THOMAS MANN AND THE ANCIENT ROMANCE

It would be sound to deliver a communication about Thomas Mann and the modern romance, discussing his relations with his contemporaries, for instance Hermann Hesse, Robert Musil and William Faulkner, or discussing the inspirations he owed to the romance of the 19th century, and at any rate it would be worthwhile inquiring into the contribution he made to develop the literary genre of romance. At first glance it appears perhaps strange to put Thomas Mann in touch with the ancient romance, that is to connect a high point of modern fiction with the relatively modest beginnings of the romance in the Greek and Roman antiquity. Nevertheless, there are connections between the renowned romancer and the first forms of the romance founded by the Greek and Roman literature.

To begin with, we have explicit references to the ancient novel. In his essay *Meerfahrt mit 'Don Quijote'*, written after his first passage from Europe across the Ocean to the United States (19.-29.5.1934), we see Thomas Mann investigating Cervantes' work and trying to find influences of the ancient romance.

This essay is composed in the shape of a diary, and indeed it is based on his *Tagebücher*. Moreover, later notes of *Tagebücher* indicate the composition and care of that «Feuilleton» and «Montag den 13. VIII. 34»: «Vormittags Ex-

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After having remembered and mentioned the *Golden Ass* the day before, «yesterday» (IX 452; cf. 451), he points to two cases which struck him by the curiosity of their motives without knowing if they had already struck others. First thing he calls attention to the fictive suicide of brave, but poor Basilio in *Don Quijote* (8.4). At the moment when his beautiful beloved Quiteria is going to be married to the rich Camacho, Basilio throws himself into his sword and breaks down, covered with blood, but he is able, shortly after, to rise to his feet without being hurt. This incident is compared by Thomas Mann with a scene in Achilles Tatus in which Leucippe appears to be slaughtered, while her beloved Clitophon has to be a witness of the atrocity. But that deed, too, as the suicide of Basilio in Cervantes, proves to be fictitious. The ancient romancer had the device to make use of a stage dagger with a receding blade which could not wound the victim, and the blood flowed from an artificial belly filled with animal guts and blood and attached to Leucippe (3.21.1-5). In a similar way Cervantes saved his Basilio whose sword passed around his corpse through a blood-filled tube of sheet metal.

Thomas Mann suggests that Cervantes has derived this shocking motive from Achilles Tatus. He is not mistaken, and we have the pleasure to see the modern romancer comparing texts and arguing like a traditional scholar. At the same time he reservedly pretends to be a little conversant with this field of science by hinting at Erwin Rohde whose book about the Greek romance and its precursors is presupposed as a matter of course so that the title of the book is not mentioned\(^\text{15}\). Besides our interpreter confesses to have consulted Karl Kerényi’s excellent book, as he says (IX 454: «... aus dem vorzüglichen Buch...»), about the Greek-Oriental novel literature\(^\text{16}\).

It might be obvious that Cervantes drew the motive of the fictitious bloody deed from Achilles Tatus. This view, proposed by Thomas Mann, can be confirmed by an additional aspect. Cervantes was well versed in the ancient romance. By his work *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* he tried to stand comparison with Heliodorus' romance\(^\text{17}\), and he has modelled his poetry on Achilles Tatus, too\(^\text{18}\). In the Basilio episode Cervantes has apparently tried to surpass the false murder of Leucippe by extending the motive to a little novel of a wedding in which the bride is married at the last moment not to the unloved man, but to her lover by means of trick and intrigue.


\(^{18}\) Cf. *ibid.* 243.
In his essay Passage with 'Don Quijote' Thomas Mann reveals still another relation between Cervantes and the ancient romance, although he is not sure about the way of the tradition (cf. IX 457). The Adventure of the Ass Braying in Cervantes (8.8 and 10) reminds him of Apuleius (9.455) - with reason. In Apuleius' novel The Golden Ass Lucius who was transformed in a donkey repeatedly has or seizes the occasion to cry or, better, to bray. Moreover, the ass of Apuleius is beaten continuously, also in consequence of his cries. In Cervantes, however, Sancho Pansa is beaten, because he imitated the braying of an ass, and then they set him on his ass.

We can proceed on the assumption that Cervantes (1547-1616), almost a rival of the ancient romance, has known The Golden Ass, too (editio princeps 1469). In that case it would not be necessary to presume intermediate stages which Thomas Mann takes into account when asking whether Cervantes received the motives possibly via Italy and by Boccaccio (IX 457).

Our interpreting romancer, however, fails in exactly citing a Greek word: «katakremnezesthai» (9.457) is not quite a correct derivation from κατακρημνίζω, 'throw down a precipice' (LSJ). But that hardly counts at all. It is more noteworthy by far that Thomas Mann touched upon an important phenomenon of the ancient prose fiction: the illusion, realized by the fictitious murder of Leucippe. This phenomenon is called «Mystifikationspraktiken» (IX 454), practices of mystification, perhaps under the influence of Karl Kerényi's book.

In his lecture Die Kunst des Romans, a lecture 1940 given to students of Princeton, New Jersey, the German author is in his element. Who is master in writing romances can be allowed to advance masterly reflections on his genre, even if he boldly generalizes and sometimes takes theoretical risks. First he does not confine himself to single philological points, but considers the general development of the romance genre. When it is said that in Homer's country not until the Hellenism and Alexandrinism the prose romance is favoured (X 350) and when we are told about the peculiarities of mental biology (X 355), the question arises whether in this Princeton lecture of 1940 the cultural-historical approach of Ben Edwin Perry has become productive in some way or other. B.E. Perry graduated in Princeton (1920) to develop then into an authority on the ancient romance.

Cf. Apul. met. 3.29.3; 7.3.3; especially 7.13.2; 8.29.4 f.
Cf. for instance ibid. 3.28.4; 3.29.3; 6.25.4; 8.30.2.
Thomas Mann's view of ancient prose fiction is rather extensive. In addition to the travel romance *The Marvels beyond Thule* and Achilles Tatius it includes Parthenius and, what is more, the fables of Aesopus (X 350). It seems questionable - to say the least - to integrate Parthenius within the romance genre. Besides we cannot agree to the opinion that Parthenius has founded the prose love romance. But then the novel of Achilles Tatius is aptly described to be unbound and boundless adventures (*ibid.*: «solche ungebundenen und uferlosen Abenteuer»). Apuleius' *Golden Ass* is highly appreciated as a brilliant performance of the world romance literature: «ein Glanzstück der Welt-Romanliteratur» (*ibid.*). By the way one might suppose Apuleius to have exercised influence on Thomas Mann's picaresque novel *Felix Krull*.

The ideas which are unfolded about the development of the romance genre are of especial importance. The ancient romance, as the lecture has it, contained possibilities (X 356: «trug Möglichkeiten in sich») that were realized in a long evolution from the late Greek and Indian fable-monsters (*ibid.*: «von den spätgriechischen und indischen Fabel-Monstren») to G. Flaubert's *Education sentimentale* and Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (*ibid.*). The decisive principle in this process is the principle of 'Verinnerlichung' (*ibid.*), to be translated perhaps by 'spiritualization'.

After having underlined the long way to spiritualization Thomas Mann takes a remarkable view which may be essential to the history of the romance genre. He pleads that the German novel of education, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* quoted as example, is nothing else than the «Verinnerlichung und Sublimierung» of the adventure novel (X 357). In the same way we are allowed to suggest with good reason: Thomas Mann's romances *Der Erwähnte, Roman* and *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull. Der Memoiren erster Teil*²⁴ are Verinnerlichungen and sublimations of the ancient adventure novel. Spiritualized and sublimed both of them seem to continue traditions of the ancient romance.

It would be worth-while considering possible influences which the ancient fiction prose might have exercised on the literary productions of Thomas Mann themselves. There is reason to suppose that these potential influences worked mediately by the way of connecting links in the narrative tradition. In the just mentioned novels, *Der Erwähnte, Roman* and *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull. Der Memoiren erster Teil*, there are apparently certain structures which remind of the ancient romance, concerning the action and the hero.

*Der Erwähnte, Roman* (1951) retells the legend - or may we say novel?²⁵

²⁴ Mann 1974², Band VII.

of Gregorius which is transmitted in the *Gesta Romanorum* (81), in the Gregory poem of Hartmann of Aue and in other widespread tradition. Not only by its incest motive, but above all by its fictitious manner of writing the Gregory legend resembles the *Story of Apollonius, King of Tyrus (Historia Apollonii regis Tyri)* which, too, is contained in the *Gesta Romanorum* (153). The similarities between the Gregorius tale and the Apollonius romance seem to suggest relations of the Gregorius tradition to the ancient or rather to the Christian romance. Thomas Mann knew himself that the Gregory legend with its Oedipus motive sprang from antiquity. Really, already when being a young man of nineteen he was well informed about that detail by the lectures of Professor Wilhelm Hertz about Courtly poetry he attended at the Technical University of Munich in 1894-1895. Later on the story appeared to the modern author to present such vast narrative possibilities to the outspinning fantasy that he resolved «selber etwas daraus zu machen» (XI 687). In this respect he proceeded, as the ancient romance tried to do, and by dehistorizing he shared another trend with the ancient romance.

*Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull. Der Memoiren erster Teil* (1954), too, seems to be in an old tradition which can be traced back to antiquity, via the Spanish picaresque novel of the 16th century and its German adaptation by Grimmelshausen. Thomas Mann himself allocated his *Felix Krull* to the adventure novel and especially to the picaresque romance which is assumed to be completed and surpassed by *Don Quijote*.

With regard to Cervantes who


Mann 1974², Band XI, 687-91: *Bemerkungen zu dem Roman ‘Der Erwählte’; ibid.* 688 about the Oedipus motive.


wished to compete with the ancient novel the picaresque tradition including also Felix Krull can be retraced to ancient times. Already in Apuleius and previously in Petronius there are distinctive picaros.

It is generally known that the action of an ancient novel consists in a long series of difficult and dangerous situations the heroes have to cope with, but defying all impediments the romance heroes or antiheroes overcome, and finally the novel has a happy ending. These patterns, handed down by the quoted intermediate stations, were differently adapted in Der Erwählte and in Felix Krull. Appreciating the literary tradition H. Wysling recognized: «Thomas Manns Texte können nach dem Handlungsgerippe, oft aber auch nur motivisch und thematisch auf 'Muster' und 'Reihen' zurückbezogen werden, ... der späte Krull auf Simplicissimus, Faust und den Hermes-Mythos». The literary roots, indeed, go back till antiquity.

It would be tempting to compare conclusions of the research on Felix Krull with results achieved in the investigation of the ancient romance. From his point of view H. Koopmann observed: «... es geht für ihn (Krull) immer glatt und komplikationslos ab» 32. «Krull, der alle Hindernisse so spielend überwindet» 33. «Das Ende ist gut, wider alle Erwartung und Wahrscheinlichkeit, und alles gelingt, was realiter niemals möglich war» 34. Correspondingly the ancient romance excels largely «durch die Gestaltung einer... Abenteuerwelt, ... die nach einer Kette von erstaunlich leicht und schnell überwundenen Schwierigkeiten und Gefahren stets ein glückliches Ende garantiert, wie es in der... Realität... wohl kaum vorkommt» 35. The happy ending is 'gattungs-immanent' 36. Mutatis mutandis the common features cannot be disregarded.

The modern author, however, was not checked by the stereotyped action scheme which too often prevented the ancient novel from getting a higher aesthetic level. Under complicated social conditions and new communicative

and in seiner mythologisierenden Einleitung weist Kerényi auf die Entwicklung bis zu Rabelais, Spanien, Simplicissimus, Eulenspiegel, Reineke Fuchs - und Felix Krull geradezu hin. Man weiß nicht, was man tut, erfährt es aber gern, besonders wenn man soviel Wert darauf legt, wie ich, sich in einer festen, möglichst weit zurückreichenden Tradition stehend zu wissen». To this tradition belongs - according to Kerényi, ibid. 160 and 178 - also Petronius.

32 H. Koopmann, Der schwierige Deutsche. Studien zum Werk Thomas Manns, Tübingen 1988, 156.
33 Ibid. 160.
34 Ibid. 162.
36 Ibid.
relations Thomas Mann sovereignly formed his action integrating elements of a far-reaching literary tradition. But there is no doubt: The modern romances we have dealt with, Der Erwähnte and Felix Krull, and the ancient romance have in common an essential narrative structure: a long line of actions and adventures - all surmounted - ending at last happily.

In connection with this structure there is still another distinct narrative device that is shared by those two modern novels and sweeping by the ancient novel: the unity of youth and beauty attached to the heroes - a quality which was transmitted again by the intermediate links of the tradition. So, for instance, the figure of Felix Krull, Simplicissimus and the hero of an ancient romance seem to belong to one another. Notwithstanding the analogies and although assuming the traditional unity of youth and beauty Thomas Mann converted his heroes to sublimed and introspective personages, applying to his literary productions an enormous lot of psychology, irony, parody and humour.

Those common structures of the ancient and the modern novel can be pointed out here only along general lines, and further investigations have to supply the proposed suggestions in detail. If these ideas prove to be plausible, ancient narrative structures are apparently preserved by intermediate stages up to modern times in a rich intertextuality. So the ancient romance can be seen in a special case to be a precursor of the modern romance - a general problem recently raised by B. Reardon. At all events the connection of youth, beauty, a series of overcome adventures and a happy ending fell in Thomas Mann's Der Erwähnte and Felix Krull - provided with a new function - on fertile ground. By the eminent romancer those structural elements of the ancient romance are shaped in an excellent form which scarcely reveals the origins.

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