

Play with lie, illusion and fantasy in Thomas Mann's novel *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull*

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Thomas Mann's unfinished novel, *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull*, written with numerous interruptions and supplements in the period from 1910 to 1954, is distinguished by a lively and intellectually rich panorama of human creativity. The main character, Felix Krull, succeeds in getting from the province, the Rhine Valley, via Frankfurt to Paris.

The Rhine Valley brought me forth – that richly blessed and benign region, harsh neither in its climate nor in the quality of its soil, rich in cities and villages, peopled by a merry folk – it must be among the sweetest regions of the habitable globe¹.

The starting-point is his flight after the death of his father, a manufacturer of sparkling wine and a playboy. His brand of sparkling wine with an artistic label is called *Lorley extra cuvée*. The deceptions of the sparkling wine manufacturer with the aid of the self-proclaimed Professor Schimmelpreester lead ultimately to the company's collapse. The factory owner saves himself by committing suicide. Professor Schimmelpreester advises the remaining members of the family with regard to re-establishing their existences. Krull's mother opens a boarding house in Frankfurt with the still well-known sparkling wine name, *Lorley*. Krull's sister, Olympia, finds a position with an operetta company. He himself gets out of his impending military service by simulating an attack of epilepsy. He calls the staff doctor undertaking the medical fitness examinations *Surgeon General* (p. 92), *colonel* (p. 94) and *Surgeon-in-chief* (p. 97), in order with these forms of address to ingratiate himself with him and put him in a benevolent mood, adding that he intended *to devote myself to hotel service* (p. 93).

Professor Schimmelpreester asks his former colleague, Stürzli, for a free trainee position for his nephew at the Hotel Saint James and Albany in Paris. On the way to France, Krull meets the wife of a manufacturer, Mme Houplé, at the border in Strasbourg. Fate will have it that she stays at the same

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¹ Thomas Mann *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull* translated by Denver Lindley, Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc. New York and Toronto/Canada, first Vintage International Edition April 1992, p. 4, originally published in German as *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull: Der Memoiren erster Teil* in 1954.

hotel where he is to be a trainee. The carousel of amorous adventures, deceptions and small acts of fraud starts turning. At the same time, Krull climbs up the career ladder from trainee to lift boy, from lift boy to waiter. His conduct is impressive: his manners, his exquisite politeness and flexibility in roles enable him to turn many unexpected events and encounters to his own favour. Krull's confidence trickery is manifest not least of all in his involved, stilted and high-flown language of which he is proud and which is full of the superficial knowledge of a semi-educated person.

As to my natural instinct for good form, that is something I have always been able to count on all too well, as my whole career of fraud will prove, and in the present literary undertaking I believe I can rely on it implicitly. (p. 4)

And at a later point:

Education is not won in dull toil and labour; rather it is the fruit of freedom and apparent idleness; one does not achieve it by exertion, one breathes it in [...] (p. 74/75).

Frequently he does precisely the opposite to what is expected of him merely in order to please the person opposite and to adapt himself to the fine society in which he moves. In this way, an episode between himself, the little Eleonore Twentyman and Lord Kilmanrock from Birmingham unfolds. The young girl had fallen head over heels in love with him, but Krull asks her not to take him too seriously. At the same time, there is an affair with Lord Kilmanrock, a man about fifty, who asks Krull to come to his castle in Aberdeen, where he lives with his sister, to be his servant. He would only have to serve him personally. But Krull resists the temptation to flee with Eleonore and evades the Lord's offer by claiming that he would not be a match for the position, even though Lord Kilmanrock offers to make him his heir.

In the round dance of his acquaintances in his role as waiter, he meets a range of people. The decisive one, however, is the Marquis Louis de Venosta, an elegantly dressed painter. Far from home at his parents estate in Luxembourg, he amuses himself with a pretty little woman, his girlfriend Zaza, who, however, cannot take her eyes off Krull. The marquis tells Krull of his worry that his parents want to send him on a one year's educational tour, a trip around the world with destinations in North and South America, the South Sea, Japan, Egypt, Constantinople, Greece and Italy, on which he is supposed to get to know a lot of people and in this way be torn out of his Bohemian lifestyle. The two men come to a friends' agreement that Krull should take over the first leg of the voyage and send Venosta's parents short travel reports from the various stations. Krull practises to perfection the marquis' handwriting in order to take on his role also on the plane of writing, including cashing a cheque at the bank. Now there is no longer any hindrance to the voyage.

The first station of the voyage is to be Lisbon. Venosta hands over the railway and ship tickets to Krull and gives him a splendid send-off. On the train Felix gets to know Professor Cuckoo, who is also travelling to Lisbon. Krull acts urbanely and starts to rave about Lisbon. The professor, who is a palaeontologist and the director of the Museum of Natural History in Lisbon, describes the people and architectural features of Lisbon. He then speaks of Krull himself and sees in him a sea-lily which Felix, who feels flattered, takes as a compliment. But the professor corrects him, telling him that it is not a flower but a kind of rooted animal found in the deep sea. They then introduce themselves to each other. As the Marquis de Venosta, Krull pretends to be a painter and artist. He also mentions his relations with mythology. He skilfully explains that his tutor had made a connection between himself and Hermes. This is an elegant divinity, says Professor Cuckoo, and both speak of Hermes' anatomical endowments in more detail. Krull lets himself go in erotically suggestive descriptions:

I won't speak of Hermes' famous legs, but think of a shapely feminine arm, an arm that embraces us if we are lucky. (p. 270).

At the end of the conversation, the professor explains to him more precisely the make-up of the world.

Having arrived in Lisbon, Krull first sits himself down at a table in a cafe where he accidentally gets to know the professor's wife and daughter accompanied by a man. The eighteen-year-old daughter reminds him of Zaza in Paris. She is called Zouzou and resembles her mother a little. They introduce themselves, the professor's wife, Madame de Cuckoo da Cruz, her daughter, Suzanna, and Mr Hurtado, one of Professor Cuckoo's research staff. Krull announces his visit to the Museum of Natural History. Zouzou teases de Venosta away. But it is precisely this prickliness that gives him hope of being able to kiss these enticingly pursed lips. At the Museum of Natural History, Krull is met by Professor Cuckoo, who leads him through the history of animals and human beings.

A little later, Krull is invited to the professor's home. This time his wife is dressed even more elegantly and fascinates Krull once again. Krull thinks that Zouzou and Mr Hurtado are meant for each other. The conversation turns on the visit to the museum, the impressions motivating a sympathy with the universe, and architectural sights close to the city. Once again, Zouzou is very prickly, and Krull speaks of his further travel plans. He takes a botanical walk with Zouzou. The professor cannot come on the walk but assures him that Zouzou will introduce him to the tennis club. Zouzou agrees enthusiastically. Later, when they are alone, he speaks of love, but she resists and says that it is a completely indecent subject, and when he sees the nude drawings of Zaza, embellished with Zouzou's fringe, she is outraged. Krull calms her down by talking of beauty and promises to show her the nude drawings one day.

Krull writes a letter to de Venosta's parents that his departure has been delayed because of Professor Cuckoo who has enormously expanded the educational scope of his voyage. Apart from that, he says that he has even got to know the prince who, before he, Krull, departs, has offered to introduce him to his Majesty, King Juan Carlos I, who has also been staying in Lisbon. The audience would take several days and he would have to wait for the return of the Cap Arcona before he could travel on. He also asks his parents to pay his hotel bill for this period. He describes the audience, which was supposed to have taken place in the meantime, and how he had highly praised the visit to the king's country, which was perhaps one of the most beautiful countries on earth. He also praised the masterpieces of painting which turned out to have been done by the king himself. He also writes about his progress in playing tennis with Zouzou and her partner. Zouzou insists on taking possession of Krull's nude drawings. The parents respond to his report of delays that at first it had angered them somewhat, but in the meantime, they regarded the delay as a happy stroke of fate, especially because of the meeting with Professor Cuckoo.

Playing tennis followed by a small lunch at the professor's home always takes precedence over trips and excursions. Krull places special importance on being able to first tell Zouzou alone about his social encounters. When her mother, Senhora Maria Pia, makes a remark about his impression of the beauty of another woman, he emphasizes how much womanly beauty had impressed him already on the first day, while glancing toward Zouzou and also her mother. Zouzou continues to speak insultingly and childishly of love. Krull skilfully retracts the compliment for her mother and speaks of the beauty of touching one another in love, for instance, with a kiss. Zouzou repeatedly reminds him of the nude drawings she has not yet been given.

Krull's double portrait of mother and daughter shifts, sometimes toward the mother, sometimes toward the daughter, which throws somewhat of a shadow on the first portrait. Professor Cuckoo draws his attention to a bullfight, a *corrida* which, however, Krull views with timidity because *the sight of blood made me somewhat queasy* (p. 370). The professor calms him down but he is overcome by a feeling of uneasiness. At the cable car station he meets Dona Maria Pia in an elegant mantilla with her large, stern, pale, southern European face. Zouzou is not wearing a mantilla and is dressed in even darker clothes as if she were going to church. With the professor they travel to the centre of the action. The journey takes place in silence. The bull, black, heavy and powerful like an animal divinity, leaps into the arena and bores its horns into the cape. *Bandarilheros* are driven into the back of its neck. The torero, Don Ribeiro, falls down. There is applause. *More and more*, Krull notes of Donna Maria Pia, *the stern and elemental person of this woman seemed to me one with the game of blood below.* (p. 377). Ribeiro thrusts the blade of his sword into the ball which thereupon collapses. During the bullfight, Krull has completely forgotten about Zouzou. All the more decisively, he then shows her the promised drawings. For Maria Pia it is siesta hour. Zouzou takes the

nude drawings, tears them up, sits down on the bench, puts her arms around Krull's neck and hammers rhythmically with her fists on his chest. Suddenly her mother is standing before them. She wants to have a quiet word with Krull and accuses him of having abused her hospitality and calls on him to act like an adult. Under his acclamation and tenderness, she carries him into the realm of bliss.

If we view the most predominant features of the *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull*, a strongly narcissistic and homoerotic component in Krull is striking which becomes noticeable in the conception of the torero Ribeiro, in Krull's fantasies about slim male legs (of Hermes), in his conspicuous, flashy clothing and his flattering beauty. In his twofold, androgynous nature he offers himself equally to women and men. In contrast to the main character in Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, in which the artist, Aschenbach, is absorbed by his work, Krull expends himself in the arts of seduction and amorous games.

The role of the artist in society is a leitmotif in Thomas Mann's oeuvre. His conception of culture is linked existentially with an understanding of the artist as a preserver of the arts as manifested in the cultural journal, *Maß und Wert (Measure and Value)*, whose editor he was from 1937 to 1939. This is nothing less than the artist's responsibility for art and ethical conduct as opposed to the barbarism of those who despise humanity. Completely opposite this position held by Thomas Mann stands the ironical, parodistic treatment of the quasi-artist, Krull, whose qualities could also be assigned to an artist. Only the non-ethical use and limitation of self-reflection and the ability to discourse with others helps Professor Cuckoo to strip down the word that has been given to him in the most marvellous way and to shift the context of the mythological perspective into its proper light. Krull's superficial knowledge becomes apparent not least of all on his so-called educational voyage which he undertakes on behalf of the Marquis de Venosta. In his place, in his name, in his clothes and in his handwriting, he slips into a role whose basic stance he does not share: *Measure and Value*.

The predominance of superficial education becomes a key code for the dictatorship of unreason. Cuckoo saves reason from the superficial knowledge of the fraudulent play-actor, Krull. The play-actor is defined by changing roles and transformations tied to the rules of dramatic theatre and its literary authors. This also touches upon the ability to see oneself through the eyes and the mirror held up by others and to integrate this insight into relations with other people. In the case of Krull, this becomes a negative event. Only the effect is faith.

With this, the birth of German classicism at the court in Weimar is illuminated once again more precisely. No lesser person than Nietzsche clearly saw the dangers emanating from the educational philistine. Goethe's famous novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, is an educational novel par excellence. In it, too, Wilhelm Meister's son is called Felix.

Between Krull and a picaro who plays the main role in Cervantes picaresque novel, *Don Quixote*, there is a certain parallel, but the *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull* are by no means exhausted by the features of a purely picaresque, artist's, educational or mythological novel.

It may seem far-fetched to speak of a symbolic journey into exile in the case of Krull's educational voyage. But could it not be the case that in the conception of the novel, Thomas Mann's circumstances and his existential experiences also played a role? We know with certainty that the novel was written in various phases (begun in 1910, continued, read to audiences, partially published and finally officially published in 1954). It should be noted that when Thomas Mann was editor of the journal, *Maß und Wert*, from 1937 to 1939, at the same time near Weimar the concentration camp Buchenwald was erected, so that his first novel in exile, *Lotte in Weimar* from 1939, was perhaps precipitated by the experience of how an assiduous dedication to culture can turn into barbarism.

The *Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull* is Thomas Mann's most frequently published novel but, despite all the novel's popularity and with all due respect to readers, one should nevertheless not forget the *Zauberberg (Magic Mountain)*. Even though the novel is described as unfinished and its continuation was considered (one could think of the various stations of the voyage which still had to be visited, such as South America, from where Thomas Mann's mother came), Thomas Mann himself said that he could have kept on writing forever and that in this way the novel could have taken a somewhat Kafkaesque turn.