

Thomas Mann, “The German Republic” (October 13, 1922)

Abstract

Thomas Mann (1875-1955) remains one of Germany’s most celebrated writers, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929. At the outbreak of the First World War, Mann, a conservative, had supported Germany’s war effort, believing that Germany should stand up to France and Russia. When the political violence that shaped the early years of the Weimar Republic claimed the lives of several members of its government, however, Mann felt a responsibility to speak up in support of the Republic and its humanitarian values. The assassination of foreign minister Walther Rathenau, one of the Weimar era’s most capable politicians, by members of the right-wing, antisemitic terrorist organization *Organisation Consul* (O. C.) on June 24, 1922, came as a particular shock to Mann.

In a speech he gave in Berlin on October 13, 1922 on the occasion of playwright Gerhart Hauptmann’s 60th birthday (who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1912), Mann appeals to the youth of Germany, emphasizing the importance of the Republic and its democracy for Germany’s future humanity and culture, and warning of the destructive power of war and clinging to the past. Mann’s speech, an excerpt of which is available here, was published in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, one of the major liberal German newspapers of the time.

Source

The German Republic

You were among my listeners, Gerhart Hauptmann—may I remind you?—when I was privileged to speak one day before the University of Frankfurt during the Goethe celebrations. My subject was culture and cultural loyalties. In other words, my subject was our humane tradition. You sat in the front row, and behind you the tiers of seats rose almost to the ceiling, crowded with German youth. That was excellent; so may it be again today. Once more, though today only thanks to my imagination, I see you before me as you then sat and I speak to you upon your birthday. And raising my head a little higher, I see the hosts of German youth there too, pricking up their ears; for it is to them that I am speaking today, above your head, it is to them I have something to say, with them that I have, perhaps—in the sense of the common phrase—a bone to pick. [...] I will persevere to the end, for I have set my heart and my mind on winning you over. German youth must be won over, so much is fact; and they are to be won, that must be a fact too, since they are not bad but only a little stiff-necked and defiant and prone to shuffle their feet.

[...]

War is romantic. No one has ever denied the mystic and poetic element residing in it. But today only the insensible would deny that it is utterly debased romanticism, an utter distortion of the poetic. To save our national feeling from falling into disrepute, to keep it from becoming a curse, we must learn to understand that a warlike and brawling spirit is not its whole content but more and more absolutely a cult of peace in accord with the mysticism and poetry in its nature.

I must beg you, young men, not to take this tone. I am no pacifist, of either the unctuous or the ecstatic school. Pacifism is not to my taste, whether as a soporific for the soul or as a middle-class rationalization of the good life. It was not Goethe’s, either, or would not have been; yet he was a man of peace. I am no Goethe; yet a little, distantly related somehow or other, as Adalbert Stifter put it, I “belong to his family.” The side of peace is my side too, as being the side of culture, art, and thought, whereas in a war vulgarity

triumphs [...] not alone, not alone, I know, so be quiet!—but as things now are in the world, and as the human being is, war is not much else today. The peoples of the world are old and sophisticated, their epic and heroic stage lies far in the past, any attempt to return to it involves a desperate revolt against the decree of time and constitutes a spiritual insincerity. War is a lie, its issues are a lie; whatever honorable emotion the individual may bring to it, war itself is today stripped of all honor, and to any straight and clear-eyed vision reveals itself as the triumph of all that is brutal and vulgar in the soul of the race, as the archfoe of culture and thought, as a blood orgy of egoism, corruption, and vileness.

[...]

My aim, which I express quite candidly, is to win you—as far as that is needed—to the side of the republic; to the side of what is called democracy, and what I call humanity, because of a distaste I share with you for the meretricious overtones of the other word. I would plead with you for it, in the sight of this man and poet here before me, whose genuine popularity rests upon the loftiest union of folk and human elements. For I could wish that the face of Germany, now so sadly drawn and distorted, might once more show lineaments like his, this poet's face, which still displays so many traits of that high trustworthiness which we connect with the German name.

[...]

Our students, our student associations, by no means lack democratic tradition. There have been times when the national idea was far from coinciding with the monarchical and dynastic; when they were in irreconcilable opposition. Patriotism and republic, so far from being opposed, have sometimes appeared as one and the same thing; and the cause of freedom and the fatherland had the passionate support of the noblest youth. Today the young, or at least considerable and important sections of them, seem to have sworn eternal hatred to the republic and forgotten what might have been once upon a time—for remembering must have exercised a restraining effect upon such hatred.

[...]

The republic is our fate; the only correct attitude to which is *amor fati*, none too solemn a phrase for the content, for it is no light fate. Freedom, so called, is no joke, I do not say that. Its other name is responsibility; the word makes it only too clear that freedom is truly a heavy burden, most of all for the intellectual.

[...]

The State has become our business; a situation profoundly hated by considerable sections of citizens and young people who will simply have none of it because, forsooth, it did not come to birth in triumph and the exercise of free choice but in defeat and collapse, making it seem bound up forever with weakness, shame, and foreign domination. “We are not the republic,” these patriots tell me, averting their faces. “The republic is foreign domination—insofar (why cannot we too quote Novalis?) as weakness is only the other side of foreign power, taking the upper hand, controlling, setting its mark.” True, true. But in the first place it is also true, as the poet says, that “a man can ennoble everything, make it worthy of himself, by dint of willing it”—a very true saying, very fine, and almost sly in the bargain, a shrewd expression of aptitude for life. In the second place, it is not true, and I deliberately repeat that it is utterly and entirely untrue, that the republic as an inner fact (I am not now referring to established public law) is the creation of defeat and humiliation. It is the issue of honor and exaltation.

[...]

Students and citizens, your resistance to the republic and the democracy is simply a fear of words. You shy at them like restive horses; you fall into unreasoning panic at the sound of them. But they are just

words: relativities, time-conditioned forms, necessary instruments; to think they must refer to some outlandish kind of foreign humbug is mere childishness. The republic—as though it were not still and always Germany! Democracy! As though one could not be more at home in that home than in any flashing and dashing and crashing empire! Have you heard the *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* lately? Nietzsche made the scintillating remark about it that it was “directed against civilization” and incited “the Germans against the French.” But meanwhile it is democratic through and through, as pronouncedly and exemplarily as Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is aristocratic. It is, I repeat, German democracy; its honest-hearted pomp and circumstance, its fervid romanticism, are evidence that the expression *German democracy*, so far from being an offence to nature or a logical impossibility, is as a compound organically correct, as correct as perhaps only one other combination could be—I mean the *German people*.

[...]

What you will answer me now, I very well know. You will say: “No, no—that is precisely what it is not. What has the German soul to do with democracy, republic, socialism, let us boldly say Marxism? All this economic materialism, this fine talk about the ‘ideological superstructure’ and the rest of the nineteenth-century twaddle, all this is simply childish now. It would be unfortunate if it came to be realized in fact at a time when it had become intellectually defunct! And is not the same true of the other fine things for which you are most surprisingly trying to stir up the enthusiasm of German youth? Do you see the stars above us? Do you know and revere our gods? Do you know who were the heralds of our German future—Goethe and Nietzsche, were they liberals, pray? [Friedrich] Hölderlin and [Stefan] George—is it your notion that they were democratic spirits?”—No, they were not. Of course, of course, you are right. My dear friends, you behold me crestfallen. I was not thinking of Goethe and Nietzsche, Hölderlin and George. Or, rather, I was thinking of them to myself, and asking myself which is the more absurd notion: to plead for the republic in their name, or to preach the restoration in their name as well.

[...]

Now you are angry; if the presence of certain highly placed personages did not restrain you, you would shout at me: “And what about your book? What about your antipolitical, antidemocratic meditations of the year 1918? Renegade, turncoat! You are eating your own words, you are riding for a fall! Come down from the platform, and stop having the effrontery to think that the words of an unprincipled apostate can win us over!”

My dear friends, I am still here. I have still something to say that seems to me good and important. As for the fall and the betrayal, that is not quite a fair way to look at it. I retract nothing. I take back nothing essential. I told the truth and tell it today.

[...]

I am in fact a conservative; that my natural occupation in this world is to preserve not to destroy—in the sense that Novalis defined in an aphorism, with both delicacy and force: It may be at certain times needful that everything should fall into a fluid state, to bring about new and necessary mixtures and produce a fresh and purer crystallization. But it is just as indispensable to moderate the crisis and prevent total liquefaction. A stock must remain, a kernel for the new mass to gather round and shape itself into new and beautiful forms. Then let what is solid concentrate even more firmly, thus preventing an excess of caloric, the crumbling of the bony structure, the wearing out of the essential fabric. Well, just such a concentration of the solid, such a provision against the destruction of the essential fabric, was this book of mine, in just such a way did it seek to conserve. It was conservative, not in the service of the past and reaction but in the service of the future. Its concern was the preservation of that stock, that kernel around which the new might crystallize in beautiful forms. The fever of revolution, inevitable and

indispensable as it always is, must not be thought of as an end in itself, a condition to be perpetuated; and the statement applies no less to the solidification of the next stage, which seems to be hostile to the future but must at the right time be fluid enough to permit the fixed and the flowing coming together to form a just peace for the sake of life and the new form.

[...]

Let me just interpolate here my opinion of [Oswald] Spengler's work—this seems a suitable place. His *Decline of the West* is the product of enormous power and strength of purpose; scientific, rich in *aperçus*; a high-brow romance, vastly entertaining and reminiscent of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* not only in the musicianly method of its composition. That is to rate the book very high. At the same time, I have my own democratic opinion about it: I find its attitude false, arrogant, and "convenient" to the point of extreme inhumanity. It would be different if this attitude were a cloak for irony, as I at first supposed; if its prophesying were a polemical technique. Certainly one can prophesy about a thing like civilization—according to Spengler the inevitable, biological endcondition of every culture, including the present Occidental one—but not that it may come to pass, no, in order that it may not come to pass; to anticipate and prevent it as a sort of mental exorcism. I thought that was the case here. But when I found out that this man wanted his prophecies of death and petrification taken in sober earnest; that he was instructing the young not to waste their emotions and passions on culture, art, poetry, and such things but to hold fast to what must inevitably be the future, which they must will in order to will anything at all, to technique and mechanics, administration, perhaps politics; when I perceived that the hand this man reached out towards the yearnings and wishes of the human being was actually just the old, natural Satanic claw, then I averted my own face from so much inhuman hate and put the book out of my sight, lest I find myself admiring so harmful and deadly a work.

[...]

Between the Calamus songs and [Novalis's] "Hymns to the Night" lies the difference between life and death—or, if Goethe's definition is the right one, between the classic and the romantic. "Sympathy with death": such a formula does not of course comprehend the whole strange shimmering complex of romanticism, but it does define its heights and depths.

[...]

No spiritual metamorphosis is more familiar to us than that where sympathy with death stands at the beginning and resolve to live and serve, at the end. The history of European decadence and aestheticism is rich in examples of this thrust through to the positive, to the people, to the state—particularly in the Latin countries.

[...]

Let us drop this question of the French. A people who had the wit to invent nationalism would have enough to abandon its invention. As for us, we shall do well to be concerned with ourselves and with our own—yes, let us with modest satisfaction use the word—our own national concern. I will call it again by its name—an old-fashioned one, yet today bright with youthful allure: humanity. It is the mean between aesthetic isolation and undignified leveling of the individual to the general; between mysticism and ethics; between inwardness and the state; between a death-bound negation of ethical and civic values and a purely ethical philistine rationalism; it is truly the German mean, the Beautiful and Human, of which our finest spirits have dreamed. We are honoring its explicit, legal form, whose meaning and aim we take to be the unification of our political and national life, when we yield our still-stiff and unaccustomed tongues to utter the cry: "Long live the republic!"

[...]

Source: Thomas Mann, *Order of the Day*, trans. H.T. Lowe Porter, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1942, in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 105–09. Reprinted with the permission of University of California Press.

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