to understand it all, and there is always the prospect of the next reading, which might take you a few levels deeper; a task that is, luckily, never finished. But whoever has met a young love, met “the one that got away” a few decades later, will recognize what His Excellency the Privy Councilor and Frau Charlotte Kestner recognized in the protracted embarrassment of their meeting, when they took each other in with sinking heart, and tactfully suppressed their tears.

And that is the ultimate translation. Not from one Indo-European language to another, but from the literature on the page to its analogs in one reader: in his burden, in his covetous joy. Without *your* recognition, all that work would be in vain; but when the author reaches that place in you whence the moist sighs come, and the



sudden fist-thumpings, you know that even a great cultural distance can be bridged, and that you are not alone in dealing with the devil's gift of time.

#### IV

Deep? Bottomless is the well of the past. Inexhaustible, the spring that waters us with the not-forgotten, with what we thought we'd finished, *Vergangenheit*, the all-walked-through, the already lived. Translate it as you can.

For if my brain is the root-ball in the bone-pot of skull, and my world the tree that grows out of it, language must be the fiber. The matted neurons at the bottom of my pot are German, grandma's German, who read Grimm's German to me, Morgenstern's German, and tales of the mischievous Max and Moritz. I spoke a five-year-old's refugee German when my version of English was an enthusiastic babble of nonsense syllables. Today my second language has a college education; my spoken German never finished high school. Yet linguists say that most of the neural switches that govern our world-making are set by our "mother tongue." Every new syntax we learn, every new world we construct must be derived from it, a product of unconscious translation, as it were.

This was the unfair advantage that pulled me, recently, into the study of Goethe, Mann, and Rilke, for the speed at which I came to enjoy even the most ornate style was a great surprise. I'd neglected the language for fifty years, yet sensed an inner program guiding me across the intricate street map of the grammatical city I inhabited as a preschooler. And my nimble progress, as improbable as sleep-walking, raised uncanny familiars from a locked emotional basement. For we learn the syntax of anger and its suppression, learn to conjugate desire, and grief, and the irregular verbs of neurosis, along with our first vocabulary, learn to feel it when a bad step-mother enters a room, how a foolish peasant behaves in a German village, learn the castor oil taste of fear, the taste it will always have, perhaps for you, perhaps for me.

And Mann sets me thrumming with resonances more complex, chords that echo from one lived life to another, sour dissonances resolved by a virtuoso stylist into a harmony that smiles. But the smile is mocking and sad. The author's life and his stories interlock, commenting upon one another. Thomas Mann leaves his stifling

commercial hometown and renounces his bourgeois heritage. He goes to Munich to live the bohemian life of the *fin de siècle*; he will return to Lubeck after two world wars, to see what the allied bombing has left. Adrian Leverkühn, his Faustian composer, goes to a later Munich of the roaring Twenties, having had a mild scorn for his bucolic origins even as a small boy. In the naughty city he visits salons where timid, dyspeptic professors prate of the sacred naiveté of the Teutonic Volk, which is just hankering to throw off the yoke of Jewish cosmopolitan rationalism in an orgy of “cleansing violence.” Adrian might have met a younger version of his author there, for Mann too had his proto-fascist phase; by the time he is writing *Faustus* the “cleansing violence” seems to him an orgy of filth.

But no, Mann could never have stomached fascism. His early right-wing work, *Reflections of an Apolitical Man*, betrays him already in its title. He was an aristocrat, not by birth, but in his esthetic, happiest when he could build his houses of words in peace. He fiddled while Germany began to burn, and in *Faustus* he confesses and repents. His hero, Adrian, the character he loved best of all his protagonists, is afflicted with the nearly untranslatable *Erkenntnisekel*—the revulsion one feels upon “seeing through” a sanctimonious principle or practice—especially one’s own—to the ignoble motives or vulgar cunning that writhe underneath. Adrian listens to the professors with a tired superiority. He is elsewhere; he chills his friends, the few who recognize his gifts. They worry about him when he rents a studio, out in the sticks, from a farmer’s wife named *Schweigestill*—be silent. Strangely callous, he never again visits his birthplace, where his mother, in widowed stagnation, sees only an occasional newspaper snippet about her famous son’s esoteric compositions. Increasingly isolated over the decades, Adrian writes cruel parodies of the Romantic composers, and builds a music of cold mathematical rigor. Only Satan can sell him the heat that he needs.

But his old childhood friend, Serenus Zeitblom (time’s bloom) is struck by an oddity: the farm to which Adrian has retired is remarkably similar to his childhood home. There is the circular bench around the great tree in the yard, the same hilltop above a similar pond, even the same barking but harmless dog. And Frau Schweigestill is an unthreatening version of the mother Adrian has ignored and forgotten, with the same pastoral fatalism, the “cow-

like warmth” the composer loathes in Mozart, the double chin, the humble ministrations . . .

A clever boy flees his childhood, yet arranges its symbols around him, so that he may live and work in their mute reproachful gaze. Afflicted with *Erkenntnisekel*, he makes a deal with the imp in the hourglass: give me time. Hot time, to soar into the cold thin air of intellect. Cold time, to scorch me in the false heat of high art. In author, reader, and character the stories echo and interlock. Adrian mocks poor Serenus, stuck in the cow-like warmth of his classical scholarship, by telling him news of nature’s prolific and heartless evolutionary pranks, of the billion billion solar systems, of the red shift, and the exploding universe. Mann wrote this in Princeton, while Hitler was conquering Europe, and Einstein was often invited to dinner. Their conversations must have been bright with galactic light. In his diaries, Thomas writes with detached irony of his weekly radio broadcasts to Germany. Was he not just playing a role again? Basically, he writes, esthetic questions interest him much more than his dogged and dutiful “fight against fascism.” His main objection to the Nazis was, after all, their lack of culture. Their appallingly bad taste.

A decade later, another boy fancied himself equally clever, and thought himself much more original than he was. High on my first dose of college, I was telling my saddened socialist parents that universes were as plentiful and cheap as sperm in a cosmic ejaculation, that father’s fervent political activism was determined, as everything else was, by his “molecules,” that philosophy was an intellectual illness that could be cured by analyzing words. Was that stolid German matron, placid and bovine, waiting to take me home again, even then, implacable and gray as earth?

She waits for Adrian to collapse, at the end of his brief and fevered flight, and takes her broken son in, while I, in my sixties, as yet barely know why a novel by a pedantic and inhibited bookworm should be heavy as a loaded gun. Why I should sweat as I hold it in my hand? It is merely a book, after all.

But the translation has, evidently, begun.