



## THOMAS MANN'S WORK ON MYTH': THE USES OF THE PAST

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### I

How do we understand the interest in myth that surfaced in the first third of the twentieth century? The following remarks are meant as a reflection on the relation between the modern experience and myth in the case of one twentieth century author and his work, Thomas Mann and his work on myth.

When we think about Western modernity, we think of rejection of tradition, an unquestioning belief in the future as the realm of human possibilities, and a series of avant-gardes trying to outdo one another in the quest for novelty. Yet this picture of modernity may well be called a caricature, the stuff of countless textbooks on Western Civilization. For a second glance at modernity reveals a far stronger concern with the past, be it as the foundation of modernity, be it as the reaction against the perceived or real speed of material and social change, or be it as the unquiet search for something that is experienced as having been lost and that should by all means be recovered for the sake of recovering the essence of our humanity, however that essence may be conceived. In short, the argument must be made that modernity, for all its dreams about new worlds and new ways of being, is deeply wedded to the past. What began with Vico's discovery of the myth as the founding element of society, in opposition to Descartes' *tabula rasa* of the *cogito*, with Herder's *Urpoesie der Vlker* and his treatise on the origin of language came into full bloom in German romanticism, in Schellings *Die Weltalter* and Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Vlker*. Simultaneously, there is the

unprecedented flowering of historiography that marks the nineteenth century and its late romantic revivals of the Middle Ages in Europe . Even Hegel's philosophy of history is founded on the idea that the spirit that unfolds in history and that comes to its consciousness in time has its ground in a past before all past. And, forgive my Germanic bias, what more radical attempt to seize the past, *nota bene*, the essential past, not the historical past, than Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, and the monumental statement Nietzsche's antipode, Wagner made, when he let the story of the twilight of the gods, the story of our civilization, as he saw it, begin in the depths of the river Rhine. From there it was but a small step for Sigmund Freud to conclude that what ails us as individuals is our refusal to remember our own preconscious past, a deliberate refusal to recognize that the beginning is a trauma. By the late nineteenth century, the present, all the progressive optimism of the imperial entrepreneurs notwithstanding, had become an uncomfortable dwelling for some of its more sensitive denizens, and it was not long into the twentieth century when the one truly gifted Expressionist poet, Gottfried Benn could begin a poem with the line: "Oh dass wir unsere Ur-ur-ahnen w<sup>ir</sup>ren./Ein Kl<sup>ump</sup>chen Schleim in einem warmen Moor. (Oh, to be one of our earliest ancestors./A clump of slime who basks in steamy moors.)" This was written one year before the catastrophe of European civilization, in 1913.

Whatever lay behind Benn's pessimism, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are part of its ancestry and Spengler's *Decline of the West* was being written simultaneously. It conveys a sense of history fatigue, a weariness of historicism, a rejection of the civilization that had sought salvation in being able to recount the origins and genesis of everything under the sun and beyond. But the past which the historian and scientists of the nineteenth century had sought to explore had led to illusory beginnings, *Scheinanf<sup>änge</sup>*, or "provisional origins" (in Lowe-

Porter's translation) that are on the way of the "Descent into Hell," the Prelude to Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. Spengler made a valiant attempt to escape from those illusory beginnings by making them all equal beginnings of new cycles of new cultures that supplanted the dying and dead ones.

What I would like to show in the following is that, following the First World War, there was a changed sense of time, of the present and its extension into past and future, and that a fundamental change in cultural memory took place, summarized in the opening sentence of Paul Valéry's *The Crisis of the Mind* (1919): "We later civilizations . . . we too know now that we are mortal." The predominant mood in literature and the arts after 1918 is one of disruption in culture and history, the experience of time having become lost, that time had indeed become relative, and that trying to regain a cultural sense of time and history required the discarding of the individualistic subjectivism that had dominated the liberal age. This changed sense of time was indeed a shared experience, even though the responses differed. The collapse of the European meta-narrative indicated to many writers that the organization of experience in terms of an exemplary individual story falsified the very nature of the new experience and its cultural memory. Eliot's *Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* stand for a new understanding of time and history, a search for the trans-historical and the rediscovery of myth as the area where trans-individual and trans-historical meaning could still be found. The "hunger for the myth became itself the greatest myth of the 1920s," Theodore Ziolkowski aptly stated already in 1970.<sup>1</sup> [1] But it was Thomas Mann, one of the time's most perceptive writers, who gave what I

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1 [1] Cited after Dieter Borchmeyer, "'Zurück zum Anfang aller Dinge.' Mythos und Religion in Thomas Manns *Josephsromanen*," in: *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch* 11 (1998) (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), p.9.

would call the definitive description of the fundamental shift in the understanding of time and history after World War I in the "Foreword" to his *Magic Mountain* that appeared in 1924, when he wrote about the story of his reluctant hero Hans Castorp: "It is his story, and not every story happens to everybody ♦ this story, we say, belongs to the long ago; is already, so to speak, covered with historic mould, and unquestionably to be presented in the tense best suited to a narrative out of the depth of the past."<sup>2</sup> [2] Hans Castorp's story, as you will remember, is set in the years 1907 to 1914. The author of *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice* was especially well equipped to appreciate the nature of the problem, because in the two prior works he had written the histories of a decline, the decline of a family and the death of its young scion Hanno in *Buddenbrooks*, while in *Death in Venice* Gustav Aschenbach, the model of a nineteenth century historical novelist, comes to grief in pursuing the charms of the young Tadzio. In a patriotic moment, Thomas Mann had already tried his hand on myth-making at the beginning of the epochal war, when in the essay *Frederick and the Grand Coalition* he compared the political situation of Germany with that of the Prussian king Frederick the Great whom he depicts as a demonic figure who created Prussia's power through his sheer will, almost out of nothing, in the face of overwhelming military odds.

Thus, at a time when the contemporaries were questioning the story of the relatively even upward movement of history towards a global civilization based on the self-understanding of European mandarins and when they responded with a more or less radical destruction of the idols and the creation of a timeless, mythical present, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust stayed within

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<sup>2</sup> [2] Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, translated by Helen Lowe-Porter (New York: The Modern Library, 1955), p. IX.

the "subjective" narrative of a past they knew and in which they sensed the origins of the present. Proust tried to accomplish this feat by recreating a meticulous book of memory of the culture of his childhood and youth; Mann by way of creating the quasi scientific experiment of placing his protagonist Castorp into the hermetically rarefied atmosphere of a Swiss sanatorium, surrounded by the decaying flora of European society before the outbreak of the war. This is not the place to discuss the relative merits of either experiment, but only to show what Thomas Mann learned from conducting his narrative search for the origins of a civilizational catastrophe and how it informed his later understanding of humanity and its history.

My understanding of the guiding structural principle of Mann's work is that, beginning with *Buddenbrooks* and ending with *Doctor Faustus*, it is based in the writer's present, a present that is never experienced as momentary, but embedded in an ongoing reflective process in which the writer continuously responds to the social and historical situation of which he is a part. Whatever literary scholars have said about Mann's political writings during and after World War I, especially his *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* (1918), the war turned this initially non-political writer into an active participant in the discussion of the Weimar Republic .

The "Preface" to the *Magic Mountain* illustrates Mann's first deliberate attempt to bring together the narrator and the historical present the story of which he is about to tell. Following the observation about the "long-ago" nature of Hans Castorp's personal story, the narrator continues: "Since stories must be in the past, then the more past the better, it would seem, for them as their character as histories, and for him the teller of them, the rounding wizard of times gone by (und für den Erzähler, den raunenden Beschwörer des Imperfekts). With this story, moreover, it stands as it does to-day with human beings, not least among them writers of tales: it

is far older than its years; its age may not be measured by length of days, nor the weight of time on its head reckoned by the rising or setting of suns. In a word, the degree of its antiquity has noways to do with the passage of time (nicht eigentlich der *Zeit*) in which statement the author intentionally touches upon the strange and questionable double nature of that riddling element."3 [3] The tone of the narrator has, ironically, as always in Mann, shifted from that of the realistic novelist to that of the "raunenden Beschwörer des Imperfekts," the anonymous teller of stories in the past tense, a sophisticated "conjurer" who knows that the element that makes a story a story is time and that this element itself has (for the first time?) become questionable and thus an object of further investigation. What Mann's contemporaries, from Proust to Joyce, Döblin and Broch (to name only some of the most prominent), had experienced each in their own way, namely that time lost its uninterrupted flow toward an immanent or transcendent goal, for Mann it became the central concern of his existence as a novelist with the writing of *The Magic Mountain*. But Mann did not like to dabble in abstractions. The narrator is quick to differentiate between the general observation and the particular subject of the story: "But we would not willfully obscure a plain matter. The exaggerated pastness of our narrative is due to its taking place before the epoch when a certain crisis shattered its way through life and consciousness and left a deep chasm behind. It takes place - or, rather, deliberately to avoid the present tense, it took place, and had taken place in the long ago, in the old days, the days of the world before the Great War, in the beginning of which so much began that has scarcely yet left off beginning. Yet it took place before that, yet not so long before. Is not the pastness of the past the profounder, the completer, the more legendary (märchenhafter), the more immediately

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3 [3] *The Magic Mountain* , p. IX.

before the present it falls?"<sup>4</sup> [4] I know of no other narrative work where an author is as careful as Mann is in this passage to set up the time parameter of the events he is about to narrate. Mann, unlike his more avant-garde contemporaries, wants to stay within the traditional narrative mode, but he warns his readers here that they should not be taken in by that traditional mode, as the story unfolds. The "long ago" is a break in the linear historical consciousness; it alerts the attentive reader to the relativity of time as a fundamentally human perspective of reality.

My interest in the manner in which Mann introduces the time element of his novel should not be mistaken for a literary scholar's preoccupation with certain narrative conventions of the modernist novel. Rather, it aims to go straight to the heart of the matter, Thomas Mann's gradual approximation of a critical terminology of the mythical dimension of human existence, I say, gradual, because Mann, unlike others at the time, was quite reluctant to adopt a quasi mythical vocabulary and that includes such names as Joyce, Hofmannsthal, and Broch -, let alone indulge in the neo-mythical fantasies of the German nationalist conservatives. Always the ironic empiricist and realist, Mann not only tested his narrative strategies but, what is more important, their applicability to the representation of human experience. The descendant of the Hanseatic patrician bourgeoisie, the Bürger Thomas Mann was not ready to break as a writer with the typical patterns that had formed his "individual" existence, a fact that elicited some occasional not so nice comments from the Bürger manque Eric Voegelin. But Mann's play with the typical is more than playing the role of the "burgher with a bad conscience" (Tonio Kröger); rather it aims from its inception at a mythical suspension of time, something Mann achieves in the sophisticated use of the Wagnerian *leitmotif* with the effect that in the narrative

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<sup>4</sup> [4] *Ibid.*, IX f.

context time becomes a succession of archetypical situations. This technique is already fully developed in chapter II of *The Magic Mountain* where Hans Castorp's repeatedly asks his grandfather to show him the family's christening basin and the tray on which it stands. The seven names of its successive owners are engraved on it, beginning with Hans Castorp's father and his grandfather and the generations before them. "Then the 'great' came doubled, tripled, quadrupled from the old man's mouth, whilst the little lad listened, his head on one side, the eyes full of thought, yet fixed and dreamy, too, the childish lips parted, half with awe, half sleepily. That great-great-great-great 'what a hollow sound it had, how it spoke of the falling away of time, yet how it seemed the expression of a piously cherished link between the present, his own life, and the depth of the past.'"<sup>5</sup> [5] The German original is far more suggestive of the relationship between past and death: "das Ur-Ur-Ur-Ur, - diesem dunklen Laut der Gruft und der Zeitverschattung" ("this dark sound of tomb and time caving in")<sup>6</sup> [6] The passage is being used as a *Leitmotif* throughout the novel whenever the narrator wants to intimate that Hans Castorp is once again indulging in his German-Romantic "sympathy with death" and slipping away from the pedagogical province of his enlightened mentor Settembrini. The son, grandson, great-grandson of Hanseatic Bürger in this novel ultimately remains the dreamer whose "hermetic" education may be of no avail to him as he disappears on the battle fields of the Great War.

What Mann had intended with the *Magic Mountain* was, in his own words of 1939 to Princeton students, a *Zeitroman*, simultaneously a novel about the times and a novel about time.

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<sup>5</sup> [5] *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> [6] Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt a. Main, 1966), p. 36.



But as a *Zeitroman* it neither was meant to "portray" the historical times in the manner of nineteenth century realism, nor was it just "about time." Instead, it would seem to us, its more or less successfully realized intention was to be the story of the beginning, not yet the beginning of everything, but the beginning of what "has scarcely yet left off beginning" as the preface states. The seven years of Hans Castorp's hermetic education in the "all-the-same" of recurrence of the seasons, of deaths, departures, and arrivals experienced in the magic mountain not only end with this "beginning," that is, the outbreak of the war, they are its beginning and thus the beginning the narrator's present. What "has scarcely yet left off beginning" is in fact the present.

There is one point to be made that has been more or less deliberately been left out until now. Mann's three major works, and we do not count some of the important stories of the pre-war period, all are filled with death. The pre-ordained death of young Hanno Buddenbrook, Aschenbach's journey, led by Tadzio-Psychopompos into the auspiciously-immense of the Adriatic, and the ever-present "exitus" of the patients of Professor Behrens' sanatorium not only reenact the "world feast of death" with which European civilization celebrated its decline, but they are also a testimony to Mann's deeply held belief that "the religious is thinking of death," as he puts it in "Fragment über das Religiöse."

## II

What I have argued so far is that Thomas Mann's road to a deeper understanding of time and myth was engendered by a continuous self-examination as an artist within the context of his time and society. The awakening from the "hermetic" timelessness of the years preceding the

First World War proceeded over a period of ten years and concluded with the publication of *The Magic Mountain* in November of 1924, a novel that was eagerly received by the German reading public and which quickly found a world-wide audience. The "hermetic" education of Hans Castorp had also been an act of self-education. It had been an overcoming of death in the sense that the realm of death of the not-so-long-ago had been left behind and the view was open to, in Mann's words, "something altogether new," which he found, by a noteworthy coincidence, in the request from an old friend of Katja Mann's to write a brief foreword to a portfolio of illustrations depicting the story of Joseph. Rereading the Joseph story in his old family bible, Mann was touched by the "graceful fable" and was reminded of Goethe's remark about the Joseph story in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "This natural narrative is most charming, only it seems too short, and one feels inclined put it in the detail."<sup>7</sup> [7] Mann, for his part, "felt an indescribable fascination of the mind and the senses at this idea of leaving the modern bourgeois sphere so far behind and make my narrative pierce deep, deep into the human."<sup>8</sup> [8] He realized that his personal interest in the story coincided with "tendencies of the time," because "[t]he problem of man, thanks to the advance of his [extreme] experimentations upon himself, has attained a peculiar actuality." The word "humane," used here "in its most scientific, objective sense, without any sentimental bearing," had acquired new dimensions of meaning, for "we have pushed forward our knowledge, whether into the darkness of prehistoric times or into the night of the unconscious; researches that at a certain point meet and fall together have mightily broadened the scope of our anthropological knowledge, back into the depths of time, or - what is really the

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<sup>7</sup> [7] Thomas Mann, *A Sketch of My Life*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> [8] *Ibid.*

same thing - down into the depths of the soul; and in all of us there is awake a lively curiosity about what is earliest and oldest in human things: the mythical, the legendary, the time before the dawn of reason."9 [9]

It is of considerable interest how Thomas Mann described his decision to embark on this mythical journey back in time, because the Sketch, the *Lebensabriss*, was written in 1930, when the memory of the beginnings of the novel was still fresh and when the "barbaric myth," as he would call it, was loudly asserting itself in Germany and elsewhere. Mann was keenly aware of this, as he distinguished his personal interest in the myth from that of some of his ideological contemporaries. He writes: "And these interests of today are not inappropriate tastes for a time of life that may legitimately begin to divorce itself from the peculiar and individual and turn its gaze upon the typical ❖ which is, after all, the mythical." And then he goes on emphatically: "I do not say that the conquest of the myth, from the stage of development at which we have now arrived, can ever mean a return to it. That can happen only as a result of self-delusion. The ultra-romantic denial of the development of the cerebrum, the exorcizing of the mind, which seems to be the philosophical order of the day, is not everybody's affair. To blend reason and sympathy in a gentle irony ❖ that need not be profane: a technique, an inner atmosphere of some such kind would probably be the right one to incubate the problem I had in mind. Myth and psychology ❖ the anti-intellectual bigots would prefer to have these two kept far apart. And yet, I thought, amusing to attempt, by means of a mythical psychology, a psychology of the myth."10 [10] The combination of myth and psychology was to become the hallmark of the work in progress. The

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9 [9] *Ibid.*, p. 66 f.

10 [10] *Ibid.* p. 67 f.

point where the two came together for Mann occurs at the beginning of the passage quoted, where he speaks of the taste for the mythical as quite legitimate at a certain age, where the mind turns to the "typical which is after all the mythical." It would, however, be quite appropriate to contradict Thomas Mann here and to assert that in his case the mind was always with the typical, and that the interest in the peculiar and individual that helped create the eccentric characters of the early stories was a way to extract the mythical, the incommensurable from the typical, which otherwise could easily sink to the level of banal normality.

Mann's extensive research for his tetralogy includes not only the Bible and Old Testament scholarship, such as several works by Alfred Jeremias' *Das Alte Testament im Lichte der Alten* (1916) and the *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur*, A. S. Yahuda's *Die Sprache des Pentateuch in ihrer Beziehung zum ägyptischen*, but countless books and articles on ancient Israel, as the two-volume anthology *Die Sagen der Juden* (1919) and Elias Auerbach's *Wüste und gelobtes Land. Geschichte Israels von den Anfängen bis zum Tode Salomos* (1932). He brought himself up to date on Egyptology and especially the literature on Near Eastern myth. But he also studied intensely such controversial books as Oskar Goldberg's *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* (1925) on the metaphysical unity between the Elohim and the people of Israel, the new edition of J. J. Bachofen's *Der Mythos von Orient und Occident*, edited by the Nietzsche philosopher Alfred Baeumler (1926) and Bachofen's *Urreligion und antike Symbole* (1926), Edgard Dacqué, *Urwelt Sage und Menschheit* (1924), Max Weber on the sociology of religion, and with particular interest Dmitri Mereschkowski's *Die Geheimnisse des Ostens* (1924), which emphasized the interconnections between the religions and the importance of these early religions for Christianity. One sentence was marked by Mann on the margin. It reads:

"Lastingness, the Always being, the Always repeating itself, the perpetual present of the mystical

process, ◆history.' The deepest past is not past, but present at every moment; through this myth becomes its (own) mystery." Mann penciled in: "Anfang," beginning.<sup>11</sup> [11] Mereschkowski's words became the narrator's words in the "Prelude." The library Thomas Mann collected for his novel and which is in the Thomas -Mann-Archiv in Zurich literally speaks volumes about Mann's work habits. Pencil marks everywhere, the habits of a scholar. But Mann was not a scholar, he was poet, more specifically, a novelist. What he had absorbed in his readings did not go into arguments and footnotes; it went into his story, sometimes cited obliquely, sometimes reappearing as the story itself. And, last but not least, Thomas Mann read Freud, whose *Gesammelte Schriften* (1928) he owned and in which he read extensively, especially "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and "Totem and Taboo." It is the task of the philologist to show how Mann internalized some of Freud's ideas, but it is a well known fact that he read Freud very much with regard to his own ongoing project, as the lecture "Freud and the Future" (1936), written for the occasion of Freud's eightieth birthday, makes abundantly clear. Mann's ability of making the thoughts of others his own, without "buying into" any doctrinal system, is precisely what enabled him to understand the nature of myth and to be an author who could transform the ideas and thoughts of others into the story that transcended their supposed individual originality. Mann's seismographic sensibility proved itself not just in the more limited context of the European crisis of the beginning of the century, it was even more in evidence when this crisis went into its second, global phase. Far from always being politically in the right, as his flirtation with

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<sup>11</sup> [11] Cited after Herbert Lehnert, " Thomas Mans Vorstudien zur Josephstetralogie," in *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 7 (1963) (Stuttgart: Alfred Kr◆ner Verlag, 1963), 498.

socialism proves, Mann, nevertheless had an almost unsurpassed sense of the undercurrents of the times.

### III

What exactly does this mean for *Joseph and His Brothers*, a work about which Hermann Broch wrote in an equally perceptive essay "Die mythische Erbschaft der Dichtung" (1945): "Here poetry is aware of its union with the soul, and both know that they have entered the realm of prophesy, a genuine dream knowledge, that has overlays of past and future and in which the dual nature of the "Once" comes together in an everlasting present"? (My translation) Broch's idea of "mythical prophesy," conceived for his own project of the "polyhistorical" novel, takes its cues from Joyce and Mann and their, however dissimilar, attempts to write the story of the soul. What Broch expressed in this and other essays, and what Thomas Mann, the mythopoeist of the "romance of the soul" at the end of the "Prelude" had put into the charming story of the fall and redemption of the soul, is itself "work on myth" the principles of which Eric Voegelin recounted in a letter to Robert Heilman, dated August 22, 1956, when he wrote: "What I just have adumbrated (most inadequately, to be sure) is the basis of historical interpretation since [Johann Gottfried von] Herder and Baader and Schelling. History is the unfolding of the human Psyche; historiography is the reconstruction of the unfolding through the psyche of the historian. The basis of historical interpretation is the identity of substance (the psyche) in the object and the subject of interpretation; and its purpose is participation in the great dialogue that goes through the centuries among men about their nature and destiny." Thomas Mann would have written historiography in quotation marks, thus reminding us that he, too, was as historian, except that he

was allowed the artistic freedom of story telling, something that smacks of the unscientific but that derives from the humane reality of the myth. Voegelin most likely would have agreed.

When the Egyptologist Jan Assmann noted in an essay of 1993 that Thomas Mann was simply not taken seriously as a "theoretician and phenomenologist of the myth" by all the experts in the field, he put his finger on a problem that all of us here are only too familiar with.<sup>12</sup> [12] Assmann looks at Thomas Mann's Joseph novels and at the essays and lectures that accompanied the work, especially "Freud und die Zukunft" as "one of the most important contributions to our understanding of myth and cultural memory." Beyond this he notes what I have already alluded to several times in this paper, Mann's ability to see life as imitation of mythical patterns, as "life in quotation," "zitathaftes Leben," as a kind of celebration of what has been, what is, and what will be there. One cannot come up with a formula like this unless one has experienced it, and - this has been my argument - Mann saw his own life in terms of such mythical patterns, as the imitation of Erasmus and Goethe, as the last Hanseatic *Bürger*, as *to* use the still valid accolade of Erich Heller's, "the ironic German." Assmann shows very well that Mann's interest in the beginning of human consciousness is informed by his preoccupation with recognizing recurring patterns and living one's life according to these remembered patterns. "The ego of antiquity and its consciousness of itself were different from our own, less exclusive, less sharply defined," says Mann in his Freud lecture and he continues: "It was, as it were, open behind; it received much from the past and by repeating it gave it presentness again."<sup>13</sup> [13] Mann here

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<sup>12</sup> [12] Jan Assmann, "Zitathaftes Leben. Thomas Mann und die *Phänomenologie* der kulturellen Erinnerung," in: *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch* 6 (1993), 133 f.

<sup>13</sup> [13] Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 424.

uses the example of Ortega y Gasset to illustrate how a man of his own time lived his life as a "reanimation, an archaizing attitude", and he states emphatically: "But it is just this life as reanimation that is life as myth."<sup>14</sup> [14] For the ancients it was the recognition that "the myth is the legitimization of life; only through it and in it does life find self-awareness, sanction, consecration."<sup>15</sup> [15] That this "reanimation" can and must have a playful element is the pervasive theme of Joseph's life in the novel, and this difference between Joseph's play with the mythical models and Hans Castorp's much more serious reverence of the past is at the same time a play with the patterns that emerged in his present. To be able to distinguish between the legitimate past and illegitimate bogus past became Mann's main concern before and during the Nazi years. The falseness of the Nazis' Teutonic myth went hand in hand with their lies about the nature of man, God, and society. Theirs was an example of a fantastic mythical stupidity, and Mann saw it as one of his main task to restore a humane function to the myth ("den Mythos ins Humane umfunktionieren"), an phrase coined by Ernst Bloch and adopted by Mann for its political effectiveness. A key element of this humaneness, as we have seen earlier, lies in ridding it of false sentimentality and conceiving it with a sense of reverence and a sense of ironic distance.

Thomas Mann never shied from repeating the major themes that occupied his thinking at each stage of his life. This was especially true of the Joseph novels, which he even called a "symbol of humanity." They became a symbol of humanity's transcendent history, seen quite unmythically as a "moving on, change, development" which take place not just on the human

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<sup>14</sup> [14] *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> [15] *Ibid.*



level but also on the level of God. Mann's understanding of the covenant between God and man reflects that school of thought that emphasizes the mutualness of this covenant in which God depends on man in their common upward striving. "For," Mann writes, "God, too, is subject to development; He, too, changes and advances; from the desert-demon to the spiritual and holy, and he cannot do this without man's help, just as man is unable to do it without God."16 [16]

At this point, Mann gives a new definition of religiosity, which he calls "attentiveness and obedience" and which appears in the novels as the "*Gottessorge*," the caring about God, about God's plan, the worry about living anachronistically according to what was once right but is no longer right. In short, Thomas Mann's understanding of myth, far from being the endless repetition of old practices, worship of the old for the sake of the old, is that of the artist, whose ego is also open to the behind and seeks "fulfillment of tradition with exciting novelty."

In 1931 Thomas Mann thanked Max Brod, the friend of Kafka, for some encouraging remarks Brod had made about the novel, after having read excerpts. Mann wrote: "It is an exceptionally obstinate undertaking, scarcely feasible, no novel, neither in terms of its limits, for it is *une mer à boire*; nor in terms of the artistic means it employs, for the pictorial, the dramatic is permeated with analysis, and it is really a kind of parodistic myth-historiography of which no one can know if it will be palatable."17 [17] The word "parodistic" may raise some eyebrows. Humorous, ironic — those words would doubtlessly apply to the work. But in what sense is it a

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16 [16] Thomas Mann, "Joseph und seine Brüder. Ein Vortrag." English: "The Joseph Novels," in: *Atlantic Monthly*, 171, 2 (February 1943).

17 [17] Thomas Mann, *Selbstkommentare. 'Joseph und seine Brüder'* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 52.

pa rod y? For Thomas Mann, pa rod y in this as much as in his other late works, including *Doctor Faustus*, *The Holy Sinner*, and *Felix Krull*, *Confidence Man* is a kind of "saying farewell," a play with the "time-honored," a "conjuring up one more time, a recapitulating," in other words, the view of the late-born. In a way one could say that Mann's attempt to conjure up the mythical world of the beginning imitates Joseph's attitude toward God, which differs so much from that of Abraham and Jacob. "There is one," he wrote in his essay on the Joseph novels, "who did not discover God, but who knows how to "treat" him; one who is not only the hero of his stories, but their director, even their poet, and who embellishes them; one who still participates in the collective-mythical, but in a witty-spiritual, playful, purposeful-conscious way." Joseph, it turns out, is an artist, a God-artist, one might say. The artist, even Michelangelo, did not invent God ♦ that is left to more spiritual, mystical souls ♦ but he/she never shies away from representing God, in the dual sense of the word. We should also note the accumulation of adjectives. The pa rod istic is doubling, imitation, repetition, and ♦ yes ♦ mockery. The degree to which each of these pushes to the foreground is determined by the intent of its author. Pa rod y may be kind or it may be vicious. But it is, by definition, never original.

Yet it would be not only unfair but simply wrong to call Mann's Joseph novels unoriginal as a work of art. Of course they are original ♦ in the sense of showing us a whole new perspective of seeing the old story. Some stories demand to be retold over and over again, others should not be told the first time; they are born dead. What makes Mann's *Joseph* original in a fundamental sense ♦ if you wish, even in a modern sense ♦ is the fact that it brings together the seemingly incompatible: the world of mythical repetition and recurrence and the invention of the one, unoriginated, imageless, familyless, singular Yahweh who cannot have a history, because He does not have a story. Thomas Mann tackles this problem in an ingenious way by letting

Eliezer tell the story of how Abraham discovered God. The genius of this story lies in the insight that it is not possible to tell stories about this God, as one tells stories about Osiris, Tammuz, and Baal, or that God could be at all associated with nature-myths. "God forbid that he would have had any dealing with such affairs! But He lay in bonds and was a God of waiting upon the future; and that made a certain likeness between Him and those other suffering godheads." 18 [18] And after Abraham and Shechem have consulted with Melchisedek upon this question, God is filled with joy. "But God kissed His fingertips and cried, much to the resentment of the angels: ❖It is unbelievable, what knowledge of Me is possessed by the son [lump] of earth! Have I not begun to make Myself known through his means? Verily, I will anoint him." 19 [19] This God is and is not like other gods, but there is one thing that he is, that is new and will always be new: He will be who He will be. This God cannot be imitated, because He does not have any qualities yet; they lie in the future and will have to wait to be invented by later theologians; but He plays his part in the drama of man, and man does his part by sometimes forgetting and sometimes remembering God, or even, in an occasional outbreak of violence, by killing God.

#### IV

I had initially referred to Mann's work as "work on myth," borrowing from the title of Hans Blumenberg's book of 1979, *Arbeit am Mythos*. What I wanted to stress was that Mann's work is proof, if we needed proof, that myth is not something that once was and has ceased to be. Whatever Mann's informed and brilliant insights into the nature of myth were, they cannot and

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18 [18] Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) p. 289.

19 [19] *Ibid.*, p. 290.

should not be turned into a doctrine. Jan Assman, who looks at this aspect in the article already mentioned, has looked at Mann's writings and found that as a set of propositions about myth they are often still valid, even if in other aspects they have become debatable. But Assmann has an eye for Mann's poetic mastery of the myth theme and he understands Mann's importance for his own work on cultural memory. I would second this and would merely add that Mann's mythical "life in quotation" makes it perhaps too easy to use him as a classic example of how to respond to the challenges of the time, if one refuses to be modern in the "bad" sense, that is to say, without being rebellious, avant-garde, gnostic, fascist, surrealist, or, God forbid, postmodern. The problem is that the work on myth, as Blumenberg has demonstrated, always remains unfinished; and this goes especially for the work on one's own myth, as Mann had an opportunity to find out already during his own lifetime, when he was elevated to the part of *praeceptor Germaniae* and simultaneously shoo-shoed as the *blatte noire* who left his country in the lurch at the time of its greatest need. When we stop looking for mythical beginnings, as Mann suggests in the "Prelude," we find that we are always in the middle of the story, and then the storytelling becomes complicated, because we may not be satisfied with the easy excuse that nothing really matters other than the eternal patterns. This is a problem the narrator was forced to address at a critical juncture of Joseph's story, when he had to discuss the question of how long Joseph actually stayed at Potiphar's house, since the biblical tradition "leaves it open; a few non-committal phrases are all we have to help us clear up the dates within our history. What shall we conclude was the real division of time?"<sup>20</sup> [20] Here the mythical patterns do not seem to work any longer. The authors of the biblical story did not deem it important enough to even ask

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<sup>20</sup> [20] *Ibid.*, p. 552.

the question, let alone answer it. The modern narrator finds it difficult simply to skip the point. So he finds himself confronted with the problem of any narrator and has to ask himself: "Do we know our story or do we not? Is it proper and suitable to the nature of story-telling that the narrator should openly reckon dates and facts according to any deductions or considerations whatever? Should he appear at all, save as anonymous source of the tale which is being told or is telling itself, in which everything is by virtue of itself, so and not otherwise, indisputable and certain? The narrator, according to this view, should be in the tale, one with it, and not outside it, reckoning and calculating. But how is it with God, whom Abram thought into being and recognized? He is in the fire but He is not the fire. Thus He is at once in it and outside it. Indeed, it is one thing to be a thing, quite another to observe it. And yet there are planes and spheres where both happen at once: the narrator is in the story, yet he is not the story; he is its scene, but it is not his, since he is also outside it and by a turn of his nature puts himself in the position of dealing with it."<sup>21</sup> [21] A truly Voegelinian meditation, we could say and leave it at that, perhaps looking at it as a fine illustration of what Voegelin meant by the *metaxy*. But should we be making it so easy on ourselves? I suggest that we ought to look at this passage with the critical eye of the modern mythologist and admit that the old myth may be retold, but it may not be repeated. Mann's narrator has hit the brick wall of modern subjective/intentional consciousness, and he quickly resorts to pointing to God, who of course does not have this problem. The narrator remains the little god whose locus is not fire but the story. And so he is content to leave it at that, adding an additional defense by reminding the reader: "I have never tried to produce the illusion that I am the source of the history of Joseph. Before it could be

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<sup>21</sup> [21] *Ibid.*, p. 552 f.


told, it happened, it sprang from the source from which all history springs, and tells itself as it goes."22 [22] I am not criticizing Thomas Mann's perspicacity here, or his quite modern reflexivity, and I am far from suggesting that he could have solved the problem any better, without seriously endangering the flux of the story. Nor must we forget that Mann's narrator is not really telling a myth; he is telling a story that is located in a mythical time and that is, among other things, meant to be an attempt to explore to what extent we moderns can put ourselves into the mythical world without becoming hopelessly anachronistic or barbarously reactionary.

We could continue this train of thought much longer, but I would like to pose some final questions at this point. There can be little doubt that Mann's achievement in the Joseph novels and in the works that preceded and followed them lies in his intuitive and later systematic search for the *archai* of, first the European, and later the global crisis of the twentieth century. This search led him to the most fundamental questions of what it means to be human. Mann's answer was that there is a depth of history that is trans-historical and, by implication transcendent. He further showed that it is not enough to "know" this, but that one had to make it part of one's personal experience. We continue to pay tribute to this artistic and philosophical achievement, not merely as scholars of literature but as humanists, as the eloquent testimony of Jan Assman about Mann's accomplishment as a scholar of myth underscores.

My question would rather be: what do we learn from Mann's quest and from the stories he told in the process? I see Mann's life work as part of the great meta-narratives of the past two hundred years, which, if we follow Blumenberg, can all be read as metamorphoses of the myth,

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22 [22] *Ibid.*

be they the world-myths of German Idealism and Romanticism, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same, Bachofen's worlds of the mothers, Spengler's morphology of history, and by all means Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte*. What had begun with the rediscovery of the past at the end of the Enlightenment ended in the collective unconscious filled with Jung's archetypes. Blumenberg suggests that the work on myth is never done, and in view of this there is the need for a philosophy of myth that refuses to fall prey to that which it philosophical tries to illuminate. Is this the direction into which we need to go? Has this road not turned out to be a cul de sac? We see today that even the great projects of a philosophy of history in the style of Toynbee and Jaspers work with categories such as "axis time" and "universal religions" that stop short of being overtly mythical. Eric Voegelin's story of the "leaps in being" began with the distinction between the "cosmological empires" and Israel's God-invention, the Covenant that opened up the horizon of history. At the end, Voegelin more or less admitted that even his early concept of history had too much of a myth about it to be philosophically tenable  too much "historiogenesis"; and so he went on to speak of the "process of the Whole" and to question the correlation between history and the "length of time" in which its happens. "Things do not happen in the astrophysical universe, the universe, together with all things founded in it, happens in God."<sup>23</sup> [23] This after having elsewhere conducted a thought-experiment that was to prove that "the universe" is a mythical category,<sup>24</sup> [24] Voegelin was himself hard at work on myth. But as myths have a habit of doing, they undergo metamorphoses, and there is good reason to consider

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<sup>23</sup> [23] Eric Voegelin, *Collected Works*, vol. 17 (Columbia : University of Missouri Press , 2000), p.408.

<sup>24</sup> [24] Cf. the essay "The Moving Soul," in: *CW 28* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp.163-172.

the possibility that Voegelin was working on such a metamorphosis in his late years, knowing that it would not be a final one. Putting it in more absolute terms: he was working on the myth of myth. Thomas Mann might have followed him there - with a good measure of ironic skepticism.

What are the directions into which we should pursue these problems further after the philosophies of history appears to have run their course? I suggest that reason and imagination form the *fides* that gives meaning to the past, the present and the future. As Voegelin put it in a letter to Brendan Purcell in December of 1976: "If we don't respect those who have gone before us, who will respect us when we are gone? If we exclude the community of mankind, the community will exclude us." It is in this spirit that the work on myth should be conducted, as the imaginative remembrance of the unfinished story of humanity.

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