

THOMAS MANN: A LIFE

BY TILMANN LAHME

Translated by Ross Benjamin

PRELUDE, 1903

He has to add a drop of his own blood to the ink when he writes—that much Thomas Mann has long known. His early efforts, in which it was otherwise, now embarrass the twenty-seven-year-old. His first published story, “Fallen,” was a variation on a tale by his admired brother; in those years, almost every impression and influence came by way of Heinrich Mann. A young man falls in love with a simple girl—in Heinrich’s version a poor employee, in his own an actress. Both women need money. Both will therefore “fall,” giving themselves to someone else for money. The love stories end in disappointment.

In Heinrich Mann’s version, there’s a clear critique of women’s social situation, along with self-criticism about the well-off young man’s role in exploiting it; the last word belongs to the fallen but self-assured woman. In Thomas Mann’s version, by contrast, a formidable writing talent vibrates in a story whose subject plainly doesn’t interest him: women’s emancipation, represented by a derided character, becomes a joke told among men; the young man’s infatuation comes off as overwrought, and the female character remains a pale cliché.

That was nine years ago. By now Thomas Mann has found his way of expressing himself in literature. What truly moves him he hides in his stories behind “discreet forms and masks” to present them to the public. Economically, this is no success. The story collection *Little Herr*

Friedemann sells poorly. All these tales of outsiders who fail at love and life strike readers as too harsh and too cold. Will the new collection, *Tristan*, just out in March 1903, do better?

Hermann Hesse, not yet known as a writer, publishes a review. He greatly admires Thomas Mann’s writing and feels a certain kinship; this view from the outside, like his own, is sharper and more painful than standing at the center and belonging. Only one of the stories, Hesse remarks, is “persistently unsatisfying.” In it, a betrayed husband, to please his wicked wife, appears at a party in women’s clothes and a wig. As “Luischen” (“Little Luise”) he sings a song, becomes the butt of ridicule, and finally collapses dead onstage. What kind of “strange and ugly story,” as Thomas Mann himself calls it, is this “Luischen”?

The twelfth edition of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* appeared in 1903, the last edition the physician and sexologist revised himself. He would not live to see it in book form; he died in December 1902. His book analyzes human sexual life, and above all what is regarded as abnormal: sexual acts of all sorts that don’t serve procreation—“unnatural,” “pathological phenomena.”

With the gaze of a doctor bending over a particularly interesting case, Krafft-Ebing treats homosexuality—that “perversion”—at especially great length. From one edition to the next he added new case studies and autobiographical letters from these “stepchildren of nature.” Thomas Mann knows the book well. Has any reading ever shaken him as deeply as this one?

Also published in the story collection *Tristan* in 1903 is “Tonio Kröger.” Almost everything Thomas Mann writes has his own experience, or at least his own observations, at its core. His first novel is a literary transformation of his Lübeck origins, childhood, and family history. And yet “Tonio Kröger” is the first story to rest on a truly radical autobiographical

foundation. One could not come closer to him personally, he writes to a colleague who had complained of his personal unapproachability, than by reading this story.

The main character is a writer who longs for life, for love and belonging, who falls in love with the blond and blue-eyed, the simple and non-intellectual—during his adolescent years with a boy—yet who, as an artist, is excluded from the “blisses of the commonplace.” This Tonio Kröger travels to his northern hometown and to Denmark and finally finds a way to reconcile life and art, at least to some extent: by seeking to overcome the dichotomy and to warm and elevate his cold artist’s world through love for the “brightly living, the happy, the lovable, and the ordinary.”

Love despite distance—can that turn out well? And in general: is this only a literary thought experiment, or an intention to act? In real life, Thomas Mann traveled to Berlin in February 1903. He reads from “Tonio Kröger” and is pleased about his growing success as a writer. And then he kisses a girl there. But isn’t he in love with Paul Ehrenberg, the painter who feeds into the character of Hans Hansen, so painfully loved by Tonio Kröger? From Berlin, Thomas Mann writes a letter home to Paul (and to Paul’s brother) in Munich. He writes about the bustle of Berlin and that he is “part of it too!” He doesn’t mention the girl or the kiss. He signs his letter “Tonio Kröger.”

Love, longing, and literary allusions are evidently of no use when it comes to actually courting the blond and blue-eyed one, as he is now beginning to suspect. A few months after the letter from Berlin, Thomas Mann makes another attempt and sends Paul Ehrenberg a photograph of himself. On the back he has written a poem:

Here is a man, most sorely flawed:

Full of passions great and small,

Ambitious, vain, love-starved,

Touchy, jealous, hard to please,
Unpeaceful, immoderate, unmoored,
Now overproud, now wretched,
Naive and sifted five times,
World-fleeing and yet world-loving,
Yearning, weak, a reed in the wind,
Half visionary, half dull and blind,
A child, a fool, almost a poet,
Painfully caught in will and delusion,
Yet with the virtue that to *you*
He is devoted with all his heart!

Rhyming in the original, it cloaks intimacy in self-irony. What does Paul Ehrenberg make of it? Only a few weeks after this renewed effort to court Paul, Thomas Mann notices a young woman at a garden party in Munich. He tells his closest childhood friend, Otto Grautoff, about the encounter and sketches a “fairy tale” for them both. How strange, he remarks, that Otto is once again witness and confidant, just as he had been back in the schoolyard in Lübeck when Thomas fell in love with their classmate Willri. What will come of his fairy tale remains to be seen. In any case, Otto is not to speak of it—especially not to Alfred Kerr, the famous theater and literary critic. Apparently Thomas knows that Kerr had already pursued in vain the young Katia who caught his eye at the garden party.

No luck in love at all? In literature, certainly not. Not in *Buddenbrooks* either, his novel published two years earlier. Decline and misfortune also dominate this family story, long

understood to have much to do with the author’s own family. But the characters are vivid and, despite ironic distance, depicted with sympathy—a gripping, brilliant novel; and everyone loves Tony, though she has the worst luck in love of all. Commercially, it had a faltering start: spread over more than a thousand pages in two volumes, it won critical recognition here and there but found few buyers. Now Samuel Fischer publishes the family saga in a single, inexpensive volume on thin paper—and success arrives. Shortly after Christmas 1903, the fifteenth through eighteenth printings are already in bookstores.

1903 is a decisive year. On December 5, Thomas Mann writes a letter to his brother about Heinrich’s new novel *The Hunt for Love*. In seventeen handwritten pages he explains how terrible he finds the book—and not only the book, really everything Heinrich does and writes. Heinrich Mann rubs his eyes when he reads the accusation of “a craving for effect” and that he is driven by ambition to counter the success of *Buddenbrooks* with something of his own.

At the height of his fraternal hate-letter, Thomas Mann turns to the detailed descriptions of the characters’ sex lives in Heinrich Mann’s novel. What is missing, he writes, is “suffering in the sexual,” instead there’s all this “limp rutting without cease” and a “perpetual smell of flesh”: they are “disgusting.” If Heinrich Mann had never spoken to his brother again after this letter, no one could have wondered.

But it turns out differently—as, indeed, everything turns out quite differently.

I

Beginnings and Early Terrors

(1875 – 1894)

SCENES FROM A CHILDHOOD

He was born at noon, as he later recounts, with the stars “favorable,” his horoscopes predicting a “long and happy life” and a “gentle death.” His childhood is “sheltered” and “happy.” He is his mother’s favorite child. He has a play shop with a small granary, just like the large one belonging to his father, the grain merchant. A rocking horse is one of his favorite toys; he names it “Achilles.” Indian games are not for him; instead, again and again, the mythical world of Homer. Before Troy, on Ithaca, and on Olympus he feels as much at home as the other children his age do in the worlds of Winnetou or Leatherstocking. As the god Hermes he leaps through the room with paper winged shoes; as Achilles he drags his younger sister mercilessly around the walls of Ilion.

Besides the visible games, there are the invisible ones, the inner adventures. One morning he wakes up with the resolve to be a ten-year-old prince named Karl. He dresses in princely fashion, holds “animated conversations” with an imaginary adjutant, and walks about “proud and happy with the secret of my dignity.” To some extent the game penetrates the outer world, since the “nursemaid” is drawn in and must treat him as royal highness. Later he takes over a puppet theater from his older brother. He loves it so much that he looks forward to his voice breaking, so he can perform his musical dramas with a new, deeper voice. Doing anything else in life is unthinkable to him. Indeed, is he not still sitting before the puppet theater even now?

In this vein, and always anew with different details, Thomas Mann later recounts his childhood. In retrospect he wants to have been, even as a child, someone moving in a straight line toward the Thomas Mann who would become a great and famous writer. He shifts the time of his birth to the noon hour and aligns himself with a constellation that brings him into proximity with

Goethe. He plays the games that Wagner and Goethe played, and his memories flirt with those of Goethe, Gottfried Keller, and Hans Christian Andersen.

In the child, Prince Karl-Thomas, the later artist is meant already to be clearly recognizable—the one who will write a novel about a prince and another about a confidence man constantly slipping into assumed roles. He portrays himself as someone set apart, favored, special, the child closest to the heart of his beautiful mother. A writer is recounting his own becoming; no one should be surprised by literary liberties. It would be better not to view all this as standing in too close a relation to what actually happened, even if here and there something true finds its way into the staged childhood.

Lübeck, then, is shrouded in dense fog. Anyone familiar with northern Germany knows how heavily it sometimes lies. This much is beyond dispute: Paul Thomas Mann is born on June 6, 1875, in the Hanseatic merchant city. It is a Sunday. He comes into the world as the second son of the grain merchant—and shortly thereafter also Lübeck senator—Heinrich Mann, third-generation head of the Mann firm. At fifteen, Heinrich Mann had to leave school in order to enter his father’s successful business. After an apprenticeship and time abroad—on business in Amsterdam, privately and for health reasons in France—he brought ambition, ability, and a feel for foreign cultures and French literature back to Lübeck, and at the age of twenty-three took over the paternal firm.

The family leads the life of the well-to-do: a large villa in the city center and a “garden house” in the suburbs; fine clothing, manners, and way of life; servants; and social intercourse within the circles of polite society. From 1887 on, a power plant supplies those Lübeck residents who can afford it with electricity. At eleven o’clock in the evening the current is shut off—unless a senator has invited guests to a formal dinner, in which case electricity is “sometimes supplied

for two hours longer!”, as the city historian notes with an astonished exclamation point. How extensively Senator Mann availed himself of this privilege is not recorded.

A nanny looks after the children. The family spends its summer holidays on the Baltic Sea, in Travemünde. It is here that Thomas Mann’s love of the sea and of music are awakened: mornings belong to the beach, afternoons to the concerts in the conductor Hess’s music pavilion. Before long Thomas Mann begins taking violin lessons. Literature and music play a major role early in his life: the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and even more those of Hans Christian Andersen; the Greek myths; the poems of Heinrich Heine and Theodor Storm. Richard Wagner is the musical star of the nineteenth century, and Thomas Mann an ardent admirer. The intoxicating quality of this bombastic music about love, death, and the grave, and all the Germanic myths in Wagner’s sound world, captivate him early on—and for a lifetime.

Thomas Mann’s older brother is named Heinrich like their father; two younger sisters follow, Julia and Carla, and—when Thomas Mann is already fifteen years old—another brother, Viktor. The father is an interesting man in an interesting city. A grain merchant who looks beyond his granaries. The commercial side of things has lost its appeal. Interested in literature, he builds up a private library, part of it kept behind a lock, inaccessible to the children and perhaps even to his wife. He reads the provocative social novels of Émile Zola, concealed on the beach behind a protective cover. By now he has made an employee a partner in the firm. More and more he leaves day-to-day operations to Hans Christian Wilhelm Eschenburg. He is more strongly drawn to politics. As the senator responsible for finance in the Free City of Lübeck, he is second only to the mayor. He himself cannot become mayor, because he did not attend university. For his son, things are to be different.

Within the German Empire, founded under Bismarck in 1871, Lübeck represents a curious element of the country and its federal system. As one of twenty-five constituent states, Lübeck is a dwarf, ranking second to last in both area and population. Nearly twenty-five million people live in dominant Prussia, some fifty-two thousand in the city and environs of the state of Lübeck. In the fourteenth century the proud Hanseatic city was the “Queen of the Hanseatic League” and one of the most important trading cities in Europe. Ever since, the world of merchants has shaped the city’s political life. But the great days are long past. While the Empire as a whole experiences an economic upswing, and the trading and port cities in particular gain new business through Germany’s ruthless colonial policy, Lübeck benefits only marginally. The Kiel Canal, built during Thomas Mann’s youth, ensures that Lübeck definitively loses its significance as a port city and commercial center. A pleasant provincial town, keenly conscious of its great past and its distinctiveness. In the streets one hears the defiant children’s rhyme:

Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen,
They need not be ashamed,
For they are free cities,
Where Bismarck has no say.

Thomas Mann’s mother likewise has family roots in Lübeck. The Bruhns family has in fact been part of Lübeck’s history longer than the Mann family—also a merchant dynasty, but one of greater economic significance and wealth. This is the paternal line of Julia Mann. Her maternal line brings a different world into the lives of Thomas Mann and his siblings.