

## Thomas Mann und die Seinen

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There has never been a more divine writer of German prose since 1832 Reich-Ranicki writes about Thomas Mann. As most people know (or should know) 1832 was the year Goethe died, and Thomas Mann clearly saw himself as a descendant of that tradition, no wonder than that he took himself so seriously. Reich-Ranicki does too, his admiration for him is if not boundless at least out of depth, few are the critical objections he seems fit to level against him. Maybe Mann did at time express some anti-semitic remarks, but if so they are greatly outbalanced by those very warm and generous things he has said about the Jews. Maybe he dithered a little bit too much, to the exasperation of his brother and his children, in making a definite break with the Germany of Hitler, the final rupture not being effected until 1936. But all in all he was the exile par excellence that held the flag of Germany, that other Germany, high, and contributed to its post-war rehabilitation. Fully uncritical he is of course not of his subject hero, but when Reich-ranicki criticizes, he does so underhand so to speak, the dual of a left-handed compliment. His diaries when published are eagerly scrutinized by the author, and he is at times aghast at the very triviality of the entries (who in his right mind would ever be interested in that Mann had one and a half cup of coffee for breakfast?) and their lapidary executions without any of the usual literary flair associated with the great writer, Reich-Ranicki argues that this makes Mann more human, more accessible, and as such worthy also of our love not only of our admiration. That Mann is in the words of his brother - 'Ichbezogen', is hardly to be denied, but as the author has remarked before, great writers are always great egocentrics, for whom hardly anything else but themselves and their work exists, so indeed the at times appalling, at times even ridiculous, manifestations of his egocentricity (which should not be confused with simple egotism, although suitably interpreted that always constitute an important component) only proves the genuinity of his genius. Reich-Ranicki is dazzled by him, and in a critic, whose business it is to be disparaging, such effusion is charming, not to say touching, and warms your heart.

The book, unfortunately, is a quilt, and not a seamless narrative, collected from a variety of pieces on Mann and his entourage, written during a period of some twenty years. Thus in a sense it does not exist, did never exist, and was brought into that kind of second-order shadowy existence by editorial decision. Are there any good biographies of Mann? In recent decades, as the author never tire of reminding us, the number of studies on Mann has proliferated, and surely there must also have been a spate of attempted biographies of varying quality. The only such biography that Reich-Ranicki treats, is a monstrous one, both of length and as to vacuity, produced by the court-writer de Mendelssohn. Writing a biography is not a simple thing, at least not of an autobiographical writer, who has already said everything and so much better and with such greater authority than any biographer would ever hope to match. Yet the writing of such a biography is not a futile task after all, there is the internal perspective, where the writer is undisputable king, but also an external,

where the biographer has an advantage of the kind of hindsight that the subject himself was forever denied. Thus a biography of a writer should challenge the writer's conception of his life, but of course that is never done in that particular biography that Reich-Ranicki thrashes in his review. Part of the work of a biographer, and in most cases, almost the only work, is to do so called 'research'. This involves seeking out documents, reading letters, if possible to interview people capable of providing anecdotes, in short to act as a vacuum cleaner. Such an approach invites the illusion that the more extensively the research has been carried through, the wider the net cast, more truths have been gathered. The second part of the work then of course is to shape the material into some kind of narrative, and when the research has been encompassing, that write-up becomes more of a report on the research done than on the life it ostensibly has been gathered to illuminate. No wonder then the reluctance of the biographer to exclude all those tidbits, however insignificant, he has been at such pains to ferret out. The dangers of biographies of well-documented lives to run into thousands of pages is hence very imminent, and only the good business sense of publishers cut things down to manageable size. But of course the appetite for the public for biographies is quite large, fed by the all too human insatiable hunger for gossip, so biographies nevertheless tend to be quite thick. A pity though that Reich-Ranicki himself has not taken upon himself to write a study on Mann, not so much a narrative biography as an intellectual and literary one. But in lieu of that project, probably in view of the advanced age of the author never to be realised, we have the present collection, with the invariably overlaps and repetitions such solutions provide.

Thomas Mann is like a big tree under whose shadow those close to him both languish and sustain nourishment. His children, many of whom turned out to be quite successful literary presences by themselves obviously benefitted from being associated to the well-known man, attracting even in youth the kind of attention, most other writers have to struggle a lifetime to entice. On the other hand the comparisons with the Mann himself, inevitably were to their disadvantage. Most successful was the oldest child - Erika, whose career as an actress, and only secondarily as a writer, saved her from being too closely compared. She was also the apple of the eye of her father, appropriating the lion's share of his attention and care; energetic and self-confident one of the few who with impunity could stand up to him. Klaus, the one year younger sibling, was close to her, and both of them falling in love with the same man - the actor Gründgens, who in time, if only shortly, would turn into husband and brother-in-law respectively. Klaus would follow a tortured career, of open homosexuality and drug abuse. Like so many precocious children he never really grew up, forever caught in pubertal anguish. He was productive, but only one book remains in the public mind - *Mephisto*, based on the character of Gründgens and denouncing Nazi collaboration. But successful as the book may have been, Reich-Ranicki finds it a failure, the typical artistic failure of most ambitious books, namely that of failing of expression. It is clear what the author tries to do, in fact too clear, but what is actually done on the page rebels against the conscious conception of the author. Klaus Mann, always fascinated by death and self-destruction, finally did good on his flirtation and took the final step. At the time his suicide was hailed as a 'Freitod' a political manifestation of despair. This is clearly a most salutary spin to what was simply a personal tragedy. The case of Golo Mann, on the other hand is the case of a late bloomer (although he

apparently did finish a doctorate at the tender age of 23 back in 1932). He did not start writing and become a cultural presence until the death of his older brother and that of his father. In many ways he reacted against his father, but as Reich-Ranicki observed, his style owes very much to him. Known he is chiefly for his history of Germany during the 19th and 20th century, and his monumental biography of Wallenstein. He is also the only one in the Mann family, with whom the author has had any personal contact, and who as a consequence, has been able to provide him with much inside information during the years. Of the three remaining children, there seems to have been very little talent left to spend on. All of them culturally engaged, but the case of the youngest - Michael, a rather successful violinist turned Germanist at Berkeley in his forties, is particularly sad. In a section lifted from Reich-Ranicki's own autobiography 'Mein Leben', he refers to his failed attempts to get him to contribute to the cultural pages of FAZ, but that his piece on Auden, which he had suggested, was so bad, both as to ideas and style, that it could only be published after extensive reworking by the editors. Nevertheless they asked whether he would prefer to write in English, but the suggestions he forwarded were unusable. So you could be a successful academic but when it comes to writing a complete nobody. Michael Mann was found dead in his smoking on January 1, 1977. Suicide is suspected, but heart failure being the official explanation.

A central place in the family Mann is of course that of Katja his wife. She protected him from the vicissitudes of an ordinary life, apart from allowing him to sire six children. Some eight years younger than him (born in 1883), she survived into extreme old age, dying at almost 97, as late as 1980, something I was never aware of. Her father Pringsheim was a professor of mathematics, and she herself, although barred from attending the 'Gymnasium', passed the 'Abitur' with flying colors at the tender age of seventeen, and as the very first female student in Munich to boot. Thomas Mann himself, although in later years the recipient of many an honorary doctorate, was a mediocre student in his days, and was never nowhere near to completing his 'Abitur'. Afterwards she studied mathematics and physics, but gave all that up to marry Mann and become his devoted wife. Why? Needless to add in addition to brains she had looks and was assiduously courted by more than one fervent admirer. How come Mann got her? He was no nobody at thirty, a few years ago having made a smashing success, also financially, by 'Buddenbrooks'. Typical of the times of the prevalent high level of 'Bildung', or at least the ambition for such, in Wilhelmine Germany. The 'bürgerliche' is often disparaged, and of course Mann displayed a deep ambivalence towards it, nevertheless it made his success possible. The father-in-law was wealthy and allowed the young couple a style of life they would keep up for their rest of their lives. Even when they fell on comparatively hard times, they could always at least keep two servants. Katja Mann did not write, at least there should be one in the family that does not, she used to say, but nevertheless towards the end of her life a book based on interviews was published, to which she contributed anecdotes and tenaciously held up the reputation of her famous husband. Reich-Ranicki is intrigued, after all he compares the family Mann to the house of Windsor, although a royalty not based on birth (at least not entirely) but on intellectual achievement.

The older brother Heinrich, maybe he is an unduly slighted figure, undeservedly languishing in the shadow of his younger brothers 'Erfolg', maybe almost on the same level?

Many hold that he was more politically astute than his brother. Reich-Ranicki makes mince-meat of such speculations. The fact was that Heinrich too had his share of the limelight. At sixty he was elected to the presidency of the poetry section of the Prussian Academy and showered with laudations, including those of his younger brother. Earlier in his life Heinrich Mann had written sceptically, not to say contemptuously on literary reputation, how it more often than not was based on gross misunderstandings. But it is one thing to disparage the reputation of a rival and declare it undeserved, it is quite another thing to be detached about yourself being raised to the skies. It is not clear whether Mann the elder did receive the applause late in life with the kind of detachment he advised to others. It should be a lesson to us all how often rather mediocre people are effusively praised by people who should no better, praise that may be at time honest excesses of temporary enthusiasm, but often nothing more than being lavished calculatingly. So whenever lauded, receive it with a cool head if a warm heart.

Heinrich Mann was very diligent and blessed with energy. He used to brag about how quickly his novels were written, that in fact that they often seemed to write themselves. In addition to fictional work, he also turned out a steady stream of essays and articles, a real busy 'Schriftsteller'. The brother was aghast, and found the reading of many of his works painful, although he often tried to be very polite. The fact was that the written works of the elder brother seemed to be nothing but first sketches, for which he had neither the time nor the inclination or patience to polish. Everyone with a talent for writing discovers that writing is easy, that it can indeed be left to itself, and the one who fancies himself to be talented is easily seduced into thinking that this is all there is to it, that further work is not necessary. Popular success was hard in coming for the brother, although he wrote in such a way to court it unashamedly. In a way his models were the cheap and sensational literature of the day, which he tried to embroider. Both his brother and Reich-Ranicki himself are repulsed by his total lack of taste, not just his sloppiness, his liberal use of clichés, and his profligate expenditure of adjectives, but his very choice of topics and ways of treating them. It is this intrusive 'Geschmacklosigkeit', which makes many of his works unreadable nowadays. Still he was not entirely without some lucky breaks. 'Der Untertan' a violent tirade against Wilhelmine Germany found a receptive readership after the First World War. (Although Reich-Ranicki finds that after having read half of it, there really is not much more point in reading further, everything being so predictable). And in 'Professor Unrat' he managed, maybe not fully intentionally, to draw a character, who in spite of being unsympathetic, nevertheless manages to engage our compassion. The book was turned into a success by being filmed under the title 'Die Blaue Engel' starring Marlene Dietrich. Maybe this made him dream about a Hollywood success?

Between the two brothers there was bitter rivalry, Heinrich, as being the older, having a headstart, but with the publication of 'Buddenbrooks' the relationship would be loop-sided. In spite of having the upper hand, Thomas Mann himself acknowledged feeling of hatred and envy against his brother, and was in many ways repulsed by him and his works. While Thomas Mann was a closet homosexual, probably without ever indulging his physical passion for young men, outwardly living a life of strict bourgeois respectability; the brother liked to move around in bohemian circles, having a healthy heterosexual appetite, with a succession of girl-friends to satisfy it. The brother was also politically more

radical, early on taking a leftist stand, in fact becoming an unashamed supporter of Stalin and the Soviet system, including the show-trials. Yet, Reich-Ranicki points out, he was no systematic thinker, in fact his political views were often shallow and naive, and as an essayist he lacked the depth of thought to really make those essays of his memorable, even if he at the time made a stir.

Heinrich Mann followed his younger brother into American exile. As he was financially much less successful, he became dependant upon his younger sibling, something that must have severely hampered the expression of open hostility. He died in March 1950 and was buried in Santa Monica, not able to make good the invitation to settle in DDR, which had been extended to him.

And Thomas Mann himself, the sun around which everything else orbited. His life was exempt from drama, at least external, and was allowed, thanks to financial comfort and the untiring efforts of a devoted and intelligent wife, to follow a regular routine, disturbed by no one, especially not by children. It involved hours of the hard work of writing in the morning, serious reading in the afternoon, and listening to music in the evening. His progress was slow but steady, knowing full well that talent is far from enough for a serious writer, that each sentence has to be carefully crafted. And so there issued from his pen a steady stream of novels and essays for over half a century. He was not interested in contemporary writers, he saw them all as rivals, of whose production he wanted as little as possible. He craved confirmation, good and appreciating reviews, yes so strog for his craving for praise, that even the awkward offerings by regular readers he found significant enough to note in his diary. But of course there was a rich font of past writers to draw from, not the least the Olympian himself - Goethe, to keep him busy. As a critic he was not temperamentally suited, but when it came to the extended essay, he felt himself as fish in water. And even if he as a systematic critic, or in the ambitions of Reich-Ranicki, a scientific one, there is much that is wanted, mostly due to a lack of genuine interest, when it comes to himself and his works, he almost always turns out to be the most incisive and authoritative critic. If we really want to know what his books are all about, we should turn to him, he almost always have the definitive answers. At least according to the author.

In this collection of articles, the author has not only occasion to comment on the diaries of Mann, some of which he evidently had no intention to withhold from publication, as well as various correspondences, he also comments at length on different books. One of which, an early work, with many obvious flaws, is his extended Novella - *Toino Kröger*, which nevertheless found an eager readership (it seems that the young Kafka read it and was affected). Obviously the young author had hit a nerve, namely the feeling of not belonging, so common to many sensitive youths, especially among those dreaming of an artistic career. In this novella Mann expresses his basic ambivalence towards the solid bourgeois life, something he both hated and envied. Of course in his own life he was able to combine the best of two worlds. The comfort of the burgher with the adventure of the writer. To be both of it and outside it. From a more detached point of view this would be considered shrewdness. And shrewdness he had of course, in his dealings with his publisher - The Fischer family, throughout his career (his brother, a more prolific writer, had to use a variety of publisher in order not to overwhelm a single one). He was very much aware of being an institution, a literary institution, which he had to cultivate to the limit and

which provided him with a role, he was perfectly happy to play.

Was he sympathetic? The question is not very interesting, the central question to ask about a writer is whether he writes well or not. It is not that his inhuman features should be forgiven or ignored, or worse, seen as necessary components of his genius, they are simply irrelevant to the basic literary question. Then of course there are other aspects of life, in which they will play a central part and be considered accordingly. Yet, humans have a craving for gossip, believing that in the quotidian details of a life, somehow the keys to it are to be discovered. Thus the market for biographies, and also for books like this, the real allure of which, is the promise of divulging to the reader some great secret. Secrets there may be, but none of the nature of being amendable to being divulged.

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