

Thomas Mann

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I bought the book over thirty years ago, as testified by a ticket purchased on June 6 1983, an actual punch-card, cancelled the maximum of ten times. It was used as a book mark, placed after the first chapter or so, where it remained for over thirty years. I must at the time not found it worthwhile to pursue it further. The book is part of the rororo series on writers and philosophers, a few others of which I have in my library, most of them bought a long time ago. Their purpose is to give the reader a quick survey of the basic facts of a life and thus not meant to substitute for a regular biography. They are studded with pictures, and this one also with extensive quotes from the writings of Mann, which conspire to make the book into a kind of collage or rather family album. The ambition of the author is to give the chronology of the books and novellas Mann wrote, and hence reading through it one gets little feel for his actual life journey, which is what primarily motivates a reader to seek out a biography. The emphasis is on the works of Mann, making the account into an annotated bibliography, rather than a biography.

We learn about the wealthy background of the Mann brothers. The mother coming from Brazil, of half German, half Portuguese descent, and thus having brought to the city a rather exotic element. Mann identifies with Goethe, as far as acknowledging the logical and stylistic inheritance from his father and the emotional, imaginative from his mother, the former predominantly expressed in music. He did not properly graduate from Gymnasium, just like his brother, who left home early to work in a bookstore in Dresden. The father died early, and thus Mann joined his mother moving to Munich in his late teens. (Mann would at the end of his life revisit the city of his childhood, his brother Heinrich would not, the attendance at his father's funeral concluding his association with the city). In Munich Mann tried his hand at writing and even had a novella published. The author points out the early influence of Bourget on Mann, an author nowadays forgotten, but at his time inveighing against the spectacle of the dilettante, the nervous, critical, hypersensitive but ultimately impotent individual, who can never make the crucial decisions. Mann became for a short time a disciple of him, extolling bourgeois values, which he would later question in his successful debut - die Buddenbrooks- which was started during a joint sojourn with his brother Heinrich in Palestrina, Italy. The novel was a roman de clef which chartered the history of his family and the final liquidation of the family firm. Mann, like Goethe, did not make things up out of thin air, something for which he was criticized, but everything he wrote was rooted in reality, and hence most of his writing was, like that of Goethe, autobiographical. The novel was a resounding success and it would take him over twenty years before he was able to repeat it by a full-length work - der Zauberberg. Although Mann soon grew out of the narrow circle held by Bourget, he remained until the end of the First World War a patriot and a conservative, holding up the German 'Kultur' against Western 'Zivilization'. He greeted the advent of the War with enthusiasm and as an opportunity for spiritual regeneration, which led to a breach with his more radical brother. However,

the aftermath of the War, made him rethink his positions and the brothers reconciled and at least officially, held each other in high regard.

In the twenties recognition came his way, crowned in 1929 by the reception of the Nobel Prize in literature. The 30's was the beginning of his time in exile, his loss of German citizenship, first his residence in Switzerland, than his move to the States, where he at first was associated to Princeton before moving to California, more specifically the hills of Santa Monica. After the war he eventually returned to Europe, setting up residence in Switzerland, not really being welcome in Germany, nor feeling comfortable there. In Zürich he eventually died shortly after turning eighty. To the very end he was active, his mind filled with projects, not to come to fruition.

The author holds up 'Dr Faustus' for special attention. That book, whose plot seems so inspired by the fate of Nietzsche, is actually very autobiographical as well. The hapless narrator is meant as a parody of the author himself, while the main protagonist - Adrian Leverkühn, is supposed to be a serious recapitulation of the life of the author himself. Parallels can of course always be constructed, but some features as the descent into dementia is clearly inspired by the tragedy of Nietzsche. One noteworthy thing was the long period of gestation of his works. *Der Zauberberg* was conceived and initiated long before it appeared, and the *Hochstapler Felix Krull*, was started long before the First World War, and was never completed, when the first part was published at the very end of his life.

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