

## The Brothers Mann

*N.Hamilton*

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Nigel Hamilton is a professional biographer. Meaning that biography as such is his forte. Many years ago I would steal time on Sundays after the sauna to read before dinner a chapter or two in a biography of Kennedy, titled 'Reckless Youth'. The subject matter being very different from what is served here. What qualifications does the author have save curiosity and a willingness to dig in archives? The repeated assertions of the greatness of the two brothers seem a bit misplaced, more characteristic of an enthusiastic amateur than a seasoned biographer and literary critic. Why write about them if that was not the case, and is not the text itself meant to convince the reader by means of reasoned arguments, rather than plain exhortations. Convictions cannot be commanded, they are always reached voluntarily, not by threat or intimidation. Furthermore the publisher has not helped the book by setting an indifferent font and a misleading typography, not always making it easy to spot what is a quotation from one of the subjects or the author's own reflection, something of considerable importance, as both Thomas and Heinrich are made to speak through their letters. In fact in what sense does the biography differ from a simple annotation of an exchange of letters?

Such prominence of two brothers is unusual. One thinks of the two brothers James, William (1842-10) and Henry (1843-16), but in their case there were no real rivalry, as one pursued a career of psychology and philosophy, while the other turned to the writing of fiction, The James family had a very eccentric father and a rather unconventional upbringing. Furthermore there was a troubled sister and two undistinguished younger brothers, while the Mann brothers had two troubled sisters, both of whom would eventually commit suicide (a family tragedy which would repeat itself among the children of Thomas, as we will be reminded of), and a (much) younger undistinguished brother. Their upbringing was not so much unconventional as exclusive. Their mother stemmed from Brazil, with a German father and a Portuguese mother. Their father was, as it would turn out to be, the last link in a 'Kaufmannhaus' originating at the end of the 18th century, enjoying a very respectable position in the free Hansastadt of Lübeck. The family had plenty of money, lived in style, characterized less by vulgarity than by high culture, in which music played an important role, the mother being an accomplished musician and singer, qualities which no doubt had played an important role besides her exotic beauty in the courtship by the father. The two brothers acquired early on ambitions of writing and neither showed any interest in business, nor any zealous interest in school-work, which would lead them to prematurely abort their formal education. They were as children rather far apart in age, the elder Heinrich born in 1871, the younger Thomas (or Tommy) in 1875, which meant that not until their teens could they become close. Heinrich, the older, had already left school starting as an apprentice in a bookstore in Dresden, where he to his father's dismay, performed indifferently, while Thomas were still in school, when their father died prematurely in his early fifties, presumably from cancer of the bladder. Nevertheless their

father had seen the handwriting on the wall and written a will in which he ordered the liquidation of the firm after his death, despairing, at least at the time, that any off-spring would be able to carry it on. This had a monumental consequence. Their father's death was a liberation, enabling them to carry on their chosen ambitions without disapproval and interference, as well as supplying them of the financial means to do so.

Their mother could set up a home in style and Thomas who joined her, hence had access to the best and most cultural of societies. His schooling having been aborted he was initially set to work in an insurance company doing dead-end tasks. He soon got enough of it and quit starting taking courses at the university, but his real vocation was writing, and he soon got some pieces accepted for publication, which must have been a momentous boon seeing his name in print. His brother had of course the same ambition, and being four years older actually beat him by four years as well. And a period of friendly competition and rivalry begun, the two brothers spending time together in Italy. It was here that Thomas started his work on *Buddenbrooks*, barely into his twenties, transfiguring his family experiences into an epic novel, which would not only make him famous as a young man, but may also because of its timeless and accessible structure, remain when most of his other works have fallen into obscurity. When he got the Nobel Prize in 1929, it was this work that was cited, although by that time there were others, which may have shared the stage.

The careers of the two brothers, starting out on parallel tracks, soon started to diverge. They were in many ways quite different, apart from their common ambition. Heinrich wrote breathlessly churning out one book after the other, and although some of them did receive their fair share of attention, especially 'Professor Unrat' after having been filmed as the 'Blue Angel', they tended to be hastily put together and of uneven quality. True, the hapdash style of his works, was in certain circles lauded as innovative and a vitalization of the German language. Thomas was slower, his production proceeding at a measured pace, and after the achievement of *Buddenbrooks*, it would take him over twenty years before he was ready to publish a new full-length epic novel, which would turn out to be 'der Zauberberg'. Politically the two brothers diverged in the years before the First World War. A divergence so drastic that it led to a break. Heinrich became more and more political and radicalized, a passionate critic of Wilhelmine Germany, rejecting German nationalism becoming more and more of a Francophile. And of course an outspoken champion of democracy. The outbreak of the First World War brought him nothing but dismay, while Thomas joined many intellectuals, to say nothing about the public at large, in welcoming the war as an opportunity for rejuvenation<sup>1</sup>. In opposition to his elder brother he took a very unpolitical position, emphasizing the difference between 'Kultur' and mere 'Zivilization', Germany he associated with 'Kultur' endowing it a superior spiritual value, as well as assigning Germany with its mission. As a result of the polemic between the brothers, conducted not only by personal letter but also obliquely in the press, where each formulation was

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<sup>1</sup> In fairness one should remember that at the time the war was expected to be short, a clinical affair, such as the wars of necessity orchestrated by Bismarck, bringing the newly united Germany the respect that was its due. That it would entail years of fighting and millions of dead and the destruction of the European civilization that one thought had come to stay, was something most people were unable to imagine, save a few individuals, such as Heinrich, whose voices called out in vain, unheeded.

regarded with suspicion of hidden meaning, Thomas was led to explicate his position in his 'Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen', something that took him two years to achieve, by the time he was finished, he had to a large extent abandoned his erstwhile position and come around to the position held by his brother, conceding one point after another, claiming, maybe not too convincingly, that he was a Social Democrat at heart, and that Socialism, to which Heinrich adhered, was nothing but humanism. However, the deep attachment to Germany and the German language would never leave him. The thoughts that had gone into his unpolitical reflections found a further resolution in his 'der Zauberberg' which would appear in the middle of the 20's. His rejection of his former (un)political view and his subsequent convergence with his brother did unsurprisingly lead to a reconciliation, and from then on, the relations between the brothers were one of unceasing mutual appreciation, not to say admiration. A rosy picture the biographer does nothing to try and dispel. However, their difference in character and interests, led Thomas to declare that there was a division of labor between them. Heinrich continuing to be a public voice, a role that Thomas tended to avoid.

Their family lives differed drastically. As a young man in Munich, Thomas was ensconced in high cultural society moving around, typically on bicycle, a regular habituee of soires and opera nights, as well as being a regular theatre-goer. His publication of his *Buddenbrooks* secured him a solid reputation opening many a door. It is unclear what heterosexual he had had as a young man although he had admitted to some same-sex infatuations, probably more of a sentimental kind than carnal, and now in his late twenties he was on the look-out for a suitable wife. His eyes fell on Katja. Young, beautiful, and very intelligent. And rich too, stemming as the youngest child (along with her twin brother) of the family Pringsheim, not only comfortably but excessively rich. Professor Pringsheim was Jewish, stemming from a family of merchants. He was professor of mathematics, and shared his interests between mathematics and music. His wife had been a celebrated beauty, daughter of the literary Dohm family. She naturally kept a salon of sorts. Thomas, as the author of *Buddenbrooks*, was welcome. He did his court to the mother, knowing that she would have an influence on both her husband and her daughter. He courted the daughter as well. Bike trips when together, she too as an ardent bicyclist, like her family (the Pringsheims took regular bicycling vacations), and by letters when apart. Maybe his court by letter suited him better, then he could lay it on. Thick. She was often away. Travel brings distraction. She was a student too, studying, to his dismay, differential and integral calculus, something unusual for a young girl at the time. She also studied under the celebrated Röntgen, the first Nobel Prize winner in physics, although he was rather irritated when she broke some equipment in his lab. Maybe she was not cut out for such a career after all. She had many suitors, and Thomas had to work hard. And on her mother too making her an ally in his quest. And eventually his endeavors bore fruit, in 1905 they married, his parents-in-law arranged an apartment for them, and rapidly a number of children would ensue. Erika in 1906, Klaus in 1907 and Golo in 1909, then there would be two more girls (Elizabeth and Monica) and one more boy (Michael). They had of course nannies and such things, so one surmises that the small children would not provide too much of a nuisance. In the years to come, but that would be far into the future, three of the children would commit suicide, although it is not quite clear, just as

both sisters of Thomas and Heinrich, decided to end their lives voluntarily. 'Der Freitod' as it can be put so heroically in German. Cynics say that it runs in families.

Heinrich on the other hand had a harder time to find a woman. Maybe his desire to do so was basically stronger. He was a much more markedly a heterosexual. On his transit to the States he shocked his nephew Klaus by drawing women with large breasts, sometimes dispensing with the woman altogether. His tastes were towards the glamorous and fatale. He was not lucky, one South American woman, wanting to become an actress, had him hanging on for years unable to make the commitment. On the rebound he married Minni, a Czech girl with whom he had a daughter. Eventually he tired of her, fell in love with a celebrated actress<sup>2</sup>, who dumped him after a year. In the end he fell in love with a beautiful and voluptuous bar-maid, much to the consternation and embarrassment to the solidly bourgeois Thomas Manns. She joined him in American exile, where she eventually, to his deep dismay committed suicide (and one surmises that the Mann household were rather relieved). The love life of Heinrich bore an uncanny resemblance to that of his fictional anti-hero - professor Unrat, of 'Blue Angel fame'. Maybe not so unexpected. Life imitates fiction, because fiction is sprung out of life itself.

The 1920's were the troubled times of the Weimar Republic, which both served loyally if not necessarily uncritically, at least when Heinrich was concerned. They ended triumphantly, as already noted, for Thomas being given the Nobel Prize in 1929, his *Buddenbrooks* being cited as the motivation. There were also rumors that his brother would get it too, but of that came nothing. When Hitler took power a few years later, Thomas happened to be in Switzerland, while Heinrich was forced into exile in Nice, his presidency of the Prussian Academy of Literature taken away from him, as well as his German citizenship, getting a Czech one instead. Many of their esteemed colleagues, who earlier had praised them, changed their coats when the wind started to blow from a new direction. Thomas would probably not have minded having returned to Germany, to his books, to his comfortable living, but he was warned by his eldest children. He remained in exile in Switzerland keeping a low profile, disavowing (along with some other celebrated colleagues) any relations to any emigre periodicals, which might interfere with the sales of his books, a decision to some part prompted by the interests of his publisher Fischer, to whom he had stayed faithful from the beginning of his publishing career. His books sold well, including his beginning tetraology 'Joseph und seine Brüder' and unlike the works of Heinrich were not burnt by the regime. For three years he kept silent until he, much to the satisfaction of his brother, decided to speak out. Something had happened, something had snapped, or maybe the issue of sales were no longer so critical.

Thomas stayed on in Switzerland for six years, during which time he made a couple of visits to the States where he was feted, given honorary doctorates, meeting the President. At the end of the thirties they decided to make the States their more permanent exile, eventually moving to the West Coast settling in Santa Monica, along with many other emigrees. The situation in Vichy France became perilous to Heinrich after the war. Would he be extradited he would meet with certain death back in Germany. He managed, as a seventy year old not in the best of health escape across the mountains to Spain, then

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<sup>2</sup> Originally chosen to play the title role of the 'Blue Angel' until Sternberg cast her out and casted Marlene Dietrich instead

flying Lufthansa (of all airliners) to Lisbon, embarking on a ship along with his nephew and woman to the States. Initially he got a paid job as a scriptwriter, but it soon petered out. He lived in poverty and obscurity, while his brother Thomas was well off. Without hand-outs from the latter, he and his wife would have been in dire straits indeed.

Thomas finished the fourth and final volume of his Joseph tetraology during the first years in the States, then at the end took up work on his final major work - Doctor Faustus. He would not return to Germany, to where he did not feel welcome, until many years after the end of the war, but would resume what would turn out to be his permanent exile in Switzerland, having become rather disgusted by the US, the country which initially had enticed him, to some extent blaming McCarthyism. His brother, getting nice offers from the newly created DDR, did not live long enough to take them up and return to Europe, dying in the spring of 1950. Thomas was resented in Germany, especially West-Germany, as having been an exile escaping the hardships of the war. As opposed to the normal meaning of an outer exile, was added the notion of an inner exile. The stand taken by people, who (at least in retrospect) had been critical of the regime, but nevertheless been loyal to Germany. Given the sentimental attachment he felt for his father land, this hurt him deeply and prompted him to make a cutting remark. Yet he did in the fifties make a number of visits to Germany, in particular to his hometown of Lübeck, the burghers of which had resented the portrait painted by him in his *Buddenbrooks* novel.

His health had been fine, and in many ways he did not, in spite of an early spectacular success, get into full gear until late in age, his mind brimming with ideas about future work, be it about Luther, Goethe or Fredrick the Great. In the States he was diagnosed with a condition of the lung, an organ he had never expected to be troubled with, a very successful operation was done removing an abscess and a speedy recovery followed more like that of a thirty year old than a seventy year old. The true diagnosis, that of lung cancer, was probably hidden from him on the insistence of his wife. He lived for another nine years. A few months after his eightieth birthday he was taken sick with thrombosis of the leg while on vacation. Flown to his home outside Zürich, where he died a few days later, the thrombosis only being a secondary affection.

Imagination does not work in a vacuum. It needs constraints and obstacles to circumvent in order to be properly stimulated. Great fiction contains little that is simply made up, most of it comes from real life, authentic experience, which is digested and processed. Thomas kept to a few themes all his life, and like that of Goethe, whose 20th century role he no doubt dreamed of playing, his fictional work is to a large part autobiographical. Typical is that his large work on Joseph is a fleshing out of well-known Biblical story traditionally known to everyone. Shakespeare too borrowed plots, the proper work of the imagination is to stay within externally imposed bounds, imaginatively interpreting them. Thus he was often accused of using real life models for his characters, models who did not always appreciate the way they were presented, starting with his uncle and his role in the *Buddenbrooks*. What one would have liked would have been a more intimate description of his mundane working habits. How disciplined was he? Did he sit at his writing desk no matter whether inspired or not at fixed hours? He obviously wrote in longhand and did not type, but were his manuscripts neat, or were there many corrections? Did his texts write themselves smoothly or did he agonize over each sentence? Did he carefully plan

his novels, or did they write themselves? His painstaking research indicates the former, maybe he found a lot of pleasure in that research, the remnants of which were packed into boxes and forgot about? Much of that no doubt vanished during the years of the regime, but what about that of later years? Are they to be found in his archives? He did after all publish a book on his work on 'Doctor Faustus'.

The work of a writer, a composer and a mathematician appear very close in spirit, highly cerebral and self-contained, independent of location and rather lonely. Yet the fruits are so dissimilar.

July 21-22, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se