Gender trouble in Thomas Mann's early novella
Der kleine Herr Friedemann (Little Herr Friedemann)

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Since the nineties at least, that is after the publication of his diaries, every examination of Thomas Mann’s early novellas has had to face up to the conjecture that they are making ample use of those literary structures, which serve to conceal the topic of same sex love. They seem to represent progressive stages of the author’s working through of his personal stigma. As a result, in the year 1912 – comparable to a coming out of the closet – homosexual love, the love of an aging man towards a boy, was openly made the subject of a narration for the first time (that is in Death in Venice). In the preceding stories the narration of homosexual desire had been taking place under the guise of heterosexuality. Yet the motif of Heimsuchung, that is the visitation by the idealised love object, the divine dispensation of what has been ardently longed for – Thomas Mann uses this sort of biblical language to indicate the homosexual love encounter in his self-commentaries – the motif of Heimsuchung, then, is fully developed already in Little Herr Friedemann (1897) and thus allows to identify the techniques of camouflage. According to his own statement, Thomas Mann developed these techniques in his ‘breakthrough story’ in a way, that entirely satisfied his needs for the first time: “Since Little Herr Friedemann I am suddenly able to find those discrete forms and masks which enable me to present my experiences to the public [without being ashamed, so to speak, or causing a scandal].”

“Discrete forms and masks” – today, with regard to gender studies, these words invoke the notion of masquerade while at the same time clearly differing from it. Whereas with Thomas Mann the mask refers to a core, that has to be protected, gender as a masquerade is understood as an imitation without an original. That is, the assumption that there is something behind or beneath that should be related to the mask as being is related to seeming, as essence related to appearance or as the kernel to the shell, is refuted. On the contrary, according to Judith Butler, it is only the repetitive

gender performance, the acts, words and gestures that ‘produce the effect of an internal core or substance’. Between her understanding of masquerade and Thomas Mann’s view of the mask as concealment there is, however, a fertile connection. Mann’s camouflaging evokes quasi detachable characteristics of femininity and masculinity as signs, as it were, so that the disguise can fulfill its function of covering up the homosexual desire. The author’s predicament to veil and to signal the socially inadmissible desire requires a keen perception and identification of the discrete forms of gender performance in order to make them a means for montage. As the strategy of camouflage works with dislocating and displacing the gender specifics, it implicitly assumes that gender identity is a construction, a fabrication, and, at the same time, camouflage is operating on redesigning the gender order as a whole. Not only the position of the stigmatized protagonist – behind which the despised homosexual hides –, but also the entire symbolic order, ostracising, for example, according to class, race and gender, is put to the test in Thomas Mann’s stories. Thus the need to camouflage results in drawing up an alternative order, that should also redefine the position of woman in the gender system. It is precisely this subversive potential inherent in Mann’s narrative use of masquerade that I want to draw attention to.

As has already been shown in Thomas Mann criticism, the virile Gerda von Rinnlingen can be understood, with regard to the author himself, as the “male lover in disguise”, as “a cover of the man desired in vain [...] and as a screen for the fantasies of downfall and death triggered by him.” According to this reading, “the ‘mask’, which the ‘homosexual’ Thomas Mann has found in his narration Little Herr Friedemann, is the one of an eccentric, who is being scoffed at and drowning in self-disgust, coupled with a ‘man-eating vamp’.” Nevertheless, even until today, there is a tendency “to take Friedemann’s story ‘literally’, to look upon it as the story of a physically impaired man, who comes to grief with the impossibility of being loved by the woman he loves.” Yet I do not agree with Boehm in that necessarily the complete work- or diary-context of Thomas Mann’s is needed as a sub- or pre-text, to be able to discover the camouflage. It belongs with the requirements of “homosexual” writing, so to speak, that the mask has to function as a signal as well so that the author is exposed and can be ‘recognized’, also with regard to his sexual orientation. Accordingly, all names, for example,

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3 Ibid.
in Thomas Mann’s work with Mann in the beginning (like Mann-heimer) or -mann at the end (like Friede-mann) point towards the problematic masculinity of their author. In this respect it is indeed useful to know about the biographical documents and the intertexts, that Thomas Mann has woven into his work – as Michael Maar has demonstrated with respect to Hans Christian Andersen. And the reader’s socio-historical knowledge of the practices of stigmatization, that a homosexual had to fight with around 1900, undoubtedly have to be taken into account. Yet still semantic signals have to be expected in the text itself, so that the critic’s de-masking will not turn into a piece of circumstantial evidence.

In my view, one of the signals in the story of Little Herr Friedemann is the deformity of Friedemann, the hump, and its ironisation. The use of physical abnormalities as a metaphor for sexual deviation is nothing new: Herman Bang, who was much read by Thomas Mann, called homosexuality – and that still in the year 1909 – “a type of hunchbackedness”. According to Bang, the aberration is an unalterable one, one by necessity and existing since birth. This is suggested in Thomas Mann’s text by the fact that the wet-nurse caused it: “It was the fault of the wet-nurse“ (“Die Amme hatte die Schuld”; it has to be noted that in German it is “the guilt”, not “the fault” as the English translations have it). Addicted to alcohol, she dropped the little boy and that brought about his deformity. The placement of this apodictic formulation right at the beginning of the story as well as the correlation of the concept of ‘guilt’, derived from high tragedy, with the dregs of the service staff already betrays, however, an ironic perspective, in which the given causality of Friedemann’s predicament is exposed as a fairy tale (there seems to be an allusion to ‘Ammenmaerchen’); the hunchbackedness, by contrast, turns into a social metaphor.

The circumstance, that little Friedemann grows up fatherless in a household, which is exclusively populated by women and in which he remains until the year of his 30th birthday (which is also the year of his death), constitutes an ‘effemination’, which belongs as a cliché in the catalogue of stig mata for identifying the homosexual. Additionally, Friedemann comes alarmingly close to femininity by virtue of name similarities with his sisters, two of whom are called Friederike and Henriette: here the derivation of the female names from the male ones (Friedrich and Heinrich) must be noted. As ‘ugly

women without a dowry’, the sisters correspond to their deformed brother, who is not popular with the opposite sex with his fatal ‘dowry’, the hunchback. Yet his sisters also contrast with him, as his hands, feet, eyes, face and hair can almost be called “beautiful” (206). This “beautiful” man, who is peaceful (‘fried-lich’ in German) like the women and beardless, significantly enough (212), thus signals a reversion of the gender order: the attribute of beauty, which is traditionally ascribed to women, has been shifted. Consequently, Gerda, “boyish” (in German: “burschikos”), sickly and childless, is his precise, mathematically constructed female counterpart. With a name that is derived from the masculine “Gerd” and from germanic ger (= spear) and being „quite devoid of feminine charm“ (215) she counteracts the heteronormativity of the gender order in the same way that he does. Being attracted to her he suffers from a visitation by the man within her. She is construed as an emancipated, a ‘phallic woman’, and akin to him by way of her sickness. “Was she not a woman and he a man?”(233). Friedemann asks himself when provoked by Gerda’s penetrating and humiliating look that forces him to look down like a woman. Friedemann who, in a mixture of asceticism and epicurism, made himself believe to have made his peace (“Seelenfrieden” [72]) with the dominant gender order by renouncing amour for ever is subjected to a break down of his carefully built up male identity (213). “Was she not a woman and he a man?” – this question becomes the prime signal for the reader and strengthens his presumption, that the seemingly fixed positions in the gender system and the institutions correlated with them are being all set into motion within the text.

In this perspective an unfavourable light is shed on the von Rinnlingens as a married couple. The malicious provincial housewives in the town, who attend compassionately to Gerda’s husband because of her “ice-cold“ looks, accentuate his exemplary manliness as follows: “[...] you ought to see him – correct, a fine figure of a man, courteous, a splendidly preserved man in the forties, a brilliant officer! They have been married four years, my dear” (215). These wives apparently blame their gender comrade for the childlessness of the couple, although the hypervirility of the officer, which they praise without reflecting on it, suggests an entirely different causality. For it is the male bonding within the military, that Herr von Rinnlingen represents, and that is invoked, for instance, when his wife Gerda addresses her husband as “Dear friend” (215). That she as his wife complies with his wishes and fulfills his orders, but, at the same time, looks “straight past him“ (233) makes it perfectly clear that he is not her true partner.

Further more, when Friedemann pays his first visit to the house of the von Rinnlingen’s, the appearance of the officer is tantamount to a homoerotic performance. Not only does Herr von Rinnlingen bow “to Herr Friedemann and to her [that is his wife] with equal courtesy” (233), he is also contrasted with his wife’s icy coldness as follows: “His brown face was quite suffused with warmth“ (233). If, in the German text, the combination of “braun” and “ganz blank vor Waerme”
amounts to a homoerotic signal, then 20 years old Gerda does not get what she needs in the marriage with this man from the military; instead she is being abused to camouflage a homosexually orientated husband.

Is her ‘phallicness’ motivated by this insult to her femininity? Or did the realization that she was being abused as a woman to represent heteronormative masculinity, lead her to a reflection upon her own desire(s)? If this is the case, then it is consistent, that Gerda acts as the protagonist of a lesbian love scene at the party towards the end of the novella: “In the back of the room, on the ottoman, close to the low, red-shaped lamp, sat Gerda von Rinnlingen in conversation with young Fraeulein Stephens. She sat leaning back a little on the yellow silk cushions, one foot placed over the other, and slowly smoked a cigarette, exhaling the smoke through the nose and thrusting forward her underlip. Fraeulein Stephens sat upright and as though carved from wood and made her replies, smiling anxiously“ (240). Here, Fraeulein Stephens, sitting “upright“, turns, speaking with Lacan, into the phallus of the actively desiring and thus manly de-formed woman, Gerda.

In the service of critizising the existent gender dichotomy and the compulsory heterosexuality corresponding to it, it is structurally downright necessary, that Gerda does not give in to Johannes Friedemann, since, firstly, he mistakes his own homoerotic desire for love of her and, secondly, he expects her to love and accept him and his sexual problem in a motherly way. His exclamation at the end: “You know it [...] – my God – my God – (244)” corresponds with his previous confession: “She sees through me!” (229) After Gerda has literally rejected him, he lies “on the floor” at the end of the narration as he did in the beginning when the wet-nurse dropped him. But he lies on the floor also like “a dog“, which alludes to the stigmatized gender of same sex love, to the “dogs in the basement“ as Thomas Mann used to say. This is why the rejection is not only a sexual rejection for Johannes Friedemann, but primarily a narcissistic injury, that destroys his entire being. Correspondingly it must hurt Gerda to be, firstly, misjudged in her own desires and urged to behave like a mother or nurse (“he buried his face in her lap“ [244]) and secondly, to be abused in the same way as in her marriage, in which she is made an instrument of the male gender order either in the sense of representation or of camouflage. The callous Gerda does not only stand, quasi-allegorically, for sexuality, here primarily in its non-admitted homoerotic version. She also represents a devaluated, abused femininity. Her “contemptuous laugh“ (244) would for this reason retaliate for having been the object of contempt.

9 Thomas Mann’s wording is: “Sein braunes Gesicht war ganz blank vor Waerme” (p. 74). The English translations do not catch the meaning here, which to a great deal is incapsulated in “ganz blank vor Waerme” (p. 86); “blank” belongs in the semantics of “glatt”, that is: smooth, unrelieved, sheer, white, shining as the statues of Greek antiquity. For another – equally unsatisfactory – translation see Lowe-Porter: “His bronze face glistened with the heat.“ Thomas Mann: Stories of Three Decades. Translated from the German by H. T. Lowe-Porter, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955, p. 16.
This contempt of the feminine is constitutive of the phallic-monistic gender order, in which the woman only exists as the contradictory opposite of the man, that is as a not-man.

This order is based upon the taboo of homosexuality, so that every loving affection towards the same sex, be it between father and son or mother and daughter, is frowned upon. *Little Herr Friedemann* would probably have been more strengthened in his sexual identity, had he experienced the tender love of a father when he was a *little* boy. The fact that this love is a taboo is metaphorized in a blatant way in the novella by the father’s early death even before the birth of his son. This melancholic, unattainable love towards the father explains Friedemann’s trancelike condition in the presence of the virile officer von Rinnlingen: “Herr Friedemann looked up at him with his large expressionless eyes and half expected to be kindly patted on the shoulder“ (233). If homosexuality is a result of various socialization processes, which are equally conditioned by cultural and political circumstances, and if, psychologically speaking, the development of the core gender identity is completed at the age of two, then this seems to be metaphorized in the narration by the catastrophic incidents just before and after Friedemann’s birth, by the missing father and the “dull“ mother-substitute, the wet-nurse, who herself needs to be nursed – with alcohol.

Being under the social compulsion of having to mask as well as to signal his homoeroticism, Thomas Mann – in his story about “Little Herr Friedemann“ – also demonstrates the deficits of the asymmetric androcentric gender system as a whole, in which the devaluated and despised woman turns into a mirror for the excluded homosexual. Both of them are victims of the idolization of the authoritative man and his dominance. But in the same process Thomas Mann also indicates the change of the binary gender order, which excludes the Other, be it the male or the female Other. A student of the paradigmatically masculine science, namely mathematics, this student of all people who on top of it is a nephew to the officer Herr von Rinnlingen, calls into question a hitherto undoubted scientific assumption, the axiom of parallelism, on the occasion of the garden party: “Immediately to the right of the door a group sat about a small table, the centre of which was the student, who spoke with enthusiasm. He had made the assertion that more than one parallel to a straight line could be drawn through a point; Frau Hagenstroem, the wife of the attorney-at-law, had exclaimed:‘That’s impossible!’ but he had gone on to prove it so conclusively that his hearers were constrained to behave as though they understood.“ (239).10 If we understand this image correctly, it is the assumption of a natural, unquestionable heterosexual gender matrix, it is binarism, that is denied here in a parabolic way. For, as if following the tradition of mathematical proofs, the subsequent passage presents to us the female homosexual pair, Fraeulein Stephens and Gerda von Rinnlingen, absorbed in erotically connotated conversation. The young people – as yet another “Fraeulein“, the

10 Translation slightly altered by myself, A.L.-K.
daughter of “Mrs. attorney-at-law Hagenstroem”, is joined with the student – are the ones, who question the heteronormativity of their parents’ generation. According to modern handbooks of mathematics, additional geometries have been developed since 1816 as alternative models to the Euclidian geometry: the hyperbolic geometry on the one, the elliptic geometry on the other hand. And within these geometries the traditional axiom of parallelism is not valid. If it is thus possible within non-Euclidian geometry to “draw more than one parallel to a straight line through a point“, the conclusion seems to be obvious, that mankind, be it man or woman, can also be imagined in “more than one“ gender relation. With that the binary model is annulled and by association we have got close to Plato’s myth of the ball-like people, in which he demonstrated erotic attraction on the basis of three genders. (The gender of the sun is characterized by male to male attraction, the gender of the earth by female to female and the gender of the moon by male to female attraction).12

For Gerda and Friedemann there is no third gender. They are enclosed in the dominating phallic monism, the rigidity of which seems to be alluded to by the metaphor of the “central path“ of the park (241), in which Friedemann’s self-destruction takes place at the end. Two obelisks, phallic symbols, stand at the entrance, which prove, as it were, the validity of the axiom of parallelism for heterosexual love relationships and allow for homosexual relations only upon the condition of death. Thomas Mann stylizes his protagonist clearly to someone suffering from the given cultural and social order: Johannes Friedemann experiences his visitation at the age of 30 like Christ, the Lord of Peace; at the same time, he goes by the name of Johannes which refers to St. John, the Baptist; and this biblical figure, like the martyr St. Sebastian, well belongs in the treasure house of homosexual iconography.

Apart from mathematics Thomas Mann also uses music, primarily opera, to deconstruct the dominant polarized gender order. Gerda von Rinnlingen and Johannes Friedemann watch a performance of Wagner’s Lohengrin together, sitting, significantly enough, in the box of misfortune, that is box No. 13. Each protagonist of the opera has things in common with both of the protagonists of the narration, which shows that the boundaries of gender are made to dissolve. Friedemann is abandoned at the end of the narration like Elsa and like her he dies. On the other hand he – being an outsider and a man with a stigma – shares with Lohengrin, who is an outsider in a heavenly guise, the pain of loneliness and the desire to be accepted and understood without reservation. The secret of the name, that is the secret of descent, as the central motif of the opera corresponds with the sexual secret in the narration, which is symbolized by Friedemann’s stigma, the hump. The analogy of

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Gerda’s arrival (“in the yellow hunting-trap” [216]) with the arrival of Lohengrin (in the ship drawn by the swan) shows, that the phallic woman Ger-da (that is the woman with “the spear”) is a “discrete mask” for the “noble, fair man”, Lohengrin, the knight in the service of the grail,\(^\text{13}\) and that is the male lover. Thomas Mann picks up the play on the sexual connotation of the biblical word “erkennen”, that is “to know”, “to recognize”. In his encounter with Gerda Friedemann confesses: “You [do] know it...“ ([244] “Sie wissen es ja...”), and Lohengrin, in the opera, laments: “If you know him [know him by his name], then he must withdraw from you“ (“erkennt ihr ihn,/ dann muss er von euch ziehn”\(^\text{14}\)). Since Lohengrin is tied to the knighthood of the grail and acts in its service and mission, which is the only way to safe-guard his “virility” (in German: “Manneskraft”),\(^\text{15}\) he could have had only a short relationship with Elsa (that is one year): heterosexual love being reduced to an intermezzo in an organization of male bonding, so to speak. These predictable losses in a relationship, that is preordained with respect to duration, as it were, stand in analogy to the melancholy of gender identity, that results, according to Judith Butler, from the cultural demand on the individual to be either man or woman.

I have tried to show, that the figure of the eccentric, of the cripple, is a mask for the excluded Other, who is ostracized on the basis of his sexual orientation. The behaviour patterns of resignation and melancholy, roaring fury and self-destructive aggression, that are typical for this kind of stigmatized individual, are all being developed in the plot of Little Herr Friedemann. From that follows, that Gerda appears as femme fatale only at first glance. Also, she does not represent sexuality as such or, exclusively, the unreachable masculine lover. She is constructed as counterpart to and mirror of Friedemann and she suffers from the heterosexual gender order in the same way as he does. She, however, is able, to turn her fury to the outside and to take revenge on the opposite gender. This woman figure of Thomas Mann’s, in which the virile features are doubtlessly predominant, points ahead to Madame Chauchat in The Magic Mountain. Chauchat holds a similar fascination for Hans Castorp as Gerda does for Friedemann. She is fascinating, because she reminds Castorp of his repressed love for his school-friend Hippe. Like Gerda, who defies the norms, the “licentious” Madame Chauchat triggers off a development in the protagonist, that can be seen as a process of de-conventionalization and re-homosexualization. So both Gerda and Madame Chauchat are woman figures, that are functionalized with regard to the main character. Whereas in the early novella, Friedemann, the protagonist, still has to perish with the visitation by his love object, that is in the process of re-homosexualization, Madame Chauchat, in the later work, simply disappears from the novel leaving Hans Castorp on his own; and the deadly homosexual embrace takes place

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 58.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 60.
somewhere on the battlegrounds of the first World War. Does that mean, war is the consequence of an unbearable gender order, in which Friede-men [i.e. “peaceful men”] do not have a chance? Kurt Robert Eissler, at least, has established a connection between war, monotheism and our gender system, that is organized around the oedipus-complex, by asking: “could not the periodicity of wars in the Christian-occidental cultural area be connected with the fact, that the killing of a son at the beginning of the Christian religion was a deed pleasing in the sight of God?”

Do not homophobia and homophilia actually coincide in this killing?

Works Cited