

## Der Untertan

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*Die Demokrati is die Weltanschauung der Halbgebildete [...] Herren und Knechten wird es immer geben [...]denn in der Natur ist es auch so. Und es ist die einzige Wahre, den jeder mußüber sich einen haben, vor dem er Angst hat, und einen unter sich der vor ihm Angst hat.*

So this is Germany. Germany and the German mentality at its worst. Heinrich Mann nourishes a deep self-hatred of what is German, seeing it manifested a long time before the First World War even. What would he have thought of the Second World War? No need to guess, he lived through it, and his opinions are not secret. But let us not digress.

This is the story of a man - Diederich Heßling, and his rise during the end of the Wilhelmine Germany. As a protagonist he has chosen a most unsavoury character, a man with few redeeming features making the most of what little he has, servility being the most abundant. The authors brother Thomas is a most meticulous writer, a real professional, administering endless care for the most inconsequential detail, Heinrich on the other hand, as Reich-Ranicki is for ever reminding readers, is a slap-dash writer, impatient, careless, uneven. And this shows, even in 'der Untertan' which apparently were many years in the making, but of course extended work is more often the result of delays and procrastination than unflagging commitment. There are scenes which are very good, such as Heßlings superb humiliation at the hands of Wulckow, the industrialist and politicians, who finds himself the object of an attempt at bribery. But too often things are just half-heartedly developed, as if the author suddenly have been seized with some inspirational impulse, but not been patient to work it out and integrate it in the story. One such example is the sexual relation between Heßling and his wife, which is suddenly made explicit, after having been hinted at. This is a theme which in a greater writer would have been skillfully interwoven in the text, but in the case of Heinrich Mann being more of a sudden realization surprising him and revealing that he is as little in control of the characters as are his readers. Of course a great writer should be able to create characters that transcend his craft, but he should be crafty enough at least to maintain some literary control. Heßling remains not so much a psychological mystery, because this would indicate some hidden coherence, as a puzzle, which is merely confusing. On one hand he is presented as an idiot, displaying a devotion to the 'Kaiser' that you would expect of a simpleton, and I am thinking in particular of his farcial antics down in Rome during his honey-moon, when he is following the German Emperor with an enthusiasm of a demented fan; on the other hand he follows an academic career, becomes a doctor of Chemistry, although he is not presented with any hint of a genuine scientific interest or curiosity. As a man of the world he is incompetent, yet he manages to climb, and at critical ventures rise to the occasion, be it only in rhetorical terms. The problem is that the main protagonist is presented as a Grosz caricature, making sense in the single frame of a cartoon, but not sustainable through an entire novel.

If the characters fail, or at least the main protagonist, many of the subsidiary characters

are quite succesful and believable, from the rather pathetic Agnes, abominably treated by Heßling in the beginning of the novel (not so much out of pure evil as out of indifference and lack of genuine feeling), to his sisters, the industrialist Wulkow and his wife, the amatuer dramatist, who in one of the more engaging scenes of the book, has one of her theatricals performed by members of her extended acquaintance. But if the book is not so much about Heßling after all, it might be about Germany, about certain social strata in its societies and give to the reader that kind of vivid sense of place and time that only a good novel can give, but even here I must admit failure to appreciate. As a reader one is constantly kept in the dark as to the actual position in time, so important in a historical novel, in fact the only indication given is (somewhat out of the blue) by the birth years of Heßlings children, indicating that the events of the novel took place before the 1890's, and hence the 'Kaiser' to which the author is refering may as well be the old one as the new and flamboyant (clearly the character who goes to Rome). One thing one would like to know would be the role of Bismarck, still alive during the time of the narrative, but active only in the beginning?

Naturally one would expect a character like Heßling come to grief, but in fact, just as surprisingly as professor Unrat in another of Heinrich Manns novels, he is carried through without the catastrophe one is led to expect ever materializing. In a way this might be a relief to the reader (especially in the case of the pathetic Unrat) but must be somewhat frustrating to the author, or is it simply a symptome of a failure of nerve and stamina?

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