

“The greatness of a writer consists in articulating the eternal problems and dilemmas of humanity”

An Interview with Professor Hubert Orłowski,
Conducted by Karolina Król

SUMMARY

The interview focuses on Thomas Mann, his oeuvre and the reception of his works. The dispute around Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, started by Stanisław Barańczak, is an important context of the text. In the interview an essay *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (yet untranslated into Polish as a whole) is mentioned.

Keywords

Thomas Mann, Stanisław Barańczak, The Magic Mountain

Karolina Król: In 1975, Stanisław Barańczak wrote *Zmieniony głos Settembriniego* [The Changed Voice of Settembrini]. Could you tell us what, in your opinion, might be the probable reasons for referring to *The Magic Mountain* rather than a different work from Thomas Mann's extensive literary output?

Hubert Orłowski: It is worth stressing from the very start that in Poland interest in *The Magic Mountain* was also present in earlier years, including the interwar period. There was no need, however, to read this book in a political

way at that time, that is to say, with reference to some reflection on the direction in which the development of political forces in Europe might have gone. I think that the discussion between Barańczak and other New Wave poets should be seen as the practical use of certain metaphorical ammunition called Thomas Mann. This allowed for an indirect interpretation of the reality of the People's Republic of Poland. Due to this, he was able to publish his text in *Literatura*, a legally published magazine, which reached a wider audience. On the one hand, 1975 was the time of the apogee of Gierek's little stability and, on the other, the memorable events in Ursus and Radom were soon to take place. It is precisely in such an atmosphere that Barańczak published his text, encouraging us to look closely at reality.

It was not so much that Stanisław Barańczak had in mind Thomas Mann as such and *The Magic Mountain*: he used the name of the great German Nobel Prize winner, an émigré, to show by the force of his authority that there had already been debates about the different types of involvement of the intellectual in the political reality.

It is worth interpreting the essay by Barańczak by means of certain categories known from scholarly literature. The year 2001 saw the publication in Poland of a selection of texts by the eminent German historian and semantic, Reinhart Koselleck, dealing with the meaning and evaluation of concepts. Back in the 1970s, he introduced two new categories: the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectations'. These are extremely handy tools for exploring historical prose, both fiction and, for example, essay writing. To my mind, the categories proposed by Koselleck allow us to make very apt observations on *Zmieniony głos Settembriniego*.

While interpreting this text, the space of experience can refer to all those lessons of life that young Barańczak took: being a young writer, an intellectual, an analyst of the reality. The essay that we are talking about comes from an early period of Stanisław's work, when he was still a young man. In the 1970s, we lived on the same Kopernik housing development in Poznań. He often brought me different samizdat volumes. We knew each other from university because we worked at one faculty at the time when the Polish philology and neophilologies were located in one building.

As for the figure of Thomas Mann: this writer continues to fascinate me and that is why I return to his literary output and write more texts about it. I have been dealing with the reception of Mann's works and I think that the dispute in the mid-1970s was one of the most interesting debates taking place around Thomas Mann. I leave aside the question of whether it did deepen the analysis of *The Magic Mountain* as such. It showed one thing, however: the power of great literature, which can be read in different ways and adapted to different polemic situations. Some people say that ancient drama is so vital because all human dilemmas and aspirations are present in it. I believe that this interpretation is still valid and can also be applied to contemporary literature. The greatness of a writer consists in articulating the eternal problems and dilemmas of humanity. Thomas Mann was certainly one of those writers who answered – not always with the best result – fundamental questions. There are many issues that can be disagreed

with, but it is the questions posed by great literature that are of paramount importance.

The Magic Mountain, written shortly after the First World War, became resounding and extremely useful in contemporary debates on the situation of the intellectual, writer and publicist during the late era of the People's Republic of Poland. The discussion of New Wave poets is a debate of eminent Polish writers rather than experts in German literature and art or the works of Thomas Mann. The task which I set for myself was not to assess to what extent the analysis of Barańczak and other Polish writers corresponds to the reading of *The Magic Mountain*, but to what degree it became an inspiration for our Polish reflections.

Barańczak used a great name and a monumental novel which features a duel between Settembrini and Naphta. He used the names of Settembrini and Naphta as certain ideal types, to quote Max Weber's terminology. In the case of *The Magic Mountain*, readers tend to have little affection for either of them. Surely the character of Naphta cannot count on a favourable reception. Likewise, Settembrini does not seem to fully meet the expectations of the reader: he is a kind of antiquarian figure, failing to match the 1920s, when fascism was born and Bolshevism was already well established.

When I was writing my PhD thesis nearly twenty years after the publication of *Doctor Faustus*, at least fifty other dissertations had already been written on Thomas Mann worldwide. At the moment, it would be difficult to cram all the publications devoted to this writer in one room. I think that the main task of a researcher thinking about Barańczak's text is not to check how faithfully the world of the novel is transferred in it, but to look at the postulates proposed by the Polish poet.

I looked at the impact of Thomas Mann's work from the perspective of Polish intellectuals. The reception of Mann kept changing, starting from the first raptures of Stanislaw Brzozowski just after the publication of *Buddenbrooks* in 1901 – nobody thought of this young man as a literary genius back then. Many other Polish readings followed, mainly due to the theme of tuberculosis and treatment in the sanatorium, which appeared in *The Magic Mountain*. The problem was social, medical and ethical since treatment could not be afforded by everyone at the time as it was only available to the richest. Poles went to Zakopane to be treated and it was said to be our Polish Davos.

Major Polish writers, great names such as Bruno Schulz, were all interested in Mann. This is an important issue demonstrating the eminence of Mann, whose works were read not only by graduate students writing their dissertations, but also by the greatest writers whom Mann interested and indeed inspired.

The growing interest in the writer was accompanied by further translations of his works. I was encouraged to publish in *Poznańska Biblioteka Niemiecka* the essay by Thomas Mann titled "Reflections of an Unpolitical Man" translating this book from German. I refused because I believe that this text would be difficult for the average Polish reader to understand, and that if someone really took an interest in this stage in Mann's work, it is always

possible to read these rather lengthy reflections in German. Mann's essays written before and during the First World War, for example "Frederick and the Great Coalition," can be found in the volume *Meine Zeit* [My Time]. The dispute with his brother, which took place before he wrote his essay on Frederick the Great, became a kind of springboard, enabling a slow transition to republican views. Mann falls into the category of conservative revolution.

K.K.: At which point did Thomas Mann begin to function in Poland as a kind of figure? His name was often used in the public discourse not necessarily referring to specific literary works.

H.O.: I wrote about five stages of the Polish reception of Thomas Mann in one of my texts. The core of your question relates primarily to the situation just after the war. Individual references to Mann's work still appeared in the notes of various writers before the end of the Second World War and the fall of Nazi Germany.

We most often use great names, such as Mann or Dostoyevsky, not because they are eminent German or Russian writers, but in order to explain the current reality, using a prominent name. The perception of the figure and work of each writer is changing. A good example of this can be the idea of accepting Thomas Mann to the Polish PEN Club, an idea which initially met with considerable resistance. Later, however, the attitude towards him changed and references were made to Mann to show that there are other Germans too, uncontaminated by Nazism. This was useful while the German Democratic Republic was being established, when the cry of "He was ours" was coined with regard to the fact that Mann had never supported National Socialism. Attempts were made at the time to show that Mann belonged more to the German Democratic Republic than to the Federal Republic of Germany, which was surely a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, Mann's name was distinctly present in political journalism, which made many people bear a grudge towards him.

He and his wife acquired American citizenship, but during the Cold War he no longer felt at home in California where he bought a house. He wanted to return to Europe, but instead of coming back to his homeland he chose to settle in Switzerland. Hence, he was first a citizen of the German Empire, then of the Weimar Republic, and a Nazi German expatriate citizen until 1936. He cut himself off from Nazi Germany in 1936. He later became a citizen of Czechoslovakia, the United States and Switzerland.

Being a citizen of different countries and changing documents several times brings to my mind the biography of my parents and myself. I was born in Warmia, where my family had been living from at least the 1820s. My parents were citizens of the Kingdom of Prussia, while I was born in 1937 already as a citizen of Nazi Germany. We were a Polish minority, but my birth certificate has a Nazi eagle on it. I was later a citizen of the People's Republic of Poland, and then of the Republic of Poland. I see the issue of Mann's belonging to different countries as part of my reflection on my own

life. Perhaps that is why I am so eager to deal with his works and their reception.

The Cold War and German politics after the Second World War had a great influence on the reception of Thomas Mann's literary output. It was hoped that the writer would present important diagnoses concerning contemporary times. In 1947, when everyone knew that Thomas Mann was writing a major novel about the causes of the degradation of humanism in Nazi Germany, it seemed that if such a great writer dealt with a very important subject, he would surely convey nothing but the truth formulated in the right way. At the time, Mann did not quite manage to do so, since it was not possible. Readers, in turn, expected Mann to tell the Germans what had actually happened to them and how the nation of writers and poets had turned out to be a nation of judges and executioners. A nation that brought the greatest writers and philosophers such as Kant, Fichte and Hegel into the world. It is not my intention to belittle English or French philosophers, but in systemic terms, it was German philosophers who created the largest philosophical systems.

K.K.: Since you pay a lot of attention to the years after the Second World War, I would like to ask you about one of the more sensitive issues relating to that period. What can be said about Jewish motifs in Mann's work? Did the writer identify himself to any extent with the anti-Semitic narrative prevailing in Nazi Germany? The description of Naphta seems to contain a lot of stereotypical elements related to the Semitic appearance of this character.

H.O.: "Deep is the well of the past" for it goes back to the mythical past of the Israelis, a good example of which is the Biblical tetralogy titled *Joseph and His Brothers*. In my opinion, however, the Jewish theme is absolutely not a key one for Mann; it is rather featured as a secondary topic. Looking at the confession recorded in church books, Mann was a Protestant. The whole city of Lübeck, where he was born, was Protestant. However, I would say metaphorically that Mann floated over the waters of several confessions.

He was going to write a drama on Luther. Some fragments of it have even been preserved. I wonder what would ultimately have resulted from this: after all, Luther is the central figure of the Reformation. Mann was writing this drama later in his life, but reflections on Luther had already appeared before.

Mann was often asked to comment on various topics. This became particularly frequent after he had received the Nobel Prize. He wrote a total of around 300 sketches in which he presented his views. He was also asked about his attitude to religion. His answers were evasive; he was not an ardent believer (although it is worth noting that Protestantism does not force worshippers to attend services regularly). Mann writing on religious topics is actually Mann writing Biblical tetralogy. It is a very interesting work yet difficult to read as it is filled with many reflections and acquired wisdom.

Many people criticised the writer, saying that he was not a *poeta natus* but a *poeta doctus* – not a writer who brings out a given way of seeing and

interpreting the world from the richness of his soul, but a person who places in his works reflections that he read or heard somewhere. Mann's collection of materials, which he used for writing individual books, has survived to this day. It was often the case that he had read some interesting anecdote in a newspaper or found an intriguing name in it, which he later used in his novels. He was a sort of collector.

Hundreds of dissertations have been written about Mann's literary output; there will certainly be even more of them. It seems to me, however, that the very issue of the dispute between Settembrini and Naphta is already settled/closed in our literature. Of course, there is a possibility that the day will come when these categories will be again interpretatively fruitful and will be used by writers for further reflection; still, for the time being, I do not see any sign of a return to this dispute from the 1970s.

Hubert Orłowski – Professor Emeritus of Adam Mickiewicz University, a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a Germanist (specialisation: the history of German literature and culture), a literary scholar.

His most important publications include: *Literatura w III Rzeszy*, Poznań 1975, second extended edition 1979; *"Polnische Wirtschaft."* *Zum deutschen Polendiskurs der Neuzeit*, Wiesbaden 1996; *Wobec zniewoleń "krótkiego stulecia."* *Szkice o literaturze austriackiej i niemieckiej*, Wrocław 1997; *Polnische Wirthschaft. Nowoczesny niemiecki dyskurs o Polsce*, Olsztyn 1998; *Literatur und Herrschaft – Herrschaft und Literatur. Zur deutschen und österreichischen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin 2000; *Z modernizacją w tle. Wokół rodowodu nowoczesnych niemieckich wyobrażeń o Polsce i Polakach*, Poznań 2002; *Zrozumieć świat. Szkice o literaturze i kulturze niemieckiej XX wieku*, Wrocław 2003; *Die Lesbarkeit von Stereotypen. Der deutsche Polendiskurs im Blick historischer Stereotypenforschung und historischer Semantik*, Wrocław 2004; *Deutsche und Polen: Geschichte, Kultur und Politik* (co-editor), München 2006; *Dzieje kultury niemieckiej* (in cooperation with Czesław Karolak and Wojciech Kunicki), Warsaw 2006, second extended edition 2015.

The editor of 50 volumes in the series *Poznańska Biblioteka Niemiecka*; in cooperation with Christoph Kleßmann from volume no. 1 to 35. He edited twenty two collective volumes and sixteen anthologies; the author of over four hundred and forty articles.

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