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## Nihilism and Mythology. The myth debate after WWII in the correspondence of three generations of scholars\*

*Nihilismo e Mitologia. O debate sobre o mito depois da  
segunda guerra mundial na correspondência de três gerações  
de scholars*

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### Abstract

After the Second World War, German intellectuals who opposed the Nazi regime, faced a crisis of consciousness. They were concerned with a critical analysis, which involved every aspect and even the very essence of their culture. In this contribution, I will turn my attention to some segments of this debate on myth, irrationality and nihilism within the field of classical scholarship and history of religions, approaching as samples the correspondence of three scholars, who are representative for three generations before, during and after WWII: the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann, the Hungarian mythologist Karolyi Kerényi and the Italian mythologist Furio Jesi, theorist and critic of the right-wing culture. In the work and reflection of all these authors, Friedrich Nietzsche will play a key role.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Nietzsche. Karoly Kérenyi. Thomas Mann. Furio Jesi. Myth.

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## Resumo

*Depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial, os intelectuais alemães que se opunham ao regime nazista, enfrentaram uma crise de consciência. Preocupavam-se com uma análise crítica, que envolvia todos os aspectos e até mesmo a própria essência de sua cultura. Nesta contribuição, voltarei minha atenção para alguns segmentos desse debate sobre mito, irracionalidade e niilismo no campo da erudição clássica e da história das religiões, tomando como amostra a correspondência de três estudiosos, que são representativos de três gerações anteriores, durante e depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial: o ganhador do Prêmio Nobel Thomas Mann, o mitólogo húngaro Karolyi Kerényi e o mitólogo italiano Furio Jesi, teórico e crítico da cultura de direita. Na obra e reflexão de todos estes autores, Friedrich Nietzsche terá um papel fundamental.*

**Palavras-chave:** Friedrich Nietzsche. Karoly Kerenyi. Thomas Man. Furio Jesi. Mito.

## Introduction

After the Second World War, German intellectuals who opposed the Nazi regime, faced a crisis of consciousness. They were concerned with a critical analysis, which involved every aspect and even the very essence of their culture. One of the most important targets of this critical analysis was the classical tradition, field in which German culture had reached the highest levels and a leading position within European and world-culture. The fascination for symbolic images, myths and ancient cults, which since more than a century moved the curiosity of scholars in Germany and made their approach to ancient cultures so unique and innovative for their time, was interested by a process of demythologization, to use a term of Bultmann. In this context, the figure of Nietzsche plays a central role. The philosopher of Naumburg, who advocated an aesthetic conception of philosophy, who is the mythological thinker *par excellence* and the herald of the nihilistic vision of the world, can be considered the scapegoat and quasi the litmus test of this phenomenon cultural revision. The judgement on this prominent figure and of the scope of his philosophy was an essential critical step for both parties in contention.

Nietzsche will be criticized on the one hand as a forerunner of decadent aestheticism and even of the Nazi ideology by those who argued the need for a purge of irrationalistic and nihilistic elements of culture and for a rationalistic purification of political and social thought. On the other hand, he will be strenuously defended by

those German intellectuals who opposed the Nazis and who claim the freedom and legitimacy of their culture, and on the right to separate the cultural and aesthetic experience of Germany from the political and ideological drives of the German society. For its last defenders, German culture does not deserve to be condemned and to experience a *damnatio memoriae*, together with the “political” and “military Germany”. Culture has a higher right of legitimacy, which distances itself from historical and political contingencies and allows to every human being to access a more comprehensive understanding of everything (good and evil) that constitutes human existence.

Following in the footsteps of this second party, I'll argue that this controversy stems essentially from a misunderstanding of the function and essence of some Nietzschean concepts and conceptions, such as Dionysism and Nihilism. The latter in particular, has too often been interpreted as a form of political and social cynicism or translated into the terms of an annihilating desire of death and destruction, which would impose itself on the society as a moral and cultural sickness. In this contribution, I will turn my attention to some segments of this debate on myth, irrationality and nihilism within the field of classical scholarship and history of religions, approaching as samples the correspondence of three scholars, who are representative for three generations before, during and after WWII: the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann, the Hungarian mythologist Karolyi Kerényi and the Italian mythologist Furio Jesi, theorist and critic of the right-wing culture.

## Historical background

At the beginning of 1934 a young and brilliant Hungarian mythologist, Karoly Kerényi, in the wake of the enthusiasm caused by reading the *Magic Mountain* (1924) and the most recent publication of *The Stories of Jacob* (1933) by Thomas Mann, decided to take contact with the famous writer, who had recently moved to Switzerland from Germany for reasons that everyone knows, sending to him one of his articles<sup>1</sup>. On 27

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<sup>1</sup> KERENYI, K. Unsterblichkeit und Apollonreligion zum Verständnis von Platon Phaidon. *Die Antike*, v. 10, p. 46-58, 1934.

January 1934 Thomas Mann responded to the attestations of esteem of the professor of Budapest showing the same impetus and commitment. From this moment on, a fertile exchange of letters between the writer and the mythologist began, which lasted until the death of Thomas Mann himself in 1955,<sup>2</sup> interrupted only by the interlude of the darkest years of the war. These were the decisive years in which Thomas Mann attended the drafting of his great mythological novel, the tetralogy *Joseph and his brothers*, of which *The Stories of Jacob* were only meant to be the prologue. Thirty years later, 1964, ten years after the death of Thomas Mann, the scheme of this epistolary encounter seems to reproduce itself in identical forms. Also this time it is a young and brilliant self-taught mythologist, Furio Jesi, who writes a letter full of transport to the now elderly and famous Karoly Kerényi, inaugurating a brief but intense exchange of letters that will last until 1968<sup>3</sup>.

What binds these so different correspondences, and therefore makes them interesting for a study in this context, is that they seem to carry on a single discourse, a same dialogue between like-minded spirits, which has lasted for decades and through three generations. The theme that will be so dear to Mann, Kerényi and Jesi is that of myth, of its religious, social and political value. Myth is understood from the point of view of the mythologists and the writer, as an original form of human experience. But at the same time, they will experience the terrible social and political secularization that had contaminated the myth by incorporating it into the Nazi ideology. With these latest drifts of Western mythical thought, an ethical confrontation was becoming unavoidable. It was from this context that the dialogue with the figure of Friedrich Nietzsche became for these authors an obligatory stage in this debate. Nietzsche is in fact the mythologist *par excellence*, the discoverer – so Warburg – or the creator, of the dual soul, which lies at the base of the Greek world. To this original polarity Nietzsche gave the names of two gods of the Greek pantheon: Apollo and Dionysus. The luminous clarity of the Apollonian Greece, many times re-interpreted in the thoughts of Winckelmann and Schiller, could not exist if not in an eternal duel with the tragic and obscure background of Dionysism, which leaks

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<sup>2</sup> MANN, T.; KERÉNYI, K. *Gespräch in Briefen*. Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> JESI, F.; KERÉNYI, K. *Demone e mito*. Carteggio 1964-1968. Macerata: Quodlibet, 1999.

through the cracks of this pacified world and betrays its dramas and unresolved tensions.

The discovery of Dionysism in Greece, with its bursting vitality, its traits of necessary cruelty, the confusion of the levels of life and death, will have a long-lasting effect on the studies of the history of religions, and its long shadow will influence the tone of scientific contributions as well as the aesthetic taste of the beginning of the century. Moreover, the Nietzsche "mythologist" of which Mann, Kerényi and Jesi will speak has itself become a "myth". His existence as a radical philosopher, a man who creates worlds, a self-exiled hermit, a censor of modern society has been read as a true "mythology", according to the famous definition of one of his first biographers, Ernst Bertram. Only considering (and fully distinguishing) these three levels — the philosopher of myth, who creates myths and who is in turn a myth — we can evaluate the extent of the cultural impact of Nietzsche's figure and philosophy on the first decades of the twentieth century. In this way we can also certainly better understand and eventually counteract that countermovement of reaction and condemnation of Nietzsche after the Second World War.

### **Myth between Mann and Kerényi: the *Joseph***

Returning to the background of our historical framework: The young mythologist Karoly Kerényi had dared to approach the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann on the pretext of being able to help him as a scientific consultant in the project that he had undertaken with the writing of the *Joseph*. Kerényi was convinced that the use of myth by the great writer in the conception of this novel was not just a literary stunt, but represented a fundamental moment in the exteriorisation of the eternal forms of myth still in the modern era. In a word, as well as Nietzsche, Mann would not only uses myths in his writing, but he also creates myths through it. He can also be considered as the last chapter of the eternal history of the vitality of myth and its action in the world. As Kerényi defined myth in 1958 in the *Preface* to the second part of his *Mythologie der Griechen* (1951-1958), it represents not only an object of study, but can also become an active project in the present. For the scholar, myth is similar to

history, although, in fact, it is not naively "historical", nor does it fully correspond to any of its possible euhemeristic reductions. By choosing to quote in the *incipit* of his most important book on mythology a famous passage from the *History of Greek Civilization* by Jacob Burckhardt,<sup>4</sup> where it is argued that myths are the true prerequisites of every aspect of Greek existence, Kerényi argues explicitly that myth is the deepest history of man, in the sense that it is both the most ancient and the most current history of man.

Myth is a part of that story that we can call "our" history, in the sense of a common heritage that makes us able to remember and to assimilate. On the basis of the experiences of psychology I doubt that we can completely ignore this period of history. And as a historian I would consider it a falsification of the overall picture of the history of mankind to want to neglect what we know in this regard<sup>5</sup>.

For Kerényi, therefore, myth has an eminently epistemological and gnoseological value. It is a complex and evolved form of consciousness, which distinguishes itself, although not in opposition, from history and intellectual knowledge.

On this point Kerényi found in Thomas Mann<sup>6</sup> a confirmation and at the same time a development of his theories. As Mann himself would admit in 1936, in a quite autobiographical passage of his essay *Freud and the Future*:

Undoubtedly, the conquest of the way of seeing typical of the myth makes epoch in the life of the narrator. It means a singular strengthening of his artistic disposition, a new serenity in understanding and shaping, that usually is reserved to the advanced ages of life; in fact, in the

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<sup>4</sup> «Myths are a prerequisite for all Greek existence. Culture, as well as every expression of life, was still the original ancient one, only gradually developing. The mythical and sacred origin of many forms of life was still recognizable and one felt close to it. All the Greeks considered themselves the successors and legitimate heirs of the times of the Heroes: the injustices suffered from the primordial times were still repaid. Herodotus traces the great struggle between West and East to the abduction of Io and the Persian wars are for him a continuation of the Trojan war» (BURCKHARDT, J. *Griechische Culturgeschichte*. Berlin-Stuttgart: Spemann, 1898. I, 1. p. 33).

<sup>5</sup> KERÉNYI, K. *Die Mythologie der Griechen*. Tübingen: Klett-Cotta, 1997. II. p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> As Mann confessed to him in a letter of 27 January 1934, he was only very late in becoming interested in the myth. While myth commonly fascinates children with its images and stories, Mann had been fascinated by it later on, and he dedicated the great mythological fresco of his *Joseph* to this discovery.

life of the humanity, the mythical point of view represents an initial and primitive stage, but in the life of the individual, it represents instead an advanced and mature stage<sup>7</sup>.

Kerényi could not but agree with this strong conception of myth. This thesis will prove to be a strong argument against the polemical objective at that time very dear to both authors: the irrationalistic abuse of myth in the culture of the time, not only by the intellectual and erudite circles of Stefan George and Ludwig Klages, but above all by the popular culture oriented by the national socialistic rhetoric. This kind of degenerate culture showed, according to Mann, «a certain aversion to the development of the human brain»<sup>8</sup> and experienced its highest moments in the misrepresentation of the myth of what Kerényi called «the very bad, not Dionysian - in the Nietzschean sense — (rather disdionysian) madness of the youth».<sup>9</sup> Kerényi had himself the opportunity to observe with concern the effects of this kind of deviated fascination for Dionysian experiences on the youth during his last visit to Heidelberg, where he saw with his eyes a modern *orobasia*: masses of young people marching enthusiastically at night on the mountain at the light of torches<sup>10</sup>.

In 1936, in the already mentioned essay *Freud and the future*, Mann specified his conception of myth at the basis of the theoretical and compositional structure of his novel *Joseph and his brothers*. Mann theorizes an active value of myth, which he understand as an ethical (practical) form at the service of action in the history of a people and in its social and political life. The ancient man for Mann, as well as for Burckhardt, justified his action in the world, and his very existence, on a mythical basis. Whenever a critical moment in his life, or in the life of the community, was looming, he turned his eyes to the past, to the examples given by his ancestors, in a word, to myth. With his action, he intended to follow in the footsteps of the great actions of the past: in so doing he found in the past justification for his present action, and at the same time he revitalized this mythical past, making it current again:

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<sup>7</sup> MANN, T. Freud und die Zukunft. In: MANN, T. *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, IX, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974. p. 496.

<sup>8</sup> Mann to Kerényi, 20 February 1934.

<sup>9</sup> Kerényi to Mann, 13 September 1934.

<sup>10</sup> It is probably one of the night-ceremonies of the original Thingbewegung, for which the Thingstaette on top of Heidelberg's Heiligenberg was built, and which was absorbed by the Nazi movement.



The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset expresses this concept by saying that the ancient man, before doing something, went back a step, like the bullfighter (Toreador) who takes the momentum for the mortal lunge. In the past he sought an example in which to descend like a diver into his suit and then, so deformed and at the same time protected, immerse himself in the problem of the present. For this reason, his life was in a sense "giving life", an archaizing attitude. But precisely this giving life, bringing back to life, is life in myth<sup>11</sup>.

This particular form of imitation of the past would psychologically correspond to an authentic mythical identification with the ancestors, the mythical heroes, the great men of the past, of which ancient and modern history would provide numerous examples. The myth would therefore be — and so Mann paints it in his *Joseph* — a repertoire of eternal human states, eternally valid and eternally attainable. Friedrich Nietzsche had proposed something similar, to help the production of the present via a mechanism of historical reminiscence, in his *Genealogy of Morality*. The invitation to build up a past from which one can derive in order to act in the present and become masters of one's own future, reproduces the same mechanism of consciousness as Ortega Y Gasset's "step back" of the bullfighter. A step backwards that is necessarily intended to be "conscious" and "aware", which therefore belongs fully to the realm of human knowledge and not to an unreflective and unconscious self. Furthermore, his constant recourse to antiquity, even to what we define as "classical" antiquity, is always filtered by the awareness of having to choose a model, on the base of which and against which to build, in perspective, both the genealogical critique of the present, and a new awareness of the inexhaustible potential of this same present.

Mann should have had still in mind the famous words of Nietzsche's opening lecture *Homer und die klassische Philologie* (1869), about the "classical" value of antiquity and its capacity to constitute an eternal "model" (KGW, II/1, 269), when 1929, in the surprising *incipit* of his magnificent *Discourse on Lessing*, he gives us a reading of myth as a model and repertoire:

Classic, as we want to understand it now, is not what is valid as a general model (Vorbild). [...] Classical is in fact the type that was formed previously (das Vorgebildete), the raising of a form of spiritual life through the individual living element; it is an original atavistic type in which the further life will recognize itself and on whose footsteps it will proceed: it is therefore a myth,

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<sup>11</sup> MANN, T. Freud und die Zukunft. In: MANN, T. *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, IX, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974. P. 498. The reference is to ORTEGA, G. J. *La rebelión de las masas*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1929.

since the type is mythical and the essence of the myth is the return, atemporality, perennial presence. Only in this sense is the classic a model, not in the sense of vacuous normative exemplariness. Classical age means patriarchal age, mythical age<sup>12</sup>.

At the base of this conception of the mythical type, which will be common to Kerényi and Mann, lies the capacity of man to recognize himself in the forms that preceded him and in those that will follow him, to recognize himself therefore first of all as man among other men, in every time. This is the basis of Kerényi's conviction that myth is eminently "human", and of his confidence that a new humanism can be founded on myth free from mystifications. But it is precisely on this trust in the value of myth in the present time and of its validity for the future that the visions of Mann and Kerényi begin to diverge.

Mann was suspicious of the myth, which he considered, yes, potentially human, but also potentially "demonic". Mann's trust was shaken by the abuses of his time, and he tended to maintain particular caution on these issues, a caution that Kerényi would reproach him for. Kerényi complained, for example, that Mann, moved by these scruples, had dedicated his mythological masterpiece to the so-called "lawful myth" of the Bible, choosing to leave in the background (although present in the conceptional frame of the novel), the "unlawful Greek myth", in vogue thanks to Nietzsche, which was considered "dangerous" because of the misinterpretations of the contemporaries. Kerényi, on the other hand, did not want to and could not renounce this Greek myth<sup>13</sup>.

Mann, felt the need to "humanize" the myth, in order to avoid this type of incorrect and ideological use.

As a narrator I came to the myth, but, with the immense scandal of the pseudo-barbaric and primitive people, I tried to humanize it, trying a fusion of myth and humanity that seems to me more fruitful for the future of the current, fanatical struggle against the spirit, in which you try to flatter the present by trampling on reason and civilization with great zeal<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> MANN, T. Rede über Lessing. In: MANN, T. *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, IX, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974. p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> KERÉNYI, K. Vorbetrachtungen 1959. In: MANN, T.; Kerényi, K. *Gespräch in Briefen*, p. 11-55.

<sup>14</sup> MANN, T. Meerfahrt mit Don Quijote. In: MANN, T. *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, IX, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974. p. 427-477, 26<sup>th</sup> May.

Again in 1941, the urgency of rethinking the myth in an anti-irrationalistic sense was evident in a letter to Kerényi of 18 February:

Myth added to psychology. For a long time I have been a passionate friend of this combination, because in fact psychology is the means to take away the myth from the fascist obscurantists and to "transfunction it" into humanity. This union represents for me even the future world, a humanity blessed from above, from the spirit, and "from the depths that are beneath us"<sup>15</sup>.

Myth and psychology is a combination that will reappear in many occasions in the epistolary exchange and in the individual paths of these two authors. Psychological can be defined the approach to the myth of Karoly Kerényi, who also co-wrote a book with Carl Gustav Jung<sup>16</sup>. The study of mythical archetypes, which Kerényi developed independently of this scholar of the collective unconscious, was intended as an epistemological investigation, which aspired to account for the articulations of the human psyche at all times and in all places. Thomas Mann at his turn, in the already mentioned essay *Freud and the future* (1936) settled on positions very similar to those of the mythologist, rediscovering myth as an eternally significant language, to which humanity, in all its phases of growth (from child to man, from antiquity to modernity) necessarily resorts and which reveals the basic structures of human thought and desire.

For both these authors, then, the rediscovery of Psychology as the extreme access route to the epistemology of man was a consequence of the teaching of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is for Mann and Kerényi the greatest modern psychologist. Contrary to Nietzsche's "irrationalistic" reception at the beginning of the century, Mann and Kerényi had taken up to the letter the lesson of *Human, all too human* and *The Joyful Wisdom*, and recognized in the philosopher's critical path the features of the hermeneutic practice of the scholar of the soul, of the psychologist. It is not by chance, in fact — as Kerényi will remember in plenty occasions - that in the *Attempt for a self-criticism* Nietzsche will speak of the birth of tragedy in Greece as a "psychological question", and of the Apollonian and Dionysian as two impulses (*Triebe*) that are the basis of human existence.

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<sup>15</sup> Mann to Kerényi, 18 February 1941.

<sup>16</sup> KERÉNYI, K.; JUNG, C. G. *Einführung in das Wesen der Mythologie*. Amsterdam: Pantheon, 1942.

A "psychological" interpretation of myth, such as that of Mann's *Joseph*, aimed to shift the analysis of this phenomenon to a different level from that of history, society and politics in which it lent itself to the risk of ideological interpretations. This need to "internalize" the myth, to remove it from the logic of earthly existence, was not shared by Kerényi. According to Kerényi, Mann was too cautious about the myth, and in so doing he conceded too much to the abuses and degenerated "mythologisations" of their contemporaries. For Kerényi there was no need to pacify the myth, to make it inert in active life, to deny or reduce its effectiveness. Kerényi follows the intuition of Nietzsche (and of Goethe before him), that nothing of what is human, of what belongs to the horizon of human experience, can be really detrimental to man, and that therefore nothing, not even the darkest aspects of existence should be demonized, and thus denied. The Greek gods of Kerényi are - exactly like the Greek gods of Nietzsche - a divinization of existence in all its aspects. He carries on an interpretation of myth as eminently human. The potentiality of the whole myth, both when it has a "positive" content and when it has a "demonic" content (when it conveys contents linked to the underworld, to death, to blood, to sacrificial violence), belongs to the human being in its integrity, and its *vis activa* cannot be denied without the danger of incurring far worse evils.

The obvious mystifications of fascist culture that "uses" myth and bends it to its own interests, have nothing to do, according to Kerényi, with an awareness of the core of sense of myth in its integrity, in its duplicity of good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. They have to do on the contrary with a superficial readings of ideas and mythical themes distorted according to the "all too human" logic of contemporary political and social discourse, which have nothing "mythical" apart from the name. This "technicized" myth, to use a Kerenyian terminology, no longer has anything of the "genuine" myth, has no depth, neither historical nor epistemological depth, and therefore deserves to be falsified.

## The seduction of myth and the pact with the devil: *Doctor Faustus*

Kerényi's concerns about Mann's anxiety with mythical materials will become more concrete after the end of the war. Between 1941 and 1945, the exchange of letters between Mann and Kerényi was interrupted, due to the worsening of the conflict and the consequent difficulties in communication between the United States and old Europe. Kerényi resumed contact with the writer in February 1945. The letter of the mythologist will find Thomas Mann immersed in a spirit very different from that of the first years of writing of his *Joseph*. The first sibylline references to a new "Faustian" novel are to be found in the correspondence of those years. It was question of a novel, whose theme is a "pact with the devil", and in which the protagonist «shares the fate - eminently German - of Nietzsche and Hugo Wolf». Kerényi follows with concern the gestation of this «monstrous novel - as Thomas Mann called it - the most personal, the most risky and for me the most exciting of my books». *Doktor Faustus*, a Faustian and Nietzschean novel, whose protagonist is a shadow of Nietzsche, Faust, Schoenberg, and Thomas Mann himself, will appear in that year, and Kerényi was among the firsts to read it. Reading this dark and desperate book is a painful experience for Kerényi. He can only recognize here the suffering of an illness, which would have struck Mann because of the horrors of war.

Kerényi was particularly disappointed that all his correspondence with Mann, their debate on myth, and the joint work during the previous years, should ultimately result in a grotesque and disturbing, however beautiful, caricature as the *Faustus*. Some specific elements in the novel denounced this metamorphosis that mythological materials had experienced in the years of the war, and now they appeared deformed in Mann's work. To quote an example: the symbol of the winged snake, which we find in the seal chosen by Adrian Leverkuehn, the anti-hero of the book, and that in Mann's intentions is a clear symbol of death. The idea of using this symbol was suggested to Mann by Kerényi, who now no longer accepts such a radical upheaval of the symbolism of the snake. In response to what he read in the pages of the *Faustus*, Kerényi will send to Mann a new representation of the winged snake, this time with Asclepius on its back. He wanted to signify in this way (as Aby Warburg will also do

in another context) that the snake is as much the symbol of illness and death as of medicine and healing. Still in 1959, five years after the writer's death, Kerényi will return to this episode in the second part of the second edition of their *Epistolary*, bitterly recalling the correspondence of those post-war years:

I don't know if he understood the symbol with which I congratulated him on the healing of the most painful (so at least I thought) identification of his life. My thoughtful and tormented question was this: how was it possible for him to simplify in such a frightening way? Wasn't he the one who said that Nietzsche's infernal revendication by the National Socialists was "the grossest" of all confusions? And now, he created a character who (as he wrote to me) "shares the fate of Nietzsche and Hugo Wolf, and is like these a true son of Hell", a character who, endowed with the most sublime qualities of a great modern composer, makes a pact with the devil: a gesture that should express, through a mythological-Christian image, the guilt that the most refined German spirits had in accepting National Socialism! This seemed unfair to me. But I also had to consider the autobiographical traits [...] and I said to myself: "but this is above all...himself!"<sup>17</sup>.

Kerényi therefore suspects that the *Doktor Faustus* is an autobiographical novel in which the writer makes a confession, in the Christian sense of the term, generated by his feeling of guilt as a German. Faustus is therefore Mann's Christian novel, the novel of the fault, accusation and expiation of Thomas Mann as a German intellectual, and like him of the whole German culture.

But how could Mann hold himself responsible for the tragic events of the Second World War and for a regime to which he had strongly opposed from the beginning? Mann's "guilt", and the one he attributed to the German intellectuals of his time, was more subtle and less obvious than a concrete moral or political responsibility. The pact with the devil, which we are talking about here, is something very subtle, which involves the culture and the highest achievements of the German spirit. It would be a kind of contagion, an insidious seduction, which, passing through art, culture, tradition, that these intellectuals idolatred, would end up corrupting their souls, making them powerless and almost impassive or indifferent to the political and social catastrophe of their country.<sup>18</sup> One of the routes taken by this seduction was that of the myth:

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<sup>17</sup> KERÉNYI, K. Einleitung. In: MANN, T.; KERÉNYI, K. *Gespräch in Briefen*. 2. edition, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967 (This is the Introduction to the II edition of the II volume of his correspondence with Mann).

<sup>18</sup> See WILLIAMSON, G. *The longing for myth in Germany. Religion and aesthetic culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004;

For me it was extremely sad to see what action the false myth exerted in Germany, or how in Germany, and very soon also outside, one could believe that this effect was exerted by a dynamic quid called myth, in whatever direction it was exerted. [...] Whoever opens the eyes of men to the great lessons of the divine-human game of mythology, purifies (I believed) and humanizes. Thomas Mann did so extensively, in his speech on Freud, through his brilliant enucleation of how myth actually act in history, conceived as an exemplary form of being. But since he was plunged in the German condition as a Protestant Christian and a German, his initial position was very complicated. He did not have clear conscience enough in his mythologizing that he connected with the maternal sphere of nature and considered only as a humanized form of the myth understood in his German way<sup>19</sup>.

Kerényi judged Mann's scruples to be unfounded, but at the same time he was aware that he could do nothing against the conscience of the writer. Mann, as a German, felt close to and participated in the moral decadence of his nation. 1945 Thomas Mann had the opportunity to express in a letter to Emil Preetorius a disorienting judgment on an old - and in other times much loved — friend of his, who had directly compromised with Nazism: Ernst Bertram, the author of the famous book *Nietzsche. For a mythology*. The judgment on Bertram is rather indulgent, but perhaps for this very reason, even heavier: according to the Nobel Prize winner, Bertram would be «the type of the thoughtful aristocratic Nazi and of the seduced Germanist»<sup>20</sup>. Certainly a Nazi, but thoughtful, aristocratic, a Germanist (a literate therefore, a lover of German literature) seduced by Germanism. As a literate, and especially as a German literate, Mann felt a deep and close sense of that seduction his old friend had been unable to resist.

One of the elements on which Mann's accusation (or self-accusation) is based is that of the aristocraticism, typical of the German scholar and intellectual. Aristocracy of the spirit, of the intellectual elite, that pathos of distance of which Nietzsche himself was the spokesman (the radical aristocratism of which Georg Brandes speaks), who disdains politics and withdraws from it, but at the same time aspires to recognition<sup>21</sup>. The true German aristocracy is an aristocracy of the spirit,

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LEPENIES, W. *The Seduction of Culture in German History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> KERÉNYI, K. *Einleitung*. In: MANN, T.; KERÉNYI, K. *Gespräch in Briefen*. 2. Edition. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967.

<sup>20</sup> Mann to Preetorius, 23 October 1945.

<sup>21</sup> MANN, T. *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. Berlin: Fischer, 1918.

which by definition is characterized as undemocratic, anti-liberal, exclusive and disdainful of the masses. In his 1949 essay *The Three Colossi*, one of the most important writings on the construction of German culture and identity, Mann wrote: «In Germany greatness tends towards undemocratic hypertrophy, between it and the masses there is an abyss, a "pathos of distance" to use Nietzsche's favourite expression»<sup>22</sup>. According to Mann, this tendency would be visible throughout the history of German culture, and in particular by the fact that it was concentrated around figures of extraordinary importance, without ever becoming the common heritage of the nation.

Already Goethe, the champion of the modern German intellectuals, the divine, the Olympic Goethe, was also a kind of inhuman figure. As Eckermann presents him in his *Conversations*, Goethe is certainly the genius with the deepest artistic humanity, but at the same time a champion of selfishness and indifference. He didn't care about anything but himself and his mission, he retired in an isolation not so much physical as spiritual, loved by everybody, he didn't really love anyone. In a letter to G.W. Zimmermann of December 7, 1949, who after the war spoke of the need to distinguish the "good Germany" from the "bad Germany", Mann replied contemptuously: «It seems absurd to me to present Goethe as a straight-A student in terms of democracy and make him the representative of the Good Germany. He was too big to be just good, and in all the great Germans there is always something of the "bad Germany"». That form of "aristocratic" democracy that was for Kerényi the Italian Humanism, a democracy of the spirit therefore, that he aspired to renew on European soil, would never have been possible in Germany, according to Mann. The legacy of Goethe, champion of the individualistic isolation of the genius, still weighed indeed as an uncomfortable and captivating model on German culture, and not least on him. The *mea culpa* of 'Thomas Mann' would be the *mea culpa* of the greatest contemporary German intellectual, who had chosen Goethe and Nietzsche as models, and who now had to question himself, along with them.

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<sup>22</sup> MANN, T. Die drei Gewaltigen. In: MANN, T. *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, IX, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1. Frankfurt: Fischer 1974. p. 374.



Goethe's reserve, however, which was fatal for the German spirit, indeed for all of humanity, his lack of humanistic solidarity - the lack of understanding for a *res publica doctorum virorum* that could have expanded the humanistic republic [...] seems to me today the tragic accomplishment of the devouring solitudes of other great Germans: Hölderlin and Nietzsche. An archipelagic harmony of island voices: what for a humanism could have resonated here, instead, at most, of a late poetic sectarianism<sup>23</sup>.

What does this have to do with Nazism? Nothing really. And they were aware of this, both Kerényi, who was engaged in defending Nietzsche from Mann, and Mann from himself, and Mann himself, who was committed to working out his sense of guilt. As Mann will say in a letter to Maximilian Brante of 26 December 1947:

I can't blame Nietzsche for having spoiled my Germans. If they were so foolish as to fall into the trap of his devilism, it's their business, and if they can't stand their great men, they should stop producing them<sup>24</sup>.

The "Nazi rogue", according to the definition of our two authors, is not part of this elaborate examination of conscience of the intellectuals. It can be included in this discourse only as an external factor, from which the constitutive weakness of the intellectual culture has been overwhelmed. To a young and intransigent Furio Jesi, determined to probe the faults of politics, intellectuals, and culture and who found in myth the seeds of that nihilistic cynicism that would lead German culture to the moral (before even military) defeat of World War II, Kerényi will say, with sharp sarcasm:

For Nazism [...] I do not have a mythological explanation, but a strictly scientific, sociological explanation. This is based on an observation by Count Hermann Keyserling, as well as my own: Nazism is a form of conquest of power by the fourth state. The first state is the aristocracy; the second the bourgeoisie; the third the workers; the fourth the delinquents and the psychopaths, the "gangster" type that the life of the cities has produced in numerous crowds [...]. For them, even the false myth was useful for deliberately deceiving the world<sup>25</sup>.

The voice of reason and common sense, which resonates consolingly in Kerényi's words, does not save us unfortunately from surrendering to that particular kind of temptation, to the seduction of feeling guilty, of knowing that we are guilty as intellectuals, far beyond the actual responsibilities that this common sense imposes on us. This too, in fact, is the result of the great catastrophe of Nazi Germany: that

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<sup>23</sup> Kerényi to Mann, 1 August 1945.

<sup>24</sup> Mann to Brante, 26 December 1947.

<sup>25</sup> Kerényi to Jesi, 25 May 1965.

subtle contagion, a real *miasma*, like the impurity that originates from the contact with blood, that manages to cast the shadow of corruption, to stain the conscience even of those who opposed Nazism, or who were strangers to it. The crimes of Nazism have cast a long shadow that has also succeeded in reaching the German emigrants, exiled people and dissidents of the regime. Hence the need of intellectuals, such as Thomas Mann, to proceed to an examination of conscience of the entire culture that they, as well as the Nazis, albeit on ideally opposite fronts, have represented.

## **Sympathy for the death: Settembrini and the Pinacoteca Sabauda**

In these terms we could maybe understand (and perhaps even scale down) the judgment of posterity, which has not spared, among the many German intellectuals, Nietzsche and Mann. As I mentioned in the introduction to this contribution, I was interested here in bringing another voice into the debate, the voice of one of those contemporaries whose judgment reflects the harshness of Mann's *mea culpa*. At the end of 1964 the young Furio Jesi, a figure of brilliant amateur who had earned a prominent place in the nascent discipline of the history of religions in Italy, began an epistolary exchange with Kerényi. Furio Jesi explicitly admits to taking Kerényi's correspondence with Mann as a model. As in that case, the dialogue between the two professors is centred on myth; just as then, it could not be limited only to myth, but involved the judgement on the whole German culture that had been nourished by myths, choosing as targets once again Nietzsche and Mann. On February 2, 1965, Jesi wrote to Kerényi in a very direct way, talking to him about the project of a book, which should also talk of Thomas Mann:

This is a book - I want to entitle Secret Germany - intended to study the survival of certain mythical images in the German culture of the 19th and 20th centuries. I feel the need to know your opinion on this sort of initial "programmatic declaration", because you have experienced the questions proposed in this book with the conscience of a scholar of myth and at the same time of a non passive spectator of modern European civilization. In particular, your participation in the spiritual life of Thomas Mann led me to consult you as a witness more than

any other sensitive to the serious moral implications of the work of the greatest German artist of the twentieth century<sup>26</sup>.

Secret Germany (*Das geheime Deutschland*) has been a very significant formula in the German cultural environment, before, during and after World War II. As a metaphorical formula, it has meant for some authors of the beginning of the century the eternal communion of the spirits of the greats of German art and thought. The visible and secular Germany of industrial progress and militarism was counterbalanced by an eternal Germany, the Olympus of the greats, always accessible in spirit to the German people. *Gebeimes Deutschland* was the title of a famous poem by Stefan George, and it was the name that he gave to the aesthetic experience of his circle, which lived isolated in communion with the eternal spirits of the Germany of art and culture and aspired to represent a historical and earthly manifestation of it. Inspired by this, the historian Ernst Kantorowicz entitled *Secret Germany* his opening lecture of the winter semester in November 1933, just returning from a period of voluntary departure from teaching in protest against the Nazi regime and the anti-Semitic laws. Opposing the political Germany of his time, Kantorowicz urged his students to remain faithful to the secret Germany of the great German spirits of the past, among all, to Goethe's, Hölderlin's and Nietzsche's Germany. During the war, the expression Secret Germany came to mean among the intellectuals who were against the regime but remained in Germany, a sort of 'internal emigration' and a contemptuous withdrawal from politics: the world of culture survived in silence, rejecting the contaminating contact with German politics. From Jesi's previous quotation, however, it is clear that he overturned the traditional meaning of secret Germany as "good Germany", and instead wanted to follow the cultural thread of the "bad Germany", the conservative and right-wing thinking, to which culture and mythical images were appreciated.

The "serious moral implications", the very ones of which Mann perceived the weight and which Kerényi had tried in vain to minimize, now return in the judgment, perhaps recklessly, of a young scholar, of communist orientation and passionate reader of Mann. This judgement reflects the sentiment of the intellectuals of the third

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<sup>26</sup> Jesi to Kerényi, 2 May 1965.

generation, which did not know the war, but felt with urgency the need for a moral and political reflection on it.

The dilemma posed by the adherence to Nazism of a part of the German intellectuals, and even more by the presence of elements inspiring Nazism in authors who were, however, opponents of that political regime. [...] When faults become so great and the world is so broadly and deeply troubled, even moral criteria are more difficult to apply rigorously<sup>27</sup>.

Criticism against Thomas Mann was largely based on that he already received after the First World War: condemnation of his militaristic enthusiasm, of his elitism and intellectual conservatism. The apology that Mann wrote in the aftermath of World War I to explain and justify his conservative positions, *The Considerations of an Impolitic* (1918), did not spare him new polemics. But the criticism that Furio Jesi addresses to Mann is not only about his political attitude and his nationalism, but also about his fascination with culture, not merely German culture, rather classical culture.

The centre of Jesi's criticism is once again myth, understood as a set of images, which are at the same time conceptions (*Weltanschauungen*), and spiritual conceptions (*Stimmungen*) that would have been common both to the highest German culture and to the low Nazi ideology. What these concepts and *Stimmungen* would have in common is the fact that they are based on what Jesi will call "images of death":

Having reduced morality to a practical morality, what can be the attitude towards those who accept within themselves those images of death, even though they do not even procure death? As long as they do not intervene in the murderous action, are they morally innocent? This question becomes particularly serious in our discourse if we apply it to an artist like Thomas Mann. He was a devoted contemplator of the images of death that emerged fascinating from his psyche and was at the same time aware of the dangers in them, remaining a clear oppose of those who wanted to derive a norm of behavior from those images<sup>28</sup>.

Jesi identified in classical German culture the clear traces of a nihilistic *religio mortis*, which he would recognize and condemn as the dominant character of the military elites of the fascist extreme right (the skulls of the SS, the *Viva la Muerte!* of the Spanish phalangists, the black shirts and the death squads of the Fascists). In his opinion, this *religio mortis* revealed itself in the first place in indulging (guilty indulging in his opinion) of some intellectuals in a complacent thought of death. According to

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<sup>27</sup> Jesi to Kerényi, 2 May 1965.

<sup>28</sup> Jesi to Kerényi, 2 May 1965.

Jesi, a certain cult of death brought together different intellectual experiences, such as that of a Cesare Pavese (who also committed suicide), of Rilke, the "sympathy for the death" of Thomas Mann, the death drive theorized by Sigmund Freud, up to the "being for the death" of Martin Heidegger.

But even before these experiences of the twentieth century, the classical philological tradition is in certain ways responsible for Jesi of the nihilistic drift of German culture, because it opened the door to the study of Greek mythology, with its tellurism, the rediscovery of the chthonic deities, the bloody ferocity of the Dionysus of the Bacchae, in the wake of which both Nietzsche and Kerényi were engaged. This culture would have been oriented by vocation towards irrationalism, the aesthetic symbolism, which denies the values of reason, morality, and active life. By identifying the seduction of images of death in classical German culture, Jesi does nothing but repropounding the second nucleus of accusation against the Germans, already identified by Mann in his self-analysis: that of the pact with the devil. Moreover, as early as 1926, in his reply to the interviewer of the *Nouvelles Littéraires* magazine, Mann admitted having always felt, in his life, and therefore in his work, a certain passion and commitment to death (*Hingabe zum Tod*), or rather a sympathy for the death (*Sympathie mit dem Tod*). The work in which this closeness to death should have been more evident was undoubtedly the *Enchanted Mountain*, the novel set on uncontaminated peaks, in a sanatorium, halfway between life and death.

When Kerényi receives this almost programmatic letter from Jesi, he immediately recognized the gravity of the situation and the delicacy of the moment. Not being able to respond immediately in an exhaustive manner, he did not want to let too much time go by before giving the young colleague his clear opinion on the subject. He then sent Jesi a few days later an article on Nietzsche, *Der Sprung: Nietzsche zwischen seinem Roman und seinem Evangelium*, in which he distinguishes (and legitimizes) in Nietzsche's work the aesthetic-literary dimension from the historical-religious one. A dedication accompanied this article, where he expressed his doubts unequivocally: «To Furio Jesi, in order to dissuade him from a titanic project that could not be absolved with justice». Kerényi will answer to Jesi in a more exhaustive way in a letter of May 17, 1965. Here he shifted the attention from Nietzsche and Mann to the

German tradition in general, and to the later interpretations that have distorted and radicalized their aesthetic positions. But Kerényi's true response to Jesi's accusations, as well as to Mann's self-accusations, had already been written in the 1955 introduction to his correspondence with the great writer, and it is, again, a mythological response.

The first argument in Kerényi's defence of Mann is, not by chance, a Goethean argument: «The entelechy of a great writer can take many forms: often with repugnance, by distributing itself, by wandering about the possibilities it contains».<sup>29</sup> For Goethe, entelechy represented not only everything that belongs to an individual, and that constitutes his formula, his essence, therefore his soul, but also and above all, that which does not belong to him and is extraneous to him by nature. The essence of an individual is in fact characterized both by what is his own and could potentially belong to him, but also and above all, by the recognition of what is absolutely foreign to him and can never become part of his essence. The first element to be noted here is that Kerényi, like Nietzsche and Burckhardt before him, adopts the argument of the legislation of greatness (*Gesetzgebung der Grosse*). The dialogue between the great spirits through the ages is like a talk of giants, who speak with each other from the peaks of the highest mountain. Ordinary mortals can therefore not understand this highest dialogue. Just as Mann said of Goethe that he was too big to be just good, so Mann too is for Kerényi a great soul, which can accept within itself many more forms, even contradictory of life and experiences than every other ordinary mortal.

The second element to be highlighted, is that here we speak of a "writer" entelechy, so Kerényi is adopting the aesthetic argument, which he already used in his essay on Nietzsche. Mann's craft led him to create continuously. Every time he began to write a book, he studied, went deep in the subject and identified himself to the point of taking on the role of his own characters. Many of the characters in Mann's novels are his incarnations, among which, we can remember the most painful, that of Adrian Leverkuehn. But for Kerényi the most authentic incarnation of Mann, the most faithful to the soul of the writer, as he had known and admired him, was rather the figure of Settembrini in the *Enchanted Mountain*:

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<sup>29</sup> Kerényi to Jesi, 17 May 1965.

With the character of Settembrini Thomas Mann created the incarnation - for me extremely nice - of the humanistic attitude in the face of an ever recurring human situation, which - as a scientific subject - belongs to the history of religions. I mean the situation of being close to death and the consequent attitudes towards death itself<sup>30</sup>.

Jesi is right in judging the *Enchanted Mountain* as the book where Mann indulges the most in contemplating the image of death. But far from seeing a decadent attitude in it, Kerényi recognizes the extraordinary mythical and exemplary value of this masterpiece. Mann did not simply indulge in images of death, but contemplated them. His was therefore the typical attitude of the philosopher and connoisseur, who faces a reality of existence and becomes fully aware of it through the instrument that is most proper to him, that of the novel:

This fact of human existence of being close to death, or rather, in reality, of being in contact with the death, represents in the *Enchanted Mountain* a subject in which Thomas Mann moves himself (and here "movement" means linguistic expression) with a certainty, a perspicacity, a precision that are not to be found in any of the scholars of this subject: in this sector of the human world, in the intermediate realm between life and death he moved as the Greeks believed that their god Hermes moved<sup>31</sup>.

If Mann is hidden behind the shadow of Settembrini, he is therefore like this last a character of hermetic nature. The nature of the god Hermes is that of the hinge between the two worlds, between the two souls of the Greek world brought to light by Nietzsche. He is the guide both of the living and of the dead (*Hermes psychopompus*). Mann would therefore be a *Doctor Hermeticus* according to Kerényi, who, like *Hermes Psychopompus*, participates in two natures, the earthly and the otherworldly, the divine and the infernal. A salient characteristic of Hermes in mythology, however, is his shrewdness, typical of the god of thieves and cheaters, which makes him the clearest example of the Trickster as it is known in the history of religions, the "divine rogue". Referring to Hermes Kerényi explains the irony that made Thomas Mann famous, and which is the basis of each of his reincarnations in his characters. Mann's attitude towards death in the *Enchanted Mountain* should therefore also be read in this light. Like Hermes, he moved between life and death with a sure step. If there was in fact a decadent complacency of death in that novel, it was embodied in the enigmatic

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<sup>30</sup> Kerényi to Jesi, 17 May 1965.

<sup>31</sup> Kerényi to Jesi, 17 May 1965.

figure of Naphta, and thus exorcised. Mann, like all great souls, entertained himself with death, dominated it, and from time to time he also allowed himself not to take it seriously. His was therefore the sovereign attitude of the writer, who is the god of his work, and who measured the divine and the demon of his soul with wise control.

In conclusion, it will be interesting here to recall a certain walk Jesi and Kerényi took together in Torino at the end of May 1965, when they were still discussing whether or not the secret Germany project and the involvement of Thomas Mann were appropriate. Walking through the Pinacoteca Sabauda, the two mythologists, the elderly Kerényi and the young colleague who did not want to give up «from the titanic project that could not be absolved with justice», dwelt in front of four mythological paintings by Francesco Albani. As Jesi recalls in a letter of 30 May 1965, Kerényi, indicating the paintings to him, said: «this is genuine mythology, and there are no demons». And stopping in front of the Rape of Proserpine, he continued: «even the kidnapper of Kore, the unspeakable sovereign of Hades, was still a god».<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jesi to Kerényi, 30 Mai 1965.



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