

many ways, they are at one in stressing “the autonomy of art.” To turn from them to Marx is a refreshing experience. For dogmatist though he was at heart, narrow though his conception was of the context of art, by gesturing in the direction of these other factors he provided the best antidote to his own dogmatism.

M. Freville is preparing, he tells us, a companion volume of the æsthetic writings of Lenin and Stalin. It is a small though very revealing difference between two ways of life, theirs and ours, that we are not expected to take seriously the late Lord Baldwin’s effusions on literature or Sir Winston Churchill’s reflections on painting.

Richard Wollheim

“A GERMAN GALSWORTHY”?

OBITUARIES in *The Times* often present to us, with a bland precision, that semi-official judgment of dead writers which has been collectively but vaguely held by the English literary world for many years before. When Thomas Mann died three months ago his obituarist deftly summarised the patronising estimate of that novelist which is fashionable in England. Mann was discovered to be turgid, repetitive, dull and, most deplorable of all, Germanic. The phrase “a German Galsworthy” was quoted with approval, and the general impression was of a writer who had once been important but who was now unreadable. And this expresses, in its own way, the fact that Mann has never been part of the accepted highbrow canon in this country. Gide, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Lawrence, Sartre, Mauriac . . . they make, heaven knows, a heterogeneous list enough, but all these names swing easily into line and trip off the tongue like a spell. They are members of the pantheon: they, in our current estimation, are the great novelists of the 20th century. To add the name of Mann would be a minor act of defiance.

This is not to say that Thomas Mann has been neglected in his lifetime. In America and Germany he has probably been written about more widely and more thoroughly than has any other novelist of our time. But in England and France his admirers have always been something of a sect, a scattered community and a strangely inarticulate one. The dominant view has been that of *The Times* obituarist.

It seems to me that there are two obvious reasons for this. In the first place Mann was a German and it is not our view that Germans can write novels—symphonies, yes; poetry, sometimes; but not novels. In the

second place Mann’s very public career was bad for his literary reputation at a time when Flaubert was, by and large, the culture-hero of the English literary man. It is true, of course, that Gide, Sartre, and Mauriac have had public careers as well, but these were public careers of a far more acceptable kind. Gide and Sartre were rebels of the left, while Mauriac has been an exciting reactionary. Thomas Mann, liberal, internationalist, humanitarian, a rather ponderous prophet, a constant dealer in the commonplaces of political decency, had little glamour for us in his public rôle. He was too like too many of our fathers and grandfathers. And when, towards the end of his life, he seemed to be indulging in a certain amount of fellow-travelling, had revolted against the America which he once extolled and would say nothing to disparage the régime in Eastern Germany, why, the time for that had passed. In his public pronouncements, of which there are whole volumes, he always seemed to be missing the bus in which we were travelling and carousing.

Someone else must discuss the value and percipience of Mann’s political views. I shall simply write, without space to say much of what I mean by it, that I regard Thomas Mann as the most fertilising novelist of this century. It is not proper, or very meaningful, to measure him against his peers and to give him higher marks for this or that than we award to Proust or Joyce or Kafka. All that I mean when I write that he is fertilising is that he seems to fertilise *me* and that I would be glad to share this agreeable sense of germination with as many other writers as possible. I would be glad to do anything I can to persuade my colleagues, contemporaries, and friends that Thomas Mann at least deserves to be *read*, and that it is not enough to have

attempted *The Magic Mountain* long ago and to talk nostalgically of *Death in Venice* and *Tonio Kröger*. Let me quickly, I hope disarmingly, add that I deliver this sermon as a comparatively recent convert, with all the self-righteousness and enthusiasm which that implies. I read the Joseph saga only in the last year, and if I have a right to talk it is a right which I have only just acquired.

I WOULD not recommend my past associates in ignorance to begin their reading with this first volume of *Felix Krull*.* Mann was writing this long picaresque comedy in the last years of his life and it bears all the marks of an old man's book. Some of these marks are delightful ones. Mann has always possessed a quite extraordinary authority in his novels and stories, so that even the youthful *Buddenbrooks* did, inimitably, exactly what it set out to do. (Is it another reason for our suspicion of Mann that so many and such inferior family chronicles have proliferated since that time?) But in *Felix Krull* the authority is absolute. I find nothing in this first available volume which I could describe as a mistake, a fumbling, a failure of nerve or eye. But it may be that the authority is too absolute, the fixed intention too rigidly pursued, the long-accumulated skill and subtlety too automatically applied. In this book, easily readable though it is, chock full of brilliancies, captivatingly funny and true, I have felt for the first time a certain tiredness, a readiness to serve up again material which has been more excitingly treated before.

In a sense, of course, Thomas Mann has always repeated his themes. Like so many of the greatest novelists—like Henry James or Jane Austen or Dostoevsky—he was a man with one or two deep truths to express and he used his genius to express them in many different ways, with many and increasing subtleties of exposition and qualification. It might seem that *Felix Krull* represents a new departure in that this, despite the pervasive humour of all his other books, was the first time that he set out to write a humorous book for its own sake. Yet I am inclined to think, after reading only the first part of this

book, that *Felix Krull* contributes rather less to our understanding of Mann's world and ideas than his earlier books have done.

The obvious ancestors of this book are *Moll Flanders*, *Gil Blas*, Casanova's *Memoirs*, and *Wilhelm Meister*; and of these the closest to it in spirit are the *Memoirs*. We are presented with a young German, son of a crooked wine-dealer in the Rhineland, who is propelled on his career of roguery "a few years after the glorious founding of the German Empire." By the end of the current volume Felix has been a very successful waiter in Paris, has changed identity with a young Luxembourgish nobleman, and has done well for himself in Lisbon under that disguise. It seems that he is about to sail for the Argentine when the volume ends, and we may perhaps suppose that his adventures will be global. Felix tells his story in the first person, a device which enables his creator to throw his favourite kind of doubt on everything which his hero tells us about himself. Yet we may surely believe Felix when he boasts that he is extremely beautiful, extremely cunning, charming, and self-assured. He is, in fact, the young Casanova almost to a hair, and the kind of doubt which is fictionally thrown on his adventures closely resembles the real doubt which we feel when we read Casanova's account of himself and his own adventures.

Ambiguity, then; what Mann has so often called "the equivocal." His truths have never been simple ones and this, his first major work to be written in the first person, discovers another method of forcing his readers to reflect on the elusive nature of truth. Is this so, we wonder, when Felix tells us something that he said or did, or something that he is? Well, it seemed so to him and it was effectively so to others, and is there, after all, any other way in which things can be so or not? He is not a marquis, of course, although he is successfully masquerading as a marquis for a great deal of the book. But doesn't he, in a sense, *become* a marquis simply by the success of his masquerade? He is thought to be a marquis by everyone he meets and for much of the time he himself manages to forget that he is, at best, a marquis only by most unusual definition. What is this protean hero *really*—for it is clearly not enough to say that he is the son of a crooked wine merchant or that he is a comedian or that he

* *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man. Part I.* By THOMAS MANN. Translated by Denver Lindley. Secker and Warburg. 18s.

is himself a crook? Even to philosophers the question of identity surely remains something of a puzzle; us it puzzles whenever we give it a nervous glance, and Mann is determined that we shall contemplate this puzzle as long and as deeply as he can make us.

FOR on another level of intention Felix (Armand the waiter? Loulou the marquis?) slyly presents another of the great Mann themes to us. He has told us before, and was perhaps the first to tell us so well, that artist, crook, and sick man are intimately related. Very early in this new book the boy Felix achieves a wonderfully convincing piece of malingering, actually forcing his body to represent the symptoms which he needs, and "I had produced these symptoms as effectively as though I had nothing to do with their appearance. I had improved upon nature, realised a dream; and only he who has succeeded in creating a compelling and effective reality out of nothing, out of sheer inward knowledge and contemplation . . . he alone understands the strange and dream-like satisfaction with which I rested from my creative task." We are reminded, by this composite theme, of Joseph's joyful slyness, of Goethe's apparently immoderate egotism in *Lotte in Weimar*, of Leverkühn's diabolic pact, of Castorp's half-invented sickness, of the magician who fell to Mario's bullet.

And the last of Mann's three great themes is not neglected either—a theme which is closely related to his identification of artist, criminal, and invalid. I mean the deliberate moral ambiguity which Mann has always propounded and which seemed, at first sight, so oddly at variance with the simplicities of the moral views he extolled in his other rôle. At first sight only, for Mann's moral ambiguity never took the vulgar and dilettante form which has been so widely practised and revered in France. His was not that moral experimentalism, that facile and ultimately maddening delight in moral paradox which has allowed Jean G  net to be mistaken for a serious writer. Mann's ambiguity was not due to any doubt that good is good and evil is evil, and it has not amused him to suppose the opposite. But he is, in this as in so many other things, a true disciple of Goethe, truly and perpetually aware that good and evil, though seldom difficult to distinguish, bear a far more complex

Early Light

The collected poems of

DOROTHY
WELLESLEY

Recommended by the Poetry Book Society

21s



Song at the Year's Turning

Poems 1942-1954

R. S. THOMAS

With an Introduction by John Betjeman

12s 6d



The Psychological Novel

1900-1950

A critical study by

LEON EDEL

9s 6d



The Reynard Library

Wordsworth

Selected by W. M. MERCHANT

880 pages 27s 6d

HART-DAVIS

relationship to each other than is generally recognised. Like Blake or Jung, Mann has never doubted that good cannot exist without evil, that the irreconcilable conflict is a genuine but an unresolvable one, and that the frontal assault on evil may be the most evil-consequenced way of dealing with it.

These are heavy words to use in writing about a book with comic intentions, but once again it is not Mann's way to allow any simple dichotomies. He was extremely funny in the tragedy of *The Magic Mountain* and he has never allowed it to be supposed that the tragic must dispel the comic or the comic the tragic. At the beginning of *Felix Krull* we are allowed to know that the hero, brother to Casanova in this as well, ends his life in a melancholy state of premature decay. We may be sure that this will not be precisely a punishment for his amiable sins, but it is perhaps a warning to us that the apparently gay narrative of a rake's progress is not to be taken altogether lightly.

I HAVE suggested, on the insufficient evidence of a first volume, that this may prove to be the least successful of Mann's major works. For the disciple there are too many rather tired echoes of earlier themes which seem to contribute little to their exposition. In the fantastic lion-tamer we see a shadow of Mario's magician, in the lascivious and self-destructive Diane a shadow of Potiphar's wife, in Lord Strathbogie a brief recreated vision of the more solid Aschenbach,

and in the hero himself much which we knew well already from Castorp and Joseph. But if anyone unfamiliar with this great writer in his comic-serious mood would wish to know whether he is likely to enjoy it I would offer the following quotation from a scene in the Lisbon museum:

Near by (were) stupid-looking giant armadillos, whom Nature had considerably protected with a heavy armour of bony plates on back and flanks. But Nature had been just as solicitous of their ravenous boarders, the sabre-tooth tigers, and had provided them with such powerful jaws and rending teeth that they could handle the bony armour and tear great slices of no doubt tasty flesh from the armadillos' bodies. The larger and more heavily armoured the unwilling host became, the more monstrous grew the jaws and teeth of the guest who joyfully leaped upon him at meal-time. One day, however, Kuckuck informed us, climate and vegetation played a prank on the giant armadillos by depriving them of their innocent nourishment, and they became extinct. And there sat the sabre-tooth tiger, after that mighty contest, there he sat with his jaws and his armour-rending teeth and fell rapidly into despondency and gave up the ghost. He had done everything out of regard for the growing armadillo so as not to be left behind but to go on being able to crunch its bones. The latter, in turn, would never have grown so large or so heavily armoured if it had not been for that connoisseur of its flesh.

The new translator, incidentally, seems to have avoided the usual perils of translation from the German.

Philip Toynbee

ON BEHAVING ONESELF

IN ONE of Miss Compton-Burnett's best books a man says: "I do admire behaviour; I love it more than anything." That may sound the remark of a shallow man, but in the fiction to which it belongs the speaker turns out in the end to have unsuspected depths. Real politeness is not the product of the fashion-mag. Let me give my best story on the subject. In 1944 it was considered necessary to parachute a French politician into his native country, although he was old for the jumping game, and although he had abnormally bad nerves for it. He was brave enough, but he had the misfortune to be powerless to master the hysteria of vertigo.

Since there was no way out of his proposed jump he suggested that the R.A.F. instructor who trained him should accompany him on the night of his mission, and should at the appointed time forcibly thrust him through the hole. This was agreed, but the instructor insisted that, painful as the occasion might be, one rehearsal should be held, and so it was arranged. As the balloon selected for rehearsal rose from the ground, the French politician went pale, went green, almost but not quite fainted. Parachuting height was reached, the balloon stood still in cosmic silence, and my R.A.F. friend, feeling very like a hangman, proceeded to the hideous