

Was not Thomas Mann one of the great humanists?

Comment on "Opulent, but flawed": a review of *The Manns: a Novel of a Century*

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The following is a comment on Stefan Steinberg's review of "Opulent, but flawed": a review of The Manns: a Novel of a Century, a series on German television, which appeared on the WSWs on 27 December 2001

Dear Comrade Steinberg,

Your review of the three-part television series *The Manns: a Novel of a Century* surprised me. Not that it is incorrect to critically appraise the series by Heinrich Breloer. In fact, I would have wished as well for a deeper insight into the literary work of Thomas, Heinrich and Klaus Mann. You conclude your criticism, however, with the following words: "Breloer's overly tolerant and humanist Mann, seen through the eyes of his favourite daughter, Elizabeth, can then easily be turned into a role model demonstrating the vitality of German democracy in the struggle against fascism."

How is one to understand "Breloer's overly tolerant and humanist Mann"? You are evidently of the opinion that Breloer's film shows a too positive picture of Thomas Mann, an "overly tolerant and humanist Mann." But was not Mann one of the great humanists? My criticism of the film is entirely different. In my opinion, the film, with its somewhat narrow viewpoint, concentrating mainly on the family, personal issues, homo-erotic tendencies and private life—themes which of course are, to a certain extent, entirely valid in a biographical film—only partly illuminated this eloquent literary figure, outstanding humanist and courageous democrat.

You support your argument with a comment that the series begins in 1923 at a point when Thomas Mann was already 47 years old and as a consequence his "fervent support for German nationalism and the First World War" was "left out." Above all, the director makes nothing of the fact that Thomas Mann "was influenced by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner". You yourself say nothing further on these issues apart from the observation, later in the piece, that "Nietzsche and Schopenhauer" are associated with "profoundly reactionary ideas" and that Breloer's film strengthens "a contemporary layer of historians and academics who seek to smooth over the contradictions and turbulence bound up with the late historical development of German capitalism."

Let us examine these arguments one after the other. The influence of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche on Thomas Mann's work is not exactly a new discovery, but rather as old as *Buddenbrooks* [Mann's first major novel, published in 1901]. As early as 1926 the literary historian Gerhard Jacob pointed out in his dissertation, entitled "Thomas Mann and Nietzsche: On the problem of decadence," that Thomas Mann's concept of life only superficially corresponded to the view espoused by Nietzsche. In "The Notion of Death in the Work of Thomas Mann," Hans Kasdorff emphasises that it cannot be denied that Mann knew of Nietzsche's philosophy of life, and continues: "But his claim to have accepted it

demands the comment that this acceptance was unproductive." Only years later did Mann become aware that his and Nietzsche's relationship to decadence clearly differed (Inge Diersen, *Untersuchungen zu Thomas Mann* [*Studies of Thomas Mann*], p. 319).

Since then hundreds of commentaries have been written about the influence of Nietzsche on Thomas Mann's work, in which supporters and opponents of Nietzsche argue up to the present day. Entire shelves of libraries are filled with such works. The reference to the "thoroughly reactionary ideas" of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer does not advance us any farther. This tinkering with formal, empty concepts always contains the danger that extremely superficial conclusions may be drawn. Somewhat along the following lines: Nietzsche's philosophy is deeply reactionary, it was used by the Nazis and, as a result, Nietzsche's influence devalues Mann's literary work and his opposition to Hitler. For this reason, goes the argument, the opinion of [literary critic Marcel] Reich-Ranicki that Thomas Mann was the greatest democratic opponent to Hitler and represented both the "opposed poles of Germanness" is not just effusive, but false.

You do not argue precisely in this manner, but your comment about an "overly tolerant and humanist Mann" leaves the door open for various interpretations.

In addition, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche must themselves be understood as very complex thinkers. From the standpoint of the history of philosophy, both represented a retrograde response to the objective idealism of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and both advanced reactionary criticisms of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Their subjectivism and turning inward, their emphasis on individualism, will and drive also had another side, which was not simply negative, but rather led in the direction of the study of psychology as far as Sigmund Freud's work and exercised a powerful attraction for artists.

While the conflict over the pros and cons of Nietzsche's work continues, it is very interesting to listen to Mann's own evaluation of Nietzsche's philosophy. In 1947, while still in exile in America, Mann undertook his first trip to Europe since the end of the war and gave a lecture entitled "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Recent History". He made the point that Nietzsche's moral criticism was not just a personal quirk, but "is to some extent impersonal, an attribute of his era. For around the turn of the century the European intelligentsia was making its first head-on assault upon the hypocritical morality of the middle-class Victorian age." (all quotes from "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Recent History" in *Last Essays*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston and Tania and James Stern, New York, Knopf, 1959)

As proof he refers to the "close kinship of many of Nietzsche's *aperçus* with the far from vain tilts against morality with which, at approximately

the same time, Oscar Wilde was shocking and amusing his public.” An essential relationship exists between Wilde’s provocative claim that “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,” and Nietzsche’s comment: “It is only moral prejudice to assert that truth is more valuable than appearance.”

“As far as I can see,” Mann continues, “there are two prime errors which deranged Nietzsche’s thinking and gave it its fatal cast. The first was a total and, we must assume, wilful misinterpretation of the relative power of instinct and intellect on this earth. It seems to have been his notion that intellect is dangerously dominant, is on the point of overwhelming instinct, so that instinct must be saved from it.” Mann describes this view as “absurd,” in view of the fact that “in the great majority of men, will, instinct, and selfishness dominate and repress intellect, reason and sense of justice.”

Mann continues: “Elementary fairness should counsel us to cherish and protect the feeble little flame of reason, intellect, and justice, not join sides with power and the instinctual life and riotously whoop it up for negatives, for every sort of criminality. In our contemporary world we have seen the folly of this. Nietzsche did a great deal of mischief by acting as if man’s moral consciousness were a devil threatening life, like Mephistopheles, with a cold diabolic fist.”

The second of Nietzsche’s errors, according to Mann, consists in treating life and morality as antagonists and thereby placing them in an “utterly false relationship.” He asserts: “The truth is that they belong together. Ethics is the prop of life, and the moral man a true citizen of life’s realm—perhaps a somewhat boring fellow, but highly useful. The real dichotomy lies between ethics and aesthetics. Not morality, but beauty is allied to death, as many poets have said and sung. How could Nietzsche not know this?”

A few pages later Mann writes that with his attack on morals, Nietzsche “was prone to confuse morality in general with bourgeois morality,” and he emphasises: “All his ranting against morality, humanity, pity, and Christianity, all his diseased enthusiasm for sublime amorality, war, and evil, unfortunately had its place in the trashy ideology of fascism. ... If it is true that ‘By their fruits ye shall know them,’ Nietzsche’s case is lost.”

But Mann rejected the vulgar and mechanical connection made between Nietzsche and the Nazi regime by the Stalinists, on the one side, and the fascists, on the other. “Let us not deceive ourselves. Fascism as a mousetrap for the masses, as the most shameless rabble-rousing and the lowest sort of cultural vulgarism history has ever known, could only have been alien to the spirit of the man for whom everything revolved on the question: ‘What is aristocratic?’ He could not even have imagined such a phenomenon as fascism. And that the German middle class confounded the onslaught of the Nazis with Nietzsche’s dreams of a barbarism that would renew civilisation—this was the crudest of misunderstandings.”

In October of the same year (1947) in which Thomas Mann made this speech, he finished his final great novel, *Doctor Faustus*, in which his concern was not to erect a last literary monument to Nietzsche through his hero Adrian Leverkühn, but rather to deepen his ideological and political reckoning.

Now to the second part of your argument. Breloer’s work strengthens “a contemporary layer of historians and academics who seek to smooth over the contradictions and turbulence bound up with the late historical development of German capitalism.” What you mean by seeking “to smooth over the contradictions and turbulence bound up with the late historical development of German capitalism” remains completely unclear. You fail to mention names. Nevertheless, you do not write in the subjunctive, but assert this as a matter of fact. Which layer of contemporary historians are you referring to and what do you mean by “contradictions and turbulence bound up with the late historical development of German capitalism”?

I presume you are referring to the internal weaknesses of German

democracy, which are closely bound up with the delayed bourgeois revolution in Germany. When the bourgeoisie finally roused itself and took up the struggle against feudal rule in the middle of the nineteenth century, the industrialisation in Europe was already well under way. Because of its fear of the proletariat, the German bourgeoisie did not dare rely on the masses, but rather pursued its aims by making an alliance with feudal reaction based on Bismarck and the Prussian state. This was the origin of the profoundly undemocratic nature of the German state and its fear, until the present day, of democratic rights.

I will by no means deny that there exist very reactionary tendencies in the milieu of culture and that attempts are being made, based on references to the “great German nation of culture,” to support the new Great Power politics centred on Berlin.

It would be a great mistake, however, in the struggle against such tendencies to throw the baby out with the bath water and deny the existence of any sort of democratic opposition to the Hitler regime. In my opinion, you are at least close to making such an argument with your formulation that “Breloer’s overly tolerant and humanist Mann ... can then easily be turned into a role model demonstrating the vitality of German democracy in the struggle against fascism.”

There was, however, a democratic opposition to Hitler based on literature and culture and Thomas Mann was one of its leading representatives. Fundamentally, one must regard Hitler’s fascism, with its enormous brutality and barbarity, as an answer and reaction to the threat felt by the ruling class when confronted with a politically and culturally educated workers movement. Why was it not sufficient to ban books? Why was it necessary to burn them in public, as though one sought to rip them out of the heads and hearts of millions?

Several generations of workers had gone through the school of workers education groups where they did not discuss struggles in the factories and trade union tactics, but studied the classics of literature—Goethe, Schiller, Heine, and also Shakespeare, Balzac, Zola and Tolstoy. It was first of all the betrayals and political crimes of social democracy and Stalinism which disarmed workers and threw them back to the glorification of trade union militancy and radicalism.

The notion that there was no split or serious opposition in the German bourgeoisie and the middle classes in the 1930s places a question mark over a revolutionary perspective for that period, or, to put it another way, it transforms such a perspective into an abstraction. How should radical social change take place when there are no divisions in the ruling class? Such a position is based on a fundamental error of vulgar radicalism, which only sees a reactionary mass outside of the proletariat.

Ferdinand Lassalle had already made this mistake and was vigorously criticised by Marx and Engels. The Stalinist theory of social fascism, based on such reasoning, led not only to the refusal to take up a united front of social democrats and Communists in a struggle against Hitler, but also drove a wedge between revolutionary workers and progressive intellectuals and bourgeois democrats.

Back to Thomas Mann and Breloer’s series. We socialists regard this eloquent titan of early twentieth century literature as part of the great cultural heritage on which the working class must base itself for its coming struggles. Not only did Mann throw down the gauntlet to the fascists, with his sharp insight and his barbed pen, in some of his works he came very close to a socialist perspective.

“An election statement for the Prussian state elections on April 24, 1932 contains passages, which here, standing in for many others, serve to illustrate with unmistakable clarity and firmness Mann’s anti-fascist standpoint.” So wrote Hermann Kurzke in his biography, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk [Thomas Mann: Life as a Work of Art]* (p. 356), and then quotes at length from the statement:

“That is why I despise this bleak amalgam called National Socialism, this shabby imitation of renewal, which is nothing other than brainless and

aimless confusion and which can only ever give rise to confusion and misfortune, this miserable mixture of stuffy souls and mass tomfoolery, before which the Germanic head teacher prostrates himself as if before a 'peoples movement,' while, in fact, the whole thing is an unparalleled popular deception and a poisoning of youth, wrapping itself up as revolution.

"In fact, National Socialism's main force of attraction for the petty bourgeois type who, in truth, is trapped in the past, is to secure the possibility of feeling himself to be a revolutionary."

Mann drew his perspective together in this statement with the words: "What is important is to win time: time for the young German democracy to stabilise itself, to purge itself, to develop in a truly social manner, time for Europe in its crisis to come to reason, to reject the past and; without bloody catastrophes, to find its way from one period into another, from one form of life into another."

Already in his essay *Culture and Socialism* (1929) Mann demanded "a compact between the conservative culture-idea and revolutionary social thought: to put it pointedly ... an understanding between Greece and Moscow." At the same time he defended the standpoint that one should establish a dialogue between Karl Marx and Friedrich Hölderlin, because a social democracy must go hand in hand with cultural education and the development of society. The Stalinists, however, destroyed these hopes—something which neither Thomas nor Heinrich Mann ever really understood. (in *Past Masters and other papers*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, Freeport, New York, Books for Libraries Press, 1968)

Without doubt, the series by Breloer has weaknesses, but the presentation of an "overly humanist and tolerant" Thomas Mann is not one of them.

Other and weaker television films have in the past provoked a powerful public response. The reaction to *The Manns*, however, was quite remarkable. Audience size grew with every episode and exceeded all expectations, with an audience of more than four million viewers for the third and final part of the series. Above all, however, the film series unleashed a serious run on Mann's books. In the week following the series' broadcast 70,000 copies of *Buddenbrooks*, for which Thomas Mann received the Nobel prize for literature in 1929, were sold. Other works were made available in reasonably priced editions.

This interest in Thomas Mann's writings must be placed in the context of a generally increasing search for good books. The autobiography of Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* [*The Author of Himself*], rapidly exceeded the one-million level in sales, and Sebastian Haffner's *Geschichte eines Deutschen* [*The Story of a German*] was on the best-seller lists for months. The latest novel by Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* [*Crab-wise*], which first arrived in the bookshops at the beginning of the month, was sold out after a few days and is now in its third printing. This interest in literature reflects the desire for serious ideas and answers and indicates a political revival in sections of the population. It is very encouraging.

With best wishes,

Ulrich Rippert,

member of the WSW International Editorial Board



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