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Introduction to Thomas Mann, "On the German Republic"

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Introduction to Thomas Mann, "On the German Republic"

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"On the German Republic" is the title of a lecture that Thomas Mann

delivered in Berlin on 13 October, 1922. It was a moment of high political tensions, as his daughter Erika later recalled when writing her memoirs in 1956:

Waves of insurrection and terror were sweeping the country. Democratic politicians had been shamefully assassinated, including the best among them, Walter Rathenau, whom Thomas Mann knew well. The German middle classes, unwilling to acknowledge the lost war's consequences as such, held the young Republic responsible for all the hardships. Thomas Mann's great essay, "On the German Republic" (1922), was his political recognition of the Republic in its hour of need and his most inopportune "step" since the *Reflections*. At this critical juncture its effect was startling, as if the author had thrown an incendiary bomb into his own house.¹

Erika, all too plainly, was rehearsing a quasi-mythical account that circulated within the family circle, albeit one often affirmed by later critics. Theo Stamm has called the lecture/essay "a crucial text in the corpus of Thomas Mann's political writings," while Terrence Reed has urged that it signaled "a startling change" in his political outlook: "If his wartime stand had come as a shock to those who thought him a liberal intellectual, his new position was an equal shock to those who had come to rely on him as a conservative nationalist."² Conservative readers, Hinrich Siefkin reiterates, "felt betrayed when the attitude he had taken and expressed seemed to change . . . in 'On the German Republic.'"³ But it was not just his political outlook that had changed; the arguments **[End Page 99]** that Mann adopted to support this reversal were also striking, unusual, perhaps even startling. Within the essay Mann, according to Michael Maar, was justifying "this reversal, among other ways, by the fact that Walt Whitman in his phallically brimming fervour was the singer of democracy, and that democracy and male love stem from the same roots."⁴ Or to put it slightly differently, the essay was as close as Mann ever came to acknowledging in public his own divided homoerotic impulses, acknowledgement that tied his recognition of the Weimar

Republic to an ecstatic reading of Walt Whitman. The result was a work that is dazzling, complex, and perennially surprising, yet one whose importance has largely escaped Anglophone readers chiefly because it was Mann himself who insisted, in 1942 when the essay was translated into English, that its most explicit and extended passage concerning male love be suppressed.⁵ As he explained to his patron and devoted friend Agnes Meyer:

Thank you for reminding me about the decidedly desirable omission of those pages from "On the German Republic." I had almost forgotten my resolution. It's clear that an American readership, for very praiseworthy reasons, wouldn't know what to make of it. It's not scandal one has to worry about, but confusion. It is self-evident that the pages will have to go.

Homoeroticism is a human phenomenon as old as the hills and in antiquity it actually played a role in shaping culture and the state. To want it to have such a role today (as was attempted in Germany, in a literary way: Hans Blüher) would be bad romanticism. In my essay on Platen I said that I consider it unproductive and aesthetically death-bound, and that also comes through in *The Magic Mountain*. From an artistic standpoint, this subject can only be treated in a style that is grotesque, as Proust did.⁶

Mann's decision, however debatable, was duly executed by his translator, Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter, with the result that Mann's great essay has been available to English-speaking readers only in a truncated, or even mutilated, form. Worse still, although the "omission of those pages" has recently been rectified through an excellent translation of them by David Fernbach, even that restoration still leaves a sadly incomplete and unsatisfactory version in English.⁷ For as English-language scholars of Mann have ruefully come to recognize in recent years:

... essentially two Thomas Manns continue to circulate...



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