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Frances Lee. *Overturning Dr. Faustus: Rereading Thomas Mann's Novel in Light of Observations of a Non-Political Man.* Rochester: Camden House, 2007. viii + 309 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57113-356-4.

Reviewed by Richard Ascarate

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"I have disregarded the accepted assumptions of what the novel is about," declares Frances Lee in the introduction to her new book, "on the grounds that they do not lead to an intelligible interpretation of the text, and posited new assumptions" (p. 1). Arguing that early critics failed to read Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947) carefully enough, generating commentary that has blinkered scholars ever since, Lee offers a fresh perspective by analyzing it through the lenses of Thomas Mann's life and his stylized (and, to her mind, equally misinterpreted) collection of essays on German nationalism and character.[1]

In the first of fourteen chapters, Lee delineates the basic arguments of *Observations of a Non-Political Man* (1918) and the polarities that Mann used to embody them: German Protestantism and French Catholicism, democracy and totalitarianism, music and literature, Romanticism and the Enlightenment, and, subtly, by extension, Thomas Mann and his own brother, Heinrich. She also draws upon Mann's later essays to carefully articulate and support her interpretations of his views on freedom and democracy just before and during the politically tumultuous, culturally fruitful Weimar years.

The second chapter traces the early (1920s and 1930s) reception of *Observations of a Non-Political Man*. Lee shows how selective interpretations of the essays emerged from the beginning, when Mann's close friend and fellow author, Ernst Bertram, suggested that the Bonn Literary Society (which had been studying the future Nobel laureate's works since the group's 1905 inception) propose Mann for an honorary doctorate. The campaign succeeded. The following year, Bertram wrote an essay that misconstrued Mann's work as a rejection of German democracy and an endorsement of the nascent fascism spreading among academic circles.

The pivotal third chapter introduces *Doktor Faustus* and the methodology that Lee adopts thereafter: drawing attention to hitherto overlooked (or ignored) parallels among the personifications of political types in the essays, characters in the novel, and details from Mann's biography. "Contrary to commonly accepted opinion" that Adrian Leverkuehn represents the degradation of

the German soul into National Socialism, she contends, "***Doktor Faustus*** is essentially the story of the rejection of the most German of all Germans, by the Germans themselves" (p. 61). For the next ten chapters, Lee assembles her argument episodically, stringing analyses together like pearls as she follows the novel's chronology: Adrian's music studies in Leipzig and his ***strenger Satz*** ("strict composition"), Zeitblom's preoccupation with demonology, the outbreak and end of the First World War, Adrian's complex and eclectic ***Apocalipsis cum figuris***, his putative account of a contract with the devil, the introduction of Marie, and Adrian's last speech before presenting his ***Dr. Fausti Weheklag*** ("Dr. Faust's Lament").

Once one has accepted Lee's premises (and so thoroughly does she support them that the reader has little reason not to)--for example, that "the story of ***Doktor Faustus*** is told simultaneously from two opposing points of view, that of [Zeitblom] ... and ... of his subject" (p. 19); that the "particular choice of categories Zeitblom uses for expressing his thoughts and the way in which he uses concepts carefully chosen from ***Die Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*** indicate that Mann means the reader to see this connection" (p. 149); and, that critics have simply rejected the idea that Zeitblom could possibly support National Socialism and assumed that Adrian does, in some way, without justifying the claim--earlier readings and preconceptions begin to topple like old growth forest beneath a chainsaw. Among Lee's more startling findings: Mann's novel actually argues that rejection of traditional cultural German values rather than a blind embracing of them brought about fascism; in Adrian's conversation with the devil, the latter is not really talking about syphilis (regardless of what critics have maintained for over five decades); Adrian's ***strenger Satz*** does not represent the constraints of state control but rather liberal democracy in a modern Germany.

Lee's study is written in a clear, jargon-free style, with charming traces of a graduate student's enthusiasm for literary discovery (to wit: "Most existing interpretation is, in effect, nothing more than a reworded repetition of what the narrator says" [p. 2]). Lee has expressed a new idea and demonstrated her mastery of a body of primary and secondary literature, but her analysis does not really shed light on any current problems or questions. Once she has expounded her thesis (and she does so admirably and irrefutably) and has drawn out its implications for various episodes and characters in the novel, she neglects to make a case about why the busy modern reader should care.

One might argue, of course, that any new reading of a classic text warrants attention. However, a glance at Lee's solid and extensive bibliography suggests that even scholarly interest in ***Doktor Faustus*** long ago ran its course. Of the 223 works listed, only 18 dealing specifically with the work were published after 1990, and only one of these after 2000. Lee also does not translate the large number of block quotes, thus limiting her audience to readers with reading knowledge of (Thomas Mann's) German.[2] On the other hand, much of her narrative consists of indirect discourse, paraphrases of character dialogues in English. Those who have read ***Doktor Faustus*** will probably find such long stretches superfluous, while those who have not will find them inadequate. Further the price of the volume will hardly endear it to the more impecunious members of the profession. Lee argues that if a study of ***Observations of a Non-Political Man*** had not been published in the 1920 edition of the Bonn Literary Society's journal, "the book would probably have gone unnoticed, since its relevance was not obvious to the current times, nor can [it] be considered as directed to the general public" (p. 43). Likewise, she observes, "***Doktor Faustus*** is very much time- and place-specific" (p. 278). Her study, however admirable the scholarship and "radically new [the] interpretation" (back cover), does little

to change this state of affairs for either of Mann's works.

Notes

[1]. The opinions expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government Accountability Office or the U.S. government.

[2]. Such indifference to a wider readership is inexplicable, for competent translations of both *Doktor Faustus* and *Die Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* have been around for a long time. See H. T. Lowe-Porter's and John E. Wood's versions of the former, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuehn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); and Walter D. Morris's version of the latter, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982).