

Über mich selbst

Autobiographischen Schriften

Th.Mann

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This is a collection of writings, which in one way or another, bear on Manns personal life. Remarkably none of it seems really have been written on his own initiative, unlike Heinrich Mann, he never ventures to write an autobiography, but appear to have sprung out of regular assignments, dutifully executed. Some are straightforwardly autobiographical, others focus on some specific episodes, in addition to which there are speeches and transcriptions of radio talks, responses to questionnaires, and some other sundry contributions, whose autobiographical significance is questionable. There seems to be no discernible principle guiding the sequence, if so, it is definitely not chronological. Inevitably there are many repetitions, but Mann seldom, if ever, repeats himself *ad notam*, reflecting his desire to always formulate himself anew¹ Taken together, repetitions do not as much irritate as reinforce, invaluable didactic tools.

The outlines of Mann's biography are easily summarized. He grew up together with one older brother, and three younger siblings, two sisters and one much younger brother. His father was the last in line of a sequence of merchants who had established a flourishing wheat business in the northern Hanseatic town of Lübeck, his mother was from Brazil, half of German stock, half of Portugese-Creole, with a definite southern appearance, thus contributing to the staid family tree an element of exoticism. The father was a respected member of the city, as well as of its Senate, because traditionally before unification, Lübeck along with other Hanseatic cities like Hamburg and Bremen was a free city, not part of any petty principality. The mother brought to the household culture, having an excellent voice and a flair for narration (the reading of Andersens fairy tales would have a deep impact on him) in addition to her obvious musical talents. Thus early on Mann was exposed to Wagner, who made a deep impression on him. He was an indifferent student at school, just as was his older brother, more interested in loafing around, reading and playing with his 'Puppentheater'². The father sensing the inappropriateness of leaving the firm in the hands of any of his sons made a will, stipulating that after his death, the firm was to be liquidated. Soon thereafter he died, whether from cancer or blood-poisoning (the latter being a consequence of the former?) is irrelevant, a death which meant for the family a liberation. The eldest brother had already left home, but the widow resettled with her younger children to Munich, a city much more congenial to her temperament than Lübeck, and Mann would soon follow suit after having attended an additional year at the Gymnasium, although, like his older brother, without going all the way to his

¹ On the other hand the bad habits of self-plagiarism only emerged with the advent of the personal computer and the word-processor.

² Making you think of the formative experiences of the Swedish director Bergman.

'Abitur'. The family lived now in comfortable but obviously reduced circumstances and the elder sons were given a modest allowance liberating them from the onus of finding gainful employment. Mann had early on experienced some literary success in getting one of his stories accepted for publication, always a heady experience, especially at an early age. The success encouraged him to pursue a literary career, wholly in line with the cultural and faintly bohemian milieu in which he had found himself in. His elder brother, with whom he would have an intimate and life-long relationship, but of which little emerges in the present collection, would serve as a model, having already embarked on such a career. They in fact decided to live together in Italy, Palistrina in fact, in the vicinity of Rome, and pursue their writing in modest comfort, their allowances going a long way when spent in Italy. It was here that Mann made the momentous decision to start writing what would later turn out to be the 'Buddenbrooks'. At first it was meant to be a joint project, but soon Mann took over entirely, secondly it was meant to be quite short, but during the process it swelled. The writing of it took place over many years, mostly in Munich, to which Mann had returned after a year. It was if anything an autobiographical work based very much on real life. Mann did characteristically extensive research writing to his relatives for information. This is of utmost significance, Mann, just as his great exemplar Goethe did not make things up, all was taken from real life and processed appropriately. Imagination does not exhibit itself from mindless making up, any fool can do that, but from working under great constraints. It is only in the encounter with obstacles that the imagination is truly inspired and rises to the occasion. As literary inspiration Mann foremost referred to Scandinavian writers such as Kielland and Lie, whose works and subject matters anticipates 'Buddenbrooks', but also to Russian writers, especially Turgenev, and the German Fontane whose 'Effi Briest' supplies Mann with the name of 'Buddenbrooks' appearing there as a minor character in passing. The book was published in 1901 and was a resounding success, and the work cited for the award of his Nobel Prize in 1929. While writing it, he often read aloud chapters of it to his family to mutual delight. He later found out that also the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf had read aloud of her debut 'Gösta Berlings Saga' to her nieces and nephews for their amusement, never suspecting that it would ever travel beyond that narrow circle. Mann admonishes:

Nicht immer sind es die größten Werke, die mit den größten Absichten geschrieben werden. Im Gegenteil halte ich es für die Regel, daß die großen Werke das Ergebnis bescheidener Absichten waren. Der Ehrgeiz darf nicht am Anfang stehen, nicht vor dem Werk. Er muß mit dem Werk heranwachsen und diesem mehr angehören als dem Ich den Künstlers. Es ist nichts falscher als der abstrakte und vorsachliche Ehrgeiz, der Ehrgeiz an sich und unabhängig vom Werke, der beliche Ehrgeiz des Ich.

In the end the manuscript was huge. The young author made a package of it, and when sealing it with wax, he clumsily burned himself. As this was the only copy of the text he was naturally worried entrusting it to the Postal Service, and put a very high insurance value on it, which made the employee smile. In due time he was informed by Fischer, to whom he has promised all his future works, that he could not publish it in its entirety, it was far too thick, the public would not countenance such a thick book, too expensive to buy, too daunting to read. Mann at the time doing a short stint in military service, out of which he soon enough would be able by family contacts to extricate himself out of, wrote

a long passionate penciled letter to the editor pleading his case with such persuasiveness that Fischer relented. The book was published in two volumes, but only when some time later, it was published in a single volume with thin paper, did sales take off, but by that time his reputation had been made.

Mann must have led a charmed life in Munich with such an achievement under his belt opening the doors to the best of cultured society. We learn from him that at the time he had a passion for the bicycle, getting everywhere on it, a craze he shared with many young (and not so young) people at the time, in particular with a young lady, a Katja Pringsheim. About Mann's early sexual history not much is known, except that he had some crushes on same-sex school-mates as a school-boy, that he in Italy met a young English woman and that he considered marriage, only to decide that the cultural rift was too wide. None of this may have actually involved carnal involvement, as to extra-curricular adventures, rites of passage for young men at the time, we can only speculate. Katja was the female partner of twins, born as the last off-spring of the family Pringsheim of Jewish descent. On the mother's side there were literary antecedents, on the father's wealth and music. The father shared his passion between music and mathematics being a professor of the latter at the university. They lived in style, and the mother kept a salon, and naturally Mann paid her court before being audacious enough to approach the daughter seriously. She was something, studying mathematics and also working with the great Röntgen, at the tender age of twenty, academically far more advanced than Mann himself. But he carried it off in 1905, and eventually six children would ensue spread out during almost a decade and a half.

Although Mann was systematically busy, apart from essays and shorter novels, he did not publish anything on the scale of *Buddenbrooks* for a quarter of a century. There was the short novel 'Tonio Kröger' a few years later, a new but highly condensed version of 'Buddenbrooks', or anyway drawing from the same source, the light-hearted 'Königliche Hoheit' would take form in the first years of his marriage, and later on the short novel 'Der Tod in Venedig' which may, due to its briefness, be the one most read (and the filmed version by Visconti in 1970 did not hurt), and as almost everything else in Mann's fiction based, in many cases almost literally, on his own personal experiences.

With the approach of the First World War, relations to his brother declined. Heinrich being a political radical, bohemian in his lifestyle, while Mann was the quintessential bourgeois, with conservative leanings. The advent of the War, was greeted with excitement by Mann, but brought Heinrich to despair. In order to, in the words of George Kennan, find out what he really thought, he embarked on a long essay 'Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen' which would take him two anguished years to complete just before the end of hostilities. Mann always emphasized the ironic character of all what he wrote, meaning a detachment from its ostensible meaning, in fact as he once wrote, he writes in order to abandon his position. And abandoned he did, after the essay was finished, he more or less repudiated much of what it stood for, assumed a more radical political view, professing himself to be a Social Democrat, a Socialist in fact (but he would always take exception to Communism, unlike his elder brother), claiming that Socialism really stood for classical humanism. The brothers were reconciled and Mann started to process his thoughts now in fictional form, the outer setting being inspired by a visit to his wife at a sanatorium.

We are of course talking about 'Der Zauberberg' which likewise started out as a short novel, and then just swelled as had 'Buddenbrooks'. It too turned out to be a success, and obviously contributed to the decision of awarding him the Nobel Prize, even if not explicitly acknowledged.

When Hitler took power in early 1933, Mann happened to be visiting Switzerland. He was warned not to try and return to Germany, and spent the next five years in exile in Zürich. In 1938 he was called to a visiting professorship at Princeton and he would spend the war years there, eventually moving to southern California. During these years he completed his tetralogy 'Joseph und seine Brüder' and started and almost completed 'Doctor Faustus' and was generally feted, meeting with Roosevelt. After the war he felt the strong urge to return to European soil and choose Switzerland, the country that had given him exile, and as he later remarked, that as a German one was lucky to be able to find a Germany outside Germany, a tolerant, democratic, European and multi-linguistic Germany, Russian exiles had had a much worse time, once outside the political entity Russia, there were no other Russian lands³. And of the last five years or so of his life not much need to be said, although active to the last, with many projects to complete (such as his youthful 'Felix Krull') and start (on Luther and Fredric the great), old age was catching up, and with it the realization of impending death. Yet, if pressed to summarize his work, he points out that *daß es lebendfreundlich ist, obwohl es von Tode weiß*. He points out that love of life comes in two forms, the first is naive but robust, and knows nothing about the existence of death; the other, the only one with dignity, is the one which in spite of the awareness of death, the joy nevertheless persists. It is the joy of life that belongs to the artist, the poet and the writer.

As to 'Bildung' that word which has no proper equivalent in English, it has to be built on something already innate, the process itself cannot bring it about. Admittedly he was not a prominent student, accused of laziness by his teachers, and finding most of the subjects boring. Once to his lasting regret he suffered to be corrected by his ignorant teacher as to the actual name of an Egyptian god, without protesting. The only happy memory of his days concern a teacher who told them that not only was Schiller the best they up to now would have encountered, but the best in all senses. In his early years Nietzsche and even more Schopenhauer exerted a deep influence on him. Not that he believed everything Nietzsche actually claimed, what fascinated him was this overcoming of himself, his 'Selbstüberwindung', which made him love him, and hence the only way he could assimilate him was through irony. And irony, as already noted, is one thing that Mann thinks infuses all his writing, in fact justifies it. But of course by itself it is not enough to make things viable, art just like life requires seriousness. As to 'Bildung' he sees himself as a modern day Goethe in the German culture, be it a mere shadow of the great man, whose sayings he repeatedly returns to and makes his own, including the bold boast of Goethe that his work in fiction anticipates life, that in fact his wisdom is innate and goes beyond experience. On the other hand, as with all profound thinkers, contradictions are not only legion but apparently intended, Goethe claims that *Das Benutzen der Erlebnisse ist mir immer alles gewesen; das Erfinden aus der Luft war nie meine Sache: ich habe die*

³ This is actually an excellent argument against trying to collect all speakers of a language into a single political unit.

Welt stest für genialer als mein Genie something that applies as well to Mann, as already noted. As to his views on culture, he professes that one may be radical and democratic and all that, yet conservative in the sense that one wants to defend culture, meaning the spirit of free and independent inquiry against the mass onslaught that only means stupid trivialization and crude vulgarization.

One charming piece deals with the summer place Mann had built in Lithuania, close to the still existing Königsberg. He remarks that the appreciation of visual beauty is not present in youth but comes later in life, and explains how his ability to see beauty in landscape has only arisen as he has aged and matured. His admiration for Caspar David Friedrich that he owns to, must hence be of a relative late date. The particular landscape to be had on the Kurische Nehrung is of a particular charm, he tells the reader. We are talking about a long and narrow tongue of land separating the Kurischen Haff from the Baltic. By summer under a blue sky the Haff is deep blue and makes you think of the Mediterranean. In fact the pines which grow by its shore remind you of southern ones as well. The white dunes on the other side makes you think of Northern Africa. The houses all come with thatched roofs and the gables come equipped with heathen crucified horse heads. And exactly such a house with two floors he commissions to be built. Simple with an open deck, and besides the dining room inside and his study, all the other rooms are simply bedrooms. One does associate Mann with vacations at the beach. In fact among his happiest memories from childhood were the vacations by Travemünde, the Baltic resort just north of Lübeck. This is an old traditions, and characterized by the roomy wicker beach chair which encloses you, a typical German contraption. Mann admits that he cannot write out-doors, he needs a roof above his head, but one imagines fondly that by that wicker beach-chair both can be combined. Not surprisingly Mann is a disciplined writer, working every day between nine and twelve in the morning. He demands good white paper and a resilient quill with nice flowing ink. He thus writes by hand. He does not copy what he writes but sends to the type-setter his original hand-written pages. But if a page is too cluttered with corrections, he rewrites this particular page. The writing is usually fast as he has normally planned everything beforehand, something word-processors have nowadays encouraged people not to do, but of course at times he has to struggle to formulate his thoughts. While he writes he likes to smoke, but he abstains from alcohol, which he only modestly imbibes in the evening. He sees no way how alcohol can actually improve or even ease the writing, writers who have drunk a lot have managed to write in spite of it, just as artists in all ages have created in spite of all kinds of debilitating hardships. As noted before, Mann likes to do research before he writes, and the results of such investigations, he keeps in a separate folder, between each item a clear line is drawn on the paper. Those notes, which also make up a plan for the work, enables him to resume an old work, even years, nay decades afterwards. Writing is very different from talking, what only a real writer appreciates. So what does he do in the afternoon? Resting and reading and socializing one may surmise. And of course taking walks. Three hours in a day does not appear very much, on the other hand what counts is the concentration during those working hours, and their regularity. This is what is meant by discipline, and something one gathers that he learned early on in life, but which may only have been established as he entered the matrimonial state. But discipline is of course not enough, there has to be

an urge, an urge Mann recognizes as a struggle to give your whole, which he also thinks maybe nothing but 'Todesangst'.

There are few travel reports, although one lengthy one documents in great detail a semi-official visit to Paris just after the war, including many public appearances and talks and panel discussions. Once when called to impromptu give a short talk, he notes that if you have not prepared anything before, you do not have to worry about losing the thread as there is none. The report is prepared like a diary, but I suspect most of it was written afterwards by the aid of scattered notes to jog the memory. There would simply not have been enough time in the day to sit down and record it in such painstaking detail, including not only the events of the days, but his own reflections on them, which could easily have been added on later. One also gets glimpses from a cruise including stops at exotic places, such as Egypt. He is impressed by the strong white teeth of the beggars. The women seem to take no part in society, but walk by shrouded in dark cloth, like nuns, with water urns on their heads, urns which lie down when empty and stand up when full. He resents a little that the newly opened grave of 'Tut-anch-Amos' is now emptied, back then when it was set up they no doubt had hoped it to be intact literally for ever. To what avail that some of its treasures he has been able to inspect in a museum in Cairo. In Istanbul every male above the age of fifteen wears a dark red Fez on his head. In Athens he refuses to be photographed along with the other tourists, he has, as he admits elsewhere, a fully irrational horror of having his picture taken. Then there is a report on a trip to Germany after the war, especially a visit to the Soviet occupational zone, where he is received with more welcome than in the Western zones. His trip to talk on the 200th birthday in Weimar is controversial, but he is not recognizing any borders in Germany. Of his travel in the States, one learns almost nothing, nor how life transpired in sunny Pasadena. He admits though that he felt very welcome, that it is easy to become an American, as opposed to a Frenchman or an Englishman, something one has to be born to. One's acceptance only goes so far. Yet one surmises that the ease with which one becomes an American trivializes the experience, and in the long run he cannot be happy and content in the States, he must be back in Europe, to be in close contact with German culture and language, which constitutes his life blood, if not necessarily living in Germany, where he is to some extent resented as a traitor. But as noted above, Switzerland provides the perfect solution.

Finally he lauds the fact that we will all eventually die and vanish. Death is part of life and we have to accept it. Without this obliteration of which death is the most tangible manifestation, there would be no time. It is time that endows life with meaning. Meaning that there is an end as well as a beginning. To death there is only a beginning, no end, thus no time. Without time, there would be nothing. Nothing of interest.

August 11, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se