

BOOK REVIEWS

MOMMSEN, KATHARINA, *Gesellschaftskritik bei Fontane und Mann*. MÖSK. (Literatur und Geschichte, 10.) Heidelberg: Lothar Stehlmann Verlag (1973). 125 pp. DM 16.80

This book was inevitable. As another exercise in the latest academic seriousness, it proves that literary "Gesellschaftskritik" is a nagging reef of embarrassments where even the best run aground if tempted away from sound philology. And the reader who comes to Fontane and Th. Mann in search of engagement also must navigate charted and uncharted ironies.

Katharina Mommsen reads Fontane and Mann for the sake of a moral lesson: their criticism of society constitutes a legacy from which we, in our present tribulations, ought to learn. Fontane and Mann are seismographs of German history from 1848 to the Cold War, and Mommsen asks whether they are not oracles too, with "therapeutische Weisungen" (p. 121) for the future. In effect she has written a humanist's essay in genuine indignation over the intellectual and cultural impoverishment of the age.

To Fontane an unmistakable symptom of decadence was "Mangel an Bildung" (Mommsen calls it "Bildungsinsuffizienz"). Thus "Bildungsinsuffizienz beim Adel" is the heart of the Fontane section of the essay, while the longer Mann section ends with "Depravation der Bildung." The lesson follows: "Will man auf die wahre Mahnung beider Dichter hören, so müssten Versuche unternommen werden, das Sensorium, die Begabung für Bildungsdinge überhaupt zu pflegen, ihr Dahinschwinden aufzuhalten . . ." (p. 123). Clearly the fate of Erasmus still haunts us; we have not yet discovered an open route between the wisdom of humanism and the arenas of power. In this context Erich Heller wrote of "the facile earnestness of literary politics" (in *The Ironic German*).

In her pursuit of the ghost-ship "relevance" Mommsen also misjudges the depths of Fontane's words, finding signs of decadence in "verwechselte Schülerstellen" and even in Effi Briest's ignorance of Heine. Then in discussing "freies Darüberstehen" she turns the most unlikely characters into examples of that virtue, among them, remarkably, Wraschowitz in *Stechlin*, because Czako once compliments him: "Es ist sehr selten, in nationalen Fragen einem so freien Darüberstehen zu begegnen" (p. 50). Meanwhile art professor Cujacius, about whom Mommsen writes nearly two pages, is said to appear in *Stechlin* as a prophet whose words about the apocalyptic horsemen (chap. 21) are to be taken seriously. Mommsen grants that Cujacius is treated quite ironically later, but not in chapter 21 (p. 50). Cujacius, however, is everywhere only an

other advocate of "Kopf ab aus Prinzip," for which his "Apostelkopf" is the appropriate image.

Old Dubslav suffers most from this sociocritical zeal. Missing the fact that he is Graf Barby's double, Mommsen sees in his comments "eine gewisse geistige Unzulänglichkeit" and an insensitivity to things poetic (p. 26). She also calls it a sign of "Bildungsdepravation" when Stechlin in his dying days turns to the hag Busechen (pp. 27, 108); yet his calling her makes beautiful poetic sense, a sense both "märkisch-praktisch" and in communion with myth.

Mommsen knows that to Fontane and Mann literature always mattered more than sociology or politics. Aristocracy and bourgeoisie were for both essentially matters of "Gewinnung," "Adel des Geistes." In no way, however, do Fontane's political opinions amount to a "Linktendenz" (p. 59), for his contempt for that which stifles change springs not from politics but from his sense of life, of "Dauer im Wechsel." The theme of *Stechlin*, "Altes und Neues," moves in a Goethian rhythm. Th. Mann chose to inherit that sense of life, and his career from agonized conservatism to "blue-eyed" flirtation with communism is a single humanistic experiment with political sympathies, always testing their hospitality to art.

Mommsen seems occasionally impatient with Th. Mann; of his novels only *Dr. Faustus* consistently serves her purpose. Otherwise she works with Mann's essays, speeches, and letters, and then takes issue with some of his opinions. Mann allegedly even rendered the problem of decadence harmless, for where Fontane saw "Unbildung" as its omen, Mann makes decadence the companion of a heightened sensitivity to art (p. 61). "Fontane mit seinen reichen Gesichtskennntnissen sah die Fakten realistischer als Thomas Mann" (p. 62).

Inexplicably Mommsen finds Mann's description of art as "Schein," "nutzloses Spiel," lacking "rechte Konsequenz und Entscheidung" (p. 71). She also does not pause at the final question mark of Zaubenberg. Castorp merely meets the world "der damaligen Intellektuellen und Künstler," finds a synthesis of "Mensch und Bildung" impossible, and digs in the war, his fate a symbol "für den Untergang einer ganzen Epoche" (p. 63). Does Castorp then die for nothing? Not for the song, the Linden tree? The question mark is the ironist's compassion and defense.

Like Fontane, Th. Mann was basically suspicious of all "Hier-steh-lich-Männer," the heroes of "Fiat justitia—perat mundus et vita!" And in the end Mommsen identifies Th. Mann's engagement beautifully when she cites his admiration for that scene in *Stechlin* where Dubslav rescues the drunk who voted for the socialist: "Was wirkt, was beglückt, das ist die Außerkräftsetzung, Entaffung, Vernichtung der Politik durch Freiheit, Resignation und Güte" (p. 105 f.).

The Ohio State University

DONALD C. REICHEL