

Creation of the Self in Mann and Barnes
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by Fred Coppersmith

For many modernist writers, the very fundamental questions of our existence -- including who we are and how we can possibly *know* anything of ourselves and our world -- are of paramount concern. Characters often inhabit a world, then, wherein personality, the self, is infinitely malleable, given to various permutations, continually rebuilt and reformed; they can, indeed, become their own interpreters, the authors of their lives -- if not exactly their destinies -- just as we, too (or so these modernists would appear to believe) may create our own identity and self. We may, like Proust, sift through the rubble and ruins of memory's lost cities, delving anew into the self we thought we understood, or we may, like the characters in both Thomas Mann's *The Confessions of Felix Krull* and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, erect a monumental facade -- a fictional universe in which we wrap ourselves like a new skin, or behind which we hide, like a mask.

Felix Krull, one might argue, has every reason to desire a new self, and every means to create this fictional universe in which he can then reside. For while he may initially claim that he is "resolved to employ the utmost frankness in my writing, without fear of being reproached for vanity or impudence," Felix is, at heart and by his very nature, a confidence man. He is a charlatan. Both he and the author state this one, seemingly unassailable fact explicitly from the beginning. His livelihood is fraud, deception, and while he may write that no "moral value or significance can attach to confessions written from any point of view except that of truthfulness," the life Felix presents -- to the reader and, perhaps, to himself -- is ultimately a lie.

Though Felix may repeatedly claim to have lived a wondrous, blissful and carefree life of grand adventure and excitement -- to now be "tak[ing] up my pen at leisure and in complete retirement" -- he does so rather *too* often, *too* emphatically, thus arousing suspicion in the careful reader and inviting us to consider whether he, like Shakespeare's Gertrude, perhaps "doth protest too much." We must, inevitably, wonder whether these persistent declarations are indeed merely a ruse designed to fool both the reader and Felix himself, for nearly every scrap of actual evidence Felix inadvertently provides would appear to indicate the exact opposite of his claims: that he has in fact led a life of abject misery and loneliness, with lies as his only recourse.

"It is a favorite theory of mine," he writes, "that every deception which fails to have a higher truth at its root and is simply a barefaced lie is by that very fact so grossly palpable that nobody can fail to see through it. Only one kind of lie has a chance of being effective: that which is no way deserves to be called deceit, but is the product of a lively imagination which has not yet entered wholly into the realm of the actual and acquired those tangible signs by which alone it can appraised at its proper worth." We must, then, ask the inevitable question: what higher truth, if any, is at the root of the lie Felix tells? Why does he create this fictional universe, these new personae -- if it is not merely because he *is* a con man?

Quite simply, Felix creates this other self -- the self beyond those identities and appellations he adopts throughout the adventures recounted in the text -- the self which he ultimately presents to the reader and which the reader must therefore delve beneath -- because his true self is not as interesting or charming. The lie is more pleasurable. "...Which is the real shape of the glowworm," Felix asks, "the insignificant little creature crawling about on the palm of your hand, or the poetic spark that swims through the summer night?"

The details of Felix's early life -- the solitary boyhood and "indulge[nce] in strange, introspective practices"; the "parents [who] bored each other to distraction" and thus over-indulged themselves in drink and other excesses; the father whose financial ruin and subsequent suicide left the family destitute -- are enough to suggest that he is more than "insignificant little creature" than the "poetic spark" of the glowworm. When one adds the further unhappiness hinted at throughout the text (culminating with Felix trapped within the persona of the Marquis), one can easily conclude that the joyous facade Felix attempts to erect is little more than a lie.

What, then, of Djuna Barnes' Dr. Matthew O'Connor? What is the nature of the fictional universe he creates and, more importantly, why does he create such a facade? "Only the scorned and the ridiculous make good stories," O'Connor himself says near the end of the text, and one could quite readily place the characters in *Nightwood* in either of these two categories, O'Connor fitting quite comfortably (or so it would seem) in the latter. He is, indeed, seemingly quite ridiculous throughout the text, given to long-winded speeches, comical, convoluted tirades that meander from one page to the next, and from one disconnected thought to the next. Yet, the further we read and examine his character -- the more Barnes reveals -- the more we may come to realize that this absurdity is an act, a guise affected by O'Connor simply to entertain, to create a life far more interesting than his own. For, as he himself asks, "cannot a beastly thing be analogous to a fine thing if both are apprehensions?"

In this, O'Connor is markedly similar to Felix Krull, as both create fictional universes in order to escape reality, or at least to publicly alter the appearance of their mundane reality when confronted with others -- to appear more interesting than they perhaps actually are. "The Baron was shocked to observe," writes Barnes, "in the few seconds before the doctor saw him, that he seemed old, older than his fifty odd years would account for....The Baron hailed him, and instantly the doctor threw off his unobserved self, as one hides, hastily, a secret life." O'Connor's gaudy mask is, then, in reality a shroud through which a dying old man peers at the world.

"The people in my life," O'Connor finally admits, "who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of the degradation and the night....I've done and been everything that I didn't want to be or do...knowing I am not what I thought I was, a good man doing wrong, but the wrong man doing nothing much..." In this, O'Connor is different from Krull, for while Felix becomes trapped within his created universe, imprisoned by the personae he thought would free him, Matthew O'Connor at the very least recognizes the sham of his life. While he may have led, as Felix, the appearance of "a grand bad story," a life of seeming revelry, ultimately his existence is rendered just as meaningless. "I'm an old worn out lioness," he says, "a coward in my corner; for the sake of my bravery I've never been one thing that I am, to find out what I am!" The facade, then, ultimately crumbles.