

Thomas Mann's First *Vision* of Woman (1893)

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image: 1. a physical likeness or representation of a person, animal, or thing, photographed, painted, sculptured or otherwise made visible. 2. an optical counterpart or appearance of an object, such as is produced by a lens, or the passage of luminous rays through a small aperture and their reception by a surface. 3. a mental representation; idea; conception. 4. a mental representation of something previously perceived, in the absence of the original stimulus. 5. form; appearance; semblance: God created man in his own image. 6. counterpart; copy. 7. symbol, emblem. 8. a type; embodiment. 9. a description of something in speech or writing: he created some of the most beautiful images in the language. 10. an idol/icon. 11. a figure of speech, especially a metaphor or simile. [...]

Webster's Encyclopedic Un-
abridged Dictionary of the
English Language.
(New York: 1989) 711.

In *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit makes several sweeping statements about the status of female characters and the role of the female image in European literature. "In their primary role as 'power-house,'" he writes, "women simply don't exist in Western literature. [...] In their secondary role, as a force of absorption, however, they have been a central concern — perhaps *the* central concern — of that literature. It is usual — and rightly so — to speak of a history of the female *image* in European literature, and of a history of the men who made it" (272-73). Theweleit describes the function of this image with relation to desire as follows: "[I]n all European literature (and literature influenced by it), desire, if it flows at all, flows in a certain sense

through women. In some way or other, it always flows in relation to the image of woman" (272). To accept these statements without reservation would be to ignore the literature beyond canonical boundaries; to deny them completely would be absurd. Theweleit's assertions are an invitation to question the matter further. I look at Theweleit's pronouncements through the texts of one male canonical author, Thomas Mann.

This paper is part of a larger project, namely my dissertation, "The Woman in Mann: Criticism Through Non-conformity." My thesis is basically that when characters do not conform with traditional gender (stereo)-types in Mann's works, they become critics — explicitly of their positions in the texts, and implicitly, of an underlying patriarchal system in Mann. After defining the (stereo)-typical and therefore expected behaviors of typical male and typical female characters in Mann, I limit my study to female characters who do not conform to their expected roles. The first female who does not completely conform to her anticipated gender role in Mann's writing is in his first short story, or as he called it, *Prosa-Skizze*, entitled *Vision* from 1893.

Since this story is only two pages long, there is not much space to set up a framework of stereotypical gender behaviors. In my dissertation I draw from a larger group of texts, from which I am able to delineate the typical, or stereotypical, in a more thorough manner than would be possible from just one short story. The term "typical," when used with respect to characters in Mann, refers to those characters, both male and female, whose behavior generally corresponds to patriarchal (stereo)types. Male characters who fall into this category recurrently possess some combination of the following traits. They are powerful, at least in the traditional sense of having control over others and conforming to the traditional patriarchal hierarchy. Those powerful men are served by other characters in the works, men and women alike. Since typical Mann characters are from bourgeois backgrounds, their power usually includes financial power. They have money and the power to decide how to spend it. Such characters are also portrayed as representatives of their families or businesses (usually both) in the public sphere. Another characteristic typically ascribed to males in Mann's works is an almost unlimited decision-making authority, which is sanctioned by patriarchal society. These men

often act as judges of others. They are also sexual aggressors who are legitimized in their sexuality. Typical male characters in Mann, such as Hans Castorp in *Der Zauberberg*, are also allowed to go out into the world, incidentally without being judged harshly by their narrators. Such characters can simply be viewed as active, especially as opposed to the female characters, who are, as we shall see, often depicted as passive. Main characters in Mann, frequently males, are usually depicted as having an inner life, that is, their thoughts are more often related by the narrator than those of their female counterparts. They also tend to silence women, and in some cases speak for them.

The typical females in Mann are, understandably, the opposite of the typical males. They are portrayed in subordinate positions, also in the traditional sense of being controlled by men as mandated by patriarchal hierarchy. A typical woman is under the direct control of, first, her father and, later, her husband. These subordinated women are also financially dependent on men and have little say over the family finances. Women are representative of their families in the private — non-business — sphere rather than in the public sphere. A woman's reputation in society affects her family name. A "true" woman keeps the family name honorable. By nature of her situation, the typical woman in Mann has restricted decision-making authority. Even though she has limited power, a woman's actions are judged by others, usually males. Since men are usually the sexual aggressors, women are most often sexually passive. As an example serves the character Rosalie von Tümmeler in Mann's final story, *Die Betrogene* (1953), who describes her marital sex life as follows: "Tümmeler begehrte mich, als ich jung war, und ich ließ mir's gefallen, willigte in sein Werben, nahm ihn zur Ehe in seiner Stattlichkeit, und wir pflegten die Wollust auf sein Begehren" (901). Later, the sexual dynamics change dramatically for Rosalie von Tümmeler. But that is another story. Generally, women in Mann must either stay home or else they will be judged harshly. While it is a virtue for Hans Castorp to venture out and get to know the world, it is a vice for Clawdia Chauchat to do the same. Surely there are other factors involved, such as the fact that Chauchat is married and Castorp single, but the fact remains that woman of any marital status who travel alone are often judged by Mann's narrators and male characters as immoral. There is little depiction of women's inner life, and their voices are sometimes actively

muted, as in *Tristan* when Herr Klöterjahn tells his wife Gabriele, "Langsam, Gabriele, take care, mein Engel, und halte den Mund zu..." (218). He speaks for her; her words are silenced.

Obviously *Vision* offers more than I am able to discuss here. The set-up alone — that the narrator is unsure whether he is asleep or awake — could be discussed further, especially in light of the dream-like sequence that follows. On the other hand, perhaps this little story is simply a finger exercise, which "deutlich ihren Charakter als Probestück zu erkennen gibt," as Hans Vaget writes in the Thomas-Mann-Handbuch (553). Because of its potential connection to Theweleit's statement, both pro and contra, the story deserves some attention here.

Mann's first story, *Vision*, was published in the Lübeck school publication *Der Frühlingsturm*, of which Mann was an editor, in 1893. The clarity with which this unassuming piece makes my point is wonderful. The very title, *Vision* (1893), suggests that it might be a revealing place to examine visions or images. The story itself presents an image of a woman. The image of a female hand animates the male narrator. The woman herself need not be present; only her partial image is necessary. Moreover, the reader gets the impression that her "actual" presence in the story would disturb the narrator in his imagining of her. Her "actual" appearance would destroy the image. *Vision* is a conspicuous example of female image as impetus for male-dominated literature, or for Theweleit's idea of desire flowing through the image of woman.

At the same time, it is very possible indeed to flip the idea of "the history of the female image in European literature and of a history of the men who made it" (Theweleit 273) over onto itself. A man wrote this story, and obviously *he* created the image of a woman within it. But there is also an underlying current of the opposite tendency. This story is not a one-sided experiment in the conjuring by a male narrator of a female image. This image, which seems upon casual reading to be utterly created and controlled by the narrator, turns out not to be a force of absorption at all. Instead, *she* egests, thus inserting herself more strongly into the story. This occurs either because of or in spite of her actual physical absence — in as much as that is possible in writing and reading.

The brevity of *Vision* prevents either character from exhibit-

ing a full range of the expected gender behavior found elsewhere in Mann. But there are clues that point toward such embodiment. The implicit power structure here is patriarchal — from the outset, the narrator speaks about himself: "Wie *ich* mir mechanisch eine neue Zigarette drehe..." (9). At the end, he puts words in the female character's mouth: "Du liebtest mich doch..." (10). In between, she seems to demonstrate stereotypical gender behavior in submitting to his gaze.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator entrances himself in the smoke of his cigarette, presumably to relax and reach a state of *Ruhe*, somewhere between waking and dreaming. This becomes impossible almost immediately: "Aber nun ist die Ruhe zum Teufel. [...] Und mit all dem verwirrt steigt Vergessenes auf" (9). From this point on, the narrator is no longer in control of the images that appear before him. "Einst dem Sehnsinn Eingepprägtes, das sich seltsam erneut..." (9) takes shape in his view. As the image takes on more recognizable form, the narrator is restricted to a waiting posture. Finally, the image completes itself: "Nun ist es da, ganz deutlich, ganz wie damals, das Bild, das Kunstwerk des Zufalls. Aufgetaucht aus Vergessenem, wiedergeschaffen, geformt, gemalt von der Phantasie, der fabelhaft talentvollen Künstlerin" (9). This image has renewed itself — this is a peculiarity of the German reflexive form — but how can a vision appear if not through the envisioning of he who sees it? And how can I as a reader say who or what is in control of the image? These are not uncomplicated questions.

If I speak of the power struggle or control issues between male and female characters in the works of Thomas Mann, it is usually social power placed in the hands of the typical man, who in turn exerts it over the woman. Sexual power, in this case however, seems to be in the hands of the woman. In *Vision* it is literally concentrated in the hand of the woman, because that is all the reader sees of her. The male narrator entrances himself to a point where he is not sure whether he is awake or dreaming. Then the vision of a table, and a crystal goblet half-filled with gold appears. A hand appears in his vision:

Davor träumend hingestreckt eine Hand. Die Finger liegen lose um den Fuß des Kelches. Um den einen geschmiegt ein

duffsilberner Reif. Blutend darauf ein Rubin. Schon wo es nach dem zarten Gelenk im Formencrescendo Arm werden will, verschwimmt es im Ganzen. Ein süßes Rätsel. Träumerisch und regungslos ruht die Mädchenhand. (10)

The hand seems passive, but maybe it is more active than it appears.

Theweleit's idea that the image of woman acts as an absorber is destroyed on the literal level when she does not actually drink from the goblet. While we might be tempted to think that the male narrator controls the image, it is not so simple. Since her appearance is partial — only her hand and the lower part of her arm can be seen by both the narrator and the reader — she physically cannot drink and therefore cannot absorb.

Not only is the narrator's wished-for "Ruhe zum Teufel," but his command over the image has gone *zum Teufel* as well. It is practically a Frankenstein-like situation, where that which was created now threatens the creator. The female hand, the main image framed by the larger image of the tablecloth and fantastic goblet of gold, takes on a life of its own. "Träumerisch und regungslos ruht die Mädchenhand. Nur da, wo sich über ihr mattes Weiß weich eine hellblaue Ader schlänglet, pulsiert Leben, pocht Leidenschaft langsam und heftig" (Mann 10). This pulsating vein imparts life to the conjured-and-self-renewing image. It forces the narrator and the reader to see that the image does have its own life, at least in one important way. For the narrator, the vein represents life and passion, for the reader, it tells of the influence of this particular woman over the narrator. Even as the narrator claims that his *Blick* controls the pulsing of the vein, it is clear that this power results in favor of the female presence. "Und wie es meinen Blick fühlt, wird es rascher und rascher, wilder und wilder, bis es zu einem flehenden Zucken wird: Laß ab..." (10). I read this section as a depiction of masturbation, but it is not that simple. Even in such a banal description of male masturbation, the power struggle between the two characters in the story remains apparent. This is not just a man thinking of a beautiful woman in order to bring himself to sexual fulfillment. The moment he says — or better, thinks — "Laß ab," this woman, or this image, is not behaving according to gender expectations. Instead of being submissive and serving the man, she has become powerful enough to cause such great sexual tension

and emotional disruption in him that he practically has to beg her to stop. The image takes over here, just for a moment. The female character steps out of her expected role and the result is critique.

This critique is both explicit and implicit. First, the female character explicitly rebels against being forced into the submissive role of the (stereo-)typical woman. The power of sexual attraction, even toward her imagined image, dominates the narrator at this point. A momentary reversal of traditional power roles has to be read as critical of those roles. The implicit critique lies in the notion that the female character gets into a power position solely on the basis of her sexual attractiveness for the narrator. That is to say, she only gets control when he loses control. Therefore her control is obviously limited to moments when he tacitly grants it. This must be read as implicit critique of the patriarchal system. Even though she gets momentary authority, the framework of the story still reflects traditional patriarchal power structure. In the end, he puts words into her mouth, assuring himself that *at least* she loved him. There is no proof of that beyond him telling himself it must be so.

Since the story is plainly a rudimentary exercise in something akin to inner monologue, there is necessarily a power relationship between the first person narrator and the image that he conjures up in order to put content into the story. The control he implicitly necessitates over the image shifts to the image itself in such a way as to render the narrator powerless over his own story, at least for a moment. The moment the narrator says "Laß ab..." enacts his temporary powerlessness. If the female image controls the narrator, even just for a moment, then Theweleit's assertion about desire flowing through the image is wrong.

After the climax, a pearl is released from the bottom of the goblet, and it rises to the top, where it bursts into red flame. The narrator tries to hold on to the vision, but it disappears. Apparently the *Mädchenhand* allows itself to be seen only until his sexual fulfillment has been attained. As a consolation, the narrator claims that she had loved him: "Wie ich mich müde zurücklehne, zuckt Schmerz auf. Aber ich weiß es nun so sicher wie damals: Du liebtest mich doch....Und das ist es, warum ich nun weinen kann" (10).

This woman is a fragment of an imaginary woman, a projection of the narrator. She is obviously powerful, sexually stimulating and

therefore dangerous. It is a strange sort of power balance in that he has conjured up the vision, but even as image, she evidently has the power to control him temporarily, and then to remove her own image from his view. The result is that he is enabled to show emotion, something he probably could not have done without her. Still, since the story ends with yet another *ich* statement — “Und das ist es, warum ich nun weinen kann” — it remains primarily about the narrator. *Vision* is the beginning of Thomas Mann’s depiction of the female as sexually powerful. Certainly the narrator could have masturbated without aid of his vision, but the release of emotion was also important to him. And the source of this release was the memory of this woman. Until he calls her *du* — “du liebtest mich doch” — she was not a specific person, simply the vision of a *Mädchenhand*. Without naming her directly, the narrator does concede that it is this particular woman who aroused him and caused him sadness and regret. From this very early sketch, Thomas Mann shows a little of the power women are to gain over men in other works. The power is still quite immature, based only on her becoming sexually aggressive, a typical male trait in Mann. Even in this first story, the tendency of characters who do not conform to traditional stereotypically defined gender behaviors to undermine and criticize both their roles and the patriarchal hierarchy in Mann’s works is apparent.

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