Professor Unrat

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July 14-16, 2007

'Unrat' means 'dirt'. Dirt sticks, as well as the name. Professor Unrat represents a nowadays extinct animal, namely that of the terrifying teacher. Nowadys teachers are not allowed to be terrifying, their freedom curtailed, their authority, moral as well as intellectual, undercut. Is this a good thing or not? It is not so clear. Both Heinrich Mann and his younger brother - Thomas, did not complete their studies, whether this led to a lifelong animosity against the school system is an open question, certainly both inveighed against it in their novels, especially against their most egregious representatives.

Does the author hate his protagonist? He certainly tries very hard to make him very pathetic as well as unsympathetic. A figure to ridicule, and in so doing excorcising fear. Unrat is described as both tyrannical and helpless, his soul wilted driven only by the lust for revenge. But in spite of the author the reader feels a kind of reluctant compassion for the figure, revelling when things go his way, even when in repellent ways. A compassion mirrored by the one felt by Künstlerin Fröhlich for the repulsive man, somehow vindicated by his fervent love for her, so fervent indeed that she cannot but be touched by it, in fact even kindled into a half-hearted ambition to try to love him as well, manifested by her aborted ambition to have him teach her Greek (Greek because according to Unrat, this is even harder than Latin). In the popular film - The Blue Angel, Fräulein Frölich is indeed his nemesis, the 'femme fatale par excellence' bringing about his downfall. Not so in the book, the book is too much of a burlesque to allow tragedy. In fact what should be seen as Unrats downfall is indeed his triumph. Of the conservative authoritarian representative of a supposedly suppressive schoolsystem, a pillar of morality and obedience, emerges an anarchist, who with his wife keeps a house of gambling and prostitution, throwing all cautions and standards to the wind. The end, towards the reader initially approaches with apprehension, fearful as to what the sadistic author will have in store, is in fact mercifully brief. Unrat, in an insane rage when encountering his supreme enemy, the superior 'Schüler' Lohmann, runs away with his money, finally bringing down the police on him and his cohort, who are seen being arrested and driven away. A relief.

One cannot say that 'Professor Unrat' is a good book. It is in many ways a bit hard to read, it gives the impression of being written in haste, and in many ways reads like a book for school-children, sympathetically depicting young men struggling with growing up intellectually, sexually and socially. Heinrich Mann is indeed known for writing close to the vulgar literature of the times, partly out of temperament, partly by design trying to make his books sell. In fact one is struck by the affinity to the books by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Bergman, the same kind of crude burlesque. But the comparison with Bergman also highlights the defects of the book. Had Bergman written the book, he would have pushed further, made Unrat more complex, more vivid, in fact coming truly alive, engaging our deeper sympathies. The repulsion that the author feels for his main character, and which he tries to make overly explicit is repulsive by itself. Imagine that Unrat had been a

Jewish character, would not the author have been retroactively accussed of anti-semitism? In fact the very sources out of which Mann draws his venom are more or less identical with those Nazism drew theirs. The blind, indignant contempt that the mass feels for the outsider, the triumph of the many against the one. Maybe at the time the book was written the furious indignation that it expresses might strike chords and serve some purposes, but a century later, those purposes are no longer present and only the stinking residue remains, the object it was meant to eradicate, already being eradicated.

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