

THOMAS MANN: A LIFE

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Translated by Ross Benjamin

PRELUDE, 1903

He has to add a drop of his own blood to the ink when he writes—that much Thomas Mann has long known. His early efforts, in which it was otherwise, now embarrass the twenty-seven-year-old. His first published story, “Fallen,” was a variation on a tale by his admired brother; in those years, almost every impression and influence came by way of Heinrich Mann. A young man falls in love with a simple girl—in Heinrich’s version a poor employee, in his own an actress. Both women need money. Both will therefore “fall,” giving themselves to someone else for money. The love stories end in disappointment.

In Heinrich Mann’s version, there’s a clear critique of women’s social situation, along with self-criticism about the well-off young man’s role in exploiting it; the last word belongs to the fallen but self-assured woman. In Thomas Mann’s version, by contrast, a formidable writing talent vibrates in a story whose subject plainly doesn’t interest him: women’s emancipation, represented by a derided character, becomes a joke told among men; the young man’s infatuation comes off as overwrought, and the female character remains a pale cliché.

That was nine years ago. By now Thomas Mann has found his way of expressing himself in literature. What truly moves him he hides in his stories behind “discreet forms and masks” to present them to the public. Economically, this is no success. The story collection *Little Herr*

*Friedemann* sells poorly. All these tales of outsiders who fail at love and life strike readers as too harsh and too cold. Will the new collection, *Tristan*, just out in March 1903, do better?

Hermann Hesse, not yet known as a writer, publishes a review. He greatly admires Thomas Mann’s writing and feels a certain kinship; this view from the outside, like his own, is sharper and more painful than standing at the center and belonging. Only one of the stories, Hesse remarks, is “persistently unsatisfying.” In it, a betrayed husband, to please his wicked wife, appears at a party in women’s clothes and a wig. As “Luischen” (“Little Luise”) he sings a song, becomes the butt of ridicule, and finally collapses dead onstage. What kind of “strange and ugly story,” as Thomas Mann himself calls it, is this “Luischen”?

The twelfth edition of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* appeared in 1903, the last edition the physician and sexologist revised himself. He would not live to see it in book form; he died in December 1902. His book analyzes human sexual life, and above all what is regarded as abnormal: sexual acts of all sorts that don’t serve procreation—“unnatural,” “pathological phenomena.”

With the gaze of a doctor bending over a particularly interesting case, Krafft-Ebing treats homosexuality—that “perversion”—at especially great length. From one edition to the next he added new case studies and autobiographical letters from these “stepchildren of nature.” Thomas Mann knows the book well. Has any reading ever shaken him as deeply as this one?

Also published in the story collection *Tristan* in 1903 is “Tonio Kröger.” Almost everything Thomas Mann writes has his own experience, or at least his own observations, at its core. His first novel is a literary transformation of his Lübeck origins, childhood, and family history. And yet “Tonio Kröger” is the first story to rest on a truly radical autobiographical

foundation. One could not come closer to him personally, he writes to a colleague who had complained of his personal unapproachability, than by reading this story.

The main character is a writer who longs for life, for love and belonging, who falls in love with the blond and blue-eyed, the simple and non-intellectual—during his adolescent years with a boy—yet who, as an artist, is excluded from the “blisses of the commonplace.” This Tonio Kröger travels to his northern hometown and to Denmark and finally finds a way to reconcile life and art, at least to some extent: by seeking to overcome the dichotomy and to warm and elevate his cold artist’s world through love for the “brightly living, the happy, the lovable, and the ordinary.”

Love despite distance—can that turn out well? And in general: is this only a literary thought experiment, or an intention to act? In real life, Thomas Mann traveled to Berlin in February 1903. He reads from “Tonio Kröger” and is pleased about his growing success as a writer. And then he kisses a girl there. But isn’t he in love with Paul Ehrenberg, the painter who feeds into the character of Hans Hansen, so painfully loved by Tonio Kröger? From Berlin, Thomas Mann writes a letter home to Paul (and to Paul’s brother) in Munich. He writes about the bustle of Berlin and that he is “part of it too!” He doesn’t mention the girl or the kiss. He signs his letter “Tonio Kröger.”

Love, longing, and literary allusions are evidently of no use when it comes to actually courting the blond and blue-eyed one, as he is now beginning to suspect. A few months after the letter from Berlin, Thomas Mann makes another attempt and sends Paul Ehrenberg a photograph of himself. On the back he has written a poem:

Here is a man, most sorely flawed:

Full of passions great and small,

Ambitious, vain, love-starved,

Touchy, jealous, hard to please,  
Unpeaceful, immoderate, unmoored,  
Now overproud, now wretched,  
Naive and sifted five times,  
World-fleeing and yet world-loving,  
Yearning, weak, a reed in the wind,  
Half visionary, half dull and blind,  
A child, a fool, almost a poet,  
Painfully caught in will and delusion,  
Yet with the virtue that to *you*  
He is devoted with all his heart!

Rhyming in the original, it cloaks intimacy in self-irony. What does Paul Ehrenberg make of it? Only a few weeks after this renewed effort to court Paul, Thomas Mann notices a young woman at a garden party in Munich. He tells his closest childhood friend, Otto Grautoff, about the encounter and sketches a “fairy tale” for them both. How strange, he remarks, that Otto is once again witness and confidant, just as he had been back in the schoolyard in Lübeck when Thomas fell in love with their classmate Willri. What will come of his fairy tale remains to be seen. In any case, Otto is not to speak of it—especially not to Alfred Kerr, the famous theater and literary critic. Apparently Thomas knows that Kerr had already pursued in vain the young Katia who caught his eye at the garden party.

No luck in love at all? In literature, certainly not. Not in *Buddenbrooks* either, his novel published two years earlier. Decline and misfortune also dominate this family story, long

understood to have much to do with the author’s own family. But the characters are vivid and, despite ironic distance, depicted with sympathy—a gripping, brilliant novel; and everyone loves Tony, though she has the worst luck in love of all. Commercially, it had a faltering start: spread over more than a thousand pages in two volumes, it won critical recognition here and there but found few buyers. Now Samuel Fischer publishes the family saga in a single, inexpensive volume on thin paper—and success arrives. Shortly after Christmas 1903, the fifteenth through eighteenth printings are already in bookstores.

1903 is a decisive year. On December 5, Thomas Mann writes a letter to his brother about Heinrich’s new novel *The Hunt for Love*. In seventeen handwritten pages he explains how terrible he finds the book—and not only the book, really everything Heinrich does and writes. Heinrich Mann rubs his eyes when he reads the accusation of “a craving for effect” and that he is driven by ambition to counter the success of *Buddenbrooks* with something of his own.

At the height of his fraternal hate-letter, Thomas Mann turns to the detailed descriptions of the characters’ sex lives in Heinrich Mann’s novel. What is missing, he writes, is “suffering in the sexual,” instead there’s all this “limp rutting without cease” and a “perpetual smell of flesh”: they are “disgusting.” If Heinrich Mann had never spoken to his brother again after this letter, no one could have wondered.

But it turns out differently—as, indeed, everything turns out quite differently.

*I*

*Beginnings and Early Terrors*

*(1875 – 1894)*

## SCENES FROM A CHILDHOOD

He was born at noon, as he later recounts, with the stars “favorable,” his horoscopes predicting a “long and happy life” and a “gentle death.” His childhood is “sheltered” and “happy.” He is his mother’s favorite child. He has a play shop with a small granary, just like the large one belonging to his father, the grain merchant. A rocking horse is one of his favorite toys; he names it “Achilles.” Indian games are not for him; instead, again and again, the mythical world of Homer. Before Troy, on Ithaca, and on Olympus he feels as much at home as the other children his age do in the worlds of Winnetou or Leatherstocking. As the god Hermes he leaps through the room with paper winged shoes; as Achilles he drags his younger sister mercilessly around the walls of Ilion.

Besides the visible games, there are the invisible ones, the inner adventures. One morning he wakes up with the resolve to be a ten-year-old prince named Karl. He dresses in princely fashion, holds “animated conversations” with an imaginary adjutant, and walks about “proud and happy with the secret of my dignity.” To some extent the game penetrates the outer world, since the “nursemaid” is drawn in and must treat him as royal highness. Later he takes over a puppet theater from his older brother. He loves it so much that he looks forward to his voice breaking, so he can perform his musical dramas with a new, deeper voice. Doing anything else in life is unthinkable to him. Indeed, is he not still sitting before the puppet theater even now?

In this vein, and always anew with different details, Thomas Mann later recounts his childhood. In retrospect he wants to have been, even as a child, someone moving in a straight line toward the Thomas Mann who would become a great and famous writer. He shifts the time of his birth to the noon hour and aligns himself with a constellation that brings him into proximity with

Goethe. He plays the games that Wagner and Goethe played, and his memories flirt with those of Goethe, Gottfried Keller, and Hans Christian Andersen.

In the child, Prince Karl-Thomas, the later artist is meant already to be clearly recognizable—the one who will write a novel about a prince and another about a confidence man constantly slipping into assumed roles. He portrays himself as someone set apart, favored, special, the child closest to the heart of his beautiful mother. A writer is recounting his own becoming; no one should be surprised by literary liberties. It would be better not to view all this as standing in too close a relation to what actually happened, even if here and there something true finds its way into the staged childhood.

Lübeck, then, is shrouded in dense fog. Anyone familiar with northern Germany knows how heavily it sometimes lies. This much is beyond dispute: Paul Thomas Mann is born on June 6, 1875, in the Hanseatic merchant city. It is a Sunday. He comes into the world as the second son of the grain merchant—and shortly thereafter also Lübeck senator—Heinrich Mann, third-generation head of the Mann firm. At fifteen, Heinrich Mann had to leave school in order to enter his father’s successful business. After an apprenticeship and time abroad—on business in Amsterdam, privately and for health reasons in France—he brought ambition, ability, and a feel for foreign cultures and French literature back to Lübeck, and at the age of twenty-three took over the paternal firm.

The family leads the life of the well-to-do: a large villa in the city center and a “garden house” in the suburbs; fine clothing, manners, and way of life; servants; and social intercourse within the circles of polite society. From 1887 on, a power plant supplies those Lübeck residents who can afford it with electricity. At eleven o’clock in the evening the current is shut off—unless a senator has invited guests to a formal dinner, in which case electricity is “sometimes supplied

for two hours longer!”, as the city historian notes with an astonished exclamation point. How extensively Senator Mann availed himself of this privilege is not recorded.

A nanny looks after the children. The family spends its summer holidays on the Baltic Sea, in Travemünde. It is here that Thomas Mann’s love of the sea and of music are awakened: mornings belong to the beach, afternoons to the concerts in the conductor Hess’s music pavilion. Before long Thomas Mann begins taking violin lessons. Literature and music play a major role early in his life: the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and even more those of Hans Christian Andersen; the Greek myths; the poems of Heinrich Heine and Theodor Storm. Richard Wagner is the musical star of the nineteenth century, and Thomas Mann an ardent admirer. The intoxicating quality of this bombastic music about love, death, and the grave, and all the Germanic myths in Wagner’s sound world, captivate him early on—and for a lifetime.

Thomas Mann’s older brother is named Heinrich like their father; two younger sisters follow, Julia and Carla, and—when Thomas Mann is already fifteen years old—another brother, Viktor. The father is an interesting man in an interesting city. A grain merchant who looks beyond his granaries. The commercial side of things has lost its appeal. Interested in literature, he builds up a private library, part of it kept behind a lock, inaccessible to the children and perhaps even to his wife. He reads the provocative social novels of Émile Zola, concealed on the beach behind a protective cover. By now he has made an employee a partner in the firm. More and more he leaves day-to-day operations to Hans Christian Wilhelm Eschenburg. He is more strongly drawn to politics. As the senator responsible for finance in the Free City of Lübeck, he is second only to the mayor. He himself cannot become mayor, because he did not attend university. For his son, things are to be different.

Within the German Empire, founded under Bismarck in 1871, Lübeck represents a curious element of the country and its federal system. As one of twenty-five constituent states, Lübeck is a dwarf, ranking second to last in both area and population. Nearly twenty-five million people live in dominant Prussia, some fifty-two thousand in the city and environs of the state of Lübeck. In the fourteenth century the proud Hanseatic city was the “Queen of the Hanseatic League” and one of the most important trading cities in Europe. Ever since, the world of merchants has shaped the city’s political life. But the great days are long past. While the Empire as a whole experiences an economic upswing, and the trading and port cities in particular gain new business through Germany’s ruthless colonial policy, Lübeck benefits only marginally. The Kiel Canal, built during Thomas Mann’s youth, ensures that Lübeck definitively loses its significance as a port city and commercial center. A pleasant provincial town, keenly conscious of its great past and its distinctiveness. In the streets one hears the defiant children’s rhyme:

Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen,  
They need not be ashamed,  
For they are free cities,  
Where Bismarck has no say.

Thomas Mann’s mother likewise has family roots in Lübeck. The Bruhns family has in fact been part of Lübeck’s history longer than the Mann family—also a merchant dynasty, but one of greater economic significance and wealth. This is the paternal line of Julia Mann. Her maternal line brings a different world into the lives of Thomas Mann and his siblings.

Julia’s father, Johann Ludwig Hermann Bruhns, as the eldest son, should have taken over his father’s flourishing wholesale wine business, but chose otherwise. When two black sheep of the family were banished to South America in 1840, he left the paternal enterprise to his younger brother and, just nineteen years old, accompanied the two cousins on their journey to Brazil. In the former Portuguese colony, now an independent kingdom, he called himself João Luiz Germano Bruhns, founded a firm exporting coffee and sugar, and a few years later owned coffee plantations in Paraty, located between Santos and the capital, Rio de Janeiro. He was successful in all this and became wealthy. He married the daughter of a neighbor and business partner, Maria Luiza da Silva, whose family, originally from Portugal, had been living in Brazil for four generations and had grown rich as landowners. Wedding gift from his father-in-law: two Afro-Brazilian slaves.

In no other Western-oriented country in the world was slavery maintained for so long as in Brazil; it was abolished only in 1888. Large landowners and plantation operators like da Silva and Bruhns profited enormously from the exploitation of the disenfranchised. Julia was born as the fourth child. Her Afro-Brazilian nanny, an enslaved woman from Mozambique named Anna, looked after her. In 1857 her mother died in childbirth. A year later, her father, called “Pai” by the children, sold his house and plantations with eighteen thousand coffee plants, as well as “ten slave huts, standing on pillars and roofed with shingles.” The many enslaved people who worked on his plantation were listed, along with their respective values, like everything else in the inventory of his possessions.

Bruhns traveled with his five children and the nanny to Lübeck. There he left the children with the Bruhns family and returned to Brazil himself with Anna. Julia was seven years old and spoke only Portuguese. Ten years later she has more or less overcome the cultural shock, the death

of her mother, and the loss of her Black surrogate mother as well as of her father, and has settled into life in Lübeck. One wound remains.

**[CAPTION PP. 20-21:** *Johann Siegmund Mann Jr. (1797–1863), the paternal grandfather: the second generation of the Mann merchant dynasty in Lübeck. Well, “dynasty”: after three generations, it comes to an end. His father, Johann Siegmund Mann Sr., had come to Lübeck from Rostock in 1775, exactly one hundred years before Thomas Mann’s birth, as an apprentice, and a few years later founded the firm “Johann Siegmund Mann, Commission and Forwarding Agents.” With Napoleon’s French troops passing through, the elder Mann did good business in grain. His son Johann Siegmund Jr. is the most commercially successful of the Manns, increasing the firm’s value twentyfold. In 1841 he purchases the large house on Mengstrasse that becomes the seat of the firm and the family and later becomes famous as the Buddenbrook House. In his second marriage he weds Elisabeth Marty (1811–1890), whose father, himself a prosperous merchant, came from Switzerland. Together they have five children. Their eldest son is Thomas Mann’s father.*

*Thomas Mann knows his grandfather only from stories. He died of tuberculosis long before Thomas’s birth. He sees his grandmother often in her beautiful house, where Christmas is also celebrated. She is deeply devout and active in the church. This paternal branch of the family is believed to be known through Buddenbrooks.]*

**[CAPTION PP. 22-23:** *The maternal grandfather, Johann Ludwig Hermann Bruhns (1821–1893): an adventurer and dealmaker, an emigrant who conquers a new culture, a German who becomes a German-Brazilian, speaks and writes fluent Portuguese, maintains friendly relations*

*with the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II, and becomes his imperial delegate; a plantation owner and coffee merchant, and beyond that a slaveholder who, according to more recent findings, fathers a child, the daughter Lucianna, with one of his slaves, Anna—the Black nanny of his daughter Julia. The paternity is publicly concealed. Lucianna is four years younger than Julia. In her childhood recollections, Julia mentions quite innocently that she played with the “mulatto child.” She knows nothing of the paternity. Did her son Thomas Mann ever learn of his aunt?*

*In 1877 Bruhns returns to Europe and lives out his old age with his daughter Maria in Kassel. Julia Mann seeks closeness to her “Pai,” to whom she is attached. This photograph shows him as an older man. It appears to be the only surviving image of him. He leaves almost no traces in Thomas Mann’s life and work. He scarcely ever mentions Grandpa Bruhns.*

*Maria Bruhns (1828–1856), the maternal grandmother (detail from an oil painting), born da Silva, came from a Brazilian family with roots in Portugal, which until shortly before her birth had been the colonial power over Brazil. According to Mann family lore, the maternal side was partly of “Creole” descent—meaning that ancestors from Portugal emigrated to Brazil but always married within the Portuguese upper class. More recently, it has been suggested that there may also be indigenous Brazilian ancestors in the da Silva line. The evidence is still lacking.]*

When the merchant Heinrich Mann courts the beautiful, tall, musical Julia with her exotic background, everyone urges her to accept him, her father included, in letters from afar. She is not permitted to marry the man she truly loves. Paul Stolterfoht is not economically acceptable to the family. Her Pai crosses the Atlantic just to dissuade her from him. In all this, the family confuses origins and inheritance prospects with a person’s future. Quite apart from all questions of feeling, Paul Stolterfoht would have been a good—perhaps the better—choice even from an economic

standpoint. He later becomes a wealthy man in Riga as the owner of a trading firm. Julia Bruhns looks back on him for a long time. Instead, at the age of eighteen, she marries Heinrich Mann, eleven years her senior, soon to become a senator of Lübeck. A sensible choice, with no trace of love.

### SCHOOL, FATHER, POEMS: BRRR!

Thomas Mann holding his school cone, Easter 1882, gazing expectantly into the camera, full of anticipation or foreboding of what lies ahead: no such photograph exists. His first day of school is evidently not an occasion the family considers important enough to be reenacted in a photographic studio. And yet they do indeed go to Hermann Linde’s studio on Breite Strasse and stage family portraits, carefully coiffed and dressed before painted backdrops, surrounded by toys and other props that are not their own but simulate a domestic setting. Everyone looks serious; no one is there for amusement—only Senator Mann smiles in one photograph with his eldest son Heinrich, perhaps three years old, as though pleased with this document of the firm’s owner alongside his future successor. That smile will soon fade.

[**CAPTION P. 25:** *The parents, Julia (1851–1923) and Heinrich Mann (1840–1891), married since 1868, shown here in the year of Thomas Mann’s birth, 1875. This is how stiff a studio-staged photograph sometimes looks.*]

A few years later it becomes clear that it was farsighted not to commemorate the start of school as a special, celebratory occasion in a photograph—not for either of the two older sons. In the fall of 1889, Heinrich Mann leaves the Katharineum Gymnasium in the middle of the school

year, during the Obersekunda, two and a half years before the Abitur. The year before, he had been held back, and now he has had enough. He wants nothing more than to escape the confinement of his hometown. He begins an apprenticeship as a bookseller in Dresden. His father has long since given up hope that his eldest might succeed him in the firm or complete a university education.

In the same year that Heinrich leaves school and Lübeck, Thomas Mann enters the Untertertia—today’s eighth grade—at the Katharineum. He attends the Realgymnasium track, not the classical humanist one: no Ancient Greek, but modern foreign languages instead. Before that, like Heinrich, he had attended Dr. Bussenius’s preparatory school. He surpasses his brother’s inglorious school career with his own: in the final year of the preparatory school, he has already been held back for the first time.

The earliest letter by Thomas Mann to have survived dates from his first year at the Gymnasium. In October 1889 he writes to his former nanny, Frieda Hartenstein, with bad news: he currently has to do “rather a lot of schoolwork.” In his next letter to Hartenstein, three months later, he is enjoying the holidays. He is reading Schiller; for Christmas he received a collected edition of his works. “School starts again on Saturday. Just imagine: Saturday! What a nuisance!” Despite these annoyances, he adopts an optimistic tone, believing that he will “manage the work quite well.”

[**CAPTION P. 26:** *Thomas Mann at the age of three and around ten.*]

Three months later, at Easter 1890, Thomas Mann’s first year at the Gymnasium comes to an end. “Quite well” could hardly describe it: he has been held back once again. At least he’s not alone. He has struck up a friendship with Otto Grautoff, the son of a bookseller. Otto is interested

in literature, clever, and recalcitrant at school. The two get along famously. They repeat the *Untertertia* together.

School is a daily “ordeal of anxiety”: the fear of being called on, of presenting homework that has not been done or has been done sloppily, or of displaying knowledge that isn’t there. And then gymnastics, for Thomas Mann the worst of all, when he, the unathletic son of a merchant, hangs from the horizontal bar like a wet sack and must endure being shouted at by the gym teacher Schramm. Occasionally there are even beatings, as Thomas Mann reminds his friend Otto in a letter shortly after the end of their school years: “Herr Gottschalk, the great pedagogue, had the fine habit of asking us, before thrashing us, whether we saw that we had deserved punishment. The anxious yes that was given him in reply rarely came from the heart, but rather from a fearful suspicion that, if we said no, we would receive a great deal more beating.”

When Thomas Mann begins to write literary works is unclear. He signs his letter to the nanny from October 1889 “ToMann. Lyric-dramatic poet.” This is no joke—or only a half-joke. At the same time, his older brother Heinrich, writing from Dresden, sneers at the fourteen-year-old’s literary efforts. To his friend Ludwig Ewers he refers to them as the “emotional productions of a half-grown, loving soul,” with which his poetizing brother “occasionally persecuted” him. Then he always “returned to business as usual, silently or laughing aloud.”

In Thomas’s dramas—Heinrich writes “dramas” in quotation marks—there could be found, “alongside all the impossibilities,” at least a few thoughts, even if “worn-out” ones, and these only rarely, “like oases in the sand.” Everything boring. “But the water in his lyric poetry is even more boring. And it is—God help us—all water, nothing but water, in which whole flocks of ducks and geese, in the form of ‘Ah!!!’s and ‘Oh!!!’s, swim about entirely without motivation...Brrr!”

Heinrich Mann broke off his schooling and made his escape to Dresden—but not actually to become a bookseller. His goal is to be a writer, better still: a poet. He idolizes Heinrich Heine and writes poem after poem in Heine’s style. He sends them to journals and receives rejections—103 poems without the hoped-for response—until at last, in 1890, the first is printed. He succeeds a year earlier with prose. The story “Beppo als Trauzeuge” (“Beppo As Marriage Witness”) appears in the *Lübecker Zeitung*. He has also written a sharp literary reckoning, the satirical “Fantasies about my Hometown L.,” but does not publish it. In this case, not only a lack of opportunities likely plays a role, but also consideration for his family.

Meanwhile, the likewise versifying brother, four years younger, is thoroughly getting on his nerves. Even when he writes admiring letters, Heinrich Mann reacts irritably. He admonishes his friend Ewers not to show his brother the writings he sends him—like the other day, when Ewers read aloud from Heinrich’s work at the Mann household. Thomas immediately took him aback with a “rapturous outburst of admiration.” Can’t he look for something of his own, does he have to imitate precisely what the elder brother has found for himself? How, in general, he moves in Heinrich’s footsteps, reading what Heinrich reads and what shapes him in “almost breathless imitation”: the Viennese modernist Hermann Bahr; even more Theodor Fontane, Heinrich’s “favorite poet among the moderns”; and finally, very importantly, Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Heinrich Mann discovers for himself in 1891.

Where does this growing fascination with becoming a poet come from? Is it an inner drive? Or is it the role that beckons—the special, the set apart? Emanuel Geibel, scarcely remembered today, is the great poet in the Lübeck of the Mann brothers, admired, courted, and provided by a patron with a lifelong pension. His poems are set to music by major composers such as Schumann, Brahms, and Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and everyone knows his wandering song “Der Mai ist

gekommen” (“May Has Come”). Whatever it is that makes becoming a new Geibel so enticing: not only Heinrich and Thomas Mann, but also their closest friends Ludwig Ewers and Otto Grautoff are drawn in this direction. All of them want to write—to compose plays and lyric poetry, or at least prose.

Heinrich Mann is already living the life of a writer in Dresden. He reads, and he writes—even secretly at work—goes to the theater, seeks out others with literary interests, but realizes that Dresden appears to be the great, culturally exciting world only when viewed from Lübeck. His correspondence with his school friend Ewers is concerned almost exclusively with authors he admires, books he is reading, and with their own writing—poems and stories—that they send each other and critique. Politics scarcely ever intrudes into their world.

As an apprentice he is a disaster. The bookselling business strikes him, despite all the books around him, as dreadfully dull. Before long there’s trouble, which reaches his father in Lübeck. Senator Mann has made inquiries with Heinrich’s employer and received an unfavorable report. “Your apathetic disposition is described in exceedingly harsh terms,” his father writes, “and after the whole account I am anxious about your future.” Heinrich Mann repudiates it all. He insists that he does his work properly.

At the same time, Senator Mann is celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his firm in Lübeck. His second son, Thomas, looks uneasily at the proud and respected father who is celebrating and being celebrated, and senses the hopeful paternal looks directed at him. He suspects, Thomas Mann later writes—and in this case there’s no reason to doubt it—that he will disappoint his father’s hopes just as much as his older brother has. Meanwhile, instead of doing his homework, he writes poems and dramas, discusses them with his friend Otto Grautoff, and is held back. The father is not to be envied.

The correspondence with his son Heinrich also has another side. They exchange views on literature. The father writes about books and theatrical performances and offers reading recommendations—Lord Byron, for instance—or criticizes the overrated Ernst von Wildenbruch with his nationalistic Prussian historical dramas. On the greatness of Émile Zola they are in agreement, surprisingly. This father cannot have been as conservative as one imagines.

His father’s literary judgment matters to Heinrich Mann. In February 1890, he writes to his friend Ewers that his poem “Geh schlafen...” (“Go To Sleep...”) has been accepted by the journal *Gesellschaft* and will soon be printed—hopefully before the firm’s anniversary. With his first published poem he hopes to impress his father. A few weeks later, he tells Ewers that he values his father’s “apt judgment” in literary matters. For that reason he doesn’t dare show him what he writes before it’s been accepted for publication.

Increasingly, conflicts come to the fore. Heinrich Mann cannot be restrained. A year after the first problems in Dresden, he sets his sights on leaving. He wants to go to Berlin and has applied to the young, up-and-coming publishing house of Samuel Fischer, where he has been taken on as a trainee. He breaks off his apprenticeship in Dresden in March 1891. Senator Mann protests angrily, but cannot prevent it. He travels to the capital and meets with Samuel Fischer. The provincial finance senator, father of two great German writers of the future, and the most important literary publisher of the future—what a meeting. The encounter itself is surely less spectacular than it appears in retrospect. Heinrich Mann himself does not yet grasp what kind of publishing house and milieu he has landed in. For him, all that matters is the “main thing: Berlin.”

In June, an agitated confrontation takes place in Lübeck between father and son. With the new trainee position at the Berlin publishing house, everything is supposed to change, everything is supposed to get better. Ten days later, the senator revises his will. A precautionary measure: in

early July he must undergo surgery for persistent bladder complaints. In 1891 this is a far riskier venture than it would be today. The organization and surgical specialization of hospitals are still in their infancy, and so the ballroom of the family villa is converted into an operating room. The doctors soon see what is going on and abort the operation. Heinrich Mann Sr. has advanced bladder cancer. Nothing can be done for him. Three months later he is dead, leaving behind a stunned Lübeck mourning its finance senator, a firm without its head, and above all a deeply shaken family: his wife and five children, among them the barely one-year-old Viktor.

Shortly thereafter the will is opened. It's a document full of ambiguities. The father had not trusted anyone in the family to carry on the firm. His will orders it to be liquidated. One could well imagine a different course: that after some years in which the family remained a silent partner and the firm was run by others—the partner Eschenburg, for instance—one of the sons might enter the business and eventually take it over. The father decided against this.

The words he appended to his last will, in an explanatory letter concerning his eldest son Heinrich, are harsh and breathe the anger of the most recent confrontations. One should oppose his “inclinations” toward “so-called literary pursuits.” He lacked the “prerequisites”: a university education, thorough knowledge. “The background of his inclinations is dreamy self-abandonment and a lack of consideration for others, perhaps from insufficient reflection.”

His son Thomas fares better: he is “receptive to calm ideas,” possesses a “good disposition,” and will “find his way into a practical profession.” But even the sixteen-year-old is not seen as a future successor. The father trusts neither one nor the other with it. In those days, his wife or daughters are, in any case, out of the question. And Viktor is still struggling with the task of stacking four blocks into a tower.

Everything is to be sold, then—Senator Mann had already prepared the way. He himself had sold his parents’ house on Mengstrasse after his mother died, scarcely a year before him. The later “Buddenbrook House,” long—also under his own stewardship—the firm’s headquarters and a place where the children spent part of their childhood, is no longer in family hands. The house the family had built a few years earlier, not far away on Beckergrube, is to be sold as well. The firm is taken over by his partner Eschenburg, who continues it under a new name as a successor company and, over the next twenty years, becomes a millionaire.

The assets the father leaves behind are to be administered and invested by trusted Lübeck business associates. His widow and the children are to live off the interest income. For Julia Mann this means an annuity: she may dispose of larger sums only in exceptional cases and in consultation with the trustees—for example, when a daughter marries and a dowry is to be paid. A guardian is appointed for the underage children. By the standards of the time, and by those of the senator, the widow and mother alone is not capable of making major decisions. Heinrich Mann too, at the age of twenty, is still considered a minor, until he reaches legal adulthood at twenty-one.

Heinrich Mann Sr. addresses admonitory words to his wife. Toward all the children she is to “show firmness and keep them all dependent.” She must not become “weak,” he emphasizes once again. “On this I place my entire hope.” No writing, dreaming, or letting oneself drift; instead, a practical, solid orientation. Should his wife “begin to waver,” he adds, she is to “read *King Lear*.” The well-read merchant instructs his wife to oppose the children’s literary ambitions—Heinrich’s in particular—and recommends as fortification literature itself: Shakespeare’s dramatic family conflict over inheritance and power.

The disposition of the estate is no less ambiguous. The father’s commercial mistrust of their abilities, expressed in the liquidation of the firm, is perceived by both sons. They carry this

burden with them throughout their lives. The urge to prove themselves worthy of him in their own way becomes a formative motif, emanating from his figure, his early death, and his critical final words. At the same time, however, his arrangements ensure a secure livelihood, making a life outside a breadwinning profession possible in the first place. Heinrich Mann recognizes this immediately. Not long after his father’s death, he breaks off his traineeship at the S. Fischer publishing house. Finally free.

## LOVE AND SUFFERING, NOT ONLY LITERARY

During the period of the firm’s centenary, the father’s cancer, and his death, Heinrich Mann is not the only one preoccupied by other matters; his brother Thomas is too. When, at Easter 1890, he has to repeat the Untertertia, there’s another familiar face in the new class along with his friend Otto Grautoff, who has also been held back. Since autumn they have been attending dance lessons together, taking place in the homes of distinguished families and occasionally in the Manns’ villa as well. The handsome blond Armin Martens becomes all Thomas Mann can think about. He seeks contact with him and secretly writes poems giving expression to his feelings. Not entirely secretly: he sends the poems to his brother Heinrich—the admired almost-writer—in hope of criticism and encouragement.

Heinrich Mann turns to his friend Ludwig Ewers, lets him in on it as well, and sends him the poems. He asks him to “cautiously convey” the following words to his “promising brother.” Thomas’s latest poems embarrass him in the same way as only the poetry of August von Platen, “the knight of the holy arse”:

This unmanly, cloyingly sentimental “friendship” lyric twaddle

— —as I rested on your breast...

—as I wrapped my arm around my friend,

And rocked myself in sweet delight...

If *this* is *genuine* feeling (sad enough, if that is the case!)—then I say thanks for fruit,  
won't even take cheese, but instead take French leave.

What Heinrich Mann is alluding to here: in one of the ugliest literary disputes in the history of German literature, Heinrich Heine became embroiled with August von Platen in a war of words from which both emerged badly damaged. Platen attacked Heine with antisemitic slurs against his “synagogue pride” and his “garlic smell.” Heine struck back with attacks on Platen’s homosexuality, this “poet and warm brother” who had “never touched a woman” and was “more a man of backside than a man of head.” This, then, is where Heinrich Mann’s “knight of the holy arse” comes from. Whether he knows about Armin Martens or is merely passing judgment on his brother’s sentimental poem is unclear. It is equally unclear how Ludwig Ewers is supposed to find a way to convey the brother’s drastic words to Thomas Mann “cautiously.”

[CAPTION P. 35: *Heinrich, Carla, Thomas, and Julia Mann in 1889*]

Heinrich Mann has no sense for love—and certainly not for love of another kind. “As I...rocked myself in sweet delight” has a different meaning for him. He reports as much to his friend Ewers again and again, for instance when he writes from Dresden to the friend still stuck in Lübeck: “Not a trace of homesickness!” Set against this is “the physical pleasure-seeker” in him. “The theaters, concerts, cafés, brothels—life is simply too amusing!” In his letters to Ewers he muses on literature, on realism and naturalism, or a path away from these currents, and how art

can take hold of life and love. By love he means free love—and really sexuality. Can there be a free sexuality outside marriage and the brothel? Isn't that an interesting subject for a story?

Meanwhile, all these intense feelings tempt Thomas Mann not merely to new poems, but to action. He hands Armin a poem and confesses how he feels. Armin Martens doesn't know what to make of it—neither the declaration of love nor the poem. He does the worst thing that can happen when one person stands before another and declares his love: he laughs at him.

In Dresden, meanwhile, Thomas's brother Heinrich has for the moment set aside his efforts to become a poet. He now sets out in earnest to give the theme of free love shape in a story, and realizes in the process how “subjective and personal” it turns out to be for him. A nameless son from a respectable family has broken off his schooling and is apprenticed as a bookseller. He actually wants to become a writer. A young saleswoman in a tobacco shop catches his eye and appeals to him. After a visit to a brothel he feels ashamed of his “morbid sensuality,” feels himself “fallen,” and is on the verge of confessing to her. They grow closer. He senses an affinity between them: both in search of a life path, of freedom, of love.

Then the differences come to light. The saleswoman from modest circumstances has a sick mother and financial troubles; she owes money to her landlord. He pressures her to settle the debt with sex. The young man wants to help out of noble motives and gives her the money. Shortly thereafter they end up in bed. The next morning he struggles with himself and with the course the love story has taken, feeling trapped in a bourgeois provider's role and a sense of obligation—when what he had wanted was freedom and independence. While he is pondering how to rid himself of the woman, a letter arrives. She has slept with the landlord, she writes, and in this way paid off her debt. She knows that her path will lead downward. She sends his money back. She wants to keep their love pure and in fond memory.

In November 1890, Heinrich Mann sends his story entitled “Haltlos” (“Without Restraint”) to his friend Ludwig Ewers. He explains his approach: not uplifting or didactic literature, nor a naturalist view of the world and its condition, but rather a sober look into the souls of his characters—“Fontane’s school.”

In the same letter that accompanies “Haltlos” to Lübeck, Heinrich Mann turns to his brother’s misfortune. The matter with Armin Martens has reached as far as Dresden. Thomas Mann has written to his brother about it. But in Lübeck as well, the episode involving poem, declaration of love, and rejection is unlikely to have remained secret. Armin Martens is not known for tact or discretion. “My poor brother Tomy.” He wants to know his older brother’s opinion, Heinrich Mann writes to his friend, and Ewers is to pass it on. Once again the indirect route via Ludwig Ewers: a direct letter to his brother at the family home evidently risked unwanted readers.

Heinrich Mann gives his friend his view of Thomas Mann’s unhappy love story, the rejection, and above all what he regards as a misdirected passion: “Just let him reach the age when he’s unsupervised and—well-off enough to give expression to his puberty. A proper sleeping cure with a passionate girl who isn’t yet too worn down—that’ll cure him.” But on no account is Ewers to communicate it to him in this form. “Ironize the whole business; that helps. Don’t take anything tragically seriously!” He should simply tell him it’s “nonsense”—“I think that suffices.”

The literary psychologist of free love, in his story “Haltlos,” takes stock of the woman’s constrained, unfree situation, but also, in a remarkably self-critical way, of his own role as a man and as a wealthy bourgeois son. All this is marked by stylistic weakness and literary immaturity and is not published during his lifetime; at the same time, the story is psychologically striking in its empathy. With an eye to what is to come, one can already discern here the beginnings of how

Heinrich Mann links erotic and political questions, directing his critical gaze less toward individual responsibility than toward the political system itself.

Even empathy has its limits. For his brother’s love—for the insecurity, the confusion, the distress—Heinrich Mann has no understanding, none whatsoever: “a proper sleeping cure”; “nonsense.”

This is what things look like in 1890: sixteen-year-old Thomas Mann has fallen in love with a boy. He has written poems about it, confessed his love to the boy, and been rejected. His first great love ends in humiliation and probably even with mockery in the schoolyard and whispering behind his back. And with questions: What is wrong with me? Why do all the others fall in love with girls, talk about it, trade stories and advice? Why is the world full of all these boy–girl stories—literature, music, the visual arts? And why does none of it interest me at all? Where can I find information about what preoccupies me and what I long for? Who has answers?

[CAPTION PP. 38–39: *Thomas Mann in the class photograph of the Untertertia—by today’s reckoning, eighth grade—at the Katharineum Gymnasium in Lübeck, probably taken at the beginning of the school year, that is, shortly after Easter 1890. He is seated at the front left on the floor. His closest boyhood friend and companion in fate, Otto Grautoff, sits behind him on the bench, second from the left. For the moment, Otto has linked arms with someone else. Thomas Mann, who will turn fifteen that June, and Otto have just been held back, Thomas Mann for the second time—but only he looks like a pupil who has wandered into the wrong classroom and ended up with a younger cohort by mistake. Among all the Gymnasium students here, who seem to be displaying emotional states ranging from defiant submission to an urgent need to get out of there, also stands the one Thomas Mann has, to his own confusion, just fallen in love with—his first great*

*love: Armin Martens, the small blond boy, top row, second from the right. It is to him that Thomas Mann reveals himself, a poem in hand. It does not end well, and it has consequences—literary ones as well.]*

Certainly not the older brother he has turned to. Heinrich Mann has problems of his own that concern him more closely. His “morbid sensuality” preoccupies him not only as a literary theme. Again and again, his letters to Ludwig Ewers dwell on his own sexual desires and how he carries them to the brothel. One day he writes that he is “in disarray,” that he has had a “terrible night”: “The woman was completely mad, and I feel utterly drained.” A few months after the “sleeping cure” letter, Heinrich Mann lectures that “love” is nothing but “illusion, like everything else.” It is really only a matter of “stimulations of the sexual nerves.” With which suitable “object of satisfaction” one gets down to business is inconsequential. For women it is no different, as that well-known “product of the rubber industry” demonstrates.

The self-assurance is only asserted. Heinrich Mann is troubled by his own drives and has sought expert advice. He reads the book *Psychopathia Sexualis* by the famous Richard von Krafft-Ebing. The physician and psychiatrist, a professor in Vienna, wrote one of the first foundational works of modern sexology and focuses in particular on what he understands as aberrations of sexual life. He coins terms and concepts that were new at the time but are now part of the common lexicon—“sadism,” for instance, or “masochism.” Intended originally only for jurists and physicians, the book has long since become a bestseller with the general public and is translated into many other languages. The demand for information about sexuality and its darker sides is enormous. A little voyeurism helps as well: what interesting case histories! And the book is well written too.

Heinrich Mann reads with particular attention the chapter on “hyperesthesia,” the abnormally heightened sexual drive. Krafft-Ebing writes that “desire increases in proportion to the frequency with which the object changes,” he tells Ewers. “But with me it’s the opposite.” He has met a prostitute whose “lush slenderness” drives him “to excess.” His hyperesthesia is fueled by this one “object,” not by changing ones. But perhaps Krafft-Ebing is right after all: already in the following letter Heinrich Mann reports at length on sex with different prostitutes and on how only a lack of money has prevented him from continuing. He hopes Ewers will not take his letter as a “gentlemen’s anecdote.”

Thomas Mann takes a while to recover from the Armin shock. Then he falls in love again, once more with a fellow pupil—one not in his grade, whom he sees only occasionally in gym class—of all times, during those hated periods—and more often in the schoolyard. He has to contrive an encounter in order to get closer to Williram Timpe. So one day, before drawing class, he goes over to Willri—as he calls him, or as he is generally known among the students—and speaks to him. He asks whether he might borrow a pencil for the drawing lesson, and is given one. After class he goes back to Willri and returns the pencil.

That’s it. That’s the whole love story with Willri. Thomas Mann will never confess his love to him, never send him poems, and nothing is known of any further attempts at conversation or closeness. And yet he will remember him as a great love and will later think of him again and again. He lives on in literature too: a love from a distance, full of longing and kept at a safe remove. That for a long time he kept as a memento the shavings from sharpening the pencil Willri had lent him is something Thomas Mann, even at seventy-five, would still recall in his diary.

[**CAPTION P. 42:** *Williram Timpe, around 1895. “Willri” is Thomas Mann’s second, secret schoolyard love. He borrows a pencil from him as a pretext to speak to him. How this becomes literature later emerges in The Magic Mountain—and later still in Susan Sontag.*]

Love must be a secret—that is one lesson of the Armin experience. What further distinguishes the love for Willri from that for Armin is that Thomas Mann may still have dismissed his passion for Armin as a youthful aberration, as pubescent eroticism, a phase—much as Heinrich Mann did with his condescending advice about a “sleeping cure.” Now, with Willri, it’s definitively clear that this is not a phase. And finally: caution in choosing whom to confide in. The admired older brother is quite obviously not the right person.

This time Thomas Mann has a different confidant—and even a witness. His friend Otto Grautoff likely learned of the Armin episode only afterward, when advice and consolation were needed to endure the rejection and certainly the mockery of their classmates. This time Otto is standing beside him in the schoolyard as he seeks contact with Willri, talks with him about this love, and will thereafter always be cited by Thomas Mann as a witness to his passion when he recalls Willri. What decisively eases matters—and the conversation—is that Otto Grautoff knows how Thomas Mann feels, blissful and lost at once. He is not merely a witness; he is a companion in fate. He too falls in love with boys.