

The Faustian Theme in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*

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Goethe's Faust has bequeathed to following generations the tantalizing, romantic notion that vital living is constituted by continually deferred satisfaction, by a series of animating and enabling desires that pursue one another without contentment.¹ At the moment he was content to linger with his life, Faust was to have lost it. Indeed, in the romantic century and a half since Goethe's day, the very words "contentment" and "satisfaction" have taken on connotations of bourgeois smugness and materialism. Those easily contented are the living dead, the "bastards" Sartre brilliantly parodied in *Nausea*. Those readily satisfied are the middle-aged, middle-class uncommitted ones ambling in the limbo of Eliot's *Wasteland*. It is easy to forget the interesting terms by which Goethe forgave his Faust: salvation through a woman's love, or rather, *das ewig Weibliche*, the eternal feminine, something completely "other" which "pulls us on," standing in for our imperfectly scrupulous desire. Taken together, these two motifs, an inability or refusal to satisfy the basic desires by which we live and our hope of salvation through an eternal other, form a myth of our modern predicament. The lineaments of this myth can be traced in works as diverse as *Nadja* and *Lolita*. Film offers us further examples in *That Obscure Object of Desire* and *The Story of Adele H.*

In German culture, of course, where Goethe is still very much a living presence, the myth takes on particular significance. The duality of impulse it supposes sorts well with the bewildering, contradictory enthusiasms of what Luigi Barzini once called the "mutable Germans" (See *The Europeans*, Chapter Three). In fact, it is just this kind of contradictory impulse that Rainer Werner Fassbinder habitually diagnosed in the period of Adenauer's Germany, the era when exhausted Nazi

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energies were being subsumed and revitalized in the so called *Wirtschaftswunder*, or “economic miracle.” As I shall argue, Faustian dualism suggests the compelling motivation in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, a film in which Fassbinder grapples with the difficulties and contradictions inherent in Germany’s post-war transformation.

Fassbinder’s film, which takes place between 1945 and 1954, has as its background the *Zusammenbruch*, the military, political, and economic collapse of Hitler’s Germany, and the subsequent *Wirtschaftswunder* of the early Adenauer years. At the end of the war, Germany was virtually covered with rubble, materially and psychologically devastated. According to one historian, “over 25 percent of all German housing lay in ruins, at a time when the vast influx of refugees and expellees [these constituted 20 percent of the post-war population] greatly augmented the need for shelter” (Rodes 307). The Germans themselves, victims of Goebbels’s propaganda until the final days of the war, were as shocked as they were humiliated by these circumstances.

Their accepted system of values was swept away by the bombs and the occupation armies. Sitting beside the rubble of their former dwellings, nibbling on a crust of bread, smoking a cigarette butt saved from the crushing heel of an allied soldier, many Germans faced the agonizing need for re-evaluating their lives. With their illusions dashed, some fell into self-effacing humility before the conquering occupants, some bolstered their ego with haughty self-exculpation. The bulk of the population, overwhelmed by the sheer exigencies of keeping alive, sank into a temporary stupor. (Rodes 307-08)

The “miracle” is that within ten years Germany was able to rise from these dire conditions to a position third among the industrialized nations of the world. Germany’s rise had much to do, of course, with Allied aid, the currency reform of 1948, the political adroitness of Adenauer, and indeed the entrepreneurial skill of the Germans themselves, but the very swiftness of the recovery left the difficult moral questions unattended and unanswered. Was it really possible to pursue a fresh start with amnesic intensity, or even to return to pacific conditions like those that obtained at the beginning of the century? Could it be, as Barzini speculates, that a different, “Swisslike Germany” had really been there all along, “concealed by the bellicose and truculent Second and Third Empires” (96)? If so, what was the relation of these Germanies, and where, after all, were all the Nazis now?

George Steiner believes the German language itself was irreversibly corrupted by the Nazi experience and argues that it has proved incapable of confronting such

questions. According to Steiner, for a brief period “immediately following the end of the war, many Germans tried to arrive at a realistic insight into the events of the Hitler era,” but “the establishment of the new Deutschland” in 1948 and Germany’s “miraculous ascent to renewed economic power” (106) put an end to such self-confrontations. “The country literally drugged itself with hard work....And with this upward leap of material energy came a new myth. Millions of Germans began saying to themselves and to any foreigner gullible enough to listen that the past had somehow not happened” (Steiner 106-07). Steiner’s argument suggests that a wedge had been driven between the language of Goethe and the language of modern Germany, rendering them, at a profound level, mutually unintelligible, and preventing the modern language from even formulating the difficult questions of Nazi guilt. The case may not be so extreme, though Steiner’s scenerio suggests intriguing insights into the motivation of Fassbinder’s characters. Actually, Fassbinder’s approach—and it has always been disturbing in its ambiguity—is to raise and imaginatively engage such questions. Maria Braun, as a representative of renascent Germany, is a Faust at once bargaining with her soul and struggling to hold on, by deferring satisfaction in favor of an ideal, to the possibility of salvation. In Steiner’s terms, she avoids an unsatisfactory reality by resort to an earlier, and perhaps obsolete vocabulary of Faustian love and salvation.

A modern Faust, of course, is to some extent at least a satirical Faust. His romantic idealism must make itself felt in the inhospitable context of modern bourgeois life. Fassbinder immediately suggests a tone of parody by making his Faust a woman finding her way in a world dominated by men and seeking as her “eternal feminine” a man. Maria Braun negotiates in this world by means of a peculiarly intense obsession that cannot find satisfaction. She survives the post war period by clinging to an obviously fictional ideal of her husband. When the “myth” threatens to become merely real, she destroys herself. Satisfaction of desire equals destruction in the Faustian equation.

It is fitting that *The Marriage of Maria Braun* is framed with explosions. Its first image is a bomb exploding in the German town where Maria (Hanna Schygulla) and Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch) are to be married. The background sounds are an absurd mixture of the adagio from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and the sound of a baby crying, suggesting perhaps the new Germany springing from the ruins of the old. The credits bleed onto the screen in a red gothic script like that of an old, official document. As Maria’s marriage document is being signed, another bomb explodes and scatters the papers, sending her on a comic scramble to retrieve it while Hermann holds down the frightened pastor. She does clutch the paper, but in the mix-up (at least as suggested by the film)

Hermann disappears. This is important, because as we will see she cherishes the idea of marriage, represented by the paper, rather than the physical presence of a husband.

Immediately after the credit scene, Maria is shown as one of many women in the period of *Zusammenbruch* who have lost their husbands. As she says to her mother, there are “too many brides, too few men.” Unlike the others, however, Maria refuses to admit that her husband is dead; to a friend she denies not being married. Her reason is simply that she wants it to be that way. She refuses to sink into a stupor like her mother and grandfather and so many Germans of the time. Possibly, Fassbinder intends to parody the German predilection for idealist philosophies that scorn merely empirical evidence. All around, however, there is evidence that the romantic Germany of the past is dead. The background music fades into the sound of an official voice on the radio droning out the names of the dead. Maria and other women carry sandwich signs asking if anyone knows of their husbands. Most people (though interestingly not Maria) scramble after cigarettes and even cigarette butts as if they were food. An old man, possibly senile, hums “Das Vaterland,” while well-fed American soldiers make vulgar jokes at the expense of the women. One of these soldiers insults Maria. When she challenges him, he apologizes and politely offers her several packs of Camels. Maria, who is not seen smoking until the end of the film, trades these cigarettes to her mother for an expensive brooch she will use to begin her career (before the post-war currency reform cigarettes were considered better than paper money in Germany). For an idealist, she shows a remarkable business sense. Maria's practical qualities, however, run in tandem with her devotion to the idea of marriage. Hard-headedness enables her to survive on one level, but the obsessive and restless ideal of her marriage is what really pulls her on. The duality of such Faustian *Tätigkeit* (“activity” does not really approximate the full meaning here) is dangerously paradoxical, even for Goethe. As Erich Heller remarks, Goethe faced considerable difficulty in reconciling his intuitions “that man's *being* was definable only through his incessant striving to *become* what he was not yet and was yet *meant* to be; and that in thus striving he was in extreme danger of losing himself through his impatient and impetuous ignorance of what he was” (31-31). Put another way, “if Faust ceased to strive, he would be damned; but he would also be damned if, in his ceaseless quest for himself and his world, he overstepped the elusive measure of his humanity” (Heller 32).

Maria is comfortable, however, with the ambiguity of this dualism. Her marriage does not stop her from becoming a prostitute. She trades her “new” brooch for “work clothes.” As she goes on her job interview, we hear the duet from *Der*

Rosenkavalier playing in the background, a suggestion of idealistic love superimposed on a corrupt reality. Although she debates with a fellow prostitute about the reality of love as opposed to mere physical sensation, she does not hesitate to become the mistress of a black American soldier (George Byrd). Interestingly, her sister's husband Willi (Gottfried John) returns to take up his real but ultimately barren marriage. When Willi assures her that Hermann is in fact dead, Maria pursues her affair with the black soldier, Bill, in earnest (she even becomes temporarily pregnant by him), but she continually refuses his offers of marriage. "I am married to my husband," she tells him. While she is in bed with Bill, Hermann, who has been a prisoner of the Russians, suddenly reappears. Seeing Hermann, she immediately runs to him, but he throws her down and then (oddly enough under the circumstances) begins frantically puffing a cigarette. Only when he has finished his cigarette does Hermann fight with Bill. Maria clubs Bill on the head, killing him. Questioned by an American tribunal, she explains herself as follows: "*Ich hab' ihn [Bill] liebgehabt, und ich liebe meinen Mann* [i.e., her husband]." This phrase is not easily translatable into English, and of course the American prosecutor does not follow her.

The German distinction between "*liebhaben*" and "*lieben*," which she invokes by way of explanation, sums up nicely the dualism of Maria's nature. *Liebhaben* is the ordinary, colloquial verb for love, suggesting the level of physical reality. Like Donne's "dull, sublunary lovers' love, whose soul is sense," it cannot admit absence. On the other hand, *lieben* can have higher, almost spiritual connotations. It suggests the "great love" that transcends physical reality. This is the love Maria claims to have for Hermann. It is a romantic ideal, and as such, more readily thrives on the beloved's absence than his presence. Tom Noonan is somewhat naive in claiming for Maria a role in "familiar melodrama" as "the woman who gives her all for love" (43). The soul of Maria's quite superlunary love is continuing and unsatisfied desire. Indeed, we cannot help wondering, once we have seen him, what Maria sees in the stolid Hermann. Paradoxically, Bill's murder is a welcome accident to Maria, for it removes the physical Hermann once again: he takes the blame and is sent to prison. Maria is free to nourish her obsession with monthly visits while pursuing her ordinary life safely without his companionship. As she puts it with Faustian emphasis, "I have very much to do."

One thing she does while her husband is in prison is to begin a rather calculated affair with a wealthy German-French businessman, Oswald. Oswald (Ivan Desny) is the kind of "western" West German, like the Rhenish Adenauer himself, who could make use of allied connections to spur Germany's recovery. As a number of critics have noted, he is also, like Adenauer and indeed Hitler, a "fatherly"

figure to the young, fatherless Maria (See Rheuban). Maria's alliance is thus of more than personal significance. She contrives to meet Oswald in the first class compartment of a train. The only other passenger who can afford this compartment is a black American soldier, whom she rebuffs in her best, vulgar English. Oswald, impressed by her self-possession, offers her a job with his firm, and soon promotes her, both in his business and his private life. All this time, she continues visiting Hermann in prison. Hermann's punishment, which on the surface at least is scarcely deserved, may suggest that he is suffering for the hidden guilt of the old Germany. When he accuses Maria, the new German woman, of taking on the role of a man, of wearing, as it were, a man's shoes (he refers to her as a *Männergefüss*), she answers that she is his wife, only brave and beautiful and clever. "Her time," she tells him, "is just beginning." She admits her affair with Oswald to Hermann, but later refuses Oswald's proposal of marriage: she will be his mistress, but not his wife. Oswald, who does not expect to live long and wants his last two or three years to be happy, visits Hermann himself, "to meet the man Maria loves." Though we do not learn it yet, they strike up a male bargain to share Maria. This bargain, with its own echoes of Faust, suggests an interesting, covert relation between the new sanitized Germany (Oswald) and the old Germany of romantic tradition (Hermann), the two coordinates of Maria's bifurcated life. Later, when it becomes obvious that her work brings in a lot of money, Hermann and Maria argue about whose money she is making. Maria claims it is Hermann's, while he claims it is hers. Hermann is threatened by the role in which Maria has cast him. Rather than act the part of ideal (and kept) love object, he would play the more comfortable part of the husband who sells his wife, as indeed he has for half of Oswald's fortune. Oswald, meanwhile, accepts the role she has allowed him. He buys her chocolates, visits her family on holidays (like an obliging bourgeois, he even takes snap shots of the family group), and in general looks after her material needs.

Maria is surprised when she learns that Hermann has been released and has left without her for Australia or Canada. He will not return until he can pay back the money she has spent on him. In the meantime, however, he sends her a rose every month. She keeps all these in a vase, another emblem of the fact that their love thrives only on the level of a romantic ideal. Maria now appears increasingly as a hardened business woman. She humiliates her secretary and is sarcastic with the workers who move her into her new house. When her mother, who has a rather coarse boyfriend of her own, comments that no one in family had ever had such a house, Maria informs her that she won't be welcome there. She will live alone in the house awaiting Hermann. Maria's house is another emblem of her

ideal notion of marriage, which is to be free of the various entanglements of her material life. It would seem that she has found the perfect balance for the duality of her life. Hermann is safely away, yet remains a presence through his gifts of the roses. Maria continues to see Oswald in restaurants and at work. When she meets with Oswald, the music is not romantic (one remembers the earlier use of Strauss and Beethoven to suggest ideals of German romanticism), but classical (Mozart) or baroque (chamber music in the restaurant). Where real marriages, like that of her sister Betti and Willi, break up, her own bifurcated love life continues. And we see Maria smoking cigarettes for the first time. Willi, who admires Maria as a "modern" woman, comments: "Maria Braun, you're beginning to get strange." One wonders if she has not begun to overstep the elusive measure of her humanity. As Goethe himself once noted with Faust's *hubris* in mind, "everything that sets our minds free without giving us mastery over ourselves is pernicious" (Quoted by Heller 36). Heller's comment on *Faust*, that it presents a fascinating and terrifying "spectacle of man's mind rising above the reality of his being and destroying it in such dark transcendence" (37), applies also to Fassbinder's "Faust".

At this point, Maria's carefully wrought balance of material and mental life comes apart. Oswald's assistant Senkenberg (Hark Bohm) comes to inform her that Oswald has died in his sleep. The background, ironically, is a political speech by Adenauer. Her reaction is to get drunk alone in her house. Hermann now reappears suddenly once again. She is ecstatic, but he seems merely taciturn. While she waits on him, gives him presents, and tries on different sets of black underwear, he drinks beer and listens to the 1954 World Championship soccer match (significantly, Germany's first post-war victory). As they prepare to consummate their "two day old marriage," they argue again over who will own their property. (By this time she has lit another cigarette, leaving the gas of her stove on.) They are interrupted by a ringing of the doorbell. Senkenberg and Oswald's lawyer, interestingly a French woman (Christine Hopf-de Loup), have come to read Oswald's will. Maria greets them in her black underwear, but puts on a white (virginal?) outfit for the reading. As it turns out, Oswald has left half his fortune to Maria, and the other half to Hermann, whom he characterizes as having "sacrificed more than anyone can." Left alone again with her husband, Maria rather ominously runs water on her wrists (she looks at first as if she were slitting them), asks Hermann for a match, touches the dead roses in her vase, and then heads for the kitchen stove to light another cigarette. It is significant, perhaps, that we have seen her washing her hands only once before, when she was first told of Hermann's presumed death at the Russian front. All this time, Hermann continues to watch the game. We now hear the announcer screaming: "Tor [score], Tor,

aus, aus, aus." Germany has won the world championship. At the same moment, there is the sound of two explosions, and the screen fades to negative images of Germany's chancellors from Adenauer to Helmut Schmidt, as it were, pacific, "Swisslike" Germany on parade.²

Fassbinder would have us keep in mind that the explosions leading to these images are linked to the explosion of Hitler's Germany in the beginning of the film, and that Maria's fate is bound inextricably with this progression. It suggests the German problem of making a fresh start with new models and no questions asked. Whether the models are really new, whether one can escape from history is questionable, however. Maria, as a "Faust" caught between ideal desire and mundane reality, fails because she can neither reconcile these nor keep them indefinitely apart. Life having become merely real to her (this is suggested by her smoking finally like everyone else), Maria dies a virtual suicide in her virginal white dress in the house she has built with her imagination.³ The second explosion suggests that Hermann too may have been a suicide, a victim of his role as the ideal object of an obsession. By counterpointing this scene with the soccer championship and the images of official Germany, Fassbinder underscores the fact that the modern material world cannot tolerate for long the romantic ideal of desire continually unsatisfied. Throughout the film, Maria's pursuit and embodiment of this ideal are parodied; indeed, modern life allows such notions to reign only under the conditions of irony. At the same time, Fassbinder emphasizes the larger implications of the Faustian theme for modern Germany. Maria's "Faust" and Hermann's "Gretchen" suggest the uneasy co-existence of the vocabularies, as well as the politics, of the new Germany and the old. It is a relationship that attempts to subsume in the ideal structure of romantic myth the unanswered and perhaps unanswerable moral questions attending Germany's progress into the modern world, and its failure is disturbingly portentous.

²Fassbinder intentionally excluded Willy Brandt from the series because he was, as Fassbinder put it in one interview, "a symbol of the reform movement" prevailed against by "fascist technocrats" (Jagau 191).

³The question of Maria's suicide is in fact ambiguous. Fassbinder's shooting script called for Maria and Hermann to go for a drive in the country with Maria at the wheel. She was to drive the car off an embankment, leading to an explosion (See Rheuban 179-80). That Fassbinder chose to forego this ending is interesting. He leaves us with the teasing possibility that Maria's death was accidental or perhaps an unconscious suicide. At least, things might have been different. Fassbinder's scriptwriter, Peter Märthesheimer, told Joyce Rheuban that both he and Fassbinder had wanted a less ambiguous ending, but considered the car crash too weak (188-89). According to Märthesheimer, "Fassbinder was always of the opinion that seemingly inadvertent things signified more about people's true motivations than their superficial, conscious actions" (Rheuban 189).

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