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**From the World Will of Schopenhauer to Divine Providence; a Reflection on
Thomas Mann's Joseph**

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“Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?” (“Deep is the well of the past. Should we not name it unfathomable?”)

The German novelist, Thomas Mann, shows himself in his works to be a master at bringing opposing forces to play against each other.

One of the central themes in his works is the conflict between decadent behavior of various kinds, and behavior that appears to overcome his characters' tendencies towards decadence. Yet, in all of this, Mann maintains a judicial detachment. One can never be sure of where he stands. For example, in works such as Buddenbrooks and Death in Venice, the reader may take sides, but never Thomas Mann himself who maintains his stance as the detached and all knowing narrator..

Consider, for example, two passages from Buddenbrooks: 1) the great grandfather forcing his way into the lifeboat in order to avoid drowning after a shipwreck and 2) His great grandson Hanno's easy capitulation to death when his fever reaches its crisis, and after the physician tells his parents that the decisive factor as to whether or not Hanno will recover is his will to live

There are some who might regard the grandfather's powerful and effective will to survive, to prevail, to thrive, and to prosper as a sign of vitality in marked contrast to Hanno's easy capitulation to death, a capitulation which might be interpreted as a sign of decadence. But Mann, student of Schopenhauer that he was, remains detached and apparently indifferent as he begins the following chapter of Buddenbrooks with a description of Hanno's funeral. The author gives us no help in interpreting the contrasting events. Why not interpret Hanno's renunciation of life as asceticism and heroism at its best, and the grandfather's clinging to life as an animal-like decadence, or, like the author, one might suspend judgment on the matter altogether?

Similarly with Gustav Aschenbach in Death in Venice: There is no hint of approval or disapproval from Mann. Does Mann's approval rest upon the man of iron discipline, the Aschenbach whose contact with his sensual appetites was that of the ruthless master to whom these imperious appetites were wholly subjugated, or is the more vital, favorable, and authentic character Aschenbach, the profligate whose surrender to homosexual inclinations has him stalking a young Polish boy on the beaches of Venice? Or, again, is one to admire most of all the creative Aschenbach who achieves his greatest artistic production at that high point at which his own will begins to give way to lust?

In his novel, Felix Krull. Mann manifests the same detachment. Who is decadent, the artful imposter Felix Krull who outwits the doctors at the draft board, or the examining physicians at the draft board who routinely accept young men in poor health into the army? In fact, Krull's revolt against much of the artificiality and hypocrisy in conventional society can be construed as positive virtue, if one can use such a term as virtue to describe Krull's behavior which seems to be beyond good and evil.

In contrast to the aforementioned works of Mann, when we arrive at the Joseph Tetralogy Thomas Mann presents us with a hero whom he clearly admires. The author initially portrays our hero to us as altogether superior, apparently flawless. Viewed merely as a product of nature, he utterly surpasses his brothers in looks, intelligence, and charm. He is the son of Rachel, his father's great love. The shrewd and crafty Jacob sees his son, Joseph, not only as the child, the offspring issuing from his great love for Rachel, but also as a champion of champions, a precious link in a providential plan – and the narrator, Thomas Mann, clearly agrees with Jacob. Joseph, is Mann's favorite, too. Yet, Mann, for all of this, in his approval of Joseph, does not lose his detachment as narrator. Mann remains unruffled by both Joseph's triumphs and his disasters. Nevertheless, the quality of the author's imperturbability has altered. His tone as narrator is no longer the Schopenhauer/Buddhist detachment we have in Buddenbrooks; rather his attitude toward his hero is that of the Lord of heaven and earth, a personal being, who, in the end, will not allow Joseph to fail.

How are we to account for Mann's change in tone and perspective in his narrative role in the Joseph books? We know that Mann researched his books thoroughly. In our view, the change in perspective is that in the process of writing the Joseph Tetralogy, Mann became better acquainted with the validity of insights he discovered in The Bible. If one can speak of the influence of Schopenhauer as the influence of an atheistic European version of Buddhism, and the influence of Nietzsche as the influence of the Dionysiac element in Greek thought on Mann, we can say that part and parcel of writing the Joseph books was an immersion in the Bible and an absorption of the mentality of the ancient Hebrews.

In an essay on the first of the Joseph books, Tales of Jacob, the American novelist, Willa Cather, states that Mann captured in this work not the past viewed from a modern perspective, but the past as past - the rhythm of time as experienced by Semitic shepherds five thousand years ago. Yet in this incredibly slow-moving story, the reader experiences the full weight of the difference between the Hebrew outlook and other ancient outlooks – a difference which includes an appreciative, yet critical view of non-Biblical approaches to life. God's call to Abraham and the exclusive election for a great task for his people are manifest both in the story of Jacob and his son, Joseph. We find in this story a holy and redemptive providence at work, whereas in the Buddenbrooks, we had an indifferent and inexorable blind will force at work.

Mann's stance in the Joseph novel is not neutral. The author has no doubt that Joseph is in collusion with a creative and redemptive force which will guarantee and display in him an incredible victory of goodness over the forces of darkness. The well of the past will show itself not to be entirely unfathomable. Its ground is ultimately good – a personal and creative God of whom Joseph's rich personality is an image.

One asks: Does this mark a permanent change in Mann, a conversion of sorts, or is this just another stance of Mann's, the ironic observer who merely reports in depth a viewpoint to which he holds no personal commitment? Is Mann's sensitivity to a personal and creative God evidenced here no more than a temporary stance, an occasion for a masterful display of his artistic virtuosity - his capacity to wear many masks? If this is the case, one must say that Mann succeeds in the Joseph Tetralogy in making a viewpoint attractive and persuasive with which he does not necessarily agree, or about which he may be personally ambivalent. He writes about the doings of a loving God in whom Mann's heart, unlike St. Augustine's, does not actually find rest. Mann was truly a great master of irony, and what could be more ironic than the writing of the story of Joseph in such a way, and with such power, that his readers could find a personal, providential God in it in whom the author, in his own personal life, disbelieved despite a mighty immersion in the Bible. One finds oneself asking, "Is the author finally no more than a masterful puppeteer who can convince his audience of the reality of his performance, but who himself remains above it all, and personally indifferent?"

Let us look more closely at Mann's portrayal of Joseph: Joseph is presented by Mann not only as the son of the shrewd and crafty Jacob; he is also the grandson of Rachel's father, Laban, who outfoxed Jacob. Joseph's cleverness is marked by an awareness that all of the obstacles he faces are part of a providential scheme. He is astute enough to realize that his relationship to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is his most important asset. It is a personal God who has endowed him not only with his great intelligence and attractiveness, but also with his power to interpret dreams. From the very beginning, Joseph is conscious that his ordeal, and his triumph over the deprivations in it, are to serve as a lesson by God for Jacob's family, his descendents, and for all mankind.

What is this lesson? Joseph's very giftedness caused great jealousy and hostility in his brothers – enough hostility for them to wish him dead. On a purely human level, this is a dilemma that many people face. Jacob, the father, knew a great deal about sibling rivalry and had paid heavily for defrauding his brother Esau of his inheritance. He also knew that Joseph, Rachel's son, was something of a masterpiece – someone that would be a great asset both to him (Jacob) and to all of his sons and daughters. His brothers in their envy of him failed to see that in harming Joseph, they were harming both themselves and their father.

Joseph's brothers were very slow in learning what Jacob knew about Joseph's potential. At first, their regret for what they had done to Joseph was based mainly on their reaction to Jacob's grief. Had they known the depth and extent of the grief and suffering that Joseph's apparent death caused their father, they would not have done what they had done to Joseph. It is only at the very end of the tetralogy when they see the practical benefits of Joseph's great capacity and their personal need for his patronage that they realize in a concrete and practical way what they had lost in losing Joseph.

Joseph, on the other hand, also had learned a very important lesson; namely, that it is a great mistake needlessly to arouse the envy of others through a vain display of one's talents. Like Socrates, in Plato's Crito, who is keenly aware that all that he has both physically and mentally, he owes in large measure to the laws and institutions of Athens, Joseph has learned that all of his gifts both physical and mental are not for vain display, but rather are to be put to the service of the God who called Abraham out from the land of Ur, the very God with whom his own father had struggled. A condition for the emergence of good in the Hebrew scheme of things is a willingness to sacrifice everything one has if called upon to do so in God's service. Abraham had to be ready to sacrifice Isaac, and Joseph, while being tormented by the wife of the Eunuch Potiphar, had to be prepared to be, if necessary, a Eunuch for the kingdom of God.

And yet, the insight into what this service entails involved a remembrance of many stories that had been passed on to him about this God and by a personal communion, a personal relationship to God not wholly unlike the inner voice of Socrates. It was this awareness of his heritage coupled to a personal communion with God that enabled Joseph to endure many hardships among which were his brothers' rejection of him, and the various travails he endured in Egypt, such as Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce him and his imprisonment. The exchange he has with Pharaoh over the sun god is a display of Joseph's maturity. Joseph is aware that his (Joseph's) God, the God of his father, is the true God, who is the origin and destiny of the whole of creation. Yet, he is respectful of the religion of the Egyptians. He sees in their belief a groping toward the true God, and in the case of Ikhanaton, a partial discovery of the truth which he (Joseph) has in its integrity and fullness through his inheritance.

The tact with which Joseph recognizes the insights of Ikhanaton endears him to the Pharaoh. While not hesitating to share his own traditional story and insights with the Pharaoh, he never overwhelms him with his own superior knowledge and erudition. To the contrary, the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh's mother so appreciate him that he accedes to a position of power in Egypt. Joseph's youthful vanity is gone. The Pharaoh has found in him an insightful advisor with an extraordinary administrative capacity. Joseph, the favored son of Jacob who had it in his blood to be a patriarch, a great leader of the Jewish people, with his quick intelligence had learned well the art of administration as head of Potiphar's household and now he was to administer effectively the whole of Egypt.

Various themes emerge in the Joseph Tetralogy that are absent in Mann's earlier work. The hero, Joseph, is alienated from his brothers, but he certainly is not alienated from his father. Secondly, he is more rooted in his father's mission than any of his brothers and thus, he is more rooted in the Hebrew tradition leading from Abraham, and more representative of it than they are. Moreover, though he is an alien in Egypt, he is able to promote his own career by making full use of his native wits and the sagacity he picked up as Jacob's son to seize every opportunity that Egypt had to offer him. As a result of his incredible success in Egypt, he is able to save his whole family from destruction and thereby he sets the stage for the next development in their historic mission.

The story of Joseph, unlike the stories in Mann's prior works, is clearly not a tale of a hero sinking into decadence. The curve of Joseph's journey is a far cry from the curve of the journeys of Thomas Buddenbrook or Gustav Aschenbach. Joseph is not swept away by a cruel, blind destiny.

As for Thomas Mann, the omniscient narrator, his Joseph novels mark a new development. His Joseph is not portrayed as the plaything of destiny. It was through the avoidable fault of complacency and vanity that he aroused his brothers' ire. He learned the dangers inherent in such display as a result of his brothers' plot. In Egypt, he exercised his gifts with an unerring modesty. A vain man could not have resisted the enticement of Potiphar's wife; a vengeful man could not have taken advantage of the opportunities of the prison. A pedant would never have entered into a sincere and elevating dialogue with Pharaoh. A feckless man, a dreamer, could not have succeeded in his position of administrator to subordinate all the leading classes of Egypt to his administrative powers.

Yet, at each step of the way, Joseph is aware that it could have been otherwise. In freely entering into concert with the God of his father, Joseph literally rises above destiny. The very concept of destiny is transformed into providence – a providence that incorporates and is respectful of human freedom. The indifferent destiny exhibited in The Buddenbrooks, the destiny whose sun sets on the just and the unjust, gives way to an Urgrund, a ground of being, who is personal, and who seeks the well-being of his hero and of his hero's family and ultimately of all people.

It appears that the research and immersion in biblical lore that Thomas Mann undertook as he wrote Joseph over a period of years had a transforming effect on his own outlook. The masterwork written in large part when Mann, like Joseph, was an outcast from his homeland and was turning his exile in America into an opportunity to advance the best in German culture marks a transition in Mann's outlook. This work reflects a reverence for the biblical motive in German thought. It resonates with the Bible instead of the non-theistic philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

In this it reminds me of a passage from the beginning of St. Thomas's Summa Theologiae. St. Thomas comments on the deeds of iconic biblical figures such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and we might add, Joseph, by asserting that they are introduced to serve as models for the conduct of our lives, and in order to establish the authority of sacred doctrines which have come down to us in The Bible.

We can say without hesitation that the story of Joseph serves as a model of behavior for anyone who, like Mann, is an outcast from his own land and his own people. It also provides us with a host of valuable insights on how to guide our lives if such is our plight. The fruits that come into our lives as a result of using such exemplary figures as guides serve as a reason for accepting the authority, the truth value, of the teachings which such figures represent.

Joseph has learned that one has an option to enter into a deeper collusion with God precisely in the midst of great suffering and deprivation. He knows that if one clings close to God during a period of want, one can turn the lessons inherent in the suffering into great use in bringing about good results for both oneself, one's family, and one's people. It is by establishing a personal affinity for a person like Joseph that one can be in a position to accept the truths of Revelation. This is apparently what happened to Thomas Mann as he wrote the Joseph Tetralogy. The writing of this book enabled him to modify the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on his world view.

We see in the Joseph novels a display of Mann's great talent in playing opposites off against each other. As in previous works by Mann, the conflict centers on the struggle between vitality and decadence. But this time the irony is not that vitality is eventually subdued by decadence, Rather, decadence is overcome and transferred into vitality. Indeed, to paraphrase the poet Hopkins, for all the decadence in the world, the world itself is never fully spent. "The dearest freshness deep down things" finally prevail. The greatest irony is that despite appearances, goodness and vitality have the last word – a rich personality is victorious and prevails despite adverse circumstances. The author, Thomas Mann, does not come across as a disciple of the pessimistic philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, or the avowed atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche. He has achieved sensitivity to the mysterious, yet ultimately benign workings of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Mann's stance in the Joseph novel is not that of a detached and neutral observer. Thomas Mann, in the Joseph Tetralogy, has taken a stand in favor of Joseph and of Joseph's God. Our author has portrayed Joseph as a person in collusion with a personal power who guarantees the triumph of goodness over the forces of darkness. The well of the past will show itself not to be entirely unfathomable. Its ground is presented in this novel by Mann as ultimately good.