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Thomas Mann and Teachers

Walter D. Morris

Thomas Mann's attitude toward the teaching profession is in many ways a negative one. He attacked and ridiculed conventional teachers, and he made teachers of manners laughable and pitiful. Nevertheless, he did have great respect for the good teacher who is a master in his field and who attracts pupils of ability.

The pedagogical ideal which Mann developed is a personal, aesthetic one in which teacher and pupil are drawn together by love and where education takes place as an end in itself. The process is creative, not infrequently involving the demonic. It may lead one into difficulty, but it may also be the way in which mankind progresses, because the teacher-pupil relationship in its ideal form must not be a simple copying—that is barbarism—but rather a long struggle in which the pupil finally overcomes his teacher and develops his own personality.

Throughout his career, Mann insisted that he was writing about himself, but the social implications of his personal struggles continually burst through and cannot be ignored. When he wrote about himself, he was also writing about Germany, Europe and mankind.

Thomas Mann's teachers play roles, for better or worse, in the political, social and moral world, and it is mainly in this way that we must look at them. The high pedagogical ideal that Mann developed with the help of his teacher, Nietzsche, and his model, Goethe, is for many unattainable. The difficulties involved sometimes made Mann feel that the great age of individual accomplishment was past, but he did not give up hope.

There is probably no more famous critical description of teachers in German literature than the one in which Hanno Buddenbrook and his friend, Kai Mölln suffer through six hours of humorous, ironical and sometimes horrible nonsense that can only perversely be connected with teaching and learning.¹

The school principal, Dr. Wulicke, whom Hanno and Kai have nicknamed "der liebe Gott," instills terror in everyone, teacher and pupil alike. The pupils, or "das Volk," as Kai calls them, are either future businessmen and seamen who care nothing about learning, or they are strivers who excel in memory work. The teachers, both in appearance and performance, are grotesque—strict disciplinarians, lazy bonvivants, sadists, pseudo-philosophers, incompetents—people who would rather be something else or teach something else; none is genuinely interested in his subject.

The scene is richly ironical. A lazy, easy-living, pleasure-seeking religion teacher

drills his pupils in the Book of Job; the cruel, pompous, unpredictable Latin teacher who arouses fear in his pupils, has them learn passages from Ovid about the Golden Age where fear was non-existent, and tough, unfeeling pupils are asked to memorize silly poems such as:

Monkey, little merry fellow,
Thou art nature's punchinello . . .

All pupils cheat when they can, and if they succeed, the consensus is that they have learned the subject. If they are caught and condemned, however, everyone agrees with this evaluation too. Truth becomes a matter of appearance because the purpose of the school is not education but adaptation to the Prussian way of life.

So dominated is the school by the ideals of duty, power, service, career and Kant's categorical imperative, that both teachers and pupils feel themselves to be civil servants. Nothing matters except advancement. The description is so devastating that one critic, himself a *Gymnasiallehrer*, protested vigorously that Mann had included no good and kind teacher as a contrast, but rather "unterschiedslos den ganzen Stand schwarz in schwarz malt."²

Of course, the artistic purpose, which is to prepare the reader for Hanno's illness and death, would not be served by the inclusion of a sympathetic teacher. Aside from this, however, it seems apparent that Thomas Mann was giving us his actual opinion of life in the lower second class of the *Realschule*. Like Nietzsche, he meant to hit and to destroy. In his "Lebensabriß," Mann tells us that he was a bad pupil and hated school. He found himself opposed to its spirit, its discipline and its teaching methods. He and a good friend called their school "die Anstalt," the same name that Kai and Hanno have for theirs, and it is clear that "Anstalt" means insane asylum.³

Years later, in an essay opposed to the difficult nature of the comprehensive *Abiturientenexamen*, Mann spoke more softly about teachers, but the essential criticism remains.⁴ The Hanno scene is the personal impression of a sensitive, talented young author about his own unhappy school days, but this impression must have contained more than a little objective truth because it struck a responsive chord in his readers and in his fellow writers.

Not since the days of *Sturm und Drang* had German literature seen such a devastating attack on the teaching profession, but the time was right. Nietzsche's lectures on the future of German Educational Institutions were well-known, and in Norway, Alexander Kjelland's novel, *Gift*, which appeared in Germany in 1885, had shown how the cruel system of secondary education could destroy a talented but weak pupil. Also, naturalism was in the air, and the sympathy of the public could be aroused by the portrayal of a weak, defenseless hero who is being beaten down by an unfeeling society.

Nor should we forget the influence of the German Empire and of Kaiser Wilhelm himself. Prussian education in the first half of the 19th century had been surprisingly

liberal. Under the influence of Pestalozzian thought, enlightened educators had established teachers' seminaries and introduced excellent reforms. This is the period in *Buddenbrooks* which Thomas Mann refers to as a happier one, "wo ehemals die klassische Bildung als ein heiterer Selbstzweck gegolten hatte, den man mit Ruhe, Muße und fröhlichem Idealismus verfolgte."⁵

But the unsuccessful revolution of 1848 changed all this. Frederick William IV blamed the Pestalozzians for the revolt and avowed his intention to crush them, which he did. All the fine work of educators such as Stein, Humboldt and Zeller was uprooted, and schools became mere knowledge factories. Even Kindergarten was suspected of being a hotbed of atheistic socialism.⁶

Education was to be for the state, an idea that Kaiser Wilhelm II emphasized in a famous speech in 1890: "We must take the German as the foundation of the Gymnasium," he said. "We ought to educate national young Germans, not young Greeks and Romans." This, he continued very un-Germanically, was the "punctum saliens" of the matter.⁷

It is hardly surprising that many German writers followed Thomas Mann's example. After *Buddenbrooks*, Hesse, Heinrich Mann, Ludwig Thoma, Rilke, and later, Wedekind, Feuchtwanger and Brecht continued the attack against secondary school teachers whose pupils were trapped and forced either to conform or to have their careers ruined. "Man sage nicht die Schulmeister haben kein Herz," said Hesse ironically in *Unterm Rad*. On the contrary, every teacher loves to see a pupil awakening to knowledge. Then his dangerous spirit must be broken and one can instill in him those qualities, "deren völlige Ausbildung alsdann die sorgfältige Zucht der Kaserne krönend beendet."⁸

Besides this attack on education for the state, Thomas Mann also refers to the relatively lower social class of many teachers. All of Hanno's teachers, with the exception of one, wear pants that are too short, a defect which symbolizes their inadequacy and inferior social status. The one exception tries unsuccessfully to dress stylishly.

Particularly in the lower grades, Hanno feels dislike for the poor, spiritually oppressed teachers who have power over him, but on a higher level it is the same. Toni Buddenbrook's good friend, Armgard von Schilling, is attracted to her young French teacher, but says, "Ich werde sicherlich keinen Lehrer heiraten, sondern einen Landmann."⁹

Ironically, the task of these socially inferior teachers is often to teach proper manners to the children of the upper classes. The headmistress of Toni's school, Theresa Weichbrodt, will accept only young ladies from "vornehme" families.¹⁰ With her French phrases and exaggerated German pronunciation, she cannot escape being somewhat laughable.

Another teacher of manners, whom Thomas Mann cruelly satirizes in "Tonio Kröger," (and to a lesser extent in "Wie Jappe und Do Escobar sich prügelten,") is

the dancing master and party arranger, François Knaak. Tanned, pretty, and fat around the hips, Knaak speaks bad French, walks and acts like a fop, and demonstrates dance steps in a grotesque manner. Obviously from a lower class, Knaak manages nevertheless with bluff and cunning to hold his position of dominance over his charges.

The high point of this education in form appears in *Königliche Hoheit*, where the teachers are engaged in the education of a prince. Schulrat Dröge constantly reminds the prince of the latter's exalted status; the physical education teacher shows every regard for the prince's shrunken left arm, and the headmaster, Kürtchen, is so class-conscious that he flies into a rage when he senses criticism of his middle-class status.

It is also in *Königliche Hoheit*, however, that we meet a teacher of real value, Doctor Raoul Überbein, "der romantische Individualist, der zu Ende geht," as Mann describes him.¹¹ Largely self-taught, Überbein is a man of experience who has suffered much and who instils in the prince the ideal of wandering on the heights of humanity. Obviously a Nietzschean character, Überbein's message is excellence in accomplishment and the conquest of self. All else—love, pleasure, and happiness—must be sacrificed to this goal.

Überbein is so fanatic in purpose and so ridiculous in appearance that he cannot succeed. A sense of humor and tolerance would make him bearable, but his uncompromising nature finally leads to his suicide. Nevertheless, it is his spirit that commands the interest of the author and the reader. His goal of excellence, so high it seems unobtainable, reminds us of what Kai tells Hanno about the teaching profession:

Ja, es gibt Hilfslehrer und es gibt Oberlehrer, mußt du wissen, aber Lehrer gibt es nicht. Dies ist nun etwas, was man nicht so leicht verstehen kann, weil es nur für ganz Erwachsene ist und solche, die vom Leben gereift sind. Man könnte sagen: Jemand ist ein Lehrer oder er ist keiner; wie jemand ein Oberlehrer sein kann, das verstehe ich nicht.¹²

Teachers, says Kai, really don't understand the grand nature of their own profession. These words are an echo of Nietzsche, who also thought of the public school system as a game in which culture was unknown and in which teachers and pupils thought only of survival. Like Kai, Nietzsche cried out, "Es giebt keine Erzieher."¹³

Inevitably, such a high ideal of competence brings with it the fear of failure. Each attempt seems ridiculous and deserving only of contempt, of a belly laugh. Much of Mann's ridicule of teachers can be explained by the high ideal to which they are compared.

After the completion of *Königliche Hoheit*, Mann entered a period of intense preoccupation with pedagogical theory. In his many essays on Goethe, in the *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, and in his philosophical novels, he developed a

comprehensive idea which included the concepts of personality, sickness, time, *Bürgertum* and irony.

For Mann, the beginning of all teaching and learning comes when one takes one's problems seriously. "Ein bloßes objektives Erziehertum unter Voraussetzung der eigenen Perfektheit," he says, "ist leere Schulmeisterei."¹⁴ One must have some innate ability, some talent, and one must come to the subject as a result of inner struggle. This struggle, or sickness, leads to self-preoccupation which brings the urge to explain oneself, and thus one is led toward autobiography and pedagogy. Mann says:

Drang und Berufung zur Erziehung stammen nicht aus eigener Harmonie, sondern aus eigener Problematik, Disharmonie, Schwierigkeit, aus der bekennenden Not mit sich selbst.¹⁵

Much time is necessary for such an education. Mann hated deadlines and wrote repeatedly of "ruhige Bildung." Finally, after a long preparation, maturity and competence make one into a balanced professional, the master of antinomies, the combination of nature and culture, the man who has the urge to teach talented pupils. The name for such a person is the *Bürger*. Mann was fond of quoting Goethe:

Wo kam die schönste Bildung her, und wenn sie nicht vom Bürger wär?¹⁶

The *Bürger* can be a businessman like the early Buddenbrooks, or an artist like Tonio Kröger, but he is always capable of clear and balanced judgment.

The all-important balance is achieved by that which Mann calls irony, a tool for the reconciliation of opposites. The pedagogical urge arises from the fondness of the teacher for his pupil which is also the love of spirit for life, or, as Mann calls it, erotic irony. The return of this love, or ambivalent irony, is what makes the pupil want to learn. The force which allows for distance and reflection while one is still absorbed in one's work is romantic irony, and the strict adherence to objectivity and professional responsibility may be compared to Mann's concept of epic irony.¹⁷

Of course, the same process is involved in the development of the artist and the intellectual in general. The so-called sickness and the consequent self-preoccupation come from the knowledge of mortality and the desire to preserve oneself in work and accomplishment. The artist, then, is also a teacher, and irony is his method. When Mann wants to tell us about teachers, for instance, he shows us a series of bad ones. Similarly, life and health are explained by death and sickness, and vice-versa; the future is revealed by the past, and saintliness is illuminated by evil.

The conditions for education are all present in *Der Zauberberg*, where Mann gives Hans Castorp the humanistic education Hanno Buddenbrook lacked. Settembrini, Naptha, Peeperkorn, and indeed, most of the characters in the novel, are teachers who also form parts of the inner conflict that Hans Castorp must resolve before he becomes educated for life. Castorp does reach a fleeting harmony, but one wonders whether he will remember what he has learned, or even if it matters.

In the Joseph novels, however, everything works to form an effective hero. Joseph is artist, rogue, critic and excellent *Bürger*-administrator as well, competent and still concerned with himself, a union of subjective and objective, of individual and society, a teacher of his people and of mankind.

Much can be accomplished in the areas removed from reality, in the fairy tale land of *Königliche Hoheit*, on a magic mountain, or in the distant past. In the reality of the twentieth century, however, the synthesis seems no longer possible. For Mann, the *Bürger*-world had come to an end.

The difficulty is that Mann's educational ideal is non-political, aesthetic and aristocratic; how could the masses of humanity find the time, the teachers and the talent for such an enterprise? When Mann wrote in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, "... Lehrer liebe ich nicht, zum Beispiel Lehrer der Demokratie,"¹⁸ he was not so much expressing an antipathy as reaffirming the personal nature of his work. He was not a writer who was engaged with current problems, a *Zivilisationsliterat*. He was writing about himself, and he identified his feelings with Germany, the land of the middle, the land of music.

Of course, with the advent of the Nazis, Mann's views changed, and these changes are reflected in *Doktor Faustus*. In some ways, the novel is a rejection of Nietzsche and the earlier ideals, but by no means is the rejection complete.

Teacher figures abound in the novel, but their combined effect is a disharmony which contributes toward the insanity of the hero. The attempt of Adrian Leverkühn to achieve a breakthrough in art is desperate, and he relies too heavily upon his teachers in music and theology while ignoring the good but ineffective humanists such as his friend, Serenus Zeitblom. At the same time, all of these teachers reflect the moral failure of the intellect in Germany during the second world war.

We may think of Adrian Leverkühn's career beginning where Hanno Buddenbrook's ends, with a music teacher who is also an organist, who leads his pupil into the mysteries of composition and of the new music. Hanno's teacher is Edmund Pfühl, who, as his name suggests, is like a pillow for the boy. He skips over finger exercises and leads Hanno directly into composition, but Hanno's enchantment with Wagnerian music makes his everyday life even more unbearable and hastens his collapse. In spite of his apparent kindness and submissive attitude, Pfühl is demonic. Like Schleppfuß, the theologian in *Doktor Faustus*, he keeps telling people he is their "ganz ergebener Diener," an obsequious phase which suggests deceit.

Leverkühn's music teacher, Wendell Kretzschmar, is also an organist, and surprisingly similar in appearance to Edmund Pfühl. Kretzschmar is well-traveled, has learned from experience, and is acquainted with the contemporary state of music. In a series of lectures, he impresses upon Leverkühn the need for an artistic breakthrough. Like Nietzsche, Kretzschmar stands on the edge of an abyss and points into the unknown. His stuttering is symbolic of the sinister nature of his subject, which is the overcoming of culture and tradition with the union of genius and death.

Ironically, it is at the University of Halle where the doctrine of academic freedom began, that Leverkühn meets the reactionary and evil theologians, Kumpf and Schleppfuß. Kumpf preaches a Luther-like, sensual German nationalism, while Schleppfuß, like the Nazi propagandist, Goebbels, twists meanings to suit his purposes and makes evil seem attractive.

The failure of the educational synthesis in *Doktor Faustus* can be interpreted to mean Thomas Mann's farewell to his teacher, Nietzsche, and to the latter's educational ideals, but this can be only partially true. Each pupil seeks to outgrow his teacher, and the search for the new cannot be bad in itself. It is the failure of the teachers in their moral responsibility which causes the destructive results. Even so, Leverkühn, whose life parallels Nietzsche's in many ways, does create music that may please coming generations, an indication of some Goethean optimism in Mann's *Faustus*.

The sheer weight of the number of teacher figures in Mann's works indicates his never-ending concern with education. What he finally seems to be saying is that both teachers and pupils should strive for subjective harmony through intense inner struggle, for objective ability in a chosen field, and for a general cultural education which gives them good moral judgment, courage, and balance. Perhaps the best indication that Mann was wrong about the demise of what he called the *Bürger*-age is that he himself, well into the twentieth century, was an excellent example of his own teaching.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden* (Oldenburg, S. Fischer Verlag, 1960), I, 700-751.
2. "without exception paints the whole profession black in black." Oskar Schwarz, "Der Gymnasiallehrer bei Thomas Mann," *Bayerische Blätter für das Gymnasialschulwesen*, September/October (1918), 127-130. Translations in the notes are my own.
3. *Gesammelte Werke*, XI, 99.
4. *Ibid.*, X, 846-7. Mann was also milder in "Die deutsche Stunde," X, 851-855, in "Worte an die Jugend," X, 888-890, and "Ansprache an die Jugend," X, 316-329.
5. "where earlier classical education had signified a pleasant end in itself, which one pursued in quiet and leisure with cheerful idealism." *Ibid.*, I, 722.
6. Adolphe E. Mayer, *An Educational History of the Western World*, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1972), 276.
7. *Ibid.*, 277.
8. "Let no one say that the schoolmasters have no heart," ... "the complete development of which is crowningly concluded in the military." Hermann Hesse, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Zürich, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), I, 417-418.
9. "I will certainly not marry a teacher, but a man of the landed gentry." *Gesammelte Werke*, I, 90. Later, in "Die deutsche Stunde," X, 853, Mann said, "Die Mittelschullehrer müßten

einhalbmal soviel zu tun haben und dreimal so hoch bezahlt werden wie bisher." ("The secondary school teachers should have half as much to do and be paid three times as much as now."), Mann wanted to improve the social status of the teachers.

10. Ibid., 87. The word "vornehm," which means "noble," is often used later in the novel by Toni as her symbol for ideal human conduct.
11. "The romantic individualist who perishes." Ibid., XII, 98.
12. "Yes, there are Junior Teachers and Senior Teachers, you must know, but there are no teachers. This is something that is not so easy to understand, because it is a matter for completely grown-up people and those who have been matured by life. One could say: a person is a teacher or he isn't; how anyone can be a Senior Teacher, I don't understand." Ibid., I, 742.
13. "There are no teachers." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1967), V. 4, Part 3, *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, 305.
14. "A pure, objective form of pedagogy with the assumption of one's own perfection is empty pedantry." *Gesammelte Werke*, IX, 341.
15. "The drive and calling to education do not come from an inner harmony, but from a problematical, nature and an inner disharmony and difficulty, deriving from a confessional need within one's self. Ibid., 340.
16. "Where did the finest education come from/if not from the *Bürger*?"
Mann cites these lines of Goethe, for example, in the chapter "Bürgerlichkeit," in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, Ibid., XII, 102.
17. For an excellent summary of Mann's theory of irony, see Ernst Nündel, *Die Kunsttheorie Thomas Manns*, (Bonn, Bouvier Verlag, 1972), pp. 125-148.
18. "... I don't love teachers, for example, teachers of democracy." *Gesammelte Werke*, XII, 21.