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"Minder übermütig tut
Sich gut."
Katharina Schlegel-Schöcher
Hie auch sonst hänge. E. M.

MANN'S LAST YEARS

THE LAST EIGHT YEARS of Thomas Mann's life, as revealed in the third volume of his letters, were as busy and active as any earlier period. He was an author who needed to retain the rhythm of his working life to the end—creative writing and correspondence, the preparation and giving of public lectures, reading and studying, and close family contacts. He spoke of tiredness and various forms of ill-health, but contrasted his own way of living with that of Hermann Hesse; while the latter firmly retired from writing as a career, Mann was impelled to keep on until the end.

With the publication of *Doktor Faustus* a phase of his life was virtually completed.

After *Faustus* I can no longer take anything really seriously. "That will not come again," Fontane said after *Effi Briest*. (September 10, 1949.)

Seeing himself as a late-comer who was rounding off an era that was almost past, he could welcome Philip Toynbee's description of him as "the lonely world-citizen". *Der Erwählte, Die Betrogene und Felix Krull* all aroused his misgivings as he was working on them. They were not written with the ardent belief in a mission such as underlay the work on *Doktor Faustus*. Writing to Erika Mann (June 7, 1954) he took up the theme once more:

Does one celebrate one's eightieth birthday with such compromising jokes (i.e., *Felix Krull*)? Tired arrogance is of no value, the proverb says. I must often think that it would have been better if I had taken my leave of this world after *Faustus*. After all, that was a book written in earnest and with a certain power, and would have provided the conclusion to a rounded, complete life's work, whereas now with *Der Erwählte*, which by the way I am fond of, an over-hanging aftermath begins that would probably be better not there.

When *Felix Krull* appeared and became a best-seller, the author

could enjoy its success. Indeed, while understanding on the whole Mann's misgivings about his imaginative work after *Doktor Faustus*, we may recall that the period after the completion of a work and before its publication was one of uncertainty and depression as far back as *Buddenbrooks*. In this letter, too, he went on to talk of future plans which might involve "something like a little character-gallery from the Reformation period, snapshots of Luther, Hutten, Erasmus, Charles V, Leo X, Zwingli, Münster, Tilman Riemenschneider . . ."; and of the necessity for him to have work and active hope. Elsewhere he spoke of tackling sixteenth-century German material by way of a stage-play on "Luther's Wedding". He would not run out of ideas, he wrote on March 20, 1952, even if he became 120.

The conviction that he had a mission for Germany and for the world was by no means as ardent as it had been during the Second World War. The *Reden und Aufsätze* contains a substantial section of Mann's political speeches which begins with his declaration of support for the Weimar Republic in 1922 and continues with essays that indicate his increasing involvement in public affairs, and in particular the focusing of his attention on the role of National Socialism in Germany. The fifty-five B.B.C. broadcasts, given between October, 1940, and May, 1945, are only one aspect of his political activity during this period, to which the address "Germany and the Germans" provides a culminating epilogue.

The problems of the postwar world concerned him deeply, but his approach made him feel isolated and misunderstood in a way that had not happened to him earlier in America. He soon expressed his dislike of investigations into un-American activities and of the atmosphere of the cold war. His visit to both Germanies during the Goethe bi-centenary celebrations aroused controversy. A letter of August 27, 1949, gives a detailed account of Mann's intentions in this context: his wish to bridge the "deep gap" running through

Germany, his refusal to take part in "the hysteria of Communist persecution and war-mongering", and his discovery of good will and idealism in East Germany. It was about this time that he was encouraging his brother Heinrich to accept an invitation to leave California and settle in East Berlin. He was no longer in agreement with Mrs. Agnes E. Meyer about the interpretations of world events. In a letter of May 24, 1950, referring to his partly autobiographical essay *Meine Zeit*, he proclaimed his belief in "peace as the supreme command and highest necessity". In the same year he advised an English correspondent not to emigrate to the United States, and was thinking of leaving America himself. On February 1, 1951, he saw the world situation in these terms:

Human wickedness merits a visitation such as the world has not yet seen, and this civilisation of rapacity, fools and gangsters deserves to be destroyed.

His antipathy to nuclear armaments was made clear at that time and remained until the end of his life. He wrote on April 17, 1955:

The H-bomb for instance is also politics, and anyone who does not feel this as a crime is displaying a religious callousness which I cannot understand, weak as I am in faith.

He was intending to leave America (April 2, 1951):

England would be the best land to live in. But bad climate and nothing to eat—un poco troppo.

In an open letter (April 3, 1951) he protested against false statements and implications, coming both from right and left, concerning his political attitude:

I am no communist and never have been one. Neither am I a "fellow-traveller" nor could I ever be one, when the journey goes into the totalitarian.

But, he went on, hysterical, irrational and blind hatred of communism represented a far more terrible danger to the United States, where he had been proud and pleased to become a citizen, than indigenous communism. In face of terrorism from "late bourgeois" society and from communism he could see simply the irresistible

approach of barbarism; these were his thoughts in the autumn of 1952, not long after he had moved to Switzerland. He was again (June 28, 1953) decided in his refusal to support either America or Russia in their disputes:

It is certainly rather different as far as the totalitarian politics are concerned which communism avows and compels. Who would not have his doubts about the cultural-pedagogic qualifications of a communist bureaucracy? About the fruitfulness of the regimentation of art and science by the party-state? These doubts have still kept me apart from the communist sphere of belief, and this sphere does not take it amiss, as it appears, because on the other hand I refuse to take part in the stupid hunting of communists à l'américaine. . . .

Can one be a political communist and at the same time a lover of thought which is freely and artistically experimental? This separation of politics and the intellect is obviously anti-totalitarian and heretical. . . .

Liberalism is finished—and so therefore is freedom too, which has brought a certain blessing to mankind, but after all not much blessing. How does it come that one can simply no longer listen to the mendacious chatter about the "free world", id est a capitalist combine of states. In the American-Russian struggle for power I am for European neutrality at any rate—without hiding from myself that neutrality once again is a form of liberalism. . . .

The last two years of his life brought less preoccupation with East-West relations and an increased recognition that his work and personality were being appreciated in the United States. He complained of the tiring effect of public honours that were offered him from many quarters, but evidently enjoyed them too. In 1953 Schiller celebrations offered a challenge similar to that of the Goethe year, and again Mann spoke in Weimar as well as in West Germany. He wrote to his grandson Frido (April 11, 1955):

. . . at the beginning of May the Schiller celebrations in Stuttgart, where I am to take part in a kind of minstrel's war with the Federal president Heuss; and from there I want to go on to the Reds in Weimar, and the West German newspapers will curse because I find that the people over there are also human beings and Germans, who are happy when one visits them and tells them some something about Schiller. . . .

If he had not been able to allow himself the visit to Weimar, he said to another correspondent, after it was over, he would have lived in vain.

After the end of the war Thomas Mann's feelings towards Germany were inevitably an extension of the position he had taken during the previous twelve years. It was only with reluctance that he agreed to visit the country in 1949. Some of his misgivings find expression in the letter of December 19, 1948:

Refugees are not welcomed. They were not loyal to Germany. For under Hitler one had to remain loyal to Germany; now one goes to Switzerland, like Wiechert and Jaspers, and to Chicago, like Furtwangler. It is laughable.

German newspapers abused their licence by denouncing British and American citizens as "communists". More food-parcels had gone from America to Germany than to anywhere else; the gods only knew why, unless it was that the Germans moaned so loudly. He was confident in Germany's powers of recovery after the currency reform (March 29, 1949), and would have liked the country to remain unarmed, taking a neutral position between the rival great powers. After the Goethe celebrations Mann believed that his visit was justified because it might have given encouragement to "those hard-pressed, better elements in Germany". On December 2, 1949, he again maintained that "all higher and better German spirit" was in a position of "bitter isolation". That Heinrich Mann received no acclaim from West German quarters was a further factor arousing disapproval. He was indignant at the attitude of "this Adenauer" and the "Ruhr-barons" in an industrial dispute (January 31, 1951). He wrote of the jealous and spiteful glances which Germans cast upon the work he had accomplished since 1933. Three years later he spoke of West Germany's wish "to live, forget, enjoy, do business and not to be reminded of tiresome matters". And again (May 17, 1954):

I know the shamelessness of the so-called younger generation over there. It is no doubt also linked up with the ridiculous economic flourishing of America's favourite colony "West Germany", this insolent and immoral prosperity after shameful deeds which closed with the journey to hell of 1945 and to recall

which today is none other than bolshevism.

But Mann did not see the situation entirely in such extreme terms. For instance, he commented on May 24, 1950, on the "pure and noble will" and "spiritual decency" that he was aware of among young Germans.

It is understandable that in his comments on literature and the arts he should not take an experimental, avant-garde approach. In music it is the world of Beethoven and Wagner where he feels at home, not that of atonalism. The nineteenth century has produced creative artists of greater stature than those of the present. For "desert-island" reading he might well choose Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, Goethe's *Faust*, Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* or *The Devils*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a volume of Stifter and Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale*. On another occasion he speaks of the value, to himself as well as to readers generally, of literature in translation; even in an unsatisfactory rendering a foreign masterpiece can become a major literary experience. He stresses the international quality of literature and the arts, and sees the German writer as having great obstacles to surmount in order to achieve accessibility to other peoples (January 19, 1952):

What an advantage, how much easier an existence, to be born into English or French civilization and culture. Being German makes one shy. It is no incentive to autobiographical confidence.

He is not particularly interested in postwar developments in German literature, and is only too willing to assume that there is little or nothing of interest or value there. But there are times when Mann can take pleasure in the fact that he can still be receptive to new experiences, for instance in his own literature. The reading of Kafka's *Amerika* arouses his "excitement, wonder, if not admiration".

A fundamental characteristic of art is its realism, he says; and the highest and most vital form in literature is not drama but the tale ("Erzählung"). After rereading Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* he sees himself as a shrew-mouse by the side of such a lion. Pablo Casals is praised for having no trace of "aesthetic neutrality in questions of humanity". Mann feels particularly attracted by Chekhov's personality, especially because of the "anxiety" that his fame caused him. And the preparations for the celebrations of 1955 arouse in him renewed appreciation of Schiller's work and personality.

For his own latest works he sees humour as a major ingredient. The intention of his writing is to entertain, though this aim can take on other worldly aspects:

It was always my wish and purpose to entertain, but would one take so much trouble about it if it were only directed at human beings? Art, it is said, aims at perfection. But this is in fact not so entirely earthly an endeavour.

More than once he tells correspondents that the treatment of the themes of sin and grace in *Der Erwählte* is serious. He is clearly attracted by the personality of Pope Pius XII after having an audience with him. The form of organized religion which attracts him most and to which he feels most bound is the Unitarian church (December 5, 1954); his grandchildren have been baptized there, and the funeral of his brother Heinrich was conducted under these auspices. He wrote on March 30, 1955:

For finally there is after all the question of the ultimate origin of nature and life, of the whole gigantic cosmic institution. No human being will ever answer the question. We all live and die in the enigma, and if we wish, we can call the feeling for this religious. It is a rather pretentious word, but the consciousness of hopeless ignorance is comparable in any case to a certain piety.

Perhaps it is not entirely satisfactory to leave Thomas Mann's correspondence with these words, or indeed with any one quotation. Evidently most of the letters are reactions to queries, comments or gifts from correspondents, and represent response to a challenge or sympathy with a friend's attitude. Mann's point of view in such circumstances cannot be expected to be consistently objective. But the vigour and commitment of his personality remained with him to the end.

Other recent books on Thomas Mann are listed on page 601.

THOMAS MANN: *Reden und Aufsätze*. I: 790pp. II: 832pp. Frankfurt: S. Fischer. DM.38 each.

THOMAS MANN: *Briefe, 1948-1955, und Nachlese*. 656pp. Frankfurt: S. Fischer. DM.36.



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