

It seems fundamentally disconcerting that Thomas Mann's position on the Jewish question has not yet been extensively analyzed and presented, for the problem is eminently obvious, as concerns both the course of the writer's life and important sections of his work. There are certainly presentations of individual questions in this area of research, but there has so far been no thorough examination of the matter.

As we undertake the attempt, we are conscious of entering, to a certain extent, virgin territory. We intend no polemic or apologetic approach, but instead concern ourselves with presenting Thomas Mann's position and opinions with the greatest degree of objectivity on the basis of documents and, to the extent possible, of the motivations underlying them.

The topic is not of significance solely from the perspective of research into Thomas Mann; at the same time, we wish to add the qualification that our intention is not to awake the impression that our problem constitutes one of the central artistic or personal questions that occupied the writer. But it did possess for him and his work an influence that cannot be overlooked. In addition, from the perspective of German-Jewish relations in the first half of this century, a set of problems arises that are of the highest interest simply because Thomas Mann was, during this period, among the leading framers of the German literary and intellectual scene; and the echo that his work evoked among German Jews in particular was exceptionally strong. Our discussion will show how the development of the German Jewish question – and later of the Jewish question generally – was reflected in the mind of a man of Thomas Mann's stature. The development and metamorphosis of his ideas produce a picture of how the Jewish or German Jewish problem is viewed from the other side, while today we are used to viewing the issue largely or exclusively from the Jewish standpoint (excepting for a moment the anti-Semitic perspective). This is true not only of his position on anti-Semitism, but also of the artistic formation of the Jewish characters in his narratives as well as of numerous more theoretical observations and finally of a number of distinctly “political” statements on Jewish problems. In all these, affinity and distance are perhaps the peculiar characteristics that may be applied to the writer's relationship to this set of issues. Naturally, it was predominantly the problem of the Jewish intellectual that fascinated him. It should not come as a surprise that he, a writer of the bourgeois epoch, had primarily Jews of bourgeois descent in mind when he described or spoke of Jews. Jewish poverty and the Jewish masses in the East and remained almost completely unfamiliar to him. Thomas Mann's position is one factor that facilitates insight into the Jewish position during the epoch of the zenith of emancipation in Germany as well as the time of the collapse, a significant contribution to the understanding of German-Jewish relations and the problems associated with them.

I am conscious of the fact that the attempt made here contains a few inadequacies. The material, which has been scattered throughout the world and could only be analyzed in part, even if that part is a substantial one. In any case, the work is intended to inspire research in this area, which is significant not only for literary history, but even more for the clarification of German-Jewish relations in an intellectual area and at a time that possessed outer splendor and seemed to promise security until an unthinkable catastrophe revealed the gaping abyss concealed behind the facade. So may this presentation contribute to the deepening of the understanding of the events and serve as an exhortation to future generations.

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