

Thomas Mann, “Against Thickheadedness and Retrograde Behavior: A Wish Made to Humanity” (1927)

Abstract

Thomas Mann’s (1875-1955) ambivalence toward mass society and belated support of the republic derived from a tension between his aesthetic sensibilities and his political ideals. In this short essay, published simultaneously in Sweden and Berlin in December 1927, Mann warns of the growing threat of anti-civilized political barbarism, which he interprets as a consequence of a general lack in intelligence and willingness to learn from past mistakes.

Source

Making a wish to humanity, that is, to today’s human society, on the occasion of the New Year? And we are only granted one while there is so much to wish for? That means we have to make a focused and large-scale wish in order to cover everything desirable with this one wish. Let’s pull ourselves together then!

Intelligence – I think that’s it. I believe it has never been more necessary for the welfare of humankind – and particularly the European part of humankind – than today. And if I were asked to further define the kind of intelligence I am speaking of, the best I could do would be to call it a willingness of mind – in a spirit of conservation.

Today there is only one kind of conservatism deserving of its name. It is the one which protects our civilization from its demise, which wishes to “conserve” it against catastrophes which threaten it and would equal its extinction. That they are indeed threatening it should have been made credible by those who have already injured it, but who will have been merely the prelude to an unprecedented razing should human society, and specifically European society, believe the incidents which had descended upon it and which it comfortably feels it is recovering from rather quickly, to be the end of the story, and that with regard to the future it could indulge in a kind of optimism allowing it any foolishness, any thickheadedness and retrograde behavior, any oafish arrogance as well as any silly play with fire. This kind of optimism, widespread among humanity, is absolutely misguided for the following reason.

There is at all times a considerable distance between reality or matter, the state the large majority of mankind still persists in and from which it hesitatingly transforms into new states, and the mind, that is, the level of insight already gained by the highest human achievements. Matter is tough, dull, suspicious, of necessity slow and cautious, hindered by itself, while the mind is lively and agile, passionate, impatient, and prone to weariness: it has often been the case that the mind was already “done” with a new idea and at least tempted to advance to new and more progressive things before matter had remotely caught up with it and begun to adjust to that level of insight which the mind was yearning to leave behind already; indeed, all its morality, its self-discipline, its sociability, and its goodness actually consists in not becoming bored with ideas before they have been realized. For a reality forfeiting all contact with the mind, a mindless and godless, irredeemably retarded reality whose circumstances are in crass disparity with the “true”, i.e. intellectually achieved level of insight, would be in danger – and we are expressing ourselves coolly and calmly here – it would be doomed, by law of nature it would be exposed to certain dynamic reactions resulting from exaggerated and unhealthy tensions.

It seems that never before has the discrepancy between matter and mind, the tension between what is

considered possible in reality and humanity's "true" intellectual level of insight been so scandalous, dangerous, morbid, and fatal as today – and while the large majority of humankind is not even remotely aware of it. They believe themselves to be recovering and in a state of "restoration" from the embarrassing incidents which apparently affected them entirely by accident, and they indulge in fatuities that would make an intelligent dog weep without imagining in their wildest dreams the disasters guaranteed to happen if, instead of their insipid skylarking, they do not seriously make haste to catch up with the mind and reasonably adjust the circumstances of their reality to its insights and demands. This is what I meant by "intelligence" and a willingness of the mind in a spirit of conservation earlier. Only a preventive intellectualism concerned with adaptation and timely accommodation is capable of saving civilization from its demise, and every conservatively minded person, that is everyone who does not want catastrophe but reason, progression and progress – far from encouraging the refractoriness of stupidity – must absorb a good deal of revolutionary will these days, he must in large part refuse the existing yet outdated and bear the accusation of radicalism rather than contribute to a deepening of the portentous rift between reality and mind.

Source: Thomas Mann, "Gegen Dickfelligkeit und Rückfälligkeit: Wunsch an die Menschheit" (1927), in Thomas Mann, *Essays*, Vol. 3: *Ein Appell an die Vernunft 1926–1933*, ed. Hermann Kurzke and Stephan Stachorski, Frankfurt a/M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994, 75–77.

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Recommended Citation: Thomas Mann, "Against Thickheadedness and Retrograde Behavior: A Wish Made to Humanity" (1927), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-4647>> [March 16, 2026].