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Letter to the Hesse Discussion Group (Hesse-L)

Friends of Hesse and Players of the Game:

This post represents an attempt on my part to gather together (somewhat haphazardly perhaps) materials relating to a series of interlocking questions:

What is a Glass Bead Game, and specifically, in what sense is it important that a "candidate" for that title should be in some sense a work in the "music of ideas"? Is Thomas Mann's Dr.Faustus a Glass Bead Game in such a sense? And -- this part is not yet written, though it lies obviously enough at the heart of the matter -- is Hermann Hesse's novel Magister Ludi[1] itself a Glass Bead Game?

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To answer these questions, we need first to examine the role of music in Hesse's novel. Some while back, Silvia Candida wrote to the Hesse list:

> *Back to GBG for one more detail: As Thomas Mann first read it - at that time, he was just about to finish his own Doctor Faustus - he perceived it as a 'musical' novel.*
>
> *Is anybody in this list willing to tell me something more about the importance of Baroque music, especially Bach's, as a structural model for the Game (maybe some reader of Douglas Hofstader's Goedel, Escher, Bach)?*

There are really two issues here, I suspect: the question of musical form as a structural model for the game within the book, and that of musical form as a structural model for the book itself.

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One of the most remarkable figures in Hesse's novel, Das Glasperlen-spiel, is the Music Master or Magister Musicae: it is he who introduces

[1] Alternate title for the English edition of "Das Glasperlenspiel" (1943) [Ed.]

the hero, Joseph Knecht, to the art of meditation, and he who throughout the book presents the clearest image of a pure Castalian as a man worthy of our deepest affection -- and our emulation.

Indeed, music is the prime paradigm for Hesse's Game. The Game within the book is clearly musical, and Hesse is quite explicit about the connection:

> *The Glass Bead Game is intimately bound up with this cult of music ("in eternal transmutations the secret power of song greets us here below," says Novalis).*

There's quite a bit of specific material on the musical nature of the Game in the forty pages of Hesse's fictitious "History", and it bears quoting: those who are already familiar with the materials can safely skip to the asterisk below at this point.

The Game begins as a musical exercise:

> *The Game was at first nothing more than a witty method for developing memory and ingenuity among students and musicians.*
>
> *It was originally a kind of exercise employed by those small groups of musicologists and musicians who worked and studied in the new seminaries of musical theory.*

Indeed, we are told in precise terms what this exercise was:

> *Perrot, who incidentally has also bequeathed to us a treatise on the "Apogee and Decline of Counterpoint," found that the pupils at the Cologne Seminary had a rather elaborate game they used to play. One would call out, in the standardized abbreviations of their science, motifs or initial bars of classical compositions, whereupon the other had to respond with the continuation of the piece, or better still with a higher or lower voice, a contrasting theme, and so forth. It was an exercise in memory and improvisation quite similar to the sort of thing probably in vogue among ardent pupils of counterpoint in the days of Schütz, Pachelbel, and Bach -- although it would then not have been done in theo-*

> *retical formulas, but in practice on the cembalo, lute, or flute, or with the voice.*

Bastian Perrot takes this exercise, and transposes it onto an abacus:

> *[Perrot] constructed a frame, modeled on a child's abacus, a frame with several dozen wires on which could be strung glass beads of various sizes, shapes, and colors. The wires corresponded to the lines of the musical staff, the beads to the time-values of the notes, and so on. In this way he could represent with beads musical quotations or invented themes, could alter, transpose, and develop them, change them and set them in counterpoint to one another.*

And Hesse says that later "states" of the Game resemble this earliest state in much the same way in which more modern music resembles early polyphony:

> *If we compare the original state of the Game with its subsequent developments and its present form, it is much like comparing a musical score of the period before 1500, with its primitive notes and absence of bar lines, with an eighteenth-century score, let alone with one from the nineteenth with its confusing excess of symbols for dynamics, tempi, phrasing, and so on, which often made the printing of such scores a complex technical problem.*

But something else has happened here, in the interim, besides the shift to a more complex notation: since Bastian Perrot's time, other languages and disciplines -- beginning with mathematics -- have been added into the mix.

> *Having passed from the musical to the mathematical seminaries (a change which took place in France and England somewhat sooner than in Germany), the Game was so far developed that it was capable of expressing mathematical processes by special symbols and abbreviations. The players, mutually elaborating these processes, threw these abstract formulas at one another,*

displaying the sequences and possibilities of their sciences. This mathematical and astronomical game of formulas required great attentiveness, keenness, and concentration. Among mathematicians, even in those days, the reputation of being a good Glass Bead Game player meant a great deal; it was equivalent to being a very good mathematician.

At various times the Game was taken up and imitated by nearly all the scientific and scholarly disciplines, that is, adapted to the special fields. There is documented evidence for its application to the fields of classical philology and logic. The analytical study of musical values had led to the reduction of musical events to physical and mathematical formulas. Soon afterward philology borrowed this method and began to measure linguistic configurations as physics measures processes in nature. The visual arts soon followed suit, architecture having already led the way in establishing the links between visual art and mathematics. Thereafter more and more new relations, analogies, and correspondences were discovered among the abstract formulas obtained in this way. Each discipline which seized upon the Game created its own language of formulas, abbreviations, and possible combinations.

In what I think of as the single paragraph in which Hesse most clearly enunciates what the Game is capable of, he uses the analogy of organ music:

All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art that the human race has produced in its creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts and converted into intellectual values the Glass Bead Game player plays like the organist on an organ. And this organ has attained an almost unimaginable perfection; its manuals and pedals range over the entire intellectual cosmos; its stops are almost beyond number. Theoretically

> *this instrument is capable of reproducing in the Game the entire intellectual content of the universe.*

And he also gives us a detailed glimpse of the Game as played at its height -- compare it with the description of the musical exercise as Perrot found it, above -- and it is here that he specifies the analogy between the structure of a fugue and the structure of a Game:

> *Throughout its history the Game was closely allied with music, and usually proceeded according to musical and mathematical rules. One theme, two themes, or three themes were stated, elaborated, varied, and underwent a development quite similar to that of the theme in a Bach fugue or a concerto movement. A Game, for example, might start from a given astronomical configuration, or from the actual theme of a Bach fugue, or from a sentence out of Leibniz or the Upanishads, and from this theme, depending on the intentions and talents of the player, it could either further explore and elaborate the initial motif or else enrich its expressiveness by allusions to kindred concepts. Beginners learned how to establish parallels, by means of the Game's symbols, between a piece of classical music and the formula for some law of nature. Experts and Masters of the Game freely wove the initial theme into unlimited combinations.*

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The Glass Bead Game, then, is the art of making music with ideas.

To spell this out in some detail: the Glass Bead Game is the art of making a multimedia "music" in which ideas of all sorts (numerical, textual, musical, visual) play the role which melodies play in music. These ideas are juxtaposed in ways which explore and express the harmonies and dissonances between them, which set them in counterpoint to one another, and which may also involve other -- eg: serial or aleatoric -- aspects of musical composition.

It is this "criterion" which I propose to use in my examination of both Hesse's and Mann's novels -- and hopefully any other books or playable games which one might think of as precursors to or exemplars of the "Glass Bead Game" as an art.

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I don't know that we can take things much farther than this without beginning to imagine the actual Game, ie what it must be like to play it.

We know that Hesse himself played some form of the Game in his garden, and hence that it is in some sense playable -- and thanks to a note which Gunther Gottschalk sent to the Hesse list a while back, we also know that it was in all likelihood based to at least some extent on a physical "game" involving optics invented by Hesse's artist friend, Max Bucherer.

But what would the Game look like if played, and -- to get back to Silvia's second issue -- is the novel itself a GBG?

Thomas Mann -- which is to say, the Magister Ludi "Thomas von der Trave" -- called Hesse's novel a glass bead game (Anni Carlsson and Volker Michels, eds, The Hesse-Mann Letters, Harper, 1975, p 92):

And Mann also inscribed a presentation copy of his novel Doctor Faustus to Herman Hesse with the words:

> *To Hermann Hesse, this glass bead game with black beads, from his friend Thomas Mann, Pacific Palisades, January 15, 1948.*
> [Anni Carlsson and Volker Michels, eds, The Hesse-Mann Letters, Harper, 1975, p 126 n 1]

So we have not one but ***two*** books which the Magister von der Trave considers to be glass bead games in and of themselves ...

Both books deal extensively with music, and I think one could say that both books invoke a music in the reader, though in neither case does this music take "playable" form. I'm getting into tricky waters here, I know, but what I'm trying to say is that a certain music subsists in imagination during and after the reading of each book, not playable, not audible, even, but present nonetheless as a sort of background against which the book is read.

I'd like to look at that music first, because I believe it's the important music in each case (ie that if the book itself is musical in either case, it will be musical in a way that reflects the specific music "about which" the book revolves.

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Mann's music is the music of Leverkuhn, and specifically the ***Lamentation of Dr Faustus***, that "mammoth variation-piece of lamentation -- as such negatively related to the finale of the Ninth Symphony with its varia-

tions of exaltation". Leverkuhn considers this work the "retraction" of Beethoven's Ninth, its negative, that which in some sense cancels it.

> *He wrote it, no doubt, with his eye on*
> *Beethoven's Ninth, as its counterpart*
> *in a most melancholy sense of the word.*
> *But it is not only that it more than*
> *once formally negates the symphony;*
> *reverses it into the negative …*

This is a curious way to think of a piece of music, but it ties in with several other "retractions" in Mann's work. Gunilla Bergsten's Thomas Mann's "Doctor Faustus" (University of Chicago Press, 1969) points out that Mann's book is in some ways itself the "retraction" of Goethe's Faust, and Mann himself writes of the "inversion of the temptation idea, in such a way that Faust rejects as temptation the thought of being saved" ...

Mann, like Hesse describing the Game, offers enough musicological detail in his description of the "Lamentation" to give it a literary verisimilitude, without thereby writing the music itself. In his The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus, he writes that his task was:

> *to build up the lifework of an impor-*
> *tant composer so that it really seemed*
> *as if the compositions could be heard,*
> *so that they were absolutely believable*
> (p41)

That's the point I'm trying to make about Mann's Leverkuhn's "Lamentation" -- it is as if we heard the composition. And I believe we "hear" it in this sense: not by hearing it, but by witnessing the cancellation of the Beethoven Ninth, ie by imagining reeling away from a concert in which the music was of equivalent power to the Ninth, but negated -- in a manner inescapable for our century -- the Joy which was articulated and "released into the world" by Beethoven's triumphant Finale.

The music of Mann's novel, then, is a void -- a powerful, structured, musical void.

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And Hesse?

Hesse, too, has us imagining a music which he does not write. Like Mann, he does this by giving enough detail to provide verisimilitude, "so that it really seems as if the Ludus Sollemnis could be seen", so to speak.

Different people have different senses of what the Game is: some subscribers to this list find in it no more than the symbolic presentation

of the idea of the grand unity of human culture -- and that seems a perfectly acceptable view.

But it is also more than this, for it can be read as programmatic of a certain type of project which has been ongoing among poets, artists and philosophers across cultures for many centuries. Seen in this light -- and Hesse explicitly invites this with his extensive pre-history of the Game -- the Game is an encouragement to continue the project, to create the *Gesamtkunstwerke*, to achieve the work of synaesthetic art which Scriabin, for instance, attempted.

Here the nature of Hesse's peculiar "music" comes to the fore -- for the music we "hear" in the background of the book is a music of ideas, a polyphony in which the voices can as well be visual as melodic, verbal as numerical. And in practical terms, that is something which was exceedingly difficult to envision before the advent of the digital representation of sounds, music, texts, and visual images. With the advent of digital storage and the world wide web, such things at last have a possible medium and a plausible home …

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Can we find the lineaments of the Glass Bead Game in Mann's Doctor Faustus? I believe we can.

We know that Mann saw Doctor Faustus as "disturbingly" similar to Hesse's Magister Ludi. Mann alludes to this in his The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus:

> *The literary event, which for days concerned me in the deepest and most personal way, was the arrival from Switzerland of both volumes of Hermann Hesse's Magister Ludi. After years of work, my friend in distant Montagnola had completed this difficult and beautiful novel of his old age, of which I had hitherto seen only the magnificent introduction that had come out in the Neue Rundschau. I had often said that this writing was as close to me "as if it were part of myself," as it goes in the old poem, "I had a Comrade". Now, seeing the whole thing, I was almost alarmed at its kinship with the task I had elected: the same idea of fictional biography -- with the dashes of parody that this form necessarily involves; the same connection with music. Also, a criticism of culture and our era, although from the point of view of a visionary cultural utopia and theory of*

> *culture rather than of a passionate and telling dramatization of our tragedy. With all the differences, there remained a disturbing similarity.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 73.

> *I am face to face with mature excellence here. Certainly much effort, deeply concealed and carefully applied, had gone into this work. With what humor and artistry had these contrived to keep the intellectualization that comes with old age within the bounds of concreteness and playfulness. I know scarcely another work which inspired such warm and respectful feelings of comradeship in me. That I should compare and contrast my own work with this one, whose mastery I acknowledged, was perfectly compatible with such feelings.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 73.

> *Evening, reading Hesse's novel. "Magister Thomas van der Trave" and "Joseph Knecht". Their different ways of handling the bead game prettily delineated … The parallels between the broader themes of the books astonishing. Mine probably more pointed, sharper, more searing, more dramatic (because more dialectical), more topical and direct. His softer, more sentimental, more self-sufficient, more romantic, and more playful (in a high sense) …*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 75.

These three quotations, as far as I know, are the three key texts for Mann's overt comparison between Faustus and Glasperlenspiel. But he goes further, describing Faustus in ways which I feel bear strong analogies to the GBG idea.

There is the notion of his novel itself taking a musical form:

> *Moreover, this reading nourished the musical conception which had long been my ideal of form and for which this time there was a special esthetic necessity. I felt clearly that my book itself would have to become the thing*

> *it dealt with: namely, a musical composition.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 64.

Mann himself says that his book contains a number of quotations, and views them in musical terms:

> *Quotations of this kind have something musical about them, disregarding the innate mechanical quality.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 33.

> *… one of the small motifs of the book, the kind I most enjoy working with -- like, say, the erotic motif of the blue and black eyes; the mother motif; the parallelism of the landscapes; or, more significant and essential, ranging through the whole book and appearing in many variations, the motif of cold, which is related to the motif of laughter.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 71.

> *Such help would be all the more welcome since the music, insofar as the novel treats of it (for, to be sure, the novel also practices it but that is a subject in itself) -- the music was only foreground and representation, only a paradigm for something more general, only a means to express the situation of art in general, of culture, even of man and the intellect itself in our so critical era.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 41

If anyone is interested in pursuing this issue of the musical form of Faustus further, Gunilla Bergsten's Thomas Mann's "Doctor Faustus" explores the novel's musical form in some depth …

Furthermore, and adding strength to the analogy between Mann's Faustus and Hesse's Game, there is Mann's notion of highly serious play:

> *The radically serious, menacing subject, around which the lightning of grave sacrifice seemed to flash, had proved the stronger in its demands and in its promise. Heaven grant that it would prove possible to let it partake a little of artistic playfulness and*

> *jest; irony, travesty, higher humor!*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 24.

and again:

> *And it was a boon to play this part; to let the book be written for me, as it were; to be conscious of the indirectness of my responsibility along with such intense resolve to achieve directness; to fling into the game reality and my private world. How necessary the mask and the playfulness were, in view of the earnestness of my task -- and this I was clearly conscious of from the very start.*
> Mann, Story of a Novel, p 37.

Finally, and to my mind most impressively, there are at least two points in Mann's novel when he describes the very style of thinking on which the Game itself is based:

> Creatively dreaming Nature dreamed here and there the same dream.
> Mann, Doctor Faustus, p 18.

> To look at the relations between things must be the best thing after all.
> Mann, Doctor Faustus, p 45.

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I believe it is possible, drawing on Hesse's novel, to formulate criteria for a Glass Bead Game, and then use them to explore Hesse's novel as itself a glass bead game -- to see whether the description of the Game in the book can be applied to the book itself. With Thomas Mann, I believe it can, and such an exploration would form the natural conclusion to this essay.

I have not, alas, yet found the time to write such a piece -- but wanted, nonetheless, to send out the materials I have written, both to the Hesse list as a response to Silvia Candida's post on Hesse-L, and as a contribution to a current thread on "GBG-like books" on the Magister-L list.

The Glass Bead Game serves as a symbol of many things to many people: but it is my profound conviction that we will better understand the ways in which certain books -- Das Glasperlenspiel and Doctor Faustus preeminent among them -- can strike us as "GBG-like" if we can get a clearer sense of the Game itself, and use the resulting *criteria* for the Game to examine possible "GBG candidates", both in novel form and in the form of playable Games.

With apologies, then, for the incompleteness of this piece, and best wishes,

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The Hermann Hesse Page