

Mario und der Zauberer

Th.Mann

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This is about a magician and his uncanny tricks. No doubt this is supposed to be of symbolic intention, and a lot of prophetic interpretations can be retrieved from it, but this I find incidental to the interest of the short story, what impresses me more than anything else is the skill of Mann as a story teller, his ability to evoke mood and location, be they of a trivial kind. Thus one may dismiss it as a mere finger exercise, but nevertheless the stunning realism of the story impresses me.

First of all it is an evocation of time and place, namely more precisely a sub-fashionable seaside resort on the Italian coast. Mann must have sought those out with his family many times, and it all is by now quite familiar to him, and his skill in conveying this familiarity with its concomitant trivial modes and frustrations I find rather engrossing, exactly because of their banality. The frustration of not being able to eat out in the veranda at the hotel, the anger, the irritation, the move to a friendlier place, where the food in addition is better. The run in with the authorities, Fascist at the time one surmises, because of their youngest daughter momentarily stripping on the beach to rinse her bathing suit of sand, incidentally a hypocritical kind of morbid prudery concerning nakedness, my wife and I have encountered in the States. Not very significant I agree, but that is the point, it is exactly those trivial things which make out the actual texture of our lives, the cloth out of which it is cut.

The description of the performing magician on the stage is far less interesting, as to his antics, bizarre as they may be, because they only provides an excuse. We become privy to the initial excitement, the cautious and embarrassed one of the parents, the innocent and uninhibited by the children. The parents are worried, will it not be too late for the children, a worry which is further enhanced, as there is considerable delay before the magician actually arrives on the scene, to the growing impatience of the mixed audience. The better folks seated, the poor locals standing in the aisles. But of course this delay is all part of the show. When he appears, Mann, and so you identify the male narrator, remarks to himself that in Italy you still may encounter this survival of the 18th century, the particular magician moving from place to place. This is an apposite remark, it characterizes in a line a particular aspect of Italy, still prevalent in the early part of the 20th century (and still is perhaps), of being an exotic place, a culture part European, part almost African, and deeply old-fashioned. One does get a whiff of that attitude to the country, when visiting galleries of 19th century art. It often contains landscapes from Italy, sometimes with women in peasant costumes, testifying to Italy as exotic and out of the past, a favorite haunt for northern artists seeking the thrills that go with that. There is a long and in many ways tedious performance, interrupted by surprises. The parents wonder why they stay on during this rather vulgar spectacle, and the narrator explains it by inertia, although admitting that there is a certain fascination to the whole spectacle, not unlike, one would suspect, the one held by a bad movie one nevertheless is curious as

how it will proceed. At the same time they are worried about the children, staying up so late, subjected to such unwholesome entertainment. The children understand little, as they do not know Italian unlike the adults, yet they sense the excitement, that they should not really be here, and thus are eager to stay on, not to be deprived of the show, although they are so tired that they intermittently fall asleep.

The whole show ends with a dramatic episode significant enough to give the novel its title, but too melodramatic really to be taken at face value, more intended as a proper finale to justify the composition and publication of the piece, the real justification of which would maybe not be apparent to the average reader, maybe not even to the more sophisticated one, without its inclusion. Because after all, just as the narrator is curious as how the whole thing will continue and end, in order for the fiction to work, we must be made to share in the same anticipating curiosity, and had there been no dramatic capping off, the average as well as the sophisticated reader would have felt cheated, and the effect would have been irritation and disappointment, and the pleasure of reading would have been retroactively cancelled.

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