

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic Book I'd Like to Rewrite and Why

Lulu Allison

BOOKS BLOW IN UNINVITED: a plot forms in a tangle of ordinary events, an idea passes on a breeze, a title pops into our minds and begs to be given its load to carry. One sunny afternoon, I was driving on the motorway, thinking about Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, about music, and the many musicians who, legend has it, went to the crossroads to make a deal with the devil.

The Faust myth is at first scolding in tone, a shot across the bows of anyone who dares to dream too big. And so by implication, those musicians did indeed dare, and thus must pay with their souls. The seeds of an idea wafted through the car window — what if those musicians were not scurrying greedily into debt and damnation, desperate to grasp the cheating hand of the devil to bring them glory? What if, as a logical extension of the music they made, they were reaching instead for the divine? What if it just so happened a demon was the divine being to respond to their call? What if, even in greed and a will to power, they were fulfilling true and blessed nature, as it existed in their own shape?

These first groping thoughts blew back out into the summer turbulence of the M27. But they kept returning, drifting back, chasing me all the way home, sliding into my notebooks. At each pass there was more to think about. Years worth of more to think about.

I met flimsy ghost characters who tried to show me the way, scoured terrain through smudgy lenses, played out and reeled in ideas. I was

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reminded, after long enough of this, how such stories imprint themselves as certainties upon our understanding: Faust was an arrogant fool, Faust was greedy, Faust hadn't the wisdom to find enough in what he already had. Leverkühn craved matchless grandeur even if it would elevate and then destroy him. Robert Johnson desired the flash glory and rewards of success. Our little civic hearts are taught that these are the dangerous ones, driven by ego, driven by the desire for power and wealth. And the myth comforts us with the coming certainty of their undoing; they destroy themselves because they were not satisfied with what an obedient little civic heart is conditioned to count as enough.

Whilst working on this novel, titled *Beast*, I often had to stop, double back, consider a character in a new light. I had to think about what we mean by divine, to ask why we automatically censure that common desire for an extraordinary life. The great gift of myths are the many layers of meaning and understanding they bring, smuggled in under the worn familiarity of the surface. They are mutable, they readily twist and recombine to present a new idea, a multitude of ideas. Why should Faust lose his soul? And is it not eternity that is after all reserved for the damned?