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Thomas Mann

Mann, Klaus

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U TO 1914 the works of Thomas Mann were little concerned with social problems. The author of *Buddenbrooks* and of *Death in Venice* considered himself as a follower of Wagner and of Nietzsche; he also admitted that he was a disciple of Schopenhauer. His work was at the same time essentially musical structure and psychological in treatment; but it was by no means a criticism of his epoch or social analysis. His early narratives show the influence of the German romantic school, of Theodore Fontane, of the Scandinavians and the great Russians rather than of the French; (whereas the epic works of his brother, Heinrich Mann, were influenced more by the great French novelists such as Flaubert, Balzac, Maupassant and Zola, and from the very beginning admit a definite social trend).

Practically all the works of Thomas Mann up to the World War are, by and large, variations on one theme; that is, the artist in relation to bourgeois society, in his relation to Life itself. He never treats the conflict: bourgeois versus proletarian but always: bourgeois versus artist. He presents the antithesis between thought and life or, more precisely, between conscious and unconscious life. This is a highly complex and subtle conflict which could only be expressed in terms of sarcasm and a great yearning. Out of this mixture of sarcasm and yearning comes the typically *ironic* undercurrent that runs through all the earlier work of Thomas Mann.

In 1914 there came a change. The first interest in social problems of any sort appears in the form of a nationalistic interest. The writer who before this had felt himself primarily an artist whose sensibility and pattern of thought had circled about the special problems that surround the artist, suddenly realizes with an entirely new passion that he is first of all a German. This consciousness of being a German with all it involves becomes a deep and complicated problem—for a time the main problem. Yet of course this new consciousness has nothing in common with the howling "patriot": what occupies the mind of Thomas Mann during the four long difficult years of the war and what arouses him is rather a consciousness of the difficulties involved in the mere fact of being a German.

Whereas before this the conflict "spirit versus life," "artist versus bourgeois" dominated the intellectual composition of his work, so during the years of the world conflagration a new antithesis became dominant: a "non-political" (that is undemocratic) Germany confronted by the democratic, literary and humanitarian West. During the entire war he toiled over a ponderous theoretical book which appeared in 1918 under the title: *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. It was intended as a sort of sublime justification of Protestant, musical, bourgeois, conservative Germany, defending itself against the democratic west, against Paris and the spirit of the French Revolution. This "unpolitical" political book reaches its climax in a very sharp and angry bit of personal controversy, directed, as all literary Germany was aware—against none other than Heinrich Mann. The latter had throughout the war remained true to his pacifist and pan-European ideals. This antipathy toward his brother's position fills large parts of the book; and the optimistic, humanitarian "man of letters believing in and propagating our civilization" is confronted dialectically with the primarily musical, pessimistic, "unpolitical" German. In short, the German concept of "Kultur" is set up against the more western and liberal ideal of "civilization".

Here I must emphasize the fact that of all my father's books this particular one is the furthest removed from my own personal point of view, and it is the one I admire the least. Its bitter accusations against Democracy seem ungrounded to me; and the climax is an apology for German Imperialism. Yet one thing is certain and important: the concept of Germanhood (to coin a word) is interpreted here differently and more deeply than it is by our present day nationalists. The author of the *Reflections* has obviously suffered to arrive at his conception of "Germanhood" and its meaning. This work which he wrote during the war should be regarded today rather as a work of art than as a statement of a point of view. It is full of music, melancholy and romanticism. Fundamentally it is a very sad book and if viewed as a musical and pessimistic work of art is not unrelated to the earliest works of its author. It defends with a great deal of wit, cleverness and astuteness a cause which the author must have known—at least subconsciously—to be already lost: namely, the romanticism of the nationalistic idea. The whole book is nothing but one gigantic retreat—one last nostalgic and brilliant plea for values and moods over which life has already trampled and which will have no place in the future. The *Reflections* are the work of a Don Quixote who spends four valuable years of his life on a lost cause. Why does he do this? Perhaps from a "sympathy with death"—to use a favorite formula of the author's own, coined during this period.

This "sympathy with death" had been the leitmotif not only of *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice*; it is also the fundamental reason for the political conservatism of the *Reflections*. It was this very "sympathy with death" which had to be overcome—and which finally was overcome by a fruitful conception of a new humanism with its friendly attitude toward life and progress—the humanism whose spiritual origin lay first of all with Goethe and which, as we shall see, is capable of including even the socialistic idea.

The Magic Mountain is a novel dealing with a young man lured and tempted by all the fascination of death and destruction who, finally, after much spiritual adventure, finds his way to this new Humanism—to a new love for mankind and life. It was inevitable that these new principles should soon manifest themselves politically as well. In the first years after the World War—quite a while before the publication of *The Magic Mountain*—Thomas Mann underwent his great and decisive political crisis. In all form and all publicity he renounced his former conservative and nationalistic opinions. He professed himself an adherent of Democracy; a follower of the new German Republic and its first President Friedrich Ebert. The speech in which this announcement was made caused a tremendous sensation. It was given upon the occasion of a Goethe-Festival in Frankfurt-on-the-Main and was entitled *On the German Republic*. A great hue and cry of "traitor" went up from the reactionary camp. No one recognized that this had nothing to do with treachery, but rather with development. Past pessimism, romanticism "sympathy with death" had been overcome; the newly discovered "sympathy with life" demanded a new ideal. This ideal was the ideal of Democracy. From that point on Thomas Mann has steadily been defending liberalism, no longer in the role of a melancholy Don Quixote, but in a more simple and clear sense—in the manner, in short, in which one defends a cause and battles for it when one truly believes in it, without the reservations of irony.

Thomas Mann's development continued to take its logical course. He remains faithful to the democratic ideal, to humanistic liberalism; but the conception of "Democracy" undergoes a change and is broadened. In his speech on the *German republic* conservative overtones are still strongly noticeable; in his subsequent addresses and articles these elements are progressively done away with; whereas an understanding, a sympathy for socialistic ideas increases. The nationalism which dominated the *Reflections* is sacrificed. (For the first time in a pamphlet called *An Accounting with Paris*, written after a visit father made to France. This was promptly taken up by the conservative press and roundly denounced.)

In the short story *Mario and the Magician* which appeared shortly after *The Magic Mountain*, there is a double-barrelled attack on Fascism: first, through a sarcastic description of conditions in an Italian watering place; second, through the character of a hypnotist and charlatan who is here symbolically portrayed as typical of the great "Leader" and misleader of the people.

The author of the *Reflections*, then, had made his peace with "civilization"; he had many traits in common with this humanist ancestor—the type which he had formerly regarded as inimical to him—and he had colored these characteristics with his own mode of thought.

In the meantime, however, he had found a new sparing partner, a new spiritual enemy. This was the type of man of letters who denies the spirit out of a false emphasis on his own love of life; who places such concepts as that of "racial consciousness," "pure energy," etc.—both of them non-rational values—against the idea of civilization and culture. The old antithesis—culture versus civilization—suddenly dwindles in importance when compared with this new and eminently important one of culture versus barbarism. For what this new type of writer—the Fascistic—desired and propagated was in all truth barbarism; it demanded the complete abdication of morality, conscience, intelligence and criticism. Every polemic utterance of Thomas Mann, the author, from 1925 to 1933 is directed against this barbarism and against nothing else.

He discovered his new enemy for the first time corporate in the person of the philosopher Oswald Spengler (author of the *Decline of the West*)—against whom he had as far back as 1925 written a very trenchant essay.

From now on there was no end to controversy. Thomas Mann, an aggressive Humanist, inveighed against the new barbarians... and reached a high point in 1932 when the erstwhile author of *Buddenbrooks* warned the German intellectual middle class against the Nazis, advising its members with great intensity to defend themselves against the barbarism of Nazi-Fascism and make common cause with the proletariat.

In 1933 Hitler and his Nazis came into power in Germany. They hated Thomas Mann, who had by now become the representative German novelist—hated him almost more than they did their purely Marxist opponents. My father, who happened to be traveling abroad in the winter 1932-33 did not return to Germany. Since February 1933 he has been an exile.

He had warned the German people against the Nazis long and intensely enough. But when, in spite of this, they gained the ascendancy he fell into a bitter silence. For the mere fact that he had left the country where Hitler now rules and never set foot on its soil again, spoke for itself. But it was years before he found words to express

I leave the question open whether this silence—for his grief and his sorrow and his scorn.

which he had his good and particular reasons—was entirely justified. One thing is certain: he could not remain silent in the long run. A declaration of opinion was demanded of him. He was drawn into public discussion. He had to state his position. And he did so. His words, however, are not tolerant and vague as were those of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the classic humanist, who wished to stand "above partisan dissention" even during the very wars of the Reformation. Thomas Mann does not pretend to "stand above partisan dissention," he knows his party and battles for it with all his force. But what is his party? It is a vast one, with disciples struggling for it everywhere. It is the great party of "Humanity" (*Menscheits-Partei*) which fights for human progress, for human dignity—and against retrogression and degradation, against the degradation of mankind. Retrogression and degradation, however, are the special attributes of Fascism, particularly the German variety, so-called National-Socialism. Thomas Mann, as a decided and militant humanist, turns against the horrible dogmatism and still more horrible activities of the Hitlers, the Rosenbergs and the Goebbels.

The lofty and complex concept of Humanism is dearer to the author, Thomas Mann, than any other idea. He first gave voice to it in the speech on the German Republic: that is, in a strongly political connotation; he has varied this theme, especially in *The Magic Mountain*; he has continued to examine his philosophy and has advocated it in many cultural and political articles and pamphlets; and finally this conception is the spiritual foundation of the great "Joseph" trilogy at which he has been laboring for the last decade.

All values dear to the Humanist are trampled underfoot by Fascism—most especially the ideal of freedom. But it is for the sake of these eternal values that Thomas Mann stands with us today—putting the whole weight of his personality and his fame into the balance—to help us who are the irreconcilable adversaries of the Hitler regime and of all other reactionary forms. What a pitiful and ridiculous gesture on the part of the Nazis to declare before all the world that Thomas Mann is no longer a German because he has taken a stand against Hitler! The lofty ideals for the sake of which he has definitely broken with the tyrants now ruling Germany have always been held high by the noblest Germans. And they would be adhered to today by many Germans within Germany itself, if only the terror permitted.

But even if one left all Germany silent as the grave, and silenced every German emigre to boot, there would still be heard the voices of the German classicists—the voices of Lessing and Goethe, Kant and Schiller, Heine and even Nietzsche. All great Germans bear witness against present day Germany. And it is in the midst of these great Germans that Thomas Mann takes his place—the author of the *Reflections*, who, from these to the denunciations of the Hitler dictatorship, has traveled so long and apparently so paradoxical a spiritual road—but in reality has only undergone a perfectly logical and intellectually clear and clean development.

English version by Rita Reil.