

Thomas Mann and the Occult

An Unpublished Letter

Munich,
21 December 1922



DEAR BARON
SCHRENCK,

At your request I shall make a brief note of what I saw yesterday at our séance with the medium Willi Sch.

On arriving in your reception room I was introduced to the other participants. I made a point of greeting young Willi and exchanging a few words with him, partly in order to show him that I was not an enemy or malicious

snooper, partly to form an impression of his personality. I found him to be a young man of about twenty, evidently of rather humble origin, speaking a South German-Austrian dialect. He was pleasantly friendly, but showed no inclination to predispose one in his favour by an excess of affability or garrulousness. He kept aloof from the company and replied rather tersely to questions. He seemed to be in a state of tension and repressed excitement, as though suffering from a kind of stage fright, which seemed to reach its height while he was dressing for the séance. Before that you gave me an opportunity to look around in the séance room and to examine the cabinet which was separated from this room by a curtain. Then, along with the others, I watched the medium dress and convinced myself that the black tights Willi put on and the black silk-quilted dressing gown with luminous stripes that he put on over the tights contained no device that might have served to delude the onlookers. Willi's oral cavity was also examined. Then the company went into the séance room.

WE SAT DOWN OUTSIDE the closed cabinet in

approximately a three-quarter circle, at one end of which the medium sat facing the two gentlemen who were to serve as watchers (*Kontrollherren*). Two of those present occupied back seats outside the circle.

My place was directly next to the medium and the watchers, whose method you, Baron Schrenck, had previously explained to me. One of the two gentlemen held the medium's joined feet and knees between his own and held the medium's wrists in his hands, while the other held the balls of the medium's thumbs. Because of the luminous stripes on his head and dressing gown I was able to see the medium's figure throughout the séance. Luminous pins were inserted in the lower part of his dressing gown at Willi's special request.

THE WHITE LIGHT was then turned off and we observers formed a chain by making contact with those on either side of us. A ceiling light with a red and black shade and a red table lamp diffused a dim reddish light. A music box was turned on. We chatted.

A few minutes later the watchers announced that the medium was in a state of trance. According to my observation, this state began with a sudden short and violent contraction, followed by repeated forward thrusts of the torso. When the medium wished to answer a question in the affirmative, this movement was sharply intensified; when he wished to answer in the negative, it became a swaying from side to side. In addition, the somnambulist spoke to the watchers in quick, loud, passionate-sounding whispers.

In speaking, he became one of the two symbolic persons into which in his dream state his personality split; he called them Erwin and Mina. The male personality component was first to manifest itself; its presence was characterised by the vigour and intensity of the compulsive thrusts. "Erwin" promised to produce striking phenomena. He did not keep his word, however, but withdrew after a time, making place for "Mina", whose gestures were gentler.

The situation owed its mystical character—and by mystical I do not mean ghost-like, but something at once primitive and shatteringly organic—solely to the medium with his struggling, thrusting, jerking, whispering, panting, and moaning, and it was on him that I concentrated my attention. His state and movements distinctly suggested the act of child-bearing. The sexual note was so unmistakable that I was not surprised to hear later on that the young man's activity is often accompanied by erections and ejaculations, sometimes actively induced.

AFTER AN HOUR or perhaps an hour-and-a-quarter, during which the results were negative, a pause was ordered with the medium's consent. "Mina" fixed its length by counting to fifteen

and ending with a violent thrust, then pedantically adding (in a whisper, I believe) another half minute—a caprice which, it seems, connoisseurs do not take very literally. I was struck by the gliding movements Willi made with his hands before waking, which apparently, at least in his imagination, served to recuperate the organic forces which he had emanated but which had not yet been manifested. His return from his trance, which had culminated in a state of perfect repose and inaccessibility (deep trance) was accompanied by the same sudden contraction as its inception.

WE SPENT THE PAUSE in the adjoining room, which we had entered on arriving. When the session was resumed, there were no results at

—On Occult Revivals—

ON 20 DECEMBER 1922 Thomas Mann took part in the *séance* which his letter describes; and on 6 and 24 January the next year, he repeated the experiment. Out of his experiences grew the essay "Okkultische Erlebnisse", which was published in the *Neue Rundschau* in March 1924. These were not Mann's only encounters with the Occult; and his interest in the subject can be explained by the pressures of his time. For a variety of reasons, the occult was both fashionable and consoling, and Mann's acute perception of the mystical yearnings which beset his contemporaries is perhaps nowhere better reflected than in the hallucinatory atmosphere of *The Magic Mountain*.

When Mann wrote his letter, the Occult revival in Germany had reached its height after two main tidal surges. The first took place in the last quarter of the 19th century. Munich—where the *séance* at Baron Schrenck-Notzing's took place—had its share of the Spiritualists, magicians, Theosophists, and devotees of occultism who populated all European capitals. The influence of the Occult was particularly notable in the artistic and literary worlds, and especially in groups associated with the Symbolists. Munich's most famous group of literary occultists was the so-called "Cosmic Circle" composed of four former disciples of Stefan George: Alfred Schuler, Ludwig Klages, Karl Wolfskehl, and Ludwig Derleth. They cultivated the theories of the Swiss anthropologist J. J. Bachhofen, attempted to make Munich the centre of a new "cosmic consciousness" and indulged their private eccentricities. Klages founded the German Graphological Society; Wolfskehl made researches into hermaphroditism; and Schuler projected a "dance of healing" (to help cure the sick Nietzsche) in which the dancers would wear copper armour. In 1904 the Cosmics broke up; and Derleth thereafter issued a series of invitations to readings of his Proclamations, which caused a sensation in the artists' quarter of Schwabing. Thomas Mann was one of the audience, and his memories of the event

formed the basis of his novella, "Beim Propheten", which appeared in 1914 in the collection *Das Wunderkind*. "Calumnies and hosannahs", he wrote, "incense and the reek of blood mingled. In thunderous battles the world was conquered and set free . . ."

The First World War intensified the anxieties which had been responsible for the original Occult revival. Spiritualist societies sprang up in every large town, as bereaved mothers, wives and lovers tried to contact their dead beyond the grave. In Germany, the shock of defeat combined with the appalling economic and political crisis to create an epidemic of Occultism such as the country had never known before. Curious sects made their appearance—some improbably linked to political objectives—gurus of every sort commanded a wide following. The market in Occult literature boomed. Some scientists turned their attention to psychical research, and in Germany the best known was probably Albert, Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing.

SCHRENCK (as he was known) was born in 1862 and qualified as a doctor with a thesis on hypnotism. Afterwards he married "the richest heiress in Württemberg" and (in the words of one of his friends) "kept a large house and a small practice." He published several works on psychopathology, but soon became associated with Baron Carl du Prel, author of *The Philosophy of Mysticism*, and became determined to study Spiritualism by scientific means. In 1914 appeared his main work, *The Phenomena of Materialisation*, containing records of sittings with several mediums said to produce materialised apparitions, notably one known as "Eva C."

Six weeks after the book's publication, Dr Mathilde von Kemnitz (who became General Ludendorff's second wife) attacked Schrenck's magnum opus in her pamphlet "Moderne Mediumforschung." She published the record of a *séance* held by Schrenck the previous summer in which the

first, none at least that I could discern. I felt no "cool breath"—the cold draught which is supposed characteristically to precede manifestations, nor was I aware of the smell, suggesting hydrogen sulphide, remarked on by others. The faint beam of light, which according to the director of the séance shone from behind the curtain of the cabinet, also escaped me. Almost three hours had elapsed since the beginning of the séance. When asked what the obstacles were, "Mina" refused to give any information but persisted in her efforts to overcome them.

AT ABOUT 11.30 the director declared his intention of closing the séance. This last attempt to stimulate the medium proved effec-

tive. Before the eyes of all present, a handkerchief that had been lying on the floor beside the little table was lifted, rose with a quick, sure movement into the relatively bright beam of the lamp light, remained there for two or three seconds, during which time it changed shape as though being squeezed and shaken, and fell back on the floor. This elevation was not "spontaneous"; the handkerchief did not rise, empty and fluttering, of its own accord, but was lifted by a support inside it. It hung down in folds from the support and was violently manipulated from within. In the second elevation, which quickly followed the first, the support was clearly marked by two knuckle-shaped protuberances. The excitement of the onlookers was extraordinary. We leaned forward, cried out, and

Freiherr's amazing credulity and total neglect of scientific procedure was exposed. Mathilde von Kemnitz had been deputed to search the medium—who had immediately claimed not to understand what was required of her and so escaped thorough checking. And those present had been friends of Schrenck-Notzing. To the pamphlet was attached a letter from Dr Walter Gulat-Wellenberg, revealing that "Eva C." was well-known under several aliases, that she was accompanied everywhere by an obvious confederate, and that Charles Richet had exposed her in Algeria several years before. Gulat-Wellenberg administered the coup de grâce by demonstrating that "Eva C.'s" vaunted materialisations were retouched photographs from the Paris newspaper Le Miroir. From this moment on, Schrenck-Notzing was ranked with the Occultists of the most believing sort, and his self-justifications grew ever more implausible. In 1920 he was still upholding his belief that "Eva C." had produced materialisations by arguing that the two-dimensional appearance of Eva's cut-out photographs was explained by "a general law" about the "continuation of the materialisation of organic parts, beyond the field of vision of the observers . . ."

JUDGING BY THOMAS MANN'S LETTER, the Freiherr had learned much from his experience with Mathilde von Kemnitz, and his precautions were more acceptable than they had been in 1914. He also had better luck with his mediums than he had with "Eva C." "Willi Sch." was Willi Schneider, one of the two mediumistic Schneider brothers whom Schrenck-Notzing had discovered in Braunau (am Inn). Both brothers were subjected at the time to a battery of tests by psychical researchers throughout Europe; and English readers are most likely to have heard of them through the publications of Harry Price. A large number of witnesses have agreed with Mann that "there can be no question of deception in any mechanical sense."

Yet we do not know how effective Schrenck-Notzing's controls really were, and Thomas Mann was not experienced in psychical research. Schrenck's experiments with the Schneider brothers came under heavy fire. In 1927 Count Carl von Klinckowstroem published a pamphlet in which he used the case of Schrenck-Notzing to diagnose something he called "the Occultist Complex." This "manifests itself in the occultist" becoming used to the miracle of mediumship and getting entangled in its dogmas and absurd hypotheses so that they become completely unreliable for level-headed interpretation and sober reporting of the evidence. In 1928 the Freiherr was reduced to suing one of his opponents in the courts, and after his death the following year a flurry of pamphlets appeared which objected to the way in which he had carried out his researches. His former colleague Albert Moll (a leading authority on hypnosis) condemned Schrenck as "an example of being led astray through ambition and sensationalism."

For all this, Thomas Mann was in good company when he found himself so convinced by Willi Schneider that he had to fall back on Einstein for explanations. Some eighteen months earlier Sigmund Freud had delivered a paper on "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy" to a small circle of his closest associates in the Harz Mountains. Freud thought the paper important enough to be delivered again at a later date—but he had to be restrained from so doing. For although he clearly understood the reasons behind the outburst of Occultism, he had also begun to feel that it was imperative to come to terms with the occultists' claims. "It no longer seems possible to keep away from the study of what are known as 'occult' phenomena", he reluctantly admitted. "The impulse towards such an investigation seems irresistibly strong . . ." As we know from the case of Yuri Geller, it remains so today.

James Webb

called each other's attention to what was happening. The third elevation was to my mind the most remarkable because at three different times the surface of the handkerchief clearly disclosed the working of an apparently claw-like organ considerably smaller than a human hand.

Further phenomena then followed in quick succession. The medium asked for the handkerchief to be removed. When this had been done, an indefinable something, which had not been among the objects on the floor, arose from the same place as the handkerchief. More or less shapeless, it seemed to be some twenty inches long and might have been taken for part of a forearm with the prehensile organ belonging to it (the suggestion of a closed hand). I could not help identifying this something as the support, the motor instrument, which had previously lifted the handkerchief and was now revealing itself uncovered. I am struck by the fact that although I looked at it intensely for several seconds I cannot remember its shape. My explanation is that it had a certain fluorescence of its own, which though faint sufficed to blur its outlines. Whereas the lifted handkerchief reflected the reddish glow of the lamp, this object did not seem to take on the colour of the light falling on it, but rather, as I recall, glowed greenish-white. In falling, it disappeared just as the handkerchief had done.

In the fifth manifestation, a table bell, which had been standing on the floor, began to ring violently and was flung under the chair of one of the participants. In the sixth, a luminous ring with a luminous cord attached rose up to the table, moved back and forth along the edge of the table with a scratching sound, and was then laid down on the table top. After that the phenomena fell off. It seemed as though the forces were wandering about the room but were no longer able to take shape or to produce any perceptible manifestation. Several times, bright round spots or nebulae, tinged red by the lamp light, appeared on or near the wall in the vicinity of the medium, then vanished. The medium seemed exhausted and expressed a desire to end the séance by wishing us all a "Merry Christmas"

through the watchers. The contractions of awakening followed. The white light was turned on. For a while Willi lay drugged with sleep, bent sideways over the arm of one of the watchers. I went up to him, tapped him on the shoulder and expressed my satisfaction, whereupon he looked at me with sleepy eyes and a good-natured melancholy smile. It was hardly the physiognomy of a swindler.

AND INDEED ANY THOUGHT OF A SWINDLE in the sense of a conjuring trick is absurd. There was simply no one there who could have rung and thrown the bell. Willi could not have done it, because his extremities were being held, and besides, he was five feet away, sunk in magnetic sleep. Who or what lifted the handkerchief and squeezed it from inside? I don't know, but like all the others I saw it with my unprejudiced eyes, which were quite prepared to see nothing if there was nothing to be seen. I repeat: There can be no question of a swindle in any mechanical sense. Here we are dealing with the occult jugglery of organic life, with processes whose abnormal reality strikes me as unquestionable, with intricate constellations deep down in man. At once primitive and complex, these manifestations may repel our proud aesthetic sense with their undignified character and triviality, but the unquestionable reality must needs arouse the passionate curiosity of the scientist. Today, when matter has been understood to be a form or, one might say, another aggregate state of energy, there would seem to be nothing very fantastic about an ephemeral materialisation of energy outside the medium's organism, about psychophysical telepathy.

I am sincerely grateful to you, my dear Baron Schrenck, for enabling me to attend one of your séances, and hope you will give me the opportunity to continue my observations. I trust that this detailed report, amateurish and inadequate as it may be, will convince you of my sincere interest.

Yours, etc.,
THOMAS MANN



Column

"WHAT DOES *détente* mean?" said my wife one night. "A relaxation of tension", I said, and we went happily to sleep. Yet she was right to be puzzled. By now *détente* has acquired such subtle shades of

meaning, and covers such a variety, if not of sins, at least of ambiguities, that it has become a concept of almost metaphysical refinement and complexity. All we can say with certainty, perhaps, is that in contemporary diplomatic usage it is concerned primarily with the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, though at times it is very hard to see how it can apply to them except in a Pickwickian sense.

Is *détente*, for instance, compatible with the Soviet Union's long-term ambition to destroy the capitalist system, or is it a way of saying that though we know perfectly well what the Soviet Union's intentions are, it is much more comfortable at the moment to pretend that they do not exist? Or again: how does Soviet intervention in Angola, as a step towards what has been called "the recolonisation of Africa", contribute towards a relaxation of tension; or is *détente* simply a way of ensuring that such plainly belligerent actions should not disturb the good relations which obtain between the Soviet Union and the United States? And how can there not be deep and enduring tension between two states, of which one believes it a self-evident truth that men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, while the other treats its own citizens, and those of its satellite nations, with the kind of barbarity of which Mr Leonid Plyushchev (free, at last in Paris) has recently shown us the marks both on his body and in his mind? In short, how can there be a relaxation of tension, or any other relationship except one of mutual contempt and hatred, between two powers whose beliefs and purposes are so totally contradictory as those of the United States and the Soviet Union? To describe the realities of such a state of affairs as *détente* seems such a flagrant misuse of words that many people feel forced to conclude that, on the one side or the other, or on both, it only serves to conceal or disguise the real objectives of policy.

No wonder my wife was puzzled, and I'm afraid my answer to her question could only have helped to increase her confusion. In this she is no different from thousands of others throughout the world who contemplate the development of the

policy of *détente* with growing bewilderment and apprehension. And perhaps in the end this may prove to be a fundamental weakness in that policy, in the sense that ordinary people, not least in the United States, find it so difficult to understand that, with the best will in the world, they cannot bring themselves to go along with it. Quite apart from their political feelings, there is a kind of moral revulsion against sitting around a table and concerting policy with men capable of approving, and defending, the treatment imposed on Mr Plyushchev in his psychiatric ward; and even in an immoral world democratic statesmen cannot afford to affront their constituents' moral feelings too flagrantly.

This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that, in the interests of world peace, people may have to conquer their revulsion; just as, in the interests of our health, we may sometimes be forced to swallow some nauseous draught. Yet, even as we drink it, the stomach rebels.

IT IS IRONIC that we should be urged to accept the disagreeable consequences of *détente* in the name of political realism. It is said that in a world in which a showdown between hostile superpowers involves the unacceptable risk of nuclear war there is no alternative to the "peaceful co-existence" which it is the object of *détente* to achieve. We must take our medicine like men; otherwise, a far worse fate is in store for us.

Yet in fact many of the arguments urged in favour of *détente* seem the reverse of realistic. There is, for instance, the argument that the economic weakness of the Soviet Union, her need of Western credits, Western technology, Western grain, is such that, in the last resort, she cannot afford a break in her relations with the West. It has been the hope of Dr Kissinger that, in return for giving the Soviet Union what she needs, she may be drawn into a series of agreements, so complicated, so comprehensive, so subtle in their interdependence, that, try as she may, she cannot extricate herself from them. Like some giant, she is to be bound by silken cords, each in itself easily broken, but together composing a network from which the giant struggles in vain to be free. It is fair to say that, in pursuit of this objective, Dr Kissinger has (in the Middle East, for instance) achieved some notable successes. At the same time, it is hard to rid oneself of the feeling that Dr Kissinger sometimes thinks that sophistication alone is enough to contain the Soviet Union.

There is again the argument that, given time and patience and economic progress, the Soviet Union will undergo a process of "liberalisation" of her political ideas and institutions, will come to understand the material advantages of those