

## Tonio Kröger

*Th.Mann*

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My first year at Harvard I sometimes hang out with some graduate students at the German department, one of them being a woman from North Dakota, who became for some time a girl friend of sorts, at least in some clinical sense. She was rather, what one says, uncomplicated and her outlook on life grated on me. She did not agree with the academic life at the department (whose social antics at the time scandalized me as being depraved and I thought in my innocence, exceptional), her ambition was far more practical, and after a year she enrolled in the Business school of the university, and our paths diverged for ever, much to my relief. She was the one who told me about Thomas Mann's 'Tonio Kröger'. I guess she found the story a bit morbid to her taste, about the young man with artistic leanings, and his infatuations with the Nordic types. I did not read the story at the time, but her reference made an impression, after all I was at the time well acquainted at least with the name and reputation of the author<sup>1</sup>. Ten years later or so, during a phase of immersing myself in reading German literature in the original, I quickly devoured the story. What I remembered was the fascination the protagonist had for the North, and how he travelled to Copenhagen and beyond, to feel the atmosphere into his bones. I found it both ironic, and slightly ridiculous that he would think of the glimpse of Sweden at the other side of the Sound as part of the fabled North, what to me was the South.

On rereading, this erstwhile impression evades me totally, what I am struck by is the similarity to the Buddenbrooks setting, in a sense it is a Buddenbrooks miniature. The same setting of Lübeck, the same patrician background, and going beyond the plot of the epic novel, to which it serves as a kind of epilogue, the sojourn in Munich. In other words it is autobiographical to the core. Is Thomas Mann unable to move on, to invent something new? The answer to this question is a yes, but that should not be viewed as a disparagement, on the contrary as a strength. Mere invention is trivial, it has much less to do with imagination than is commonly assumed. Imagination only works when constrained, when called upon to circumvent and overcome obstacles, not to avoid them, and to elaborate on what is given and cannot be changed. It does not take very much imagination to come up with solutions when there are no problems, no selection pressures, when anything goes; any fool can do that, and do. Thus Mann is doomed to process his

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<sup>1</sup> The summer before I went to Harvard in 1971 I used to read a lot picking volumes from my parents library. I read Goethe's Werther in a Swedish translation, as well as the story 'The transposed heads' by Mann, likewise in Swedish translation. A few years before my mother had given my Mann's Buddenbrooks in German at Christmas, although at the time reading it in the original seemed too daunting to me. Many years before they referred to 'Doctor Faustus' in their library as an example of an unreadable book, the first sentence occupied half a page. This intrigued me a lot, and early on the image of Thomas Mann as being somewhat of a quissential author was imprinted

particular life, his particular problems, throughout his career, would he try to do anything else, he would be of little interest.

Tonio Kröger is what one calls an 'outsider'. One who feels himself separated from other people. This sense of separation is existential and deep, and has nothing per se to do with a divergence of interests, this being just a symptom not a cause. The outsider longs for the warmth of normality, to be part of the crowd, to share its simple tastes, to be accepted. Eventually he may accept his status, and if so with a certain well-deserved pride, and find it incumbent on himself to look down on the crowd, something that of course is frowned upon, but which I find fully appropriate and justified. One way of rationalizing your exclusion from mediocrity is to find some particular distinguishing external trait that sets you apart. In the case of Kröger it is his southern ancestry on his mother side, his dark hair, his foreign features, even his first name can be blamed. Consequently, normality will be represented by the opposite. The blue-eyed blond northerner, with his healthy stupidity, his unproblematic view of life, his vulgarity and hence his popularity. No wonder that our Tonio seeks him out, wants to emulate him, although he knows that this is doomed, and above all to earn his attention, respect but above all his love. Concomitantly with his idealization of his Hans Hansen he develops an infatuation for the female counterpart - Ingeborg Holm. How fitting that both have northern names, Danish in fact. With her the association is even more intangible, how he longs for her only noticing him and in fact it is far from clear that she even is aware of his existence, in fact one is very clear that she is not.

There is an interlude of many years. Tonio has grown up, he is shown in his proper element, not in the sea of common man, but on dry land on one of many scattered small islands, so to speak. Still the nostalgia for the longing of his youth has not left him, and it takes the form of a fascination of the north, its blue-eyed inhabitants, its Nordic names, and he first returns to his hometown en route to Copenhagen then to a seaside resort further north, close to Helsingør. And once again, he is confronted with the sea of common humanity, now in the form of a big wedding party. And who does he not see there, but Hans Hansen and Ingeborg Holm arm in arm. This is of course too neat, but that is the whole point. The story is written like a piece of music, with recurring themes that grow more and more significant with each repetition. Mann is often decried as being too cerebral as a writer, his stories being tied down by philosophical ballast. Admittedly ideas, and that means philosophical ideas, play an important role to him, and hence also in his fiction, but above all he is a master storyteller with the unobtrusive skills that go with that. A gift apparent from the very first blooming out already in his epic youthful novel, and which more than anything else I suspect have brought him readers. It is an old-fashioned gift, and hence timeless. One can compare him with Henry James and Theodore Fontane. James is hailed as a cerebral writer, a master of subtlety in intricate social relations, but James is unable to evoke a milieu, even a mood, where Mann shows himself a master. Fontane, one of the few German novelists of the 19th century, obviously had quite an influence on Mann, in fact the name 'Buddenbrooks' is picked from one of Fontane's novels. Fontane, I hold to be superior to James, he too is able to evoke a sense of place, compared to Mann he is less solid though, his fiction not as painstakingly researched and composed. Fontane was more of an inventor than Mann, less focused on his own experiences more liable to branch out,

but this an apparent advantage is in the long range a disability as it threatens to make the work into period-pieces, read more for their antiquarian charm than their existential.

That woman of the introductory lines, was incidentally of Nordic descent, but that held no fascination to me, our relation being accidental and the result of a seduction of a slightly older and more experienced woman, whose course, although comparatively short, were far too extended in time. A necessary rite of passage, leaving a sour taste in the mouth, but as such not unusual. In fact the lot of the outsider may appear lonely in childhood, but in adulthood, there is the realization that it is not unique, there are enough outsiders out there to make up for a reading public, even having some financial impact by numbers. You need to be somewhat of an outsider yourself to fully appreciate the novel, otherwise it is but an exercise in morbidity.

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