

THOMAS MANN'S "TOBIAS MINDERNICHEL" IN LIGHT OF SARTRE'S "BEING-FOR-OTHERS"

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Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* proposes not only an ontology but also a philosophical anthropology which describes the rational/irrational nature of man's "Concrete Relations with Others." Interpersonal relations are seen as based on the subject/object conflict, in which the "I" attempts to turn the "Other" into an object in order to maintain the subject status of the self. A principal manifestation of the conflict is, literally or figuratively, "the look" (*le regard*), for in "being seen" one becomes painfully aware of the self and the accompanying guilt, shame, and fear. The self can, conversely, return the gaze and thus transcend the other's transcendence. The two poles of human emotions, love and hate, represent basic sado-masochistic tendencies, for in love the subject attempts to lose the self in the object, and in hate the subject attempts to annihilate the object to maintain subjectivity. An "authentic" relationship is as difficult to achieve as authentic existence, and human relations are more often seen as vascillating between the extremes of attraction and repulsion.

A Sartrean framework is useful for investigating literary portrayals of interpersonal relationships. The power of "the look" has been understood at least since the ancient Egyptian depiction of the eye and the Greek myth of the Gorgon Medusa. It is also a frequent motif in modern German literature, in works of writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Büchner, Hauptmann, and Kafka. The present investigation is devoted to Thomas Mann's short story entitled "Tobias Mindernickel" (1897), which serves as paradigmatic illustration not only of the gaze but also of the resulting sadomasochistic actions of an individual in extreme isolation. For the protagonist, a dog is an "ideal lover" in that it is free, yet dependent, a fact that elicits

a love/hate response on the part of the master, analogous to other often-noted polarities in the works of Thomas Mann. Without wishing to make Thomas Mann into an "existentialist," I would suggest that the interpersonal relations portrayed in the story are illustrative of Sartre's theory of "Being-for-Others" in *Being and Nothingness*, published nearly half a century later.¹

The focus in the story "Tobias Mindernickel" is on the title figure, who is sketched with the selectivity and linearity reminiscent of the *Novelle* form. The protagonist is a Thomas Mannian outsider, in this case not an artist but simply a loner, who lives in almost total isolation from society. That the reader is given no direct insight into the personality of the character is presumably due to the fact that the narrator, in his ironic first-person stance, has no access to the consciousness of the character he has created (although that character's initials are identical with those of the author). The narrator assumes the role of the external observer who then speculates on the internal processes of consciousness. Frequent occurrence of clauses such as "It seems that . . .," "He appeared as if . . .," "It is possible that . . ." puts the actual assertion into a subordinate clause, making it grammatically dependent upon the perceiving consciousness, to whom the events appear as baffling as they do to the reader—and, apparently, also to the protagonist, who seems to be a puzzle to himself. The narrator introduces his topic as follows: "There was a story about this man; I tell it, because it is both puzzling and sinister, to an extraordinary degree" (p. 51).

Since the narrator is ostensibly limited to observational statements, he gives a description of the physical appearance as a clue to interiority: "Mindernickel's exterior was odd, striking, and provoking to laughter" (p. 51). Physical features are significant, for in Sartrean thought the body is the primordial contact with the world; it determines a psychic space and constitutes the totality of meaningful relations to the world (an aspect which receives even greater emphasis in the writings of Merleau-Ponty). Indications—in clothing, mannerisms, and furniture—that Mindernickel belongs to a higher class of folk than that with which he is associated suggest a discrepancy, a non-coincidence of appearance and reality, that the *pour-soi* is what it is not and is not what it is. Mindernickel experiences a desire to relate to something outside the self, yet he is hermetically sealed off, with access neither to society, nor to nature

—nor to the self. He has, apparently, never found a way to live, for "there seems to be missing in him the natural superiority with which the normal, perceptive individual looks out upon the phenomenal world. He seems to measure himself against each phenomenon and find himself wanting; his gaze shifts and falls and grovels before men and things" (p. 51). His state of isolation seems total, and solipsism leads to monotony and despair, as he becomes at least vaguely aware of the contingency of being.

In this situation of alienation, the encounter between self and world is critical, and Sartre's discussion of Being-for-Others is helpful in analyzing the nature of the relationships. For Sartre, self-consciousness is pure interiority, and I cannot be an object for myself. The Other is thus the mediator between me and myself, and my being-for-myself depends upon my being-for-others. This self-other relation, however, is at its core one of conflict: "The Other is presented in a certain sense as the radical negation of my experience, since he is the one for whom I am not subject but object While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me" (BN, p. 340). This is clearly a reflection of Hegel's illustrious doctrine of master and slave.² One means of enslavement is the gaze, and the Other is then the one who looks at me and thus turns me into an object: "With the Other's look the 'situation' escapes me I am no longer master of the situation" (BN, p. 241). "The Other as a look is only that — my transcendence transcended" (BN, p. 239).

This power of the look is the reason, we are told, why Mindernickel rarely leaves his room. People make fun of him; children laugh and mock, and adults come to the doors to look. He is an object in the eyes of others, and further, he is an object for their amusement and ridicule. Sartre discusses shame as the recognition of oneself before the Other: Shame is "the recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging" (BN, p. 237). "The alienation of myself, which is the act of being-looked-at, involves the alienation of the world which I organize" (BN, p. 239). One could turn back upon the Other so as to make an object out of him and thus transcend the Other. Mindernickel, however, is unable to return the look of the others, but instead keeps his eyes cast to the ground. For all the opaqueness

of character, he is in their eyes transparent, naked, and exposed as he walks: "He made no defence, glancing timidly round . . . like a man hurrying through a driving rain without an umbrella" (p. 51). His being, so defined by their look, is in flight, pursued by the Other. This defenseless state is accompanied by fear as well as by shame, and even when others laugh in his face, he greets with humble politeness. Fear, for Sartre, "implies that I appear to myself as threatened by virtue of my being a presence in the world" (BN, p. 264). "We resign ourselves to seeing ourselves through the Other's eyes. . . . We cause our body to be designated for us as it is for the Other by utilizing these designations to denote our body as it is for us" (BN, p. 330). Mindernickel is acutely and constantly aware of his body not as it is for him but as it is for the Other.

He has so thoroughly internalized the opinion of others that it is not dependent upon the presence of an observer: "Further on, when the children had stopped behind and he was not known, and scarcely noted, his manner did not change. He still hurried on, still stooped, as though a thousand mocking eyes were on him" (p. 52). Sartre discusses the state of being-looked-at in the absence of an observer, when "the Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms, and I continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others" (BN, p. 253). This explains why Mindernickel has no perception of the world, of nature or of people, for, as Sartre notes: "We can not perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other. This is because to apprehend a look is to be conscious of being *looked at*. The look which the eyes manifest is a pure reference to myself" (BN, pp. 234-35).³

In contrast to this object status, an episode is related in which Tobias acts as a free subject. When a child receives a mild injury at the hands of playmates, Tobias steps in to help. In the first instance of direct discourse in the story, one hears him expressing sympathy and giving something of himself (if only a handkerchief) to another human being, who is in this case an object because of his momentarily helpless states. This assertion of free subjectivity is so gratifying to him that he can now look people in the eye: "His eyes looked larger and brighter, he looked squarely at people and things" (p. 53). However temporary the new self-image may

be, one surmises that it gave impetus to his decision to restructure the self-other relations in his life.

One does not know his intentions when, one Sunday morning, he takes a walk along an elegant promenade and there buys a dog. He seems nervous about this "project upon the world" and walks around the dog three times, keeping his eyes fixed on him. After the transaction is completed, Tobias pulls on the line, glancing fearfully about, and amid the laughter of observers he finally gets the dog to his room, from which they scarcely depart. Here begins the description of a subject-object confrontation which is, at its core, sado-masochistic. Significantly, it is an animal that plays the counterpart to Tobias. An adult relationship would, presumably, be too threatening, and even in the case of the child, Tobias was able to act as a subject only as long as the child was injured, i. e. dependent. Not wishing to speculate on the consciousness of animals, one can at least say that they are not self-conscious.⁴ As part of the natural world, animals apparently experience no conflict between being and consciousness (which may be the reason they photograph so well). Perhaps even a cat would be too strong a subject for Tobias (as it was for Büchner's Lenz);⁵ but a dog's allegiance is unquestionable and the desire to please nearly insatiable, so emotionally dependent is a dog upon his master.⁶

To escape the terrible loneliness and anguish of solipsism, Tobias needs another subject that will freely love him, yet one that will not be so free as to withdraw that love. Freedom must be limited to the prescribed realm, for Tobias cannot love that which he cannot control. The dog, as a free natural subject is capable of being converted into a controllable cultural object and is thus an "ideal lover" for Tobias — free, yet dependent. Sartre writes, the lover "wants to be loved by a freedom but demands that this freedom as freedom should no longer be free.... He wants this freedom to be captured *by itself*" (BN, p. 343). Although the relationship in the story is non-sexual in the physical sense, it has rightfully been said that all existence has a sexual significance and that every sexual phenomenon has an existential significance.⁷ Sartre finds three patterns of behavior possible in love: One may lapse into indifference; one may turn to masochism, which is the attempt to become a thing to be controlled by the other; or one

may turn to sadism, which entails trying to possess the other by violence. Conflict is thus the inevitable basis of the love relationship.

Just as Tobias was victimized by others, he now makes the dog a victim. His feeling of humiliation gives rise to aggression, and in this inter-animal relationship he asserts all the subjectivity which was denied him in inter-personal relationships. Sartre understands sadism as “a refusal to be incarnated and a flight from all facticity and at the same time an effort to get hold of the Other’s facticity” (BN, p. 375). It is not merely the will to dominate or the thirst for power; rather, sadism is born from anxiety in the face of the Other. “What the sadist seeks to appropriate is in actuality the transcendent freedom of the victim. But this freedom remains on principle out of reach” (BN, p. 381).⁸

The struggle of two warring subjectivities which began at the moment of contact continues upon arrival at home, as Tobias discovers that with the incentive of food he can control the dog. As the dog becomes tired and does not obey, Tobias reacts by striking him with a stick. Shortly thereafter, however, comes the peripeteia as his emotions change from anger to contempt, to pity, and to love. When the dog licks Tobias’ face and boots, it is like a caress, and Tobias virtually loses himself in emotion: “He pressed the dog passionately to his breast, his eyes filling with tears” (p. 55). In this displacement of and substitution for human relations, Tobias gives to and receives from the dog the “love” which was denied him in relations with others. His situation before the Other — be it man or dog — is one of helplessness and sense of inferiority. Sartre writes: “Masochism is a perpetual effort to *annihilate* the subject’s subjectivity by causing it to be assimilated by the Other; this effort is accompanied by the exhausting and delicious consciousness of failure so that finally it is the failure itself which the subject ultimately seeks as his principle goal” (BN, p. 355).⁹

The narration of direct discourse when Tobias addresses the dog is reminiscent of his brief encounter with the child, and in both cases the discourse has only emotive, no conceptual content, as the speaker tries to awaken sympathy for his own despair. The “dialogue” is, of course, a monologue, and Tobias personifies the dog in order to have a conversation partner, speaking with him as though he were human. Communication between man and

animal is, of course, not unusual; what is exceptional is the totality and the exclusiveness of this mode of relating to the world — and, consequently, the impossibility of relating at all. There is no indication that Tobias spoke with human beings or even with the self. Internal processes seem to be on a preverbal, perhaps pre-reflective level, and language for Tobias is not a live option for self-expression. In the absence of language, the "look" is all the more revealing, for it also "speaks." At a time when he feels dominant it is a "proud and angry look," and for comparison the narrator conjures up the image of Napoleon with the illusion (delusion) of grandeur. His eyes later fill with tears, language breaks down, and with "mild eyes" he speechlessly gazes at the dog (p. 55).

The dominance relations develop with increasing intensity and constant power shifts. Tobias devotes total time and attention to the care of his pet, who is known as "Esau" (which name perhaps contains a reference to the biblical Esau, whose birthright, i.e. right to existence, was appropriated by the other). Tobias, quite understandably, has no desire to appear with the dog in public. The resulting confinement is restrictive for the animal, but it is precisely in this state of "shared isolation" that Tobias can maintain the subject-object dependence which seemingly fulfills his dual desire to give up the self to another and to dominate another. When the dog lies beside Tobias on the sofa and gazes at him with soft, melancholy eyes, Tobias is pleased. When, on the other hand, the dog demonstrates his natural vitality and independence, Tobias becomes insecure; this state produces a psychological feeling of distance and an emotional response of anger. "Then Tobias followed his motions from afar with a helpless, disapproving, wandering look and a hateful, peevish smile" (p. 56). This leads to violence, and on one occasion when the dog escapes out the door, causing Tobias to make a public spectacle of himself, the beating is especially hard. Sartre discusses hate, which "implies a recognition of the Other's freedom.... The occasion which arouses hate is simply an act by the Other which puts me in the state of being subject to his freedom. This act is in itself humiliating; it is humiliating as the concrete revelation of my instrumental objectness in the face of the Other's freedom" (BN, p. 387).

As Esau one day is "accidentally" injured (by running into the knife with which Tobias is cutting the animal's food), the master

is greatly alarmed; yet, the narrator relates, "a gleam of relief and happiness came over his face" (p. 56). With the injured dog in a state of dependence, Tobias can maintain the subject role, and he cares for the "invalid" day and night. As Esau begins to recover, however, Tobias becomes progressively more restless, and he no longer nurses the wound, perhaps subconsciously wishing it would not heal. He feels the other escaping him and senses that he cannot fully possess him. When Esau has fully recovered and is again experiencing the joy of life, it is then the catastrophe occurs. Significantly, it is at a moment when Tobias attempts to be near the dog that he is rejected, as the dog snaps at the hand which would have stroked him. A conglomerate of emotions—fear, hate, and contempt—well up within him, and Tobias, with a "sidelong, jealous, and angry look" takes the knife, and all is over. Tobias goes so far as to kill the dog in order to establish the dominance relations.

The intentionality of the act is in this case a difficult question. Although his actions are clearly directional, he seems to be so little aware of his own ambivalent emotions that the results are surprising to him and at once wanted and unwanted. Even on the occasion of the first beating, it was as if some unknown force in a schizoid personality had taken control over what the reader—and the protagonist—knew to be "Tobias," and in the final act his movements are termed "mechanical." Repetition of the penultimate scene in the denouement, in which he wounds the dog in exactly the same place, indicates both the intentionality and the blindness of his motivation: when the dog is accidentally injured, he nurses him back to health; but finding the object thus to be escaping him, he injures him again mortally. Perhaps the "ideal" state would be some minimal form of existence in which the dog remained alive but was totally dependent upon the other. Since such a condition of stasis cannot be prolonged in a living organism, Tobias has to kill to make permanent the object position of the Other. Sartre discusses this means of attempting to get hold of the Other's freedom: "If I killed him I would in a way possess him, but since he would no longer be free, this would not satisfy me. He would have escaped me in the end, by dying. On the other hand, if he is still free, then he necessarily escapes me" (BN, p. 380).¹⁰

Since Tobias seems not to understand his own emotions, he neither chooses his responses nor accepts responsibility for the consequences. He utters a final monologue of "sympathy" (in quotation marks, since the possibility of *syn-pathos*, i.e. "feeling together," is annihilated by the solipsism that dooms him to the windowless prison of the self). The dog dies like a sacrificial lamb, "his clouded, questioning eyes directed upon his master, with a look of complaint, innocence, and incomprehension" (p. 57). Tobias lays his face on Esau's body and "weeps bitter tears." The last phrase may have biblical undertones, for Peter, the prototypical betrayer, also "wept bitterly." One surmises that Peter, like Tobias, must have been a puzzle to himself, feeling both an attraction to another being and a repulsion as that being escaped him. Tobias, who had died a thousand deaths in the eyes of others, tried to restructure his relationship to the world. His failure is as total as that attempt in the opposite direction of Kafka's Josef K., who, having given up his subjectivity, dies like a dog. The problem of how to reconcile conflicting free choices seems not to admit of solution.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke*; Vol. VIII *Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1960), pp. 141-151. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943). Citations are made from the following translations: Thomas Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 51-57. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essays on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965). Page numbers are indicated in the text (the latter with the designation BN).

² See *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Chapter IV.A., "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft" for Hegel's discussion of dominance and subjection. Thomas Mann almost certainly knew this source, and scholarship has also demonstrated Sartre's dependence on Hegel.

³ Similar themes occur throughout the early works of Thomas Mann. In "Der kleine Herr Friedemann" the narrator renders the thought-processes of the protagonist as follows: "Wie sie ihn angesehen hatte! Wie? Sie hatte ihn gezwungen, die Augen niederzuschlagen? Sie hatte ihn mit ihrem Blick gedemütigt?" ... "Lag nicht noch immer ihr Blick auf ihm? Aber nicht wie zuletzt, leer und ohne Ausdruck, sondern wie vorher, mit dieser zitternden Grausamkeit.... Konnte sie, wenn sie ihn durchschaute, nicht ein wenig Mitleid mit ihm haben?" (VIII, pp. 90 and 97). The self's view of the self is topicalized in "Der Bajazzo": "Ich bin nicht imstande, mich mit anderen Augen anzusehen als mit denen der 'Leute'" (VIII, p. 138). The power of the Other's look is, of course, dependent upon one's self-conception, and the narrator in "Luischen" offers the following evaluation: "Kein Anblick ist häßlicher als derjenige eines Menschen, der sich selbst verachtet, der aber

aus Feigheit und Eitelkeit dennoch liebenswürdig sein und gefallen möchte" (VIII, p. 170). The consequences are portrayed in "Der Weg zum Friedhof," where the narrator remarks: "Selbstverachtung und Laster aber stehen in der schauderhaftesten Wechselbeziehung" (VIII, p. 190).

⁴ Heidegger writes: "Animals are as they are, without their standing—from their Being as such—in the truth of Being and preserving in such standing what is essentially their Being. Presumably, animals are the most difficult of all entities for us to think of, because we are, on the one hand, most akin to them and, on the other hand, they are, at the same time separated from our ex-sistential essence by an abyss." Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. Edgar Lohner, in *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Richard M. Zaner and Don Ihde (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 155.

⁵ The narrator of "Lenz" relates the following episode: "Einst saß er [Lenz] neben Oberlin, die Katze lag gegenüber auf einem Stuhl. Plötzlich wurden seine Augen starr, er hielt sie unverrückt auf das Tier gerichtet; dann glitt er langsam den Stuhl herunter, die Katze ebenfalls: sie war wie bezaubert von seinem Blick, sie geriet in ungeheure Angst, sie sträubte sich scheu; Lenz mit den nämlichen Tönen, mit fürchterlich entstelltem Gesicht; wie in Verzweiflung stürzten beide aufeinander los." Georg Büchner, *Werke und Briefe: Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Fritz Bergemann (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1958), p. 108.

⁶ Thomas Mann presents this conception of a dog in "Herr und Hund."

⁷ Leonard L. Duroche, "Existential-Phenomenological Language Theory" (Manuscript). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Duroche for his outstanding direction of the NEH Summer Seminar on German Literary Existentialism (Univ. of Minnesota, 1977), from which this paper arose.

⁸ Similarly, Erich Fromm in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973) notes that sadism occurs most frequently among frustrated individuals who feel powerless and have little pleasure in life (p. 131). "It is transformation of impotence into the experience of omnipotence" (p. 290). He sees sadism and masochism as two facets of the "authoritarian character" (p. 292), for whom all relationships are vertically structured, with submission to "superiors" and dominance over "inferiors." See also, T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950). It would go without saying, were it not for prevalent misconceptions, that the attempt in this paper is not to describe psychotic behavior but rather to understand character traits present to varying degrees in common humanity.

⁹ Aspects of the authoritarian personality, particularly as it is related to socio-political structures, are investigated in the following essay: Gunter Reiß, "Herrenrecht: Bemerkungen zum Syndrom des Autoritären in Thomas Manns frühen Erzählungen," in *Gedenkschrift für Thomas Mann*, ed. Rolf Wiecher (Kopenhagen: Verlag Text & Kontext, 1975), pp. 67-94.

¹⁰ In Thomas Mann's story entitled "Luischen," Amra, more or less intentionally, causes her husband's death through humiliation; or, seen the other way around, he, more or less intentionally, lets himself be so humiliated. Similar themes occur in "Anekdote" and, with a reversal of roles, in "Ein Glück." On a different conceptual level one is reminded of the ruminations of Büchner's Leonce concerning which is preferable, a live or a dead lover, with the conclusion: "Ich will deine Leiche lieben" (Büchner, "Leonce und Lena," I.iii., *op. cit.*, p. 122).