How Long Is a Minute?

Virginia Manierre

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THOMAS MANN was a great magician. With something like a wave of his hand he created worlds and people in whose enchanted lives we share. Because he was a great artist these worlds are as real to us as our own. While we are reading, the tangible world about us melts away. We could not say who we are. Space and time have taken on new forms, the forms of his imagining. When Marcel Proust tried to analyse the nature of art, he said,

It is the revelation — impossible by direct and conscious means — of the qualitative differences in the way the world appears to us, differences which, but for art, would remain the eternal secret of each of us. Only by art can we get outside ourselves, know what another sees of his universe which is not the same as ours and the different views of which would otherwise have remained as unknown to us as those there may be on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing only one world, our own, we see it under multiple forms, and as many as there are original artists, just so many worlds have we at our disposal, differing more widely from one another than those that roll through infinite space, and years after the glowing center from which they emanated has been extinguished, be it called Rembrandt or Vermeer they continue to send us their own rays of light.

Thus we may return to the worlds of Thomas Mann and that special atmosphere which he was able to create. His is a universe vivid with color and sense experience. He loved to dwell on the taste and odor of things, their proportions and the feel of them. He had a special skill for conveying the vivid sensation. One can hardly believe that one has not actually seen Lea's and Rachel's riding camels, picketed, "highly bred animals; possessing a grotesque beauty, with wise little serpents' heads on top of their
swaying necks, and feet like cushions, so that they did not sink in the sand. They lay on straw which the servants had strewn plentifully for them, arrogantly chewing the cud.”

For all their vividness, these worlds of Thomas Mann are sometimes blurred at the edges—deliberately so. He had an ever-present sense of the constant and imperceptible change which all objects and all relationships undergo. Especially in the Joseph books this fluid quality constitutes a mysterious undercurrent to all the action. Because nothing is ever quite itself, but always in the process of changing, because time, ideas and people flow together, identify, separate, but not quite separate because they have once been identified, the universe of Thomas Mann has an uncertain, almost dream-like quality. It is intense and vivid, vague and diffuse, suggestive and ambiguous.

This poetic quality springs largely from Mann’s love for and feeling for words. We are reminded of Mallarmé’s remark that “poetry is not written with ideas, it is written with words.” To play with words, to spin out ideas, to see how words affected facts or facts affected words—all these Mann did lovingly and elaborately. He was not satisfied with one meaning, but must find a second, weigh it against its opposite, turn it inside out, toss it from side to side like “the colored balls which jugglers send flying out of their hands and catch again and you cannot see them as separate balls because they make a bright bow in the air.” Typical are his words in The Magic Mountain.

Is it not well done that our language has but one word for all kinds of love, from the holiest to the most lustfully fleshly? All ambiguity is therein resolved: love cannot but be physical, at its furthest stretch of holiness; it cannot be impious, in its utterest fleshliness. It is always itself, as the height of shrewd “geniality” as in the depth of passion; it is organic sympathy, the touching sense-encroach of that which is doomed to decay. In the most raging as in the most reverend passion, there must be caritas. The meaning of the word varies? In God’s name, then, let it vary. That it does so makes it living, makes it human.
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He knew all about the "magic of the word, whereby the uppermost was turned undermost, an unforced and flexible and perfectly genuine use of language to work enchantment."

Geographically and historically the worlds which Mann created are far apart yet they are all stamped with his stamp. His unique vision opens doors through which we step and find ourselves in a world at once foreign and familiar — familiar because the themes with which he deals are as old as time and as universal, but foreign because of the "qualitative differences in the way the world appears" to him.

Several of these themes preoccupy Mann, whether in Hamburg or Switzerland or the ancient Middle East. These recur in every book. Sometimes he plays with his ideas, sometimes he handles them with a deadly seriousness and at other times, at his best, perhaps, he handles them with a kind of poetic ambiguity, an almost sensual delight in revolving and examining a problem which has no answer or which might have many answers.

He is interested in the nature of time, of disease, of truth, in the relation of death to life, in the relation of the individual to the many. Over and over again he deals with these themes. Each time he examines them from a different angle under a different light. Each time we think, "perhaps this will be it," but each time he diffuses and elaborates, seeing new aspects, enriching the subject with a kind of circular imaginativeness that goes round and round, suggesting more and more and ending — if it could be said to end at all — where it started.

Thus Thomas Mann deals with time. Joachim, a practical and not very imaginative fellow, says, "A minute is as long as it takes the second hand of my watch to complete a circuit." But Hans Castorp — feeling particularly "clear-headed" that morning, answers, "But how can we possibly measure anything about which we actually know nothing, not even a single one of its properties? — to be susceptible of being measured, time must flow evenly, but whoever said it did that? As far as our conscious-
ness is concerned it doesn’t, we only assume that it does for the sake of convenience."

It is this subjective nature of time which gives Mann’s books so individual an atmosphere. The events are not so much happening in a kind of orderly sequence as washed back and forth, as it were, extending in both directions, their roots in the future as well as in the past. This two-way vision gives experience an added richness — nothing exists in a single instant of time, but stands in an intellectual and emotional relation to what came before and what follows. Castorp sees this process as “change in the midst of duration, of time as both flowing and persisting, of recurrence in continuity.” Time seems to lap over and fold up on itself. Our devices for measuring time are artificial and unreal. “Time has uneven measure, despite all the objectivity of the Chaldean chronology.” The real time is subjective time. “It is idle to say that a year consists not only of its seasons, the succession of spring, green grazing and sheep-shearing, harvest, summer heat, first rains and new planting, snow and frosty nights and round again to the rosy blossoms of the tamarisk. That is only the frame of the year; the year itself is a filigree of life, heavy with events, an ocean to drink up. Such a filigree of thinking, feeling, acting and happening the day is likewise, and the hour, on a smaller scale, if you like; but distinctions of size among time units are very little absolute and their relative yardstick is the measure of ourselves, our feeling, our adaptation, or the lack of it.”

Mann’s virtue is not that he has discovered this relative nature of time, but that he can convey it in his books. His world is not simply the world of the present and what is happening now, but a many-faceted world so bound to the past as to be sometimes inextricable from it and bound up too with the future, not by any kind of determinism, but by the laws of man’s being and the nature of the relationships that establish continuity.

Mann’s universe seems to have an extra dimension, an added
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richness, because people and events are not single. Like the inter-relatedness of time, there is the interrelatedness of people. Old Eliezer confuses himself with all the Eliezers of the past. He uses the first person when speaking of Eliezer, the servant of Abraham. This is not simply a speech habit, but a sense of continuity, a profound identification with his predecessors. "The notion that each is himself and can be no other, is that anything more than a convention, which arbitrarily leaves out of account all the transitions which bind the individual consciousness to the general?" What those simpler, perhaps more naïve people of the Biblical past seemed to feel in their bones, the modern world forgets. The world of Buddenbrooks and of Castorp has lost most of this consciousness of continuity, most of this sense of inter-relatedness. The Buddenbrooks are practically cut off from every one but Buddenbrooks. Their sense of continuity depends on the success of the business. Only in a flash of insight, for one blessed moment does Thomas Buddenbrook see beyond this, "I shall be in all those who have ever, do ever, or ever shall say 'I.'" In the Magic Mountain too, the individuals stand alone. Their sense of solidarity is only superficial. "Logically, of course, each mild case was thus driven to think slightly of itself; yet preserved its individual self-respect by merging it with the general, as was natural and human." Hans Castorp too has a vision. He sees or dreams of man's "mystic community." But like Thomas Buddenbrook's, this vision, which seems at the moment all that matters in the world, fades in his memory. In neither man does this insight have sufficient force to serve as guide or standard. Like all of us in the modern world they continued to live from day to day, ignoring the rich depths of feeling and experience, in time and all about them, apparently aloof from all complicated interrelatedness of existence.

Felix Krull comments on this high concentration of individualism and unrelatedness, for Felix Krull, whether he knows it or not is a victim of this very tendency in the modern world where relatedness becomes a kind of mechanical Dale Carnegie concept. Speaking of the conductor in the train, he says,
This honest man who punched my valid ticket earned his livelihood thereby; somewhere a home awaited him — there was a wedding ring on his finger — he had a wife and children. But I had to behave as though the thought of his human associations could never occur to me, and any question about them, revealing that I did not regard him simply as a convenient marionette, would have been completely out of order. On the other hand, I had my own particular human background about which he might have inquired. But this, for one thing, was not his privilege and for another, was beneath his dignity. He was concerned only with the validity of the ticket held by a passenger who was no less a marionette than he. What became of me once the ticket had been used was something he must coldly disregard.

Thus Mann, with a kind of detached irony, expresses this lack of a sense of community. But in Faustus he sees it with no detached irony but with a kind of horrified revulsion. Leverkuhn's complete inability to attach himself to any one is a pathological phenomenon. That he feels that this morbidity contributes to his art is another aspect of its morbidity.

The serenity and graciousness of the whole Joseph sequence lies in the fact that Mann is describing people who form a whole — not completely, not ideally, but very humanly and with reservations. Joseph expresses this most charmingly:

But lo, the world hath many centers, one for each created being, and about each one it lieth in its own circle. Thou standest but half an ell from me, yet about thee lieth a universe whose center I am not but thou art. For our universes are not far from each other so that they do not touch; rather hath God pushed them and interwoven them deep into each other.

This relatedness has other dimensions. This "mystic community" includes the men of the past and the men of the future. There is a sense of the universal as well as the individual and this conditions Mann's attitude toward his characters.

This attitude is an irresistible combination of sympathy and detachment. That each man must inevitably work out his own destiny, that each in a sense creates his own life history and his own character (some, like Christian Buddenbrook unconsciously
and out of weakness, others, like Joseph with a certain degree of choice and insight).

Mann may pretend that his men and women are simple. They are in reality complex. He says of Hans Castorp that he is a simple soul with mediocre powers, but the young man who "takes stock" at the Sanitorium is considerably more than this. Perhaps it is the heightening of his sensibilities by disease, the slightly feverish intensity of living, when one is ill, that accounts for this contradiction, but more likely it is because Mann cannot resist a complex character, cannot write about people who are not analytical and perceptive. Tony Buddenbrook, who much of the time appears none too bright has flashes of insight and analytical inspirations which keep us interested, and no doubt Mann too. Mann needs an instrument upon which to play. He cannot say what he wants to unless the instrument has potentialities, sensitivities, a competence for the intricate and highly elaborated.

In Mann's universe there is a close relationship between the specific and the general. This world and the unknown — the unknowable — are closely bound together and man is permitted to make guesses, to act on assumptions. His intuitions of a larger universe are valid. Like Samuel Butler, Mann seems to say that "the art of living is that of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises." Mann's characters vary considerably in the degree of insight vouchsafed them. But at best they are all working in the dark with only occasional flashes of light. Joseph was convinced that nothing in the lower world would know how to happen or be thought of without its starry prototype and counterpart; and the great certainty guiding his life was belief in the unity of the dual.

This is most clearly expressed in the case of Joseph, but it is implicit in all of Mann's work.

The questions involved in this relationship, Mann does not try to answer. He speaks of the "riddling essence of which our
own normally unsatisfied and quite abnormally wretched existences form a part” and he asks, “For do men know whether they do well or ill before God?” Well or ill, ignorant or knowing, men are not puppets—mere helpless creatures pushed hither and yon. They have powers to guide, if not to control their own lives. When they lose sight of the higher reality and become too involved in the “here and now,” it is not the result of incapacity, but a kind of deliberate blindness on their parts which over and over again involves them in defeat. The universe is not unsympathetic to man, but it is demanding. It requires a kind of spiritual and intellectual discipline and the refusal to exercise this results in blind self-indulgence and defeat. Through all of his books runs the thread of this idea.

— How complicate
The discipline of man,
Compelling him to choose himself
His pre-appointed pain.

Chronologically Mann’s development is intensely interesting. From his earliest work he demonstrates an increasing awareness, an increasing acuteness and an increasing skill which coincide with his greater maturity. This development seems a steady and constant growth through the Joseph books which are so to speak, the climax of his literary career. All through the Joseph cycle one feels an intellectual and spiritual maturity consonant with a high degree of artistic skill. They are an exquisite whole, the form and content so inextricably mingled that it is nonsense to talk of the “what” and the “how.” They are part of each other and make meaningful Proust’s remark that “style is not a question of technique but of vision.”

But surely Mann’s vision was darkened by the events in the world about him. He no longer felt sure “of the preponderant influence of the individual destiny upon the general force of circumstances.” The relationship between this world and the world of the spirit, man’s capacity to deal with this world by the
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light, however flickering and ineffectual, from that other world, these assurances seem to have been dashed and the whole universe took on a bewildering and nightmarish quality—a mad swing between extremes of light and dark, life and death, good and evil. The Devil describes Hell itself in these terms—the hottest and the coldest, the brightest and the darkest, no stops between extremes. Over the world of Dr. Faustus hangs a doom—a sense of the irrationality of the universe, a kind of shunning of the light that one is inclined to attribute to the mounting horror of the world of the late thirties and forties. In Dr. Faustus evil has ceased to be an individual characteristic, a quality in human beings to be understood and dealt with. It has become a monstrous abstraction beyond the meager powers of individual men. Leverkuhn’s morbid ideas are beyond his power to control. Herr Settembrini once said that

Iunacy undoubtedly in many cases meant the kind of self-abandonment which was the refuge of a weak nature against extreme distress, a defense against such overwhelming blows of destiny as it felt itself when in its right mind, unable to cope with. But almost anybody might get in that state; and he, Settembrini, had held more than one lunatic to temporary self-control, simply by opposing to his humbuggery an air of inexorable reason.

There is no such “inexorable reason” to save Leverkuhn—nor does humbuggery seem to be the word for what he experiences. Those themes which preoccupy Mann in his earlier books seem to be taken out of the rational and human sphere and amplified by abstraction to something beyond human capacity. The light and the love in Joseph’s world are drowned out by darkness and hostility in Leverkuhn’s.

Thomas Mann’s last book was Felix Krull. It seems he began it many years ago, dropped it and then took it up again during the last years of his life. It is impossible to say where he began and where he left off. The book has the same kind of charm which we associate with all Mann’s books, his mannerisms, his
unique style. But it lacks the richness of his other novels, those layers of meaning, those elaborations of relationships, those subtle qualifications. Felix Krull himself is a kind of caricature of Joseph. He has the charm and sweetness, the desire to please. He has the same vices—exhibitionism, a tendency to complacency sometimes amounting to arrogance. He has the same need for response from the people about him and the same gifts for arousing that response. But he has not the knowledge and consciousness of the "blessing" to steady him and give it all significance. His need to please others is purely egotistical. His ambition to get on is purely materialistic. These traits in Joseph are refined and given meaning because they are employed for the benefit of a higher power. Joseph is dedicated, spoken for. None of his achievements are for himself, but in a kind of partnership with the Highest.

It is interesting that Mann should have gone back to this character—so vivid, so endearing and portrayed him again, but this time simply stuffed with sawdust. Krull says, "He who really loves the world shapes himself to please it." And the result is a kind of monstrosity—not uncommon in the modern world—the mechanical charmer, the self-seeking personality boy. Joseph shaped himself, not to please the world, but to please the Highest, whom he never forgot he was serving and as he shaped himself he shaped the Highest too.

Perhaps history—the history of 1930 and 1940—destroyed Mann's faith in man. Perhaps age made him question his old assurance in man's capacity for spiritual experience. Perhaps it is neither of these, but a desire to point out the road Western man is taking today. Implicit in the book is a criticism of the mechanical nature of man's relationships, of our materialistic goals and the thin and empty continuity which takes no account of the past nor of the world of the spirit which leads into the future. But the book lacks enthusiasm. If it is a pointing-out of the wrongness of the road, it is a disillusioned one. There is no passion, only a kind of cynical hopelessness. We are left at the
end of this chronological sequence of Mann's books with a kind of doomed helplessness. The horror is gone. There is only an empty shell, temporary and joyless.

One is inclined to turn Mann's treatment of time against himself, not to distinguish the "now" from the "then." Those worlds of his in which the joy and passion of life are wedded to its significance are present to us and will be present — mere calendar dates notwithstanding. Mann's despair or his hopelessness seem temporary. We feel that it was the true Mann — outside of time — who said, "For we must ask whether the temporal, the individual and the particular get more worth and value from the eternal, or the eternal more from the particular and temporal."

Present to us always are the worlds of his earlier work with their richness and delight. And beyond the chronological sequence — outside of time — Mann says, "For with the world-whole and its unity the human being has always and ever to do, whether he knows it or not."

References


