

Thomas Mann and Creative Re-Identification

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The author argues that the character of Clemens in *The Holy Sinner* by Thomas Mann represents – at least in part – a subtly ironic outcome of a process of empathetic engagement, identification and disidentification between Mann and James Joyce. This outcome is described as a form of ‘creative reidentification’, which may serve as a liberating mode of thought accessible to every human being.

L'autore formula l'ipotesi che la figura di Clemens ne *L'eleto* di Thomas Mann costituisca l'esito anche ironico di un processo di immedesimazione, identificazione e disidentificazione di Mann con James Joyce e indica questo esito come una «reidentificazione creativa», la quale può costituire una modalità di pensiero liberatoria per ogni essere umano.

KEYWORDS: *Clemens, Joyce, identificazione, immedesimazione, reidentificazione*

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This article stems from a rereading¹ of *Der Erwählte* (1951) by Thomas Mann (1875-1955). As readers will recall, it is a highly unusual text, apparently the result of a reworking of a medieval legend, in particular drawing on Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius* (12th century). That work already raised and explored the problem of incest from two perspectives: first, in relation to the consequences for a person born of incest, and second, in relation to the implications of incest committed unknowingly. In *Der Erwählte*, there are numerous instances of incest (between father and daughter, between siblings and between mother and son). Yet the main protagonist, Gregory himself, ultimately becomes pope – and indeed an enlightened and tolerant pope – because, after enduring the harshest of trials, he appears to have overcome the problem of guilt (and sin).

Thomas Mann, however, has the entire story of Gregory and his family narrated by a monastic scribe from the library of St Gallen. An Irish monk living in that Swiss monastery, he repeatedly states that he is telling a story involving events and emotions of which he has no direct experience. Moreover, he does so in a singular language, containing lexical and formal elements of Middle High German but also of medieval French, the British idiom and, of course, Latin, forming a curious and engaging mixture. Mann often employs this linguistic blend for ironic purposes, effectively inviting readers to understand that his book is made up of several interwoven stories. These begin

¹ Thomas Mann, *Der Erwählte* (1951), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. VII, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990. Cf. the Italian translation by Elena Broseghini, *L'eletto*, in Id. *Romanzi*, vol. II, a cura di Luca Crescenzi, «i Meridiani», Mondadori, Milano 2021, p. 503-779, with a wonderful and enlightening *Introduzione* by Elisabeth Galvan (p. 467-500). I briefly reviewed it in «SpiWeb», <<https://www.spiweb.it/cultura-e-societa/leletto-di-t-mann-recensione-di-a-a-semi/>> (ultimo accesso: 2 April 2025).

with the story of Gregory's grandparents and Gregory's own personal history, yet readers are also encouraged to wonder whether the 'true' story might instead be that of the monk himself – Clemens – who in fact reworks what we call the myth of Oedipus within himself as well as on the page. Clemens does so at times cheerfully, at others with a sense of sadness, compassion or astonishment – and occasionally even, or so it seems, with a sigh at not being able to himself be the story's main character. Yet he constantly affirms the existence of the law and pays it its due acknowledgement – here, Mann's irony is sometimes overt, at other times barely hinted at. Compared with the fate of Oedipus as explored by Sophocles, however, Mann proposes a very different resolution, even to the point of a miracle: all the bells of the churches of Rome ring out joyfully – though there are no bell-ringers – at Gregory's entry into the Urbs. We shall return to this point later.

As I was reading this novel, my attention was increasingly caught by the figure of Clemens: an Irishman living in Switzerland, who plays with languages while at the same time revealing the need for such play; who claims to be merely a writer and ultimately is the 'spirit of the narrative', yet without having had the actual experiences which, in his work, he must nevertheless possess an in-depth understanding of – indeed, in some sense experience within himself even before he can describe them. And yet the actual experience available to him is that of language: something that stands 'prior' to individual languages but that can only be glimpsed through them. I found myself wondering, almost as though I had been presented with a riddle: just who is this Clemens?

My answer? Clemens called to mind the figure of James Joyce (1882-1941), himself an Irish writer who had lived outside his native country and who died in Zurich, Switzerland – his final place of residence. Incidentally, Thomas Mann would also spend his last years there. Joyce was an Irish writer who placed language itself at the centre of his work – a centre that necessarily became a kind of 'labour', yet also something liberating and pleasurable for readers. In *Ulysses* (1922) language is transformed and renewed, and in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) it is pushed to the point of incomprehensibility – or, if one prefers, of total or universal signification. This, however, is a form of thought driven by psychosexuality.

In short, I began to wonder whether, through the figure of Clemens, Thomas Mann might be illustrating the result of a complex process of identification, disidentification, and re-identification with Joyce – a process that struck me as especially interesting². By this I

2 The development of Thomas Mann's interpretation of the figure and work

also mean to emphasise that this note certainly does not aim to attempt an ‘analysis’ of Mann himself (which I see as methodologically questionable as well as humanly inappropriate) but, rather, to ask what Mann might teach us about a problem – namely that of identification and identification-through-empathy – that concerns all individuals.

Indeed, and precisely because it concerns all individuals, identification is one of the main topics of research in psychoanalysis. As of 21 May 2024, the PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing) database returns 36,685 results for the entry ‘Identification’ alone – a volume that in itself attests to psychoanalysis’ awareness of the complexity and problematic nature of the individual’s relationship with external objects through this process.

In this note I shall consider identification as the unconscious psychic process that produces within the individual’s psyche relatively coherent sets of representations derived, to some extent, from the perception of external objects and capable of generating – largely at an unconscious or preconscious level – an effect of assimilation, contrast, resemblance and coherence between the subject and the external object.

This is, so to speak, a deliberately broad definition, intended to encompass all those ‘outside → inside’ psychic processes that may produce the effect described, without distinguishing, at the outset, between the numerous theoretical constructions subsequently elaborated within psychoanalysis (incorporation, primary identification, secondary identification, narcissistic identification, projective identification, and so forth).

Delimiting the concept of identification in this manner implies: (a) considering perception as an active process determined unconsciously; (b) the consequent need to take into account the drive component involved; (c) the theoretical need to determine on which psychic structure this process produces its effects; (d) the conception of ‘sets of representations’ which, though subject to the rules of the primary process, can reconstitute themselves in a relatively coherent form³; (e) the differentiation of the representations derived from this

of James Joyce is particularly complex. Eva Schmidt-Schütz (*Doktor Faustus: Zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 2003) devotes a chapter to this issue (*Joyce mit Maßen*, p. 29-114), also outlining (*Identifikationen und Verweise*, p. 48-60) its possible implications for *Doctor Faustus*.

³ Albeit without pursuing it further, I refer here to the question of the concept

process from the precepts that appear at the level of consciousness.

With regard to point (c), the psychoanalytic literature is unanimous in indicating the Ego, the Ego ideal and the Superego as the 'sites' where one sees the effects of identification processes. I believe that it is important to emphasise that these are the *effects* of a process that, in various ways, involves the entire psychic apparatus. It is therefore useful to bear in mind that the *conscious* effects of this process may differ widely – sometimes even radically – from the presumed characteristics of the object of identification. For example, a character trait such as kindness may – and generally does – have multiple unconscious identification roots which may simultaneously be associated (sometimes even by contrast) with external objects, while also expressing unconscious conflictual dynamics that depend in different ways on distinct forms of drive investment. In short, I wish to stress the complexity of identification processes, which cannot be understood as mere equivalences between the subject and the objects of identification.

It is, moreover, essential that this be understood as an unconscious process, and that within this domain identification may – and generally does – concern unconscious aspects of the object⁴, aspects which may themselves be the result of a preliminary process of projection on the part of the subject.

Whether, for each individual, identification proves total or partial, transient or permanent, is a matter for the specific clinical analysis, which is often complicated and complex. It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that the characterisation of identification as 'total' or 'partial' always requires further qualification. Does one mean identification with the totality of the object or, conversely, a 'total' effect upon the subject's Ego (or Superego or Ego ideal)? Likewise, the characterisation of the effects of identification as 'transient' or 'permanent' should always be specified in relation to a particular psychic structure or agency (for example, the Ego). At the same time, one must

of the 'complex', a notion that has enjoyed fluctuating fortunes and is now largely abandoned. The conceptual centrality of the Oedipus complex nevertheless remains, as also emphasised by Le Guen in the entry 'Complesso di Edipo e Complesso di castrazione' in his *Dizionario freudiano* (Borla, Roma 2013). Within this specific conflict, we find the configuration of relatively stable representational complexes and their being, to a considerable extent, the result of processes of identification.

4 Here I will not address the problem of the 'choice' of the object with which one identifies – a choice that is, of course, connected to the alternative between 'having' and 'being' the object, and which in any case concerns not only primary objects but all the possible significant objects (for the most varied reasons) encountered over the course of one's life. I would, however, emphasise that this is an active 'choice', as indicated in point (a) above.

consider that the representations implicated in these effects and 'sites' may persist in various ways at the level of the Id or within the configurations of memory traces. As a result, the economic manifestation of the effect at the level of the Ego may be destabilised or re-stabilised in different ways through renewed investments or disinvestments of drive energy which, by facilitating the dynamics of displacement and condensation, pre-establish different associative pathways.

In this note – which I hope will remain brief – I shall refer to the unconscious effects of identification at the level of the Ego, drawing on the classical conceptualisation of the Ego⁵ as an agency that is predominantly unconscious, yet also preconscious and, lastly, conscious, and subject to continual transformations or re-equilibrations resulting from the need for mediating between the demands of the Id, those of the Superego and those of external reality – an agency with which we are constantly concerned both in everyday life and, more specifically, in clinical work.

If one adopts a dynamic – that is, constantly in motion – concept of the Ego, it becomes easier to imagine the effects of identification as the forming of representational sets that may be invested in different ways, thereby becoming – momentarily, transiently or permanently – the channels through which the Ego exercises its mediating activity and tendency to realise desire. To use a simple image, it is as if lenses were formed through which the Ego sees and subsequently confronts external reality. This latter distinction – between *seeing* and *confronting* – is necessary in order to conceive the effects of identification not only on sensoriality but also on motility.

From the perspective of unconscious functioning, the investment in the representations involved in identification results in the subject *becoming* the object of identification, and therefore *thinking* 'like' the other. The quotation marks are justified by the fact that, as noted above, the representations involved are not, so to speak, mirror images of the external object. What is, however, important is to consider that this generates a mode of thinking – namely, a way of ensuring the articulation and transformation of psychic processes determined and structured by the primary process into psychic processes structured according to the secondary process, and therefore capable of *forming* the quantity of psychic activity that can gain access to the qualitative

5 Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es* (1922), in Id., *Das Ich und das Es. Metapsychologische Schriften*, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a.M. 1994, p. 251-295. Also André Green in *Idées directrices pour une psychanalyse contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2002, p. 141-145 though the approach taken here differs from Green due to my different theoretical concept of the mode of integration of the two topographies.

processes of the conscious system (and, in part, of the preconscious one). By *forming*, I intend to recall point (d) mentioned above, and in particular the singular property of these representational sets of re-establishing themselves in a relatively coherent form (that is, endowed with inter-representational links) and the function that such sets⁶ may fulfil as a transition from the primary process to the secondary process within the unconscious Ego.

In this note, I wish to emphasise the problem of disidentification and re-identification – that is, the dynamic possibility of a continuous transition from the investment in the effects of identification to the investment in the ‘remainder’ of the Ego. This formulation is obviously highly simplified: suffice it to consider that what I have referred to, in quotation marks, as the ‘remainder’ of the ego is in fact a constantly shifting ensemble in which unconscious processes of very different kinds may reside and, for our purposes here, above all other identification processes (and their effects) relating to different objects. Within the primary process, different lines of thought may coexist without contradicting one another⁷.

Beyond the favourable or unfavourable consequences of identification, one must also consider the effect deriving from the subject’s capacity – based on the use of the Ego’s physiological splitting – for self-reflection⁸. This process requires a topographical qualification, since self-reflection (a process of the Ego) may produce a conscious effect, may operate only at the level of the preconscious, or may even remain entirely unconscious. If this effect reaches the level of consciousness, it may allow a partial discharge of the tension produced by the recognition of a relative estrangement – that is, the presence of an Other within the Ego – a recognition that entails a modification of the narcissistic equilibrium. In a sense, through self-reflection supported by splitting, the Ego may recognise that it is not entirely ‘itself’, whether partially or wholly. If this ‘recognition’, by contrast, takes place only at the unconscious level, the resulting energetic disequilibrium may show itself through reactions which – at the level of conscious experience – appear as feelings of humiliation (‘I am

6 It is useful to recall that these sets, which are always capable of being re-constituted, owe this feature to the facilitation of the discharge of energy – that is, they are, so to speak, economically advantageous pathways and therefore those primarily tested.

7 Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbewusste* (1915), in Id., *Das Ich und das Es. Metapsychologische Schriften*, *op. cit.*, p. 251-295.

8 On this feature of the Id, see Green, *Idées directrices pour une psychanalyse contemporaine*, *op. cit.*, p. 141-143.

no longer myself') or of secondary anger ('I have been colonised, invaded, alienated'), but also as feelings of differentiation and gratitude ('I *can* thanks to him'), depending on the subject's balance between narcissism and object-relatedness.

Needless to say, these last two sentences have been formulated in this way solely to enable us to imagine the psychic process involved. In other words, they have been expressed in an animistic manner, almost as if the Ego (and likewise the Superego or the Id) could be considered an independent actor, a character on the psychic stage. In meta-psychological terms, however, the Ego is an agency in which unconscious, preconscious and conscious processes take place, but it is certainly not a *subject* capable of *stating* 'I am like this' or 'I am like that'. The animistic representation serves only to facilitate the depiction of the process, which may be investigated both from the perspective of narcissistic equilibria and from that of object relations capable of conditioning the individual's relationship with external reality.

All this to say – returning to *The Holy Sinner* – that it appears to me that Mann reveals the consequences of a profound psychic labour which, in my view, makes use of an initial process of empathy and subsequent identification with Joyce in order ultimately to move beyond it. I shall herewith attempt to see whether I have correctly understood the complexity of the process suggested by Mann.

It should be noted that Thomas Mann never knew James Joyce personally, nor did he read his any of his main works. In a letter to Enzo Paci (a letter written with some difficulty, begun on 8 August 1950 and completed on the 12th) Mann states the fact explicitly: «Joyce ist mir auf direktem Wege unzugänglich. Aber über ihn habe ich auf Englisch manches gelesen, was mir das Gefühl einer gewissen künstlerischen Schicksalsverwandtschaft gegeben hat»⁹. Joyce was directly inaccessible to him. Yet – and Mann emphasises this in italics – he had read certain things in English about Joyce, things that gave him the feeling of a certain affinity, a kind of kinship in artistic destiny. Mann writes about him», not «about his work». And indeed, if one leafs through the *Tagebücher*, one finds notes and annotations referring above all to two works on Joyce (in particular William York Tindall's *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*¹⁰ and Harry Levin's *James Joyce: A Critical*

9 The letter is reproduced in the ninth volume of Thomas Mann's *Diaries, Tagebücher 1949-1950*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, p. 698-700.

10 Thames and Hudson, London 1960.

*Introduction*¹¹). What struck me is that these annotations become more frequent – I counted thirteen of them – precisely during the period (1949-1950) in which Mann was writing *The Holy Sinner*.

At this point, perhaps it is necessary to open a long parenthesis concerning Thomas Mann's work as a whole. I am not a Germanist, and I apologise in advance to the hypothetical Germanist (I have one in mind) who might happen to read this note: I have no desire to encroach upon another's field. That said, however, I feel obliged – in the interest of intellectual honesty – to mention a belief of my own: namely, that the entirety of Mann's work can be traced, from beginning to end, in the light of an ongoing and often explicitly acknowledged effort to recognise an object, detach himself from it, and then recognise himself in what will become the object of his inquiry (which is no longer the object initially recognised), only to ultimately 'accuse' it of being insufficient or unsatisfactory. This then makes it necessary to seek another object – or, significantly, to retrieve an earlier idea and finally place it consciously at the centre of one's interest. In the case of *Doctor Faustus*, for example, in the 1940s Mann rediscovered a note dating from 1901. In any case, the object is always transformed. Through this writerly trajectory, it seems to me that Mann illustrates an aspect of the human condition that I believe it important to reflect upon.

From *Buddenbrooks* (1901) to *Der Zauberberg* (1924), to the tetralogy on Joseph (1934-1943), and then on to *Doctor Faustus* (1947), finally reaching *The Holy Sinner* (1951)¹², it seems to me that Mann illustrates an ongoing process of inner recognition, of conscious empathy followed by detachment and, ultimately, by re-identification with an object *in constant transformation*. If in *Buddenbrooks* the object is Mann's own family history, it later becomes the history of others (that of Jacob and then Joseph), which nevertheless also represents his own complex family life and, above all, the complexity of his own psychic life – unfathomable and/or capable of being explored only in stages¹³. In *The Magic Mountain* it already becomes his *own* Europe, while in

11 Faber and Faber, London 1960.

12 Of course, here I mention some of the works I deem most significant on this topic, but there are several others (starting from *Death in Venice*, 1912, for example, or, even earlier, from *Tonio Kröger* 1903).

13 Cf. the prologue to *The Stories of Jacob*, paradigmatically entitled *Descent into Hell*, where the theme of the knowability and unknowability of the human psyche and of each individual's personal history is central. Thomas Mann, *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (1933), in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. IV, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990.

Doctor Faustus (also through the use of empathy and identification with Schönberg and his musical revolution), the object becomes the tragedy of Germany and of Mann's own being German¹⁴. From this point of view, *Der Erwählte* represents the attainment of a certain level of awareness, together with the self-ironic acknowledgement of the interminable nature of this identification process.

In my view, therefore, Schönberg and Joyce are individual, as well as especially evident, objects of identification. Yet they become something else – paradoxically, precisely because they *are* and *remain* themselves. This is the dynamic aspect that I believe Mann to reveal and convey.

If, as mentioned, there had been no possibility of direct communication with Joyce, such an exchange did take place with Schönberg – who was likewise living in exile in the United States – and it proved both explicit and complex. Mann, who in those years was also in contact with Adorno and familiar with his writings on music¹⁵, presented Schönberg with his reflections on the latter's musical thought and on its use in the novel he was writing. Schönberg – after the first edition of *Doctor Faustus* – thus requested and eventually obtained the addition of a final note¹⁶, which remains, truth be told, somewhat ambiguous. For although Mann appropriates Schönberg's musical theory, by appropriating it he also transforms it into something that, while apparently creative, leads the thought of Adrian Leverkühn (the main character in *Doctor Faustus*) straight towards the abyss – towards destruction and catastrophe. One might say, of course, that a scholar may take another's thought and transform it while leaving it recognisable. Yet

14 Rightly celebrated in this regard is the lecture delivered at the Library of Congress in Washington (June 1945), during which Mann, rejecting the distinction between a 'good' Germany and an 'evil' one, emphasised that: «Nichts von dem, was ich Ihnen über Deutschland zu sagen oder flüchtig anzudeuten versuchte, kam aus fremdem, kühlem, unbeteiligtem Wissen; ich habe es auch in mir, ich habe alles am eigenen Leibe erfahren.», Thomas Mann, *Deutschland und die Deutschen* (1945), in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. XI, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990, pp.1126-1148:1146.

15 In particular, he had the chance to read Adorno's manuscript of *Philosophy of Modern Music* (Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, J.C.B. Mohr – Paul Siebeck, Tübingen 1949), centring on an analysis of Schönberg and Stravinsky's musical thought. Cf. Thomas Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans*, Bermann-Fischer Verlag, Amsterdam 1949, p. 41-47.

16 A final note can also be found in *Der Erwählte*, which states that «Diese Erzählung gründet sich in den Hauptzügen auf das Versepos 'Gregorius' des mittelhochdeutschen Dichters Hartmann von Aue, der seine 'Geschichte vom guten Sünder' aus dem Französischen ('Vie de Saint-Grégoire') übernahm». Thomas Mann, *Der Erwählte* in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. XI, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990, pp.9-261:261. Thus, the warning of an appropriation (see further on).

for the original scholar, the experience of being reused and diverted may not always be agreeable. For an exile and persecuted figure such as Schönberg, it must have been even less pleasant to see his thought transformed – albeit still recognisable – into the seductive voice of an abyssal vortex. In *The Story of a Novel* (1949), Mann makes his own position on this matter quite clear (while Schönberg's view of the episode can be inferred from the correspondence between the two¹⁷). What Mann writes in this context is particularly interesting for my purposes:

Soll ich auch die von mancher Seite beanstandete Übertragung der Schönberg'schen Konzeption des Zwölf-Ton- oder Reihen-Musikstils auf Adrian Leverkühn als einen solchen Montage-Akt und Raub an der Wirklichkeit anführen? Ich muß es wohl, und das Buch soll in Zukunft auf Schönbergs Wunsch, einen Nach-Vermerk führen, der für Unkundige das geistige Eigentumsrecht klarstellt. Es geschieht ein wenig gegen meine Überzeugung. Nicht so sehr, weil solche Aufklärung eine kleine Bresche in die sphärische Geschlossenheit meiner Romanwelt schlägt, als weil die Idee der Zwölf-Ton-Technik in der Späre des Buches, dieser Welt des Teufelpaktes und der schwarzen Magie, eine Färbung, einen Charakter annimmt, die sie – nicht wahr? – in ihrer Eigentlichkeit nicht besitzt, und die sie wirklich gewissermaßen zu meinem Eigentum, das heißt: zu dem des Buches machen. Schönbergs Gedank und meine ad hoc-Version davon treten so weit auseinander, daß es, von der Stillosigkeit abgesehen, in meinen Augen fast etwas von Kränkung gehabt hätte, im Text seinen Namen zu nennen¹⁸.

A closed sphere, a whole possessing its own unity and meaning. And yet, it must be noted, Mann's version cannot but remain connected to Schönberg's original thought – it is, precisely, an appropriation from the real world.

It seems to me that here Mann is illustrating a kind of watershed, the only point at which the effects of identification can properly find their place. Not on this side, because then the thought of a 'lender' becomes dominant and in some way alienating; nor on the other, because then the origin is lost and the thought he has 'appropriated' becomes something entirely different. This 'other' thought must instead be inserted into a closed sphere – here, specifically, the sphere of the novel. It is there (within the Ego?) that it can become something else, while still admitting that it remains, in some sense, recognisable and

17 Arnold Schönberg – Thomas Mann, *Apropos Doktor Faustus: Briefwechsel Arnold Schönberg – Thomas Mann; Tagebücher und Aufsätze 1930-1951*, hrsg. v. Eric Randol Schoenberg, Czernin, Wien 2009. This book also features an interesting interview with Nuria Schönberg Nono, who helpfully illustrates the emotional climate of Schönberg as a composer and the ensuing relationship with Mann.

18 Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*, *op. cit.*, p. 36-37.

traceable. As if – to offer a simple image – the Ego were a sphere moving up and down along the edge of a blade; or as if every work of the Ego (the result of an ‘appropriation’ from the real world followed by a transformation), were precisely such a sphere in precarious balance. Again, a sphere – yet a ‘closed’ one.

But let us return to Joyce whom, as noted previously, Mann did not know personally and whose works he did not read, though he did read *about* him – especially during the period in which he was writing *The Holy Sinner*. Let us return, then, to Mann’s (hypothetical) Joyce. Through the Irish monk Clemens and his writerly vicissitudes, and through the traits described by Mann in an affectionately (albeit not always) ironic tone, to my mind a singular portrait of James Joyce seems to emerge. And yet, if we connect this appearance with what I noted earlier about Mann’s relationship with Schönberg’s thought, one asks oneself: is this *truly* Joyce, or rather ‘someone’ who acquires meaning only within the ‘closed sphere’ of the novel? In other words: what purpose does this (modified) image of Joyce serve?

It should be noted that the situation represented here by Mann appears to differ from – and in certain respects to be the opposite of – his relationship with Schönberg. At issue here is not the *work* of an author (dodecaphonic music or *Ulysses*), but the *person* of the author himself. Moreover, the similarities were not lacking: was Mann himself not forced to leave his homeland, to remain in exile for many years and then, when he might have returned to Germany, did he not choose to live in Switzerland? Did he choose, or did he, rather, recognise that he could not¹⁹ return to Germany?

I believe that here Mann shows us a particular trajectory concerning the fate of identifications – a problem we frequently encounter in psychoanalytic work, when we find ourselves observing that certain identification ‘filters’ (I do not know how else to call them) return again and again, almost as if they were indestructible. Naturally, they mark the limits of the effectiveness of our work (that of both patient and analyst). This has to do with the problem of *Durcharbeitung*²⁰.

It seems to me that Mann illustrates a path that proceeds from empathy to identification, to dis-identification, and then back to empathy, in order to ultimately reach the overcoming of identification.

19 Cf. Thomas Mann, *Warum ich nicht nach Deutschland zurückgehe* (1945), in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. XII, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990, pp. 953-962.

20 Cf. Antonio Alberto Semi, *Metodo psicoanalitico e Durcharbeitung*, in *Trasfert di vita: coazione a ripetere, ripetizioni, trasformazione*, a cura di Maria Pierri – Maria Vittoria Costantini, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020, p. 34-55.

Involved, as always, is a displacement of the centre of gravity of the ego, accompanied by an increasingly mobile interplay of possible investments. The overcoming of identifications – note that I am now shifting to the plural – experienced as symptomatic and necessary formations simultaneously signals that their dissolution is not possible. Whatever the dynamics involved, their disappearance would once again form a neurotic movement and a source of further conflict. Rather, their persistence – disinvested yet capable of renewed investment – testifies to the existence of a network of possibilities²¹. In a certain sense, this includes the possibility – sometimes favoured by concrete circumstances – of reviving and subsequently relinquishing the effects of an identification. Alternatively, it includes the possibility of transforming the entire identificatory formation into a psychic object libidinally invested yet also capable of being disinvested. In short: thinking *through* the other, or thinking the other.

There is, however, one element that Mann regards as essential and indestructible, or shows it to be so for him: the so-called mother tongue. This has strongly paternal characteristics when it presents itself as a system of rules – phonetic, grammatical, syntactic – that *may* be acquired and assimilated but cannot, in fact, be overcome. Thomas Mann repeatedly emphasised – especially during the controversies surrounding his refusal to return to Germany – that his true homeland was the German language. In this way, I believe that Mann sheds light on the nature of so-called primary identification and on the individual challenge it entails: to recognise it? to work it through? But *how*, if one cannot do without it?

It is almost as though this identification were also realised in every individual through the acquisition of language – not language in the abstract, which is a potential ability of human beings but, rather, through that *particular* language, certainly mediated by the emotional (and not only) relations between infant and mother, yet conveying an insurmountable law (a Law?). Is it possible to ‘overcome’ this identification by moving from a particular language to language as such²², or must we, instead, recognise a simultaneous possibility and impossibility – a ‘temptation’ that *may* provoke sin and guilt but also a very particular form of joy? For one must enter the community of human

21 See, further on in this article, the bell-ringing at the entrance to Rome as a potential depiction of this network of possibilities.

22 In this regard and through the voice of Clemens, Mann adds a reflection on the need for abstraction (language as such in place of individual languages), a necessary and ever-relevant admonition for anyone who attempts to deny the importance of theories, even among ourselves. Cf. Mann, *Der Erwählte*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

beings²³ after birth. Yet this is not just *any* community, but the one into which the stork has deposited us. Understood in this way, primary identification, understood is also a manifestation of individual destiny²⁴.

Thus, through the figure of Clemens, with his difficulties concerning the languages that may be used, that actually exist, or that *are* in fact inevitably used, it seems to me that Thomas Mann tackles the problem of overcoming identifications and, at the same time, the potential limits of such an operation. While reading, as I imagined Clemens to be a recognisable transformation of Joyce – and yet a transformation that made ‘Clemens’ entirely Mann’s own, and therefore not an alienating identification – I found myself thinking that Mann was illustrating a dynamic interrelation between primary identification (insurmountable and linked – indeed, owed – to fate in its specific realisation) and secondary identification, identifying in the given language and in its possible inflections the phenomenological field suited to examining this dynamic.

Can such an overcoming occur through an in-depth knowledge of one’s personal history, of the history and mythology of one’s cultural group? In the prologue to *The Stories of Jacob*²⁵, Mann had already dwelt ironically on the fathomable or unfathomable vicissitudes of the human soul, seen as a bottomless well²⁶. By probing it, one may arrive at a certain point, only to instantly realise that there is something more – that another abyss opens up, and then another still, and so on and so forth. Can one stop in this endless probing? Yes, one *must* stop; in fact, one *does*. Yet stopping only makes sense if one recognises that the work has reached a limit, not an end. In this sense, it is not a failure: it is the acknowledgement of a path that has been travelled.

Here, as early as 1933, Mann seems to envisage what Freud would later write – both theoretically and clinically – in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937). And if one wished to draw a comparison with the real James Joyce – the author of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* – Mann would, on pain of dehumanisation, reject a destructive

23 Entering a community – *that* particular community – is also the meaning of circumcision. It is not enough to have been *born* into that family; one must acknowledge a second stage that allows one to recognise one’s *belonging* to the community. Similar rituals can be found across various cultures.

24 For an overview of the issue of ‘destiny’, see Laurence Kahn, *Faire parler le destin*, Kliensieck, Paris 2005.

25 Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder. Vorspiel Höllenfahrt* in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, Bd. IV, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1990, p. 9-55.

26 «Hinab denn und nicht gezagt! Geht es etwa ohne Halt in des Brunnens Unergründlichkeit? Durchaus nicht. Nicht viel tiefer als dreitausend Jahre tief – und was ist im Vergleich mit den Bodenlosen?», *ibid.*, p. 54.

form of overcoming identifications such as he may have glimpsed as potential in Joyce's explorations. Would this not, once again, resemble what occurs in *Doctor Faustus*: the appropriation of 'something' from reality in order to transform it into something else, while still leaving open the possibility of glimpsing a potential critique within this transformation? And is such a potential critique not always also a self-critique – seen as the recognition of the human being's own indivisible nature which, however much it may be described in parts, remains a single organism?

It seems to me that Thomas Mann illustrates this trajectory beginning from the question – though he does not call it so – of empathy. Mann speaks of an «appropriation from the real world» and of the assembling operations that this entails. I believe one must imagine a situation where an external object attracts our attention²⁷ and becomes an object of thought, reconsideration and imagination – much as when one truly studies a book. Wandering, so to speak, between consciousness and the preconscious until we seem to have genuinely understood what the author wrote. We feel able to turn the author's thought over, to inflect it in various ways, to apply it to other realities. In short, it seems that we have made it our own.

This procedure is often used in order to 'master' – as the expression goes, and I mention it here because it relates to the appropriation spoken of by Mann – certain notions, typically scientific theories. It is one thing to have understood the statement of Bernoulli's laws; it is quite another to have made them one's own, to feel capable of articulating and applying them to a wide variety of concrete situations. Learning, however, is only one instance of this process, for it is a psychic procedure that we use very frequently, albeit with greater or lesser involvement. And another phenomenon occurs with specific objects – such as the protagonist of a film or of a literary narrative: we say that we are 'gripped' by that character or that story, rather than that we have 'appropriated' it. I repeat that here I am describing conscious or preconscious processes. Naturally, we may ask what process unconsciously took place within us that made that perceptual object so attractive. Above all, were we 'gripped' by it, or did we 'appropriate' it? At times the supposed passivity serves to avoid questions about activity. Mann does not do this; on the contrary, he acknowledges it explicitly.

²⁷ A complex passage on which I shall not dwell here, but which nonetheless implies a (drive-related) movement of activation of perception (point a) of the definition) and a kind of suitability of the object (the question of representability, repeatedly emphasised by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*).

In short, empathy is a process that takes place at the level of consciousness and the preconscious, yet it occurs because it is permitted – or provoked – by unconscious drives and dynamics. The question posed by Mann, however, seems to concern the possibility, on the part of the empathising subject, of recognising or re-experiencing the unconscious identification component – not recognising it theoretically, as a psychoanalytic researcher might do, but through transformations of the representations of the object of empathy. Through these continually shifting representations – always somehow associated with the external object – the identification component itself becomes changeable, yet is felt and known to be disturbing precisely because it is bottomless.

To what extent is this dynamic connected with guilt? The guilt that Mann specifically indicates in *The Holy Sinner*, which I am discussing here, is the guilt of having intensely enjoyed incest. Yet with an important qualification: the pleasure experienced is something indispensable, something that must be experienced and subsequently recognised. Without this recognition (and, prior to it, without the experience itself) it would be difficult for human beings to attain individuality and subjectivity. Guilt, however, is precisely the price paid. It is almost as though – in or according to Mann – guilt consisted in having tasted the flavour of overcoming primary identification, and thus the flavour of incest.

But where am I heading? At this point, rereading what I have written so far, I asked myself whether it would be possible to draw a thread leading to a conclusion regarding what Mann appears to have taught me. Yet when one pulls at threads, one always risks tightening knots and making them harder to untie.

So far, here the thread has so far been the play of empathies which call forth unconscious identification. These, in turn, question the subject of these operations regarding their ‘nature’, whether primary or secondary, eventually returning us to the theme of incest as something inevitable and recognisable, yet experienced in a situation that is, so to speak, pre-individual, undifferentiated, intensely pleasurable but also unbearable – because one risks no longer being there at all. Only by remaining in exile can one enjoy his homeland, whereas returning to that primordial situation would inevitably entail dehumanisation: that is, the impossibility not only of achieving one’s constitution as an individual but, more profoundly, of accomplishing one’s own development as a subject.

However, in my view this is not all Mann teaches us, for the other side of the matter concerns the possibility of creativity, understood

as the ability to recognise and make use of the endless possibilities afforded by the play of identifications: the bells of all the churches in Rome that

[...] das ist nicht Zeitgemäß noch Einklang, sie reden auf einmal und alle einander ins Wort, ins Wort auch sich selber: an dröhnen die Klöppel und lassen nicht Zeit dem erregten Metall, daß es ausdröhne, da dröhnen sie pendelnd an am anderen Rande, ins eigene Gedröhn, also daß, wenn's noch hallt «In te Domine speravi», so hallt es auch schon «Beati, quorum tecta sunt peccata»²⁸, hinein aber klingelt es hellt von kleineren Stätten, als rühre der Meßbub das Wandlungslöcklein²⁹.

Thus, the bells represent the thousand possible voices that – without any intervention from bell-ringers – may reach one's consciousness. I think Freud would have appreciated such a description of unconscious dynamics. From the Id (Rome), a great many voices may reach the Ego, concordant or discordant, each with its own individuality or temporal colouring – from the little bell of the altar server to the deep reverberation of the great bell. The important thing is to be able to enjoy them and then to succeed in thinking about what can actually be achieved. This is what Gregory does: he does indeed become Pope but, above all, a *tolerant* Pope.

The destiny of the representations of the multiple identifications – which always refer back to primary identification, not in order to fix themselves upon it but to draw strength from it – is therefore to take shape as a universe of possibilities that the Id provides to the Ego. The Ego may make use of them, provided that it does not attempt to repress them. Yet it can do so only if it feels that, in doing so, it cannot fail to take account of their primary 'root'. This is a condition for the development of a free form of thinking – or, rather, of thinking capable of recognising its own constraints – which may

²⁸ I do not know to which Latin version of the Psalms Mann is referring to, nor if Mann was familiar with the Hebrew text of Psalm 32: 1,2, which goes:

תהילים ל"ב (א) לְדָוִד מִשְׁכִּיל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂוָה פֶשַׁע בְּסוּי הַטָּאָה. (ב) אֲשֶׁר אָדָם לֹא יִחַשֵׁב ה' לוֹ עֲוֹן וְאֵין בְּרוּחוֹ רִמְיָהוּ
I am told that it could be translated as «1. Lesson to David: Happy is the man who bears [upon himself] a crime; [his] sin will be forgiven. 2. Happy is the man whose sin God would not consider [because he] is not false». I note this here because note 2 in the Italian edition of *Der Erwählte* (Mann, *L'eleto*, *op. cit.*, p. 1343) considers that this quotation introduces the theme of grace within the fabric of the narrative. Another possibility, however, is that it introduces the problematic theme of the ever-difficult intellectual honesty («happy is the man who is not false»).

²⁹ Mann, *Der Erwählte*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

then create new (psychic) realities and share them with others. From this perspective, Clemens is the character who represents an invitation to the reader to create his or her own story. The necessary self-criticism – or awareness – of the dynamics compelled by unconscious identifications makes it possible to recognise them, to disinvest them, but also subsequently to reinvest them within a world of thought that transforms them. One might perhaps speak of creative re-identification.

Is this merely the possible destiny of the writer, the artist, the thinker, or is it a configuration of psychic activity available to everyone? It seems to me that Mann – apparently so closely tied to the intellectual bourgeois *élites* – shows that this personal itinerary is available to anyone, provided one is willing, or able to tolerate, paying its price.

Up to this point I have privileged the theme of identification with the object, and I have not addressed – except when indicating the possibility of constituting the process of identification itself as an object, or when signalling the question of a possible primary incest interrupted by primary identification – the question of the transition from identification (*being* the other) to the relation with the object (*having* the other). It seemed to me to be a thread of thought that Mann traces admirably, and that may perhaps be usefully reconsidered through the reading of this work of his. For me, it certainly has been.