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The Problem of Art and the Artist in Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*

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Abstract:

The paper looks into the dialectics of art and art experiences that Thomas Mann interrogates in the depiction of his central character of Tonio Kröger. I have particularly contested the idea of a paradox that Mann accentuates in delineating the mind and thoughts of an artist. Following the strictures of a traditional bildungsroman, I intend to show how Mann intensifies the pattern of individuation by the predominant incorporation of powerful symbols. The paper intends to explore the interiorized dynamics of the mind of the artist and the irony of permuting artistic sensibility with lived experiences. It distinctly focuses on the universality of identity formation, in respect to artists and the politics of aesthetics that it alters in the course of time.

Keywords: bildungsroman; paradox; art; aesthetics; identity

In considering the aesthetics of André Gide and Thomas Mann, one finds a similarity in the critical disposition of the artist that prioritizes the mood of their work and the elementary idiom to scrutinize the values of the social cartography in which their works were implicated. The characters often pose their inability to understand the realities in which they grow and experience life. They constantly provide a particular kind of negotiation in appropriating their own identities, in relation to ascertain the criticism and scrutiny of values. In his introduction to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice and Other Stories* (1988; Bantam Books) David Luke writes about *Tonio Kröger* that it is "essentially been born of two interacting themes, one intellectual and one personal. The intellectual material was Mann's continuing argument with himself about the psychological origins and effects of literary talent: particularly, at this time, the question of whether an intellectually sophisticated kind of literary creativity, involving irony and detachment, did not dehumanize the artist, diminishing his capacity for compassion, driving him into a kind of emotional limbo, depriving him increasingly of his ability to feel. This was compounded by the already familiar Nietzschean problem of philosophical dyspepsia: knowledge and insight (*Erkenntnis*) that seemed inevitably to entail disillusionment, pessimism and ethical nihilism, to the point at which one rebels against it in what Tonio Kröger was to call *Erkenntnisekel*, the nausea of knowledge."

Reading Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, subsumes a prior consideration of his masterpiece *Tristan*, and provides an understanding of Mann's aesthetic theorization, which can never be compact without realizing the importance of the central episode of Mann's story. This section can be considered to be a direct retelling of Mann's discourse on art, artist and the whole corpus of aesthetic composition. It can also be considered to have a likely similarity with the first sequence of the last chapter of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916),

where young Stephen discusses his conception of aesthetics with the Dean and Lynch. In conversation with Lisaveta Ivanova, Tonio lays down his problematic conceptualization of the engagement of the artist with his art and the whole component of artistic creativity. It is in the center of this argument that Mann works out the paradox of identity and existence associated with the artist.

It can be mentioned as T.J Reed points out in *Text and History: Tonio Kröger and the Politics of Four Decades* that “the central theme of *Tonio Kröger* is usually said to be the opposition of ‘Geist’ and ‘Leben’ – that is of literary sensitivity and detachment on the one hand, and ordinary harmonious vitality on the other. This idea is further elaborated in stating the distancing of the artist’s self from the matter of his creation, which to some extent, motivates Tonio’s conversation with Lisaveta quite splendidly. The symbol of spring and the artistic sensibility that it inspires is put to a grave doubt by Adalbert, the short-story writer in the nouvelle, and this idea is however significantly accentuated by Tonio. However, he expresses his inability to feel what Adalbert felt in considering spring to be the most ‘abominable season’. Tonio feels precariously ambiguous in estimating his response to the particular season and regards it as a distraction, by all the memories and feelings that it inculcates in the mind of an artist. The grandeur of spring that becomes for Adalbert a disillusionment of artistic inspiration brings disdain and bewilderment to Tonio by the sheer vivacity and effervescence that spring animates in an individual. It is this heightened perception of reality, pressed upon the mind of the individual and the need to objectify such perceptions, that he considers being unnatural and obtrusive. Artistic creation should not only hold a certain indifference to the sources from where it is construed but also the process should be distinctly detached and impersonal. If too much of importance is given to the artifact and the artist become emotionally involved with it, then the work of art is a complete ruin – “... you will produce something clumsy, ponderous, pompous, ungainly, unironical, insipid, dreary and commonplace.” Hence he goes on to mention that if the individual implements the emotions, stirred by a situation, to comprehend art then it will be “invariably commonplace and unserviceable.” It is the uninvolved mind that can ingeniously bring about the essentials of an artistic composition – “only the stimulation of our corrupted nervous system, its cold ecstasies and acrobatics, can bring forth art.” Tonio continues to mention that the aesthetic temperament of an artist to convey powerful emotions into artistic expressions, is specifically limiting as it loses reality and becomes too analytical. The genius of the artist atrophies into a state of meaninglessness, as and when it directly infuses the powerful gush of emotions into his art without any sense of objective neutrality – “...it presupposes a certain human impoverishment and stagnation ... all strong emotion lacks taste. As soon as an artist becomes human and brings to feel, he is finished as an artist.”

The paradox of intellectual detachment and the necessity of human involvement with life constitute the central core of this elaborate dialectical contemplation of the artistic proclivity. Georg Lukács in *Essays on Thomas Mann*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (New York : Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), points out about Mann’s only completed play, *Fiorenza* (premiered on 11th May, 1907 in the Frankfurt Playhouse) – “ ... the dying Lorenzo di Medici says to Savonarola, ‘Whither the longing urges, there one is not, that one is not – you know? And yet man likes to confuse himself with his longing.’” It is this irony that invests Tonio’s situation. The need of intellectual indifference and aloofness of the artist and the inevitable obligation of belonging to the vivacity of human life and emotions. The composed articulation of the intellect, distanced

from life, constituting emotions and feelings can affect the brilliance and the touching beauty of a papal soprano but it can never have the elemental tenderness and the lifelikeness of humane and human experiences. T.J Reed points out further in *Text and History* that Tonio's ambivalent situation can be compared to "...the biblical fall of Man – which was also a matter of 'Erkenntnis' – and is thus , of course, part of a notorious German tradition going back to Kleist and Schiller. Tonio Kröger is unable to return to the pre-conscious Garden of Eden, or a state of grace. He can only resolve ... to moderate his critical consciousness with love, the bourgeois love for ordinary humanity which he compares to the Christian charity ... of I Corinthians xii."

This human aspect of art that bestows an integral connection with the artifact can often be considered to be one of the most problematic component of the sensibility of the artist. He mentions that literature prioritizes a particular reality that not only constructs a distinct critical paradigm but also infest the artist with a specific sense of isolation. It is here that the paradox of the artists' reality is engaged. It is this essential dichotomy that he refers to when he considers that literature is not a profession, but a 'curse'. It instigates the critical idiom in the mind of an individual quite early in life, which in turn brings in a sense of alienation and isolation and provokes a strong skeptical temper of suspicion and disbelief about the whole structure in which the artist is located. Tonio mentions that the comfortable sense of contentment and harmony that is usually experienced at an early age, especially in its conception of God and the world, is gradually thwarted with the congealment of the aesthetic politics of the artist. The individual locates his own solitude and an assumed sense of superiority and detachment that separates the artist from the common folk - "a gulf of irony, of skepticism, of antagonism, of awareness, of sensibility, is fixed between you and your fellow men". This isolation infiltrates the mind of the artist with a strong sense of seclusion that undermines the possibility of a communication with the people around him. For the individual, the impact of this fundamental silence is not only remoteness of the self but also a troubled conscience, which cast an inevitable confinement of the possibilities of human relations and experiences.

In his early interaction with Hans this idea of a subconscious indifference is quite significant. However, it is again this relation with Hans that constitute his yearning for intimacy and love. He experiences this silence of communication and his inability to express his affection for him. This acrid feeling of an emotional sterility is consequent of Hans' negligence and carelessness. It is a tremendous brutal feeling that manifest itself on Tonio in the appalling self confession – "Whoever loves the more is at a disadvantage and must suffer." It can be suggested that the apparent incompatibility between Hans and Tonio is rooted in the intellectual and temperamental difference between the two. Though there is a feeling of mutual care and understanding, Hans' responses often lacks the emotional involvement and the sensitivity that is indispensable for Tonio. This essential difference can also be interpreted as the element of estrangement and isolation that gathers and develops around an artist, who though craves for the love and intimacy of the common folk, can never identify and commit himself completely with them. It is this subconscious paradox that becomes for the artist, an ongoing fatal process – "There's no problem on earth so tantalizing as the problem of what an artist is and what art does to human beings".

The moment of melancholy is a paradox of yearning and for the young sensitive youth, art provide the very recluse that sustained for Tonio that feeling of tenderness and love.

Mann has incorporated with impressionistic precision, the emotional destitution, the loneliness and the desolation of young Tonio on experiencing the pangs unrequited emotions. The violin and his poetry gathers around him like those constant symbols of a conviction, well shaded from the stark, brutal world that has wounded him so profusely – “The fountain, the old walnut tree, his violin and the sea in the distance, the Baltic Sea to whose summer reveries he could listen when he visited it in the holidays: these were the things he loved, the things which, so to speak, he arranged around himself and among which his inner life evolved – things with names that may be employed in poetry to good effect, and which did indeed very frequently recur in the poems that Tonio Kröger from time to time composed.” He is repeatedly reproached by the authorities and his wretched condition can ironically be compared to his failure to secure love and affection from Hans.

This longing for the pleasure and quite predominately the sensuality of this pleasure can well be understood in the incompatibility of Tonio’s relationship with Ingeborg Holm. From the outset, it is the physical dimension of Inge that has been repeatedly heightened in Tonio’s fascination for her. The sight of her on a particular evening is strikingly sensual – “her thick blond tresses, her rather narrowly cut laughing blue eyes, the delicate hint of freckles across the bridge of her nose. The timbre of her voice haunted him and he could not sleep.” Tonio was perfectly conscious of the nature of this sudden intense love that he felt for Inge. The feelings of despair and humiliation were very strongly emboldened in his mind and he was also acutely certain that this longing that he felt was devoid of any kind of involvement of Inge. Hence he contemplates that this kind of love “destroys the lover’s peace of mind, flooding his heart with music and leaving him no time to form and shape his experience, to recollect it in tranquility and forge it into a whole”. A terrible sense of absence, loneliness, desolation foreshadows Tonio heart as he watches Inge performing in the dance school. He is almost engaged in an interior monologue with Inge, when he admits his love to her repeatedly – “I love you, dear, sweet Inge,” he said to himself...’ The idea of loving someone beyond the metaphors of expression and to reach the very height of this sense perception of conveying this tenderness to the person, even at the expense of being deeply wounded, is what comprehends Tonio’s love for Inge. The desperation and the misery of unrequited love instigated Tonio to consider Inge almost as the romantic other, complete and ample with all her perfections but distant, illusory and unattainable. It can be suggested that it is the Tonio’s intellectual temperament, yearning to escape the brutal world that deigns Inge as the artist’s recluse of ideal beauty and love. Remembering a wonderful poem by Theodore Storm – “I long to sleep, to sleep, but you must dance.” What a torment, what a humiliating contradiction it was to have to dance when one’s heart was heavy with love...’

The irony and the bitter paradox of beauty, love and intellect is closely exemplified in Tonio’s confusion and realization of the ‘tragedy’ of his circumstance. The loss of love and the unnerving strain of walking the tight rope for acceptance and for maintaining that intellectual prudence is what problematize his situation. When he slipped out of the room where the quadrille continued under the monitoring eyes of Herr Knaak, whose eyes that Inge admired, those that can never “penetrate to the point at which life becomes complex and sad...” Tonio continued to contemplate almost in a dream like state, gazing out of a window, realizing the utter futility to crave for the adoration of Inge. It can be suggested here as Kenneth G. Wilson points out in *The Dance as Symbol and Leitmotiv in Thomas Mann’s Tonio Kröger*, that “the old, honored metaphor of life as dance is a basis of both structure and theme in Thomas Mann’s *Tonio*

Kröger.” He suggests further that “the structural use of dance is simple: the dancers seek love, and the final position is a claiming of partners. Tonio as would-be dancer begins with Hans Hansen, fails to win him, turns to Ingeborg, fails again, and then seeks Lisabeta, though not as a partner in the usual sense of the dance...” As a matter of fact the use of the dance form of quadrille is itself distinctly symbolic. As G. Wilson points out about the quadrille as “...a civilized dance of couples, a “society” square dances. The quadrille, with its five parts, is a particularly sophisticated dance form; the patterns are highly complex, rigidly conventional, and extremely formal and physical expression are often enthusiastic and sometimes even boisterous.”

He is overwhelmed by disdain and self pity. Sinking in remorse, he suffers the acute sickness of possessing a strong criticism of all those people who cannot draw pleasure and sustenance from poetry or the sheer lavish bliss of experiencing the beauty of nature. His thoughts ponder and the serenity of being back at home, sitting at his window and “reading Storm’s *Immensee* and occasionally glancing out into the garden where it lay in the evening light, with the old walnut tree and its heavy creaking branches? That was where he should have been...” A more sobering and yet depressing thought soon proceed and it is the fear of rejection, admonition and rebuke clouds his mind. All his intellect and finer aesthetic temperament cannot secure him the love and the closeness of Inge or Hans. Magdalena Vermehren with all her fondness for Tonio, can never match the overwhelming emotion and the intensity of this yearning that remains forever blinded by an ironic incomprehensible ruthlessness of Tonio’s positionality – “For happiness, he told himself, does not consist in being loved; that merely gratifies one’s vanity and is mingled with repugnance. Happiness consists in loving – and perhaps snatching a few little moments of illusory nearness to the beloved.”

It can be asserted that this continuing sense of involvement and alienation is what gratifies the mind of the artist. The need of intellectual solitude and seclusion is consumed and assimilated by the necessity of physical involvement. “Intellectuality on one hand and devouring feverish lust on the other.” It can be mentioned, that this sense of opposition and juxtaposing between the two absolutes is the requirement of a loveless mind. Mann makes it evident, in the text that these elemental extremes reflect the paradox of the artist’s creation. The separation between the artist and his art is instrumental in foregrounding most perceptively, the profound emotional intensity and the aesthetic brilliance of his work of art. In his conversation with Lisaveta, Tonio’s discursive narrative on art and the nature of the artist is particularly important in this context. While mentioning about Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, he states that the impact of such a work of art on the listener is profound and majestic, yet its grandeur never owes to the magniloquence of the composer. The artist maintains an intimately withdrawn space which can never empathize with the high flown enthusiasm of the admirers. It is the neurosis of a melancholy and the emotional devastation of the artist which can impart such excruciating beauty to the work of art. It can be suggested that the artist has to dissociate himself completely from the process of aesthetic creation and indulge in a tendency of repugnance to his own artifact. What he creates is what he transmutes into an interrogation of beauty. Hence for the artist, it can be mentioned that his work of art is not only cathartic but also aesthetically incompatible for him. After completing the work of art, it becomes the very symbol of the artist’s annihilation, the embodiment of his regret and a strong self revulsion for ever endeavoring to conceptualize it. “Anything that has been expressed has thereby been eliminated – that is his

creed. When the whole world has been expressed, it too will have been eliminated, redeemed, abolished”

What follow next is a series of small epiphanies that are complicit to the devastation and the reconciliation of Tonio with the baleful realities of contemporary life. This becomes detrimental to the artist and his created art. The metamorphosis of these realities and situations into finer elements of his art constantly occupies the paradox of aestheticism and poetic imagination. These images become powerful symbols of destruction that impregnates the mind of the artist with the brutality and the morbidity of life. His visit to the north to Denmark is marked by the expectation and the exaltation of an overriding nostalgia. The memories of his father and the experiences on revisiting his old ancestral house are poignant and significantly shocking. A part of his old house has been converted into a public library and his own bedroom has been stuffed with books. The scene is brilliantly evocative where Tonio steps inside the room and remembers with a bitter fondness “his first heartfelt clumsy efforts at verse composition ...” His mind wanders out and takes a turn at the old walnut tree, a symbol of permanence and one of the few spots of memory and nostalgia that goes beyond the temporal and the spatial dimensions. The meticulous observation of the library official, his return to the hotel and most significantly the interrogation of the policeman, mistaking Tonio as someone else, convicted of fraud are all images of violence that are cast upon the sensibilities of the artist.

While considering the structure of Mann’s nouvelle, it can be mentioned that it has two significant moments around which the central themes are developed. It is the central episode of Tonio’s indulging dialectics on art and the artist, while in conversation with Lisaveta and the last sequence of events centering around his thoughts while he writes a letter, addressed to Lisaveta. The opposing politics of detachment and involvement manifested in the separation between the world of the artist and that of the bourgeois is resolved into a denouement of senses and experiences. Tonio expresses a sense of displacement and a disjointed existence, fractured between the two worlds. The sense of alienation and isolation deepens on the mind of Tonio on being ostracized from both the worlds. It is neither the finer sensibilities of the artist nor the bourgeois elaboration of experiencing the variety of life. He probes into the recognition of beauty and strikes a reconciliation with all the metaphysics of thought and the superfluous ideas of intellect and that of learning. He insistently contends for a realization of the mind to be alert and sensitive to other human beings and to that of finding beauty in the most ordinary circumstances of life. It is the paradox of the inability of belonging to the accentuated world of the artist and at the same time to remain perfectly detached from the ordinary and the commonplace.

In his letter to Lisaveta, he broods over this conflict. “I admire those proud, cold spirits who venture out along the paths of grandiose, demonic beauty and despise ‘humanity’ – but I do not envy them.” This amalgamation of opposing senses inspires a tendency, often dissipated, that constitutes a perceptive, spontaneous and intuitive response to life – “For if there is anything that can turn a *littérateur* into a true writer, then it is this bourgeois love of mine for the human and the living and the ordinary.” It is this earnestness in the yearning for adopting this intermediary path and a temperament of never resolving into any distinct secured domain of life. To locate the perfect expression of life, one has to probe into the objects of reality and at the same time steadfastly maintain a critical distance to perceive, love and record life with all its

diversity. “Do not disparage this love, Lisaveta; it is good and fruitful. In it there is longing, and sad envy, and just a touch of contempt, and a whole world of innocent delight.”

Tonio Kröger can be read as a statement of Mann’s art. The lucid frame of its structure and the narrative is distinctly important in considering the precision of thought and the range of powerful symbols. They are gathered together to work out the central theme of art as a paradox of the artist’s temperament. The ambiguity of the artist as entirely developed in Tonio’s uncertainties about his own vocation as a writer and his affection for everything that is not art. As Erich Heller points out - “... Thomas Mann is right in saying that in his *Nouvelle Nietzsche*’s philosophy of Life gains the upper hand over Schopenhauer’s denial of it, tilting the scales of Will and Spirit, which stood ironically balanced in *Buddenbrooks* , in favour of Life.” Towards the end of the nouvelle Tonio goes on to negate the ‘inhumanity’ of the artist : “To see things clearly, if even through tears, to recognize, notice, observe, even at the very moment when hands are clinging and lips meeting, and the eye is blinded with feeling- it is infamous, indecent, outrageous He is mistaken who believes he may pluck a single leaf from the laurel tree of art without paying for it with his life.”

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