Kai Sina

Reading *The Magic Mountain* in Arizona: Susan Sontag's Reflections on Thomas Mann

Abstract: Susan Sontag's visit to Thomas Mann on December 28, 1949 has, until now, tended to be treated as a parenthetical anecdote, a biographical curiosity – or, indeed, to be ignored altogether. The truly interesting question of the consequences of Sontag's encounter with Mann and his work has not even come close to being answered. This article explores how Sontag's – often partially autobiographical – statements concerning Thomas Mann combine reflections on authorship and storytelling with thoughts about Germany and, in particular, about the Shoah. Building on this, a further, more general question emerges: what role do the essayist's secular Jewish origins play in her encounter with the German writer?

DOI 10.1515/naha-2015-0010

"Afternoon, an interview with 3 Chicago students about the 'Magic Mountain'." No, Thomas Mann cannot have divined who was among these three students from Chicago whom he encountered on December 28, 1949. Indeed, the "interview" he was obliged to give was almost forgotten amid hectic everyday business: "Lots of post, books, manuscripts," the diary reports directly after mentioning the students' visit.[1] The Thomas Mann scholar Hans Rudolf Vaget describes this meeting as one of the "most surprising and charming episodes in that great chapter, Thomas Mann and America,"[2] and yet it seems to have passed the Nobel Prize winner himself by.

And how could it have been otherwise? On this December afternoon the enigmatic figure who would later dominate much of intellectual life not merely in the USA but also in Europe had yet to make her mark. Susan Sontag was sixteen years old when she met Thomas Mann and she was so utterly intimi-

1 Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher 1949–1950*, ed. Inge Jens (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1991), 143.
2 Hans Rudolf Vaget, *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2011), 342.

Kai Sina: University of Chicago, Department of Germanic Studies (Feodor Lynen Fellow) – Primary affiliation: University of Göttingen, Seminar für Deutsche Philologie, Käte-Hamburger-Weg 3, D-37073, Göttingen, E-Mail: kai.sina@phil-uni.goettingen.de

dated by the physical presence of her literary idol that even the memory filled her with shame: "Everything that surrounds my meeting with him has the color of shame," reads the first sentence of an autobiographical essay from 1987 that appeared in *The New Yorker* under the ambiguous title "Pilgrimage."[3]

The odds on a lively and stimulating encounter really could not have been worse: on the one hand, a highly renowned author, feted during his American exile as the 'Greatest Living Man of Letters'; and on the other, a somewhat precocious child prodigy who had discovered the novel *The Magic Mountain* two years previously and had since then worshipped its author as a literary "God" (she explicitly writes in her notebook on the day of their meeting: "I interrogated God this evening at six").[4] Given this asymmetry, it is hardly surprising that Thomas Mann barely registered the meeting, while for Susan Sontag it turned out to be an embarrassing affair that would continue to evoke shame for a long while – at least according to her account in "Pilgrimage." Even before the meeting, which her friend Merrill had arranged almost without asking her, she had sensed why she wished to avoid the encounter: "I had the impression (and this is the part of my recollection that is most touching to me) that Thomas Mann could be injured by Merrill's stupidity or mine …"[5] In the end, however, her curiosity seems to have won out over this shame-filled fear.

The short meeting only becomes "surprising and charming," as Vaget describes it, when viewed from a distanced, contemporary perspective. What occurred at 1550 San Remo Drive in Los Angeles on that Wednesday afternoon was, after all, nothing less than an encounter between two intellectual and literary icons of the twentieth century, who at first glance seem to have nothing in common. Is there a path that leads from Thomas Mann – the great author of the German bourgeoisie, the world famous writer living in exile and the powerfully eloquent opponent of Adolf Hitler – to Susan Sontag, who would rise in the sixties and seventies to become the star of New York's intellectual scene, an apologist for pop culture and the author of such provocative and polemical essays as "Against Interpretation" and "Styles of Radical Will"? Yet the two figures, who seen from today's perspective, appear to be poles apart, sat together on the afternoon of December 28, 1949 drinking tea. This is precisely what prompts the "surprise and charm" of the episode.

---

3 Here quoted from: Susan Sontag, "Pilgrimage," in *A Companion to Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain*, ed. Stephen D. Dowden (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999), 221–239: 221.

4 Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Early Diaries 1947–1963*, ed. David Rieff (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), 56.

5 Sontag, "Pilgrimage," 231.

Given their obvious intellectual and artistic differences, Susan Sontag's visit to Thomas Mann has tended until now to be treated as a parenthetical anecdote, a biographical curiosity – or, indeed, to be ignored altogether. Although one of the most important intellectual voices in the United States repeatedly referred to *The Magic Mountain* as "a transforming book, a source of discoveries and recognitions,"[6] the commentary on the novel in the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* of Thomas Mann's works, which includes a section dedicated to the text's reception in America, doesn't mention the name 'Susan Sontag' even once.[7]

The relevant edition of Sontag's essays of the sixties and seventies tells a rather different story; the index indicates a total of fourteen references to the name 'Thomas Mann' or to one of his works. Most of these appear in the essay "Illness as Metaphor," in which Sontag more than once quotes from Mann's work – mainly from *The Magic Mountain*, but also from *Death in Venice* and *Doctor Faustus*.[8] However, these references are yet to be taken particularly seriously: while contributions about Susan Sontag repeatedly allude to the formative experience of reading Thomas Mann for her intellectual development,[9] this assertion is usually not pursued further.[10]

It may be surprising, but the truly interesting question of the consequences of Sontag's encounter with Thomas Mann and his work has not even come close to being answered; indeed, the question has, until now, barely even been

---

6 Ibid., 227.

7 Compare Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, commentary by Michael Neumann (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2002), 121–123 and 125. One must consult American research on Thomas Mann to find even cursory allusions to Susan Sontag, as for example in the *Casebook* Vaget published on *The Magic Mountain*, which begins by referring to the "significant new perspectives" that Sontag opened up with her essay "Illness as Metaphor." See Hans Rudolf Vaget, ed., *The Magic Mountain: A Casebook* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

8 Compare: Susan Sontag, *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Library of America, 2013), 865.

9 Compare, for example: Daniel Schreiber, *Susan Sontag. Geist und Glamour. Biographie* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2008), 35. This book has recently been translated: *Susan Sontag: A Biography*, trans. David Dollenmayer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

10 Compare, however, the following comments: Schreiber, *Geist und Glamour*, 11, 29, 31, 34 f., 43, 177, 207, 230 f.; Jerome Boyd Maunsell, *Susan Sontag* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 22 f.; Carl Rollyson/Lisa Paddock, *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company 2000), 18, 39 and 314; Carl Rollyson, *Reading Susan Sontag: A Critical Introduction to Her Work* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 6 and 212; Barbara Ching, "'Not even a New Yorker': Susan Sontag in America," in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, ed. Barbara Ching and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 52–77, here 55–61; Liam Kennedy, *Susan Sontag: Mind as Passion* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 5 and 126.

posed. What we have is simply a proposition, stated most clearly in Vaget's book on *Thomas Mann, the American* (*Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner*) which posits the author of *The Magic Mountain* as "a constantly present point of reference from classical modernism" in Sontag's "enormously influential critical work"; in addition, Vaget emphasizes the extraordinary importance of the essayist and writer in shaping the – above all – American perception of Thomas Mann in the second half of the twentieth century: "Susan Sontag [indicated] that a familiarity with the work of Thomas Mann belonged as a matter of course to the mental toolkit of an intellectual. No other voice on America's literary scene could have defended this position with greater conviction than she."[11]

In this vein, Susan Sontag discussed Thomas Mann generally and *The Magic Mountain* specifically – sometimes merely in passing, at others in greater detail – on various occasions. The sources to which I have access cover the period from 1948 to 2003. The earliest comments are expressed by a highly gifted and extremely well-educated fourteen year old, whose diaries document her enthusiasm for Thomas Mann; the latest are articulated by an internationally famous essayist and representative of American intellectual life, who in her acceptance speech on being awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2003 once again returned to the beginnings of her literary and intellectual life.[12] Given this extended period of time, spanning almost six decades, Sontag's first documented opinion on Thomas Mann and his novel does not seem at all exaggerated: "[Mann's] *The Magic Mountain* is a book for all of one's life," she wrote in her diary on September 1, 1948, and from today's perspective the following sentence reads like a proclamation: "I know that!"[13]

If one analyzes the available sources in their chronological order, as I intend to do here, a whole spectrum of Sontag's thoughts, opinions and emotions relating to Thomas Mann and his work opens up. This spectrum is as broad as it is complex, and over time Sontag continues to adhere to some of these opinions while revising others. Within this context, I shall focus less on the overall picture, and on what is perhaps the most obvious theme, namely Sontag's deliberations on "Illness as Metaphor," with their repeated references to Mann's work. Rather, I intend to use three selected sources to focus on a specific intellectual constellation: my question is how Sontag's – often partially autobiographical – statements concerning Thomas Mann combine reflections on author-

11 Vaget, *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner*, 344.
12 Susan Sontag, "Acceptance speech," *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2003*, ed. Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels (Frankfurt/Main: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 2003), 7–13: 12.
13 Sontag, *Reborn*, 6.

ship and storytelling with thoughts about Germany and, in particular, about the Shoah. Building on this, a further, more general question emerges: what role do the essayist's secular Jewish origins play in her encounter with the German writer?

I

Susan Sontag's undated text "At Thomas Mann's" was presumably written shortly after her visit to San Remo Drive, and was discovered as a nine page-long, typewritten manuscript following her death.[14] To the best of my knowledge, it has thus far been completely ignored by critics, which is astonishing given that it enlightens us on important aspects of how Sontag became what she was: an author and storyteller, theorist and intellectual.

First, a brief description of the nature of this text: the events at Thomas Mann's house are communicated to the reader by a female "I" who at one point is explicitly identified as "Miss Sontag,"[15] but who functions as a fictional narrator rather than a sober reporter of the facts of the actual visit. The narrative elements range from the intentional use of leitmotifs via a well-crafted dialogue and vividly but ironically sketched characters to an entirely clichéd final sentence: "We ran down the driveway, got into the car and drove away into the dark green California nighttime."[16]

The external facts mainly accord with those that Sontag outlined in her personal notebook;[17] the visitor attends college at the University of Chicago, the visit to the famous author takes place over the Christmas vacation, contact is

---

14 Susan Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," in Susan Sontag Papers (Collection 612), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, Box 146, Folder 3. On the issue of dating: the text itself bears no date. The archive dates it to the year 1948, but this is not plausible, since the meeting with Thomas Mann took place in 1949. It appears to me that the text can be dated only imprecisely. It is reasonable to surmise that Sontag wrote her essay during her time at the College of the University of Chicago (she graduated in the spring of 1951). This is, for example, indicated by her inner-circle-language: the details of what the "special world of the College of the U[niversity] o[f] C[hicago]" (2) signifies here is fully revealed only to the initiated.

15 Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 7.

16 Ibid., 9.

17 Compare: Sontag, *Reborn*, 56–60. What we have here is a series of personal notes which originally were not entered into the diary, but rather written down in a notebook. (Susan Sontag, Notebook # 24, in: Susan Sontag Papers [Collection 612], UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, Box 123, Folder 8). David Rieff, Sontag's son and the

initiated by telephone – and so forth. Other details, however, suggest that the story has been fictionalized; in the narrative the meeting occurs on a Sunday, yet the actual date was a Wednesday. And while Sontag's diary mentions *two* friends accompanying her to Thomas Mann's (in her handwritten notes her friends Merrill and Jane are named),[18] the story mentions only *one*, a "Harry" who is also referred to as "Mr. Fisher"[19] – and who does not seem to represent an actual biographical figure.[20]

This, then, is a semi-fictional narrative text with an autobiographical basis. The text tells of "Susan" and "Harry," who have been friends since childhood. As college students and enthusiastic fans of Thomas Mann they attend a five week long course on *The Magic Mountain*, a book which they had both previously not merely devoured but had positively lived in: "we had really lived on that magic mountain."[21] At the end of the course, toward which they display an openly skeptical attitude ("we sat in the back row noisily whispering comments and criticisms to each other"),[22] they present their own interpretation of the novel to their tutor, which they deem to be as provocative as it is innovative. Following the tutor's muted response, both first of all react with self-doubt ("[p]erhaps we were stupid") and then pose the obvious question: "Why not ask Thomas Mann himself?"[23]

The reader, however, is at no point given the details of the eloquently argued interpretation of *The Magic Mountain*. Following her conversation with the admired writer the narrator even remarks, "I don't remember what my great reinterpretation of *The Magic Mountain* was. I remember Thomas Mann received it very quietly."[24] Instead, the essay brings into play a different and unexpected aspect, which entirely eclipses the question of the literary work's meaning, namely the question of whether it is possible to recapitulate an encounter like

---

editor of *Reborn*, extracted the notes from the notebook and integrated them into his edition of the diary (see the short editor's note on page 56).

18 Compare Sontag, Notebook # 24. It is unclear to me why Rieff replaces the names "Merrill, Jane and I" with the initials "E, F, and I" in his edition of the diary (Sontag, *Reborn*, 56).

19 Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 7.

20 We can at most venture a speculation here: possibly this is the amalgamation of two school friends of Sontag's, namely Peter, whose father was imprisoned and killed by the Gestapo (more on this biographical reference below) and the afore-mentioned Merrill, whose name offers assonance with "Harry." Sontag's biographer reports that Sontag shared her enthusiasm for Thomas Mann with both friends. See Schreiber, *Geist und Glamour*, 31 f. and 33 f.

21 Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 3.

22 Ibid., 2.

23 Ibid., 3.

24 Ibid., 9.

this faithfully. How can we appropriately – that is, truthfully – talk about meeting someone whom we had previously only known through pictures in books and newspapers? While her personal notebook had merely hinted at this theme ("[v]ery controlled, undistinguished face, exactly like his photographs"),[25] the essay addresses it in far greater detail and simultaneously raises the problems associated with it:

> Thomas Mann was sitting on the edge of the couch, very erect, heels together and knees apart, the right leg somewhat forward. It was the so familiar pose, a composite of his picture on all the dust jackets of all his books. He was wearing a grey gabardine suit, I think, and white shoes. I am sure of the white shoes, because he wears them in the pictures, too. One hand was casually placed on his right knee, and there was a large dog squatting beside him, as in the pictures. The part about the dog, now, as I recall it, seems so incredibly consistent that perhaps there wasn't any dog. Yet I'm sure there was. That was the first really awesome thing. Thomas Mann looked just like his picture.[26]

What had it been like again – white shoes? A dog? Sontag's description is noteworthy in that she conveys as a conflict of memory the fact that the real "person of the author" cognitively dissolves into the "figure of the author" presented by the media.[27] Although the actual encounter was still fresh in her memory, it remains unclear how Thomas Mann was dressed and whether a pet was actually present because the mental pictures and the narrator's personal experiences blend into one another, becoming indistinguishable. The form of the story, which brings together real – but improbable-seeming – occurrences and fictional elements, thus appears natural, even fitting. Or to put it differently: Sontag is clearly not overly concerned with documenting what actually happened – for what would she really have to report? The episode, which evades both reliable cognition and cogent recollection, gains a sense of unchallenged reality only in this free narrative form. Sontag's essay is thus, in part, a subtle plea for storytelling and its potential to shape reality.

Moving entirely away from the question of the most viable interpretation of *The Magic Mountain*, which she neither addresses nor, apparently, remembers, Sontag uses the visit to discuss a fundamental aspect of modern readers' perceptions of authors, namely the fact that a reader's cognitive image of an author

---

25 Sontag, *Reborn*, 56.

26 Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 7.

27 The differentiation between the "figure of the author," which is discursively created, and the "person of the author" who exists in the real world can be traced back, as is well known, to Roland Barthes, "The Death of The Author," *Aspen* 5/6 (1967): http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes.

is largely based on the images of this author created in the media. Coming from Sontag, this insight is important, given that she would intentionally position herself for the camera in a way that hardly any other intellectual figure of the 20th century had done, and in doing so created an iconic image of herself. Is this professional attitude toward the media related to her early encounter with Thomas Mann? This hypothesis would be worth discussing at greater length.[28] Of one thing, however, we can be certain: Sontag's critical thinking about the medium of photography, which she would spell out in her book *On Photography*, as well as in the essay "Regarding the Pain of Others," is already hinted at in this early text. "The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photograph"[29] – the issue which Sontag sketches in her short story can be traced back to this incisive sentence: any reliable memory of the encounter with Thomas Mann is displaced by the existence and mental presence of countless photos of him.

Sontag also subtly develops a further important aspect in her text. The narrator tells us that the task of getting her childhood friend Harry, "the boy across the street," to read *The Magic Mountain* and to engage in intellectual debate was not without its difficulties: "Making an intellectual out of Harry became my chief sadism during high school."[30] The problem arises because the two friends' personalities develop differently: rather than dedicating himself to erudite conversation and lofty literature, "Harry still wanted to play Gestapo and continue our search for a super-deadly ant-killer with my Chemcraft set."[31] By connecting the National Socialist secret police with the motif of the chemistry set and the "super-deadly ant-killer," Sontag creates an ambiguous image – and through this, a very clear allusion to the Shoah.

Bringing into play the technique of the leitmotif, with which Sontag was able to familiarize herself through the work of Thomas Mann (her copy of the novel is annotated accordingly),[32] she returns to the chemistry set at the end of

---

28 It would also be worth considering in this context Sontag's more general reflections about the star as a phenomenon created by the media: "I've shaken hands with everyone from Alicia Alonso to Efrem Zimbalist. And pretty disillusioning it was, too. Especially the women looked so much older than their photographs. No one of them really looked as I had imagined" (Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 4). The gender-specific implication of this statement would have to be discussed separately.

29 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 89, here with the well-known reference to the photographs of the Shoah.

30 Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 2.

31 Ibid.

32 See Sontag's comment in the margin, "introduction of leitmotifs," in the context of the opposition between the romantic East and the enlightened West, which is characteristic of *The*

the story. The author has saved as a souvenir the – now partly burnt – cigarette that Thomas Mann had offered his visitor, and comments: “It must be still among my diaries, sea shells, and Chemcraft sets in mother’s garage in Los Angeles.”[33] The very motif, which, together with the reference to the Gestapo, had functioned as an allusion to the Holocaust, is revisited in the context of meeting Thomas Mann. Sontag thus creates an overarching context that is subordinated to a concept never mentioned in the essay, namely Germany. German culture clearly appears to Sontag as a culture of extremes, which somehow combines fascism, genocide and great literature. In her 1980 essay “Syberberg’s Hitler,” a clear-sighted study about German culture and National Socialism, which includes some incidental and rather illustrative references to Mann’s work, she would use a quotation from Mann’s *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*) to contextualize this specific tension: “To be the spiritual battlefield of European antagonisms – that’s what it means to be German.”[34]

What begins as a personal reflection on an exceptional encounter and on questions of authorship and narrative proves at this point to be firmly anchored in the historical context of its time and thus gains a more universal meaning that transcends the personal. It was not until decades later, in 1987, that Sontag returned to these early reflections about Thomas Mann the writer and narrative, Germany and the Germans, the Shoah and great literature – in her essay memoir “Pilgrimage.”

II

What was it that attracted Susan Sontag to Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* so strongly that even at an early age she defined it as “a book for all one’s life,” and indeed, for all *her* life? In retrospect at any rate, the essayist remarks on the

---

Magic Mountain (Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, translated from the German by H. T. Lowe-Porter [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944], 154. The book is archived with Sontag’s papers: Susan Sontag Papers [Collection 612], UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, Box 330).

33 Sontag, “At Thomas Mann’s,” 9.

34 Sontag, “Syberberg’s Hitler,” in Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 137–165: 149, compare also: 150 and 152. In her essay “Fascinating Fascism” Sontag goes into greater detail; her focus here is on the fascist imagery of Leni Riefenstahl and the “aesthetics” of the SS (Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 73–105).

great potential for recognizing oneself in the novel, which rendered reading it a life-changing moment for her:

> There on the mountain, characters were ideas and ideas were passions, exactly as I'd always felt. But the ideas themselves stretched me, enrolled me in turn: Settembrini's humanitarian élan but also Naphta's gloom and scorn. And mild, good-natured, chaste Hans Castorp, Mann's orphaned protagonist, was a hero after my own unprotected heart, not least he was an orphan and because of the chastity of my own imagination. I loved the tenderness, however diluted by condescension, with which Mann portrays him as a bit simple, overearnest, docile, mediocre (what I considered myself to be judged by real standards). Tenderness. What if Hans Castorp was a Goody Two-Shoes (appalling accusation my mother had once let fly at me)? That was what made him not like but unlike the others. I recognized his vocation for piety; his portable solitude, lived politely among others; his life of onerous routines (that guardians deem good for you) interspersed with free, passionate conversations – a glorious transposition of my own current agenda.[35]

"The work is a great and satisfying one" – in her early notebook Sontag uses these words to describe the intuitive closeness she feels to the work of Thomas Mann, in this case with reference to *Doctor Faustus*.[36] This response is also expressed in "Pilgrimage"; indeed, it seems as though Sontag has finally found the right words to be able to vividly describe what she had felt in her teens but had only been able to express by paraphrasing: figures are bearers of ideas, and ideas are in turn passions – this is how it is in the novel, this is how it is for the reader.

Sontag describes reading the novel as a process of being expanded intellectually. She thereby alludes to a concept developed by the critic Lionel Trilling, whose essay "Art and Fortune" influenced her understanding of literature and which she read as early as 1948.[37] In this essay, Trilling discusses a very general phenomenon, namely "the nature of the novel,"[38] the essence of which he regards as communicating "ideas" and shaping them in narrative. The great novels create figures that can be defined as "mythical" in that they invariably stand for universally valid, differentiated intellectual concepts: "The great characters of American fiction, such, say, as Captain Ahab and Natty Bumppo, tend to be mythic because of the rare fineness and abstractness of the ideas they represent."[39] Trilling talks in this context, with reference to Balzac, of a "Litera-

35 Sontag, "Pilgrimage," 227.

36 Sontag, *Reborn*, 19.

37 See Sontag's relevant statements when being interviewed: Schreiber, *Geist und Glamour*, 32f.

38 Lionel Trilling, "Art and Fortune," in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), 245–267: 245.

39 Ibid., 251.

ture of Ideas,"[40] which can, on the one hand, certainly be generated through illusions ("controlled fantasy of storytelling"), but on the other hand should always also yield "liberating effects."[41] This was, according to Trilling, particularly necessary given the growing role that ideology was playing in American society after 1945,[42] "with its special form of unconsciousness."[43] In Trilling's view, the potential and the task of the novel consist of keeping thinking fluid, ideas flexible, and the spirit open; the novel is the medium of a *Liberal Imagination*.[44] Or in Sontag's own words, referring to her reading of *The Magic Mountain*: "the ideas themselves stretched me."

Following these explanations, Sontag proceeds to address the image of Thomas Mann in the USA of the Roosevelt-era, focusing above all on his position as representative of a different, better Germany – a position not only ascribed to him by others, but also acknowledged by Mann himself:

> A guest at the White House, introduced by the Vice-President when he gave a speech at the Library of Congress, for years indefatigable on the lecture circuit, Mann had the stature of an oracle in Roosevelt's *bien-pensant* America, proclaiming the absolute evil of Hitler's Germany and the coming victory of democracies. Emigration had not dampened his taste, or his talent, for being a representative figure. If there was such thing as a good Germany, it was now to be found in this country (proof of America's goodness), embodied in his person; if there was a Great Writer, not at all an American notion of what a writer is, it was he.[45]

Sontag reflects here on the perception of the author as a *public intellectual*, and does so in a tone that is certainly critical, and even cynical: as though the exaggerated image (as an "oracle") of Thomas Mann manufactured in Roosevelt's America and which the author himself had readily accepted ("his talent for being a representative figure") has absolutely nothing to do with the personal perception of the reader. But is this individualistic response surprising? For her

---

40 Ibid., 261.
41 Ibid., 258 f.
42 It is quite likely that Trilling is referring here to the persecution of real and supposed communists in the early phase of the Cold War, although his essay does not explicitly address this phenomenon.
43 Trilling, "Art and Fortune," 263.
44 This is the title of the volume in which Trilling included his essay "Art and Fortune" after it was first published in the magazine *Partisan Review*. Adam Kirsch outlines Trilling's essay project as follows: "[I]n *The Liberal Imagination* he [...] would write to educate the middle class, insist on the cultivation of mind, and defend the autonomy of literature." In this context, he considers "Art and Fortune" Trilling's most personal essay. Adam Kirsch, *Why Trilling Matters* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2011), 48.
45 Sontag,"Pilgrimage," 228.

reading of his *literary work*, which relies so heavily on her identification with it – "[f]or a month the book was where I lived"[46] – the public image of *the author* is insignificant. Or to put it more neutrally: in Sontag's view the book stands on its own. It has detached itself from its creator as well as – and above all – from his public persona.

The meeting with Thomas Mann, rather forced upon her by her friend, is also determined by this division between author and work: "Why would I want to meet him? I had his books."[47] The pressing problem here – which, however, has no bearing on the reading of the novel – is the cultural difference between the young visitor and the established author, which during the visit proves to be insurmountable. In one of the most insightful passages of the essay, Sontag considers the possible consequences of the encounter, the consequences for a person who has experienced fascism, mass dispossession and the destruction of his country, in part in person, in part from the distance of exile. From this passage we learn that Sontag's detailed knowledge of Mann's work is by no means limited to *The Magic Mountain*, *Doctor Faustus* and *Death in Venice:*

> Could he imagine what a world away from the Gymnasium in his native Lübeck, where fourteen-year-old Tonio Kröger wooed Hans Hansen by trying to get him to read Schiller's *Don Carlos*, was North Hollywood High School, alma mater of Farley Granger and Alan Ladd? He couldn't, and I hoped he would never find out. He had enough to be sad about – Hitler, the destruction of Germany, exile. It was better that he not know how really far he was from Europe.[48]

This passage is as touching as factually incorrect: Sontag was a college student at the University of Chicago and no longer a pupil at North Hollywood High School at the time of her visit to Thomas Mann (she had left the school in December 1948, precisely one year previously).[49] This is apparent not only from the date of the visit, which according to both Sontag's personal notes and Mann's diary was 28th December 1949, but also from a far more prosaic detail: the notepad in which Sontag outlined her memories of the meeting with Thomas Mann and which was found among her papers after her death, comes from the "University of Chicago Bookstore," as announced in black lettering on the red cover.[50] So why does Sontag change the date here? Has she misremembered the details?[51] Is it as simple as that?

---

46 Ibid., 227.
47 Sontag,"Pilgrimage," 229.
48 Ibid., 236.
49 Schreiber, *Geist und Glamour*, 36.
50 Compare Sontag, Notebook # 24.
51 This option is considered in Maunsell, *Susan Sontag*, 23.

It is not that simple. By changing the date of the meeting from 1949 to 1947, Sontag transforms the whole setting: the 16-year-old college student becomes a 14-year-old schoolgirl. The already considerable age difference between the visitor and the host thus becomes greater yet: the elderly author does not meet a young woman, who has already left her parents' house and moved far away to fulfill her desire for higher education. Rather, he encounters a *girl* who is still immersed in the environment of family and school. This ploy also serves to enhance the girl's intellectual naivety: as yet she knows nothing about the intellectually exciting world of the University of Chicago, which was in the early fifties (and still is) one of the most interesting and important academic institutions in the USA. By altering the date of the encounter Sontag thus exacerbates the "foreignness" of the two subjects and heightens the contrast between them.

This technique becomes questionable because Sontag thereby omits from her portrayal a tangible connection that actually existed between visitor and host – namely, that Thomas Mann was well acquainted with the environs of his young visitor. As early as October 19, 1940 he had held a talk entitled "War and Democracy" at the University of Chicago, and in this context had become acquainted with the enigmatic president of the university, Robert M. Hutchins[52] – the same "Mr. Hutchins" mentioned by name in Sontag's "At Thomas Mann's."[53] A year previously, in 1939, Mann's youngest daughter Elisabeth had married the Italian intellectual Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, who from 1936 to 1948 – and thus during Hutchins' time as president – was employed at the University of Chicago itself. In 1945, the university even held a celebratory dinner in honor of Thomas Mann's seventieth birthday, and the writer improvised a short speech of thanks: "[A] word of thanks from my lips for this charming occasion arranged for us by outstanding members of the University of Chicago."[54]

These biographical details make it abundantly clear that Thomas Mann would have had a very good idea of the intellectual environment in which the "3 Chicago students" who visited him in December 1949 found themselves. The

52 Thomas Mann is even named twice in Hutchins' memoirs (Milton Mayer, *Robert Maynard Hutchins: A Memoir*, ed. John H. Hicks [Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993], 310, 472).

53 Sontag speaks in particular of the pioneering reforms in the context of university politics that Hutchins initiated at the University of Chicago: "Mr. Hutchins had abolished the cut system even before he abolished football" (Sontag, "At Thomas Mann's," 2). See Anna Dorothea Schneider, "Die University of Chicago unter der Hutchins-Administration 1929–1951," in *Literaturkritik und Bildungspolitik, R.S. Crane, die Chicago (Neo-Aristotelian) Critics und die University of Chicago* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1994), 35–46.

54 Thomas Mann, "Dankrede für das Dinner der University of Chicago, 1945," in *Essays VI: 1945–1960*, ed. Herbert Lehner (Frankfurt/Main, 2009), 39–41: 39.

heightened alienation and the exaggerated contrast that Sontag artificially creates by changing the date of the meeting prove in this context to be a most striking confusion,[55] for which there are, I believe, two possible explanations.

Firstly: Sontag's visit to Thomas Mann is first and foremost a very good story. And Sontag tells this story in the mode of a comic tension that stems from an exaggerated incongruity, from a culture clash between an old, intellectual, highly cultured Europe, which Thomas Mann represents, and a young, pragmatic, uncultured America, to which the narrator assigns herself:[56] "He asked us about our studies. Our studies? That was a further embarrassment. I was sure he hadn't the faintest idea what a high school in Southern California was like. Did he know about Drivers' education (compulsory)? Typing courses?"[57] The backdating by two years is essential for this emphasis of cultural difference, just as it was for the above-mentioned opposition between Lübeck and Hollywood, and between Tonio Kröger and Farley Granger – otherwise the contrast would simply not have been there. "Pilgrimage" thus furthers and reworks an approach that was already in play in "At Thomas Mann's": Sontag doesn't simply tell the story of her meeting with Thomas Mann *differently*, but rather she tells a *different story*, one that may be based on real events but that she in the same breath transports into the sphere of the fictional – thus freeing herself from reality.

Secondly: in her still widely-discussed essay "Against Interpretation," Sontag criticizes the traditional Western understanding of literature as mimesis and points to its weaknesses: "The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation."[58] Sontag subjects to a thorough revision the idea of mimesis and representation ("that a work of art *is* its content")[59] and above all the resulting process of interpretation, which is tantamount to resolution and revelation ("Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y isn't really B? That Z is really C?").[60] In this context she abrasively describes the hermeneutic practice of interpretation as "the revenge of the intellect

---

55 By contrast, compare with Schreiber's argument – based entirely on recourse to Rieff – in support of the authenticity of the text (Schreiber, *Geist und Glamour*, 11).

56 The construction of a contrast between Europe and America is discussed in detail in Ching, "'Not even a New Yorker,'" 53 ff., (which includes further references and sources related to this topic, which played an important role for Sontag).

57 Sontag, "Pilgrimage," 236.

58 Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in Sontag, *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, 10–20: 10.

59 Ibid., 11, emphasis in original.

60 Ibid., 12.

upon art."[61] Why? Because every interpretation, every attempt to lead art back to reality, is an impoverishment: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' It is to turn *the* world into *this* world."[62]

In this context, the changing of the date in "Pilgrimage" and the resulting fictionalization are consistent with Sontag's overall approach, for the essay thereby undermines the idea of mimesis. In other words, Sontag modifies the "content" in such a way that the primacy of "representation" is suspended – and this serves the narrative "form."[63] A good story is a good story is a good story; what it is not is a fact-filled report of biographical or historical events. In "Pilgrimage," Sontag subtly but forcefully insists on this intrinsic value of narrative. Years later, in her peace prize speech of 2003, she was to express this in a single, succinct sentence: "I am a storyteller."[64]

III

Sontag's peace prize address is of exceptional importance in so far as we are dealing with a speech delivered to a German audience, at a historic German location, namely St. Paul's Church (Paulskirche) in Frankfurt.[65] An aspect that was present throughout Sontag's engagement with Thomas Mann, namely Germany – referred to in allusions to the Shoah in "At Thomas Mann's," or with regard to his public persona as an ambassador for a better Germany in "Pilgrimage" – now emerges into the foreground.

After discussing at length the tension between the USA and Europe that had been newly re-ignited during the course of the American *War on Terror*, at the end of her speech Sontag turns to her own biography as a "third-generation American of Polish Lithuanian Jewish descent."[66] She tells of a childhood that

---

61 Ibid., 14.

62 Ibid., 14, emphasis in original.

63 "Form" and "content" are central terms in "Against Interpretation."

64 Sontag, "Acceptance Speech," 12.

65 In 1848/49 St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt was the seat of the first freely-elected German parliament. Sontag emphasises this aspect as well as the symbolic meaning of the prize awarded to her in her very first sentence: "To speak in the Paulskirche, before this audience, to receive the prize awarded in the last fifty-three years by the German Book Trade to so many writers, thinkers, and exemplary public figures whom I admire – to speak in this history-charged place and on this occasion, is a humbling and inspiring experience" (Sontag, "Acceptance Speech," 7).

66 Sontag, "Acceptance Speech," 11.

was, throughout, dominated by Germany and the Germans – in the most terrifying and monstrous sense as well as in the best and most beautiful: "I grew up in the American provinces (Arizona and California), far from Germany, and yet my entire childhood was haunted by Germany, by the monstrousness of Germany, and by the German books and the German music I loved, which set my standard for what is exalted and intense."[67] Sontag's perception of the extreme ambivalence of the Germans, which previously came across in her first descriptions of the visit to Thomas Mann, is expressed unambiguously in these sentences. On this occasion, however, the speaker doesn't simply leave it at these few sentences, but rather proceeds to describe in detail her experiences of German culture, beginning with the good, the true and the beautiful:

> Even before Bach and Beethoven and Schubert and Brahms, there were a few German books. I am thinking of a teacher in an elementary school in a small town in southern Arizona, Mr. Starkie, who had awed his pupils by telling us that he had fought with Pershing's army in Mexico against Pancho Villa: this grizzled veteran of an earlier American imperialist venture had, it seems, been touched – in translation – by the idealism of German literature, and, having taken in my particular hunger for books, loaned me his copies of "Werther" and "Immensee."[68]

Reading Goethe and Storm in the desert of Arizona is yet another surprising, charming episode, which Sontag speaks of here for the very first time. Yet the statement is more complex than this, for "Mr. Starkie" is, after all, not just any reader, but rather a former soldier, a veteran of the "Punitive Expedition" of the US army against the revolutionary Mexican leader Pancho Villa in the years 1915/16. This very first, early encounter that Sontag has as a primary school pupil with German literature is thus already ambivalent: the idea of emphatic absolute love in Goethes's *Werther,* the poetic realistic transfiguration in Storm's *Immensee* and "an earlier American imperialist venture" clearly do not form a dichotomy here, but rather converge in the figure of the "obscure, eccentric Mr. Starkie."[69]

Other texts from the canon of German literature follow the works of Goethe and Storm, "including Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony,' where I discovered dread and injustice."[70] At this point, the very novel that from then on would determine her intellectual life enters Sontag's biography of reading. Nowhere does she make the novel's outstanding significance as clear as in this speech: "I found all of Europe in a German novel. No book has been more important in my

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 11 f.
69 Ibid., 12.
70 Ibid.

life than 'The Magic Mountain' – whose subject is, precisely, the clash of ideals at the heart of European civilization."[71]

However, the moving reading of *The Magic Mountain*, which would continue to reverberate throughout her life, did not annul Sontag's ambivalent image of Germany – on the contrary. Without explicitly talking about Thomas Mann, his exile or her encounter with him in December 1949, Sontag describes her intellectual socialization, which was fundamentally influenced by – mainly German-Jewish – academics, artists, musicians and writers who had been forced to flee from the Nazis: "I am [...] a late beneficiary of the German cultural diaspora, having had the great good fortune of knowing well some of the incomparably brilliant Hitler refugees, those writers and artists and musicians and scholars that America received, starting in the 1930s, and who so enriched the country, particularly its universities.[72]" Again, she describes an experience of great, indeed of unfathomable, ambivalence: Sontag identifies herself as a late beneficiary of the National Socialist policies that had led to mass exile; and she names those whose lectures and seminars she attended at the universities of Harvard and Chicago, and whom she was even able to get to know personally: Hans Gerth, Herbert Marcuse, Christian Mackauer, Paul Tillich, Peter Heinrich von Blanckenhagen, Aron Gurwitsch, Nahum Glatzer and, somewhat later, Hannah Arendt – "so many models of the serious, whose memory I would like to evoke here."[73] The acceptance speech unexpectedly becomes at this point a commemoration of the dead.

It is hardly surprising that, in this context, Sontag comes to speak of her own Jewish secular origins, although she describes her family as "only nominally" Jewish and "completely secular and assimilated for two generations."[74] She looks back once more at herself as a ten-year-old child – and at this child's recurring, nightly terror:

> At the time I am speaking of, 1943, I was aware that there was a prison camp with thousands of German soldiers, Nazi soldiers as of course I thought of them, in the northern part of the state, and, knowing I was Jewish (only nominally, my family having been completely secular and assimilated for two generations, but nominally, as I knew, was enough for Nazis), I was beset by a recurrent nightmare in which Nazi soldiers had escaped from the prison and had made their way downstate to the bungalow on the outskirts of the town where I lived with my mother and sister, and were about to kill me.[75]

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.

What is important to note is that Sontag very closely relates her nightmarish terror of the Nazi soldiers with her reading of the “tattered volumes of Goethe and Storm” borrowed from “Mr. Starkie.”[76] Through this contrast, Germany is virtually portrayed as a ‘haunted house,’ whose ghosts of art *and* National Socialism seemed to pursue Sontag as a child.[77]

This perception only changed, as Sontag goes on to tell her audience, in the 70s, following an encounter with her German editor at the Hanser publishing house, Fritz Arnold. Soon after the two first met, he told her of his service in the former German army, the Wehrmacht, and of his three years as a Prisoner of War in America – indeed, in a small prison camp in, of all places, Northern Arizona. Only at this moment of personal confrontation do the frightening discrepancies of Sontag’s image of Germany appear to dissipate – indeed, “this was the beginning of a great friendship.”[78]

The friendship was not just based on good will, but rather on a particular relationship with literature, for Arnold’s personal experiences of literature overlap with those of Sontag in one important respect: while the ten-year-old at her mother’s house in Tucson, Arizona, read the classics of German literature to escape from the emotional claustrophobia of family and school, Arnold, in the nearby prisoner of war camp, worked his way through the English and American canon – and for him too, reading these books was a kind of liberation. The speech thus appropriately ends with a plea for a “world literature” (quite in Goethe’s sense) that would help to transgress national grudges and ideological restrictions. “Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom.”[79]

Only in retrospect, from the perspective of her peace prize speech, does it become clear in what sort of biographical context Sontag’s reflections about Thomas Mann and Germany – both the literary and political Germany – should be interpreted as well: namely, the context of her Jewish origins,[80] which in the

76 Ibid.

77 See here the decisive sentence, which has already been cited above: “My entire childhood was haunted by Germany”.

78 Sontag, “Acceptance Speech,” 13.

79 Ibid.

80 On this extensive topic, see: Sherry Lee Linkon, “Susan Sontag,” in *Jewish American Writers: A Bio-bibliographical and Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Ann R. Shapiro (Westport/London: Greenwood Press 1994), 415–422 and Tresa Grauer, “Susan Sontag,” in *Jewish Women: A Com-*

nightmarish imagination of the child had been experienced as reason enough to be persecuted and even murdered. This unfathomably polarized perception of the Germans thus forms a counterpoint to Sontag's reflections on Thomas Mann. From Sontag's perspective, it is impossible to consider Mann, despite the fact that he himself had been forced into exile, without calling to mind National Socialism and the Shoah, albeit with subtle allusions and associations. The fact that Sontag nonetheless sought intimacy with his novels, and indeed ventured to approach the man himself, can be explained by her idea of a sublime literature which transgresses national, ideological and religious barriers – literature as *Liberal Imagination*.[81]

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Heinrich Detering (Göttingen) who has supported my research with funds from the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize. Miriam Amico (Los Angeles) helped me with the archival research. For translation work, I thank Anne E. Rutherford (Göttingen). Ian Cooper (Kent), Friederike Reents (Heidelberg), and Maren Ermisch (Göttingen) made some important remarks.

prehensive Historical Encyclopedia, most recent update: 20th March 2009, http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sontag-susan.

81 In "Notes on Camp" Sontag apostrophizes the idea of liberalism as specifically "Jewish": "Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal [...] causes." ("Notes on Camp," in: Sontag, *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, 259–274: 272 f.). This would offer an interesting starting point for further research.