

The Virgilian Progression," *CL*, 17 (1965), 1–23. See also the introduction ("The Pastoral Context") to my book, *Spenser, Marvell, and Renaissance Pastoral* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970).

Thomas Mann's "Gladius Dei" Once Again

To the Editor:

In his article on Thomas Mann's "Gladius Dei" (*PMLA*, Oct. 1968), Ernst F. Hoffmann attempted an evaluation of its narrative technique which deserves to be challenged, since the problem involved concerns not only the interpretation of this particular story but also our appreciation of structural problems in the early work of Mann.

To Hoffmann, "Gladius Dei" is a "social and cultural satire and a literary finger exercise of the first order."¹ There is little one could object to in this statement; equally acceptable is Hoffmann's discussion of some of Mann's devices, such as Hieronymus' "imitatio" of Savonarola, the varying treatment of time, the importance of locale and social circumstance, and stylistic parody. But doubts arise when Hoffmann claims that the "verbal repetitions and self-quotations within the text"—one of the most distinctive features in Mann's fiction—"possess" a "rhetorical rather than symbolical function."² This judgment, I suspect, is based on Mann's own later view,³ according to which his breakthrough to a musico-symbolical motif-structure did not occur until "Tonio Kröger." An unprejudiced reading of the story, however, can show that "Gladius Dei" does in fact have a symbolical motif-structure.

Like most other critics, Hoffman seems more or less to equate the "musicality" of Mann's fiction with the use of leitmotifs; and since he asserts that there is "a distinctive difference" between the "verbal repetitions" of this story and the "leitmotifs in the later works," he seems to deny "Gladius Dei" any musical motif-technique at all.⁴ The danger behind such an argumentation, i.e., the fixation on leitmotifs,⁵ is widespread in Mann criticism. It has led many critics to overlook the use of more traditional devices such as variation and inversion, which offer the author—in music as well as in literature—the possibility to hint at subtle and hidden connections between seemingly separate elements of his work.⁶

Hoffmann's observations on the structure of "Gladius Dei" remain on the surface. He comments on topographical references and their repetitions; but more important motifs (Hieronymus' coat and his facial expressions) are not examined. Consequently he failed to recognize the basically musical structure of "Gladius Dei"⁷ and the symbolical motif on which the whole story rests.

This central motif is the motif of the sword. It is

announced—first somewhat enigmatically—in the Latin title of the story. At the end it recurs in Hieronymus' quotation from Savonarola: "Gladius Dei super terram . . . cito et velociter" (viii, 215), thus rounding out the narrative and revealing its specific meaning. Immediately before the end it appears in Hieronymus' mock apocalyptic vision as "ein breites Feuerschwert . . . , das sich im Schwefellicht über die frohe Stadt hinreckte." But these very obvious references to the sword do not stand alone. Deeply indebted to the art of Wagner, and determined to compose "gute Partituren," Mann states his motif at the outset of the story, thus preparing for its subsequent musical development. In the long introductory section, the sword motif is sounded in the reference to the young people on Ludwigstraße, "die das Nothung-Motiv pfeifen" (viii, 197). The connection of this allusion with the title of the story becomes evident when we remember that in German the "Nothung-Motiv" from Wagner's *Ring* is often referred to as the "Schwert-Motiv."⁸

The situation alluded to is, I believe, that of Siegmund in the first act of *Die Walküre*—a work Mann also used in his story *Wälsungenblut*. Some highlights of the Siegmund-plot—his monologue "Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater" and his climactic discovery of the God-sent Nothung-sword with which he will battle Hunding for his sister and bride Sieglinde—are drawn into the web of "Gladius Dei." Siegmund's situation is echoed, though in a strongly burlesque distortion, in Hieronymus' dream—also reminiscent of Moses—"daß ein Befehl und Ruf aus der Höhe an Hieronymus erging" (viii, 204), to take steps against the excesses in the cult of the arts. Likewise, one may perceive an ironic echo of Siegmund's discovery of Nothung in Hieronymus' final vision of a sword which is to destroy Munich and Mr. Blütenzweig's art shop where his own spiritual bride, as it were, the Virgin, is being prostituted. Unlike Siegmund, however, Hieronymus proves to be grotesquely unable to gain possession of that sword, let alone wield it.

The musical treatment of a motif in literature can very well go beyond verbal repetitions. Mann makes use of this possibility in "Gladius Dei" by transforming, in analogy to the musical device of inversion, the sword to a sceptre. This occurs at the end of the first section when Munich's cult of the arts is summed up and put under the emblem of a "rosenumwundenes Zepter" (viii, 200). In this image we have a transformation of the sword and a reversal of its significance from destruction to fertility. The end of the story's first and last sections are thus balanced by the two motifs of the fiery sword and the sceptre entwined with roses—both appearing in the sky above Munich—and they are contrasted as two opposite symbols: one of destruction and one of flowering. Mann probably draws here on the traditional emblematic meaning of

sword and sceptre as Imperial insignia. The reader is to wonder whether Munich and its art will emerge in the sign of the sceptre or that of the sword, whether art will remain sovereign or whether it will become the instrument and the object of destruction.

This transformation of the sword motif further suggests a connection with the symbolic name of Hieronymus' principal antagonist, Herr Blüthenzweig. The name Blüthenzweig is simply the diminutive form of the "rosenumwundene Zepter," and Herr Blüthenzweig turns out to be the symbolic personification of Munich's art. This then is the most far-reaching ramification of the central sword motif.

This musical relationship between the sword, the sceptre, and the name Blüthenzweig must be taken as the key to the cultural criticism of "Gladius Dei." The aim of this criticism is to reveal artistically the hidden connection between the seemingly opposed forces of the story: Munich's cult of the arts and Hieronymus' anti-artistic zeal. The reader is to recognize Hieronymus' destructive impulse against art as a direct outcome of the very cult of the arts.⁹ Mann depicts Munich at a period of artistic flowering; but the sword motif with its threatening implications is shown to be literally in the air of Munich. Hieronymus simply picks it up, combines it with his own religious fervor, and tries to wield it in the spirit of his idol Savonarola. The end of the story seems to imply that the sword rather than the sceptre will reign over Munich and art. But as usual, Mann's message is not straightforward and not without irony. To be sure, Hieronymus' zeal is thwarted and ridiculed; but Mann does not really grant the reader the consolation of a comic relief. Hieronymus is a product and a representative of the same Munich culture which, on the surface, seems to be such a brilliant and beautiful affair. Yet Hieronymus and Herr Blüthenzweig merely represent two aspects of two antagonistic forces within art itself—just as the motif of the sword can be taken as the inverted form of the sceptre, or vice versa. Nor does Mann pose in the role of the prophet of doom, he simply shows himself soberly aware of the fact that the destructive impulse against art is in itself a side effect of its cult. In an author who was to write *Der Tod in Venedig* this insight can come as no surprise.

In "Gladius Dei," Mann's affinity to music manifests itself in two respects: one root of the central sword motif is musical in origin; its narrative treatment in repetition, inversion, and variation is also decidedly musical. This literary emulation of music, .e., of Wagner's music, was the avowed and obvious ambition of the early Mann. To him, Wagner's symbolic subtlety in music remains exemplary for a long time although the message of this music elicited from him hardly more than irony and doubt. In a little-known article, written only two years after "Gladius

Dei," Mann emphatically acknowledged his debt to his "Meister und nordischen Gott." Speaking of his own narrative technique he states: "alle meine Novellen haben den symbolischen Zug: diese wagnerischen und eminent nordischen Wirkungsmittel . . . sind schon völlig Instinkt bei mir geworden."¹⁰

With regard to Mann's artistic development, a quick reminder of *Der Weg zum Friedhof* and of *Der Tod in Venedig* may suffice to reveal the importance of "Gladius Dei." Compared with the almost contemporary story "Der Weg zum Friedhof"—which is based on a similar conflict—"Gladius Dei" shows a distinct advance in the artistic organization of the narrative material and concomitantly an increased critical awareness. While in the former story the interpreter cannot detect one central motif with a sophisticated musical treatment, "Gladius Dei" marks an important step forward in a development that reached its first climax in *Der Tod in Venedig*.

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Notes

¹ Ernst Fedor Hoffmann, "Thomas Mann's 'Gladius Dei,'" *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 1360.

² In a similar vein Hoffmann writes: "The recurrences in 'Gladius Dei' . . . only assure that the essentially fictional event of the last part does not become independent of the pointedly topical beginning and thus they secure the ties of the story to a specific time and place in reality. Nor does the repetition of words or phrases when used to identify characters in 'Gladius Dei' carry the weight of accumulative knowledge which may evolve into a symbol as it does, for instance, in 'Tonio Kröger' or again in *Zauberberg*" (pp. 1360–61).

³ "Lebensabriß," in Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1960), xi, 115–16. Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ P. 1361.

⁵ We are still far from a clarification of the relationship between Mann's fiction and Wagner's music. For an intelligent review of the problem of the leitmotif see Ch. i ("Die Theorie des Leitmotivs") of Francis Bulhof, *Transpersonalismus und Synchronizität. Wiederholung als Strukturelement in Thomas Manns "Zauberberg"* (Groningen: van Denderen, 1966), pp. 7–28. See also: Victor Žmegač, *Die Musik im Schaffen Thomas Manns* (Zagreb: Vjesnik Pogon Tipografija, 1959), pp. 40–45, 86–98; Steven P. Scher, "Thomas Mann's 'Verbal Score,'" in Scher, *Verbal Music in German Literature* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 106–54.

⁶ See Hans Mayer's remarks on the close relationship in Wagner's *Ring* between the motif of the sword and that of Wotan's spear, in *Anmerkungen zu Richard Wagner* (Frankfurt: Suhr Kamp Verlag, 1966), p. 102.

⁷ This musical quality was clearly felt by Howard Nemerov when he wrote that "Gladius Dei" "anticipates a kind of musical composition . . . in which, as Leverkühn says,

'there shall be nothing unthematic.'" "Themes and Methods: The Early Stories of Thomas Mann," *Carleton Miscellany*, 2 (1961), 11.

⁸ See Mann's revealing confession about the impact on him of Wagner's sword motif in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, xii, 80–82.

⁹ Hoffmann, admittedly, arrives at a similar interpretation (p. 1359). His method, however, is more intuitive, and he fails to show the objective correlative of Mann's cultural criticism in the musico-symbolical structure of the story.

¹⁰ "Der französische Einfluß," x, 838.

Mr. Hoffmann Replies:

I am afraid that I feel Professor Veget has given in—a little—to temptation and has presented us with a personal reading of "Gladius Dei" which includes several observations and speculations hitherto unpublished, but which is, on the whole, valuable predominantly to himself and a very select group of "Gladius Dei" fanciers. His two main points are, I believe, that the "central motif" of the story is the sword and that the story has a "basically musical structure."¹ While some of his observations on the sword strike me as rather farfetched (e.g., Hieronymus' dream as an echo of Siegmund's situation, or the *rosenumwundenes Zepter* as a "transformation of the sword and a reversal of its significance from destruction to fertility"), others appear quite convincing (as, e.g., the connection between that sceptre and the art dealer's name). Concerning the "musicality of Mann's fiction" I should very much like to defend myself against the accusation that I seem "to deny Gladius Dei any musical motif technique at all." I have had no training in music theory and I find that I'd rather not use the terms "musical" and "musicality" when writing about narrative techniques, because I should not know precisely enough what the words would signify. Professor Veget clearly has no such handicap and will, therefore,

properly use them. I can have no quarrel with that, particularly since he arrives at a conclusion which is close enough to mine. (See his note no. 9.) My real question is rather: How many readers will—and should, rightly—be interested in these matters?

I admit that I also had, and still have, misgivings about the usefulness of my paper on "Gladius Dei." In its defense, I can only repeat that I think this little story deserves our attention because it permits us insights into the mechanics of some of Mann's famous stylistic devices; insights which are of general interest because they show something about the cause-and-effect relationship between stylistic phenomena and the reader's impressions. This defense, of course, rests on my reading of the story. I realize that Professor Veget does not accept that reading and I believe I am following his thoughts correctly when I understand him to mean that "Gladius Dei" is basically more similar to the later *Novellen* than I had granted; that, like them, it has "a symbolical motif structure" and therefore should be grouped *with* them rather than considered in contrast to them as I had done. If this is so, however, my misgivings must include not only my own paper, but also Professor Veget's comments, for, if "Gladius Dei" is really only one story among many of the same type and structure, quite brief, a minor work and not yet an example of the fully developed style: should we then really spend all this time on it? (And to what extent am I guilty of the same waste of reader's time by pointing all of this out?)

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Note

¹ Footnote on Prof. Veget's footnote no. 7: As far as I can see, H. Nemerov speaks about "Weg zum Friedhof" and not "Gladius Dei" when he makes the statement quoted by Professor Veget.