

Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß

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Denn mit den Gedanken ist es eine eigene Sache. Sie sind oft nicht mehr als Zufälligkeiten, die wieder vergehen, ohne Spur hinterlassen zu haben, und die Gedanken haben ihre toten und ihre lebendigen Zeiten. Man kann eine geniale Erkenntnis haben, und sie verblüht dennoch, langsam, unter unseren Händen, wie eine Blume. Die Form bleibt, aber die Farben, der Duft fehlen. Das heißt, man erinnert sich ihrer wohl Wort für Wort und der logische Wert des gefundenen Satzes bleibt völlig unangetastet, dennoch aber treibt er haltlos nur auf der Oberfläche unseres Inneren umher und wir fühlen uns seinethalben nicht reicher. Bis - nach Jahren vielleicht - mit einem Schlage wieder ein Augenblick da ist, wo wir sehen, daß wir in der Zwischenzeit gar nichts von ihm gewußt haben, obwohl wir logisch alles wußten.

Ja, es gibt tote und lebendige Gedanken. Das Denken, das sich an der beschienenen Oberfläche bewegt, das jederzeit an dem Faden der Kausalität nachgezählt werden kann, braucht noch nicht das lebendige zu sein. Ein Gedanke, den man auf diesem Wege trifft, bleibt gleichgültig wie ein beliebiger Mann in der Kolonne marschierende Soldaten. Ein Gedanke, - er mag schon lange vorher durch unser Hirn gezogen sein, wird erst in dem Momente lebendig, da etwas, das nicht mehr Denken, nicht mehr logisch ist, zu ihm hinzutritt, so daß wir seine Wahrheit fühlen, jenseits von aller Rechtfertigung, wie einen Anker, der von ihm aus ins durchblutete, lebendige Fleisch riß ... Eine große Erkenntnis vollzieht sich nur zur Hälfte im Lichtkreise des Gehirns, zur andern Hälfte in dem dunklen Boden des Innersten, und sie ist vor allem ein Seelenzustand auf dessen äußerster Spitze der Gedanke nur wie eine Blüte sitzt.

This long passage comes at the end of the book, and has little significance to the plot, but it shows very well the tenor of the novel, and its emphasis on philosophical reflection, not unlike the spirit of William James. The protagonist is Törleß a young confused boy at a school for future officers at the end of the 19th century. In many ways he shares the characteristics of the young author, who was not many years past his puberty when it was written, but it would be naive indeed to take the tale as autobiographical, at least as far as actual events are concerned.

First and foremost we have Törleß who is about sixteen. He has taken up by some older boys Reiting and Beineberg and is desirous of their approval. He has lost his virginity with an older woman, who readily serves the pupils of the school, an experience not of joy but a mixture of carnal desire and disgust. He is constantly brooding on existential and metaphysical topics, as young sensitive and intellectual teenagers tend to do. Broodings and thoughts that inspire the fear and trembling we associate with vertigo, gazing into the

void. It is not so atypical of Musil, with a background and interests not often seen by the literati, to take mathematical examples. Infinity, which Törless as an exemplary student of mathematics had taken in stride, starts to make his head spin and inspire terror, once contemplated outside the class room. But what really bothers him in mathematics are imaginary numbers, those ghosts which seem to have no real existence, mere impossible figments of the imagination, yet for mysterious reasons seem to work. In enters real concrete sensible numbers, and out comes likewise real and sensible numbers, but what has taken place in the interim? It is like a bridge across a river, which is solidly anchored at each shore but in the middle is a void. How do you cross it? And when successfully crossed how did you manage? How is mathematics connected, if not by logical irrefutable steps, each firmly grounded? He seeks out his math teacher, a young man, whose mathematical erudition he admires, yet he is unable to extract a satisfying explanation from him. All that the teacher can do is to assure him that eventually he will get used to it. It works so beautifully why rock the boat? If mathematics does not have a firm solid foundation what has? Is everything in a flux, could everything be something else than it appears to be? As noted those are problems that torments intellectual awakening. Life is no mere game, or is it just a game? An illusion, maybe nothing exists except my perceptions? A terrifying thought, because the young mind in philosophical mood is no mere academic philosopher, what it lacks in formal sophistication it makes up in earnestness. Morals and logic become intertwined, it is a matter of life and death. And as we all know, too many may choose the latter.

Törless is tormented but not suicidal. For most youngsters the vitality of life trumps everything else. In the office of this mathematics teacher he had discovered a book casually lying around. It is by Kant. Maybe this will give the clue? He gets hold of a copy, and tries to read it, but is thwarted, he understand nothing. He gives up in disgust. There is more to life. Through his companions he get dragged into something that both fascinates and repels him. In the end he wants nothing to do with it. The plot hinges upon Beineberg noticing that some of his money has been stolen informs his companions. Suspicions land on Basini, a weak youngster of modest means with a widowed mother as only family. Törless is for turning him in as a petty thief, but Reiting sees his chance and pounces on it, like a hawk set on prey. Later on he easily extracts a confession out of Basini confronting him face to face, but promises not to report on him, provided that certain conditions are fulfilled. Not surprisingly those turn out to be a request to be his slave. Basini having no choice, and maybe egged on by a masochistic streak as well, consents. Beineberg is in on it, while Törless also taken into confidence merely accepts being a spectator. The three companions have a secret place in the building, reached only in a tortuous way, where they traditionally meet in secret. Now Basini is brought there to be humiliated. Törless initially excited withdraws but learns and deduces that Basini is being shamefully exploited. He is torn between sympathy for the oppressed and contempt for his weakness. He himself would never have consented to such degradation, he has after all dignity. But Basini has no dignity. As a young immature man, contempt wins out over sympathy. It is after all a matter of survival. But nevertheless he is mixed up and confused, hence the title of the novel. In fact Basini by now resigned to being sexually abused by his tormentors, ends up seducing Törless, who at first appalled cannot in the long run resist. Basini, not yet

sexually mature, is like a sexually immature girl, and the whiteness of his skin and the beauty of his perfect body holds an irresistible attraction to Törless. For some time they are lovers, but Törless breaks away in disgust, and Basini, who for some time lived in the illusion of having a protector, is now thrown helplessly to the wolves.

There is a penultimate scene of significance. They all meet in the secret hide-out, whose walls are covered with red textiles as if dripping with blood. This has now been turned into a torture chamber. Beineberg submits Basini to an experiment based on his theories of life and death. *Das Sterben is nur eine Folge unserer Art zu leben. Wir leben von einem Gedanken zum andern, von einem Gefühl zum nächsten. Denn unsere Gedanken und Gefühle fließen nicht ruhig wie ein Strom, sondern sie 'fallen uns ein', fallen in uns hinein wie Steine.* Beineberg lectures and continues *Wenn du dich genau beobachtest, fühlst du es, daß die Seele nicht etwas ist, das in allmählichen Übergängen seine Farben wechselt, sondern daß die Gedanken wie Ziffern aus einem schwarzen Loch daraus hervorspringen. Jetzt hast du einen Gedanken oder ein Gefühl, und mit einem Male steht ein anderes da wie aus dem Nichts gesprungen. Wenn du aufmerkst, kannst du sogar zwischen zwei Gedanken den Augenblick spüren, wo alles schwarz ist. Dieser Augenblick ist, - einmal erfaßt, für uns geradezu der Tod..* Death situated in the middle of our lives, and thereby the possibility of escaping both life and hence also death, letting the Soul free play. For a mathematician, the implicit idea of the process of time is interesting, moments of thoughts interspersed with stretches of void. Beineberg continues to develop his ideas, but the end result is not one of intellectual resolution but an orgy of whipping the poor victim badly, scarring his white body with red scars. Törless is disgusted by it all, and flees, finally submitting to Basini's pleas for help if only obliquely. He writes him a note to report to the director, which he actually does. An investigation is undertaken, Törless flees the scene, but is protected from suspicion by his two companions, who earlier has threatened him by disclosure. He is found, and brought to an interrogation in front of the director, the class teacher, the religious educator and the mathematician. He gets himself involved in elaborate philosophical digressions to the frustration of the school authorities, except for the religious teacher who approves. In the end he is deemed unfit for the school and sent home to the relief of everyone. The book ends, and we will of course never find out what happens to the rest.

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