

Response to Alan Latta, "Spinell and Connie: Joyce Carol Oates Re-Imagining Thomas Mann?"*

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Alan Latta argued in his essay that Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966) is a "re-imagining" of Thomas Mann's novella "Tristan" (1903). The evidence for this claim is of two kinds: *biographical-circumstantial* and *textual*. In regard to the biographical-circumstantial evidence he cites Oates's oft-expressed admiration for Thomas Mann, her preoccupation with his works in the 1950s and 1960s, and hints in other works of hers that she had used motifs from Mann's works. Furthermore, in her collection of short stories *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972) she included five stories that she called "re-imaginings"—namely, of stories by well-known American and European writers (Thoreau, James, Kafka, Chekhov and Joyce). "In each case, Oates transformed the original text in varying ways, creating new texts which could stand on their own as independent stories" (Latta 322).

All this is interesting and offers a context for the argument of Professor Latta's essay, but it does not by itself present us with any conclusive or convincing proof of any relationship between Oates's story and Thomas Mann's "Tristan." To be convinced—short of a direct admission from the author herself—we need some hard textual evidence. The bulk of Professor Latta's argument comprises what he considers to be conclusive textual evidence of the intertextuality of the two texts. His starting-point is the description of the secondary character Ellie in Oates's story, who is depicted as having "[...] a pale, bluish chest [...] a fair, hairless face, cheeks reddened slightly as if the

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veins grew too close to the surface of the skin, the face of a forty-year old baby" (Latta 317; Oates 45-46).

This description of Ellie Oscar reminds Professor Latta of Thomas Mann's description of the writer Detlev Spinell in "Tristan": "[...] his looks were quite out of the common. Imagine a dark man at the beginning of the thirties, impressively tall, with hair already distinctly grey at the temples, and a round, slightly bloated face, without a vestige of a beard. Not that it was shaven—that you could have told; it was soft, smooth, boyish, with almost downy hair here and there" (Mann 326).

Insofar as the two characters both give the impression of being childlike or boyish they do, indeed, resemble each other in a general way, although the only specific physical similarity is their lack of facial hair. However, it is quite clear from the totality of the two descriptions that they are not alike physically in any other respect—in fact, they are quite dissimilar. In order to be accurate, we must complete the description of both characters, as given by the respective narrators. Ellie Oscar is further described as follows: "He had fair brown hair, with a lock that fell onto his forehead. His sideburns gave him a fierce, embarrassed look [...]" (Oates 40). This description stands in stark contrast to that of Spinell with his grey hair and slightly bloated face. Furthermore, in relation to Spinell, Mann's narrator tells us, his "bright doe-like eyes had a gentle expression, the nose was thick and rather fleshy. Also, Herr Spinell had an upper lip like an ancient Roman's, swelling and full of pores; large, carious teeth, and feet of uncommon size" (Mann 326). The detail of the hairless face recedes into the background when we compare the full description of the two characters: they could scarcely be further apart physically. Alan Latta also cites as evidence the remark of the narrator of "Tristan" that one of the patients at the sanatorium, "a cynic and ribald wit" (Mann 326), christened Spinell "the dissipated baby" (Latta 317; Mann 326). However, the narrator comments: "The epithet was malicious, and not very apt" (Mann 326). Thus this piece of evidence is of questionable value, since the narrator denies its

accuracy and since it occurs in any case in the context of a story whose style and intent are satirical. But Professor Latta believes he has found some further textual evidence of a connection between the two characters. In the case of Ellie Oscar, his "lips kept shaping words, mumbling along with the words blasting in his ear" (Latta 317; Oates 46). The author believes that this is reminiscent of the description of Spinell's mode of speech: "His voice was mild and really agreeable; but he had a halting way of speaking that almost amounted to an impediment—as though his teeth got in the way of his tongue" (Latta 317; Mann 328).

In fact, on closer reading there is really no comparison at all between the manner of speaking of the two characters. In the quotation cited above Ellie Oscar is listening to popular music on a transistor radio and simply mouthing the words he hears. He is not speaking at all, but simply following the song to which he is listening. The music is playing loudly in his ear, because earlier in this scene he had "turned up the volume on his radio" (Oates 43) and "was pressing the transistor radio up against his ear and sat there in a kind of daze" (Oates 45), and he is so enrapt that Arnold Friend "pounded on the car to get Ellie's attention" (Oates 45). When he does speak later on two occasions, he utters, in fact, only a brief sentence each time, asking Arnold Friend if he should "pull out the phone" (Oates 50). He does, indeed, speak those words (at least the first time) in a halting manner "[...] pulling the words out of the air one after the other as if he were just discovering them" (Oates 50), but this is more indicative of his slow-wittedness, rather than a speech impediment.

In a similar manner, Spinell's "halting way of speaking" has to be read in context: he has just met Herr and Frau Klöterjahn, and the description of his speech in this scene is an ironic adumbration of his nascent (and at this point perhaps unconscious) desire for Herr Klöterjahn's wife Gabriele—as well as the artist's nervousness (a frequent occurrence in Mann's works) when meeting "normal" people. That this "halting way of speaking" is not his normal manner is indicated by two pieces of evidence. First, earlier in the story we

had been told that Spinell, though "unsocial" (Mann 326), is "once in a while overtaken by an affable, blithe, expansive mood; and this always happened when he was carried away by an aesthetic fit at the sight of beauty [...] 'How beautiful!' he would say [...] 'My God! Look how beautiful!' And in such moments of ardour he was quite capable of flinging his arms blindly around the neck of anybody, high or low, male or female, that happened to be near" (Mann 326-27).

Second, following the first meeting with Gabriele Klöterjahn, Spinell has no problem with frequently approaching her (once her husband has returned home!) while she is "taking the cure" on the terrace of the sanatorium, and on these occasions he waxes eloquently and frankly about various topics. In the key scene of the novella, where Gabriele plays the piano at Spinell's urging, there is not even a hint of his "halting way of speaking." In fact, his speech is fluent and persuasive (features one would never expect from Ellie Oscar).

Thus we must conclude that this initial textual evidence is too thin and too selective to constitute proof of genuine intertextuality. The few details that might hint at Oates's having borrowed from Thomas Mann reveal themselves in the final analysis as either very minor parallelisms or not even equivalent.

Professor Latta believes, however, that the plots of the two stories offer further evidence of a re-imagining. In Joyce Carol Oates's story, Arnold Friend "proceeds to try and convince Connie to come for a ride with them, using a combination of music, charisma, and gradually increased threats" (Latta 320). In "Tristan" Spinell becomes infatuated with the sickly Frau Klöterjahn and one day persuades her to play Chopin and then Wagner on the piano. When she has finished playing, he "falls on his knees before Gabriele, in a silent gesture of desire and imploring" (Latta 320). The ending of Oates's story clearly hints at sexual coercion—and some interpreters have said rape and death (cf. Wegs; Robson; Latta 321). "Tristan" describes Gabriele's worsening health after her musical tête-à-tête with Spinell—and eventually strong indications of her impending death. However, this is not the end of "Tristan": the concluding scene portrays Spinell's

confrontation with the baby Anton Klöterjahn and the former's defeat by and escape from that which the baby symbolizes: potent life.

Do the plots of the two stories, in fact, demonstrate enough similarities to permit any conclusions? "Tristan" is, in essence, a satirical (and merciless) portrayal of an inept artist and human being, Spinell, whose clumsy attempt to woo Gabriele Klöterjahn causes a serious relapse in her illness. Spinell's later behaviour is likewise ridiculous: he writes a long and vituperative letter to Herr Klöterjahn, chastising the latter for his boorishness and accusing him of being unworthy of having such a sensitive, artistic wife as Gabriele. For his part, Klöterjahn confronts Spinell in person, charging him for being such a coward ("[...] it strikes me as idiotic to write pages of a letter to a person when you can speak to him any hour of the day" [Mann 354]), and denouncing him as (among other things) a "tomfool" (Mann 355), "a cowardly sneak" (Mann 355), "a contemptible cur" (Mann 355), and a "skulking fool" (Mann 356). The artist, who claims to be superior to the insensitive bourgeois, is "crestfallen, like a big, unhappy, chidden, grey-haired schoolboy" (Mann 355) and finally put in his place when confronted soon thereafter with the Klöterjahn's "fat son" (Mann 359), who is being taken for a walk by his nurse. The concluding paragraph of the story reads: "Herr Spinell turned around and went thence [...] his gait was the hesitating gait of one who would disguise that, inwardly, he is running away" (Mann 359). All in all, the story is Mann's pitiless "castigation" (Mann's own word: see below) of aspects of his own persona, but transposed and distilled into a form that bespeaks a more universal significance. The oppositions art versus life and artist versus bourgeois are recurrent themes in Mann's fiction. One of the most significant aspects of these themes emerges in Mann's works under the influence of Schopenhauer: the question whether art has the power to transcend Will.

Thomas Mann's "Tristan" is an early example of what would become a long list of works in which Thomas Mann portrayed his doubts about the role of the artist and his position in society. The story

"Tonio Kröger" (published in the same collection as "Tristan," 1903) presents Mann's serious discussion of the problem of the artist, while "Tristan" looks at the problem from a satirical perspective (cf. Vaget 82-91; Kurzke 106-10). Spinell is one in a long line of artists in Thomas Mann's works, from Tonio Kröger—who is detained and questioned when he visits his birthplace because he resembles a wanted criminal—to Felix Krull (1911) who is the artist as consummate confidence-trickster, to Adrian Leverkühn (1947), the composer who makes a pact with the Devil. Even the use of Wagner's music in "Tristan" (namely, themes from the opera *Tristan and Isolde*) is employed in ironic contrast to Spinell's hopeless and inept wooing of Gabriele: he knows what the music means ("He explained in a few low-toned words" [Mann 345]), but his ineptitude is unwittingly brought into focus by Gabriele's innocently devastating reply: "Yes, yes. It means that. How is it you can understand it all so well yet cannot play it?" (Mann 345). The narrator comments: "Strangely enough, he was not proof against this simple question. He coloured, twisted his hands together, shrank into his chair" (Mann 345). Both as an artist and as a man, Spinell is inadequate. The pseudo-artist as a detached observer and critic, yet incapable of participating fully and freely in life (viz. Tonio Kröger) is a commonplace in Thomas Mann's works.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" on the other hand, contains not a hint of such preoccupations. In contrast, it is a much simpler and starker study of Connie's "seduction" by the sheer charisma and intimidation of Arnold Friend. To summarize both plots as comprising the same basic motif: "a young woman is seduced away from her family by a male who desires her, using the power of music as a weapon" (Latta 320) is to oversimplify both stories and to ignore the obvious chasm between the two (as well as the actual ending of "Tristan"). In Oates's story music is not the means of seduction, as it is in "Tristan," rather it forms no more than the background to the initially seductive and eventually menacing words of Arnold Friend (cf. Latta 324). The "Liebestod" of *Tristan and Isolde*

provides Spinell with an excuse for insatiable yearning; the music behind Arnold Friend's words provides the sexual rhythm for his enticement of Connie. But it is surely going too far to claim that the difference in the type of music and the use of it are an intentional re-working on the part of Oates: "[...] changes were necessary, even here. The transformation of setting and protagonist brought with it the change from Wagner to Presley et al., and from actively playing the piano to passively listening to a radio" (Latta 324).

Furthermore, the claim that "Ellie Oscar, in charge of the radio, embodies this transformation exactly: he combines the appearance of Detlev Spinell with a clothing style and first name similar to Elvis Presley's" (Latta 324) is unfounded since—as was shown above—Ellie and Spinell are physically quite different except for the lack of facial hair. The argument that Oates has changed the male protagonist in "Tristan" into a female protagonist in her own story (Latta 323) is both unconvincing and inaccurate, since the two works share a parallel structure insofar as they portray a man pursuing a woman (there is simply no need to view Oates's Connie as a transformation of Spinell). Furthermore, Latta later argues, in addition, that Spinell had to be transformed into *two* characters: Ellie "with Spinell's appearance" (Latta 325) and Arnold Friend with his "charismatic masculinity" (Latta 325). It is not clear how Spinell could have become all of Connie, Ellie and Arnold through Oates's re-imagining. In fact, there is a striking parallel between the male characters in the two works: Detlev Spinell "lacks testosterone" and "resembles a castrato" (Heilbut 158), whereas the name Klöterjahn is derived from the Low German idiom for testicles (Luke xxiv). Thus Mann has set up a clear opposition of the feeble artist and the virile businessman (a theme that he had already treated at length in his novel *Buddenbrooks* [1901]). In Oates's story Ellie Oscar is the asexual companion of the over-sexed Arnold Friend. However, the parallel between the two sets of characters does not lead us to any useful conclusions, since in "Tristan" the two characters are rivals, whereas in Oates's story they are friends.

Professor Latta's conclusion that "Thomas Mann's novella is clearly an intertext for 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" is unsupported by the evidence. In fact, when examined closely, the evidence falls apart. Thomas Mann's "Tristan" was written, the author himself tells us, "as a judgement on an undesirable element in myself, that lifeless preciousness of the aesthete which I consider supremely dangerous [...] in this character I was castigating myself" (cited in Luke xxii). Is it plausible that Joyce Carol Oates would have "re-imagined" this merciless persiflage of the artist as a tale of sexual predation? What kind of "re-imagining" would that be? With such wide parameters surely anything could be seen to be a re-imagining of something else. "Tristan" is not about sex: it is about the confrontation between sexless aestheticism and virile life. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is an entirely different kind of fiction. In sum, the plots of the two stories are only superficially similar: they deal with the relationship between a man and a woman, but they do so in quite a different manner and with different concerns and conclusions.

The great danger of comparative literature and intertextual studies is that they may establish a parallelism between two texts, but one that does not necessarily have any significance. The fact that two clocks tell the same time does not mean that they are connected. In the case of these two stories by Thomas Mann and Joyce Carol Oates, one must conclude that the evidence is simply not strong enough to draw any useful conclusions: in this case the two clocks are not even telling the same time. The assiduous search for intertextual references demonstrates the truth of Tonio Kröger's pronouncement: "If you are possessed by an idea, you find it expressed everywhere" (Mann 96).

Such references are, of course, to be found throughout the works of Joyce Carol Oates and those of Thomas Mann. In the case of the latter, his use of other texts (long before the term "intertextuality" even became current) was a manifestation of Mann's view of the novel at a late stage in the life of this genre. Was there anything left to say? Was any novel in the twentieth century not merely repeating things that

had been said before? Mann's answer to these and similar questions was not simply to incorporate passages from the works of others into his own stories and novels, but to engage in his own "re-imaginings"—by re-creating archetypal myth in twentieth-century guises. In so doing he "borrowed" figures from life (rather than from the works of other writers), modelling his characters to some degree on family members (e.g. in *Buddenbrooks*) or on prominent personages (e.g. Gerhart Hauptmann in *The Magic Mountain*). In all such cases, however, the fictional figures in his works became the repositories for and expressions of more universal concerns.

A final point: Thomas Mann's stature as the pre-eminent German novelist of the twentieth-century has not resulted in his having had a major influence on writers who came after him (cf. Kurzke 13-14). This is a remarkable situation, and it stems from the fact that those writers who have concerned themselves with Mann's works have done so chiefly from a position of stated opposition or feigned indifference. "Dozens of writers," wrote Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "declared that they were indifferent to no one more than the author of *The Magic Mountain*. But they asserted that in voices that were quaking with anger and even envy" (quoted in Kurzke 13). Joyce Carol Oates is the rare case of a contemporary writer who has expressed her strong admiration for Thomas Mann. Thus it may well be that in her voluminous body of work there are still mother-lodes of intertextuality to be mined.

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