

THOMAS MANN wrote this engaging novella in a few weeks in 1943. (The new translation by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann, which is brisk and direct, is a welcome replacement of the fussier and less accurate English version done by Helen Lowe-Porter for the original publication.) The novella was written after Mann helped pitch a film on the Ten Commandments to MGM. The film never got off the ground, but this text appeared as part of a rather uneven volume on the subject to which ten prominent writers contributed. The obvious intention of the volume, assembled at a dark moment in the war, was to offer a defence of the Bible's ethical code at a time when it was being vilified by the Nazis. The stories in the 1943 volume were prefaced by the account of a purported conversation involving Hitler, Goebbels and Streicher, in which Hitler, striking a vulgarised Nietzschean note, ranted about liberating the German people from the slave morality of Judaism and Christianity.

Mann's deep interest in the ancient Hebrews considerably antedated the Ten Commandments project, as he had spent much of the 1930s on his tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers* (the last volume appeared in 1943), immersing himself not only in the Bible itself but in biblical scholarship, early rabbinic interpretation, comparative religion and anthropology. His instrument was perfectly tuned for this quick performance in the middle of the war. The story he wrote incorporates some shrewd exegetical insights and many beguiling inventions that one could call midrashic. It is not merely about the Ten Commandments but is an imaginative biographical portrait of 'the man Moses', as the biblical text calls him several times in a kind of zero-degree epithet. Mann recasts all the miracles in naturalistic terms, some of them quite bold in their inventiveness. He puts forth, for example, a dark, veiled hint that the killing of the first-born in Egypt was carried out by death squads led by Joshua. This idea accords with the fascinating notion about the exercise of violence that Mann introduces at the very beginning of his story: the first narrative report the Bible gives us of Moses is his killing the abusive Egyptian slavedriver, 'so he knew better than those with no experience that to kill may be sweet, but to have killed is ghastly in the extreme, and that you should not kill.' How to imagine an ethic that limits violence in an appallingly violent world becomes a central burden of the narrative.

What is especially noteworthy about *The Tables of the Law* among Mann's fictions is its playfulness. Gravity is the more characteristic trait of Mann's writing, the reason Nabokov dismissed him as a pretentiously self-monumentalising nonentity. One scarcely thinks of playfulness in connection with *Buddenbrooks* or *The Magic Mountain*, and *Joseph and His Brothers*, whatever comic interludes it may include, tends to sink under the weight of its narrative detail and its narrator's lengthy lucubrations. Only the picaresque *Confessions of Felix Krull*, a sometimes hilarious novel that still retains its sprightliness, is an exception to this rule. By contrast to his long biblical novel, the rapid-paced brevity of

# How to Hiss and Huff

Robert Alter

THE TABLES OF THE LAW

by Thomas Mann, translated by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann.

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*The Tables of the Law* is a distinct advantage, often pointing up the comic aspects of serious matters. Here, for example, is its paraphrase of part of the biblical code of laws, which sounds almost Voltairean, though without Voltaire's animus towards his subject:

For you live in the flesh, but are sworn to the Invisible One, and marriage is the epitome of all purity in the sight of God. For that reason you should not take a woman and her mother as well, to give only one example. That is unseemly. Nor should you ever, ever lie with your sister, to see her shame and she yours, for that is incest. You shouldn't even lie with your aunt, that is neither worthy of her nor of you, and you should shrink back from it.

This jauntiness spills over from the narrator's tone to the narrative details with which Mann fleshes out the story of Moses. In this version, Pharaoh's daughter is a lubricious young woman who fancies a sweaty and muscular Hebrew labourer, takes him to bed, conceives by him, and promptly has him murdered so he can't tell anyone. The child to whom she gives birth is sent out to be nursed by Jochebed, as in Exodus, though here the Hebrew woman is merely a milk-mother. I don't agree with Michael Wood's proposal, in his thoughtful afterword to this volume, that the assignment of maternity to Pharaoh's daughter is motivated by a desire to undercut notions of Jewish – more properly, Hebrew – racial purity. The idea of Moses as an Egyptian is an old one, and it had some currency in the early 20th-century biblical scholarship Freud drew on for *Moses and Monotheism* (in German called *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*).

What I think Mann is up to here is rather a witty gender reversal of the Freudian family romance. In his story, the child is not the offspring of some prince antithetical to his ostensible father (paternity, as Freud observed, is always a matter of surmise) but of a princess and a nameless plebeian Hebrew. Writers think of such things at least in part in order to make their plots move along, and Mann's invention has two advantages for what follows in the story. Pharaoh is several times called Moses' 'lecherous grandfather', and Moses himself is evidently aware of his own illicit origins. This gives him leverage with Pharaoh when he confronts the Egyptian monarch during his mission to liberate the enslaved Hebrews. Still more amusingly, Moses appears to have inherited his mother's hot-bloodedness. Later in the story, Mann has him plunged in nights of passion with his Ethiopian woman, much to the distress of Miriam and Aaron. Just as he is a man who has killed seeking to articulate a code that opposes killing, he is a man enamoured of the pleasures of the flesh who wants to limit carnal impulses.

fractory nature certain possibilities of moral clarity.

The climactic moment of Moses' undertaking is of course his ascent to the summit of Mount Sinai, where he will incise the new law on stone tablets. Here Mann introduces one of his most arresting inventions, which provides thematic justification for itself despite its historical impossibility. Why, Mann's narrator wonders, did Moses need a full 40 days – a formulaic number in the Bible – to chisel in stone a few dozen words? A product of good Egyptian education, he certainly knew hieroglyphs and probably, Mann conjectures, cuneiform as well. But these complicated and arcane scripts would not serve the lapidary purpose of the new imperative law. Moses spends much of his time on the mountaintop painstakingly working out a different system of writing:

He gathered together the sounds of the language that are formed by the lips, the tongue, and palate, and by the throat, while setting aside the few open sounds that appeared in the words intermittently, enclosed by the other sounds and becoming words only because of them.

Joining together these graphic indications of 'how to hiss and huff, to mumble and rumble, to spit and smack', a person could not only represent the consonantal sounds of Hebrew words but of any language. Now, Moses, if he was a historical figure, surely did not invent the alphabet, though inscriptions found at the site of a 19th-century BCE Egyptian copper mine elsewhere in the Sinai suggest that it was invented there, and not by PHOENICIANS BUT

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by Canaanite mine-workers who borrowed Egyptian hieroglyphs and made them represent the initial consonants of the equivalent words in Canaanite.

The alphabet, which among the sundry systems of writing in the world seems to have emerged only at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, from whence it spread to Greece, then Rome, and eventually far beyond, was an immense leap forward in the technology of culture. Writing was no longer limited to elaborate systems involving hundreds or often thousands of characters and therefore destined to be the property of a learned, often sacerdotal elite, but could be carried out with a set of little more than 20 readily acquired characters. The alphabetic medium of Moses' writing is equally important for Mann's conception of his character and for his understanding of the intrinsic nature of the Mosaic code.

Alphabetic writing, liberated from the image-hordes of other systems of inscription, is eminently malleable and is also exportable. As Mann's narrator says of the signs that Moses has devised, 'lo and behold, you could write the whole world with them, whatever occupied a space and whatever occupied no space, what was made and what was made up – absolutely everything.' This list of what the alphabet can do shows a distinct kinship with what the novelist can do: 'write the whole world', freely mixing objects and ideas, things that are and things that never were. And when Moses comes down from the mountain with the second set of tablets, he explains to the Hebrews

that God 'wrote it in your language, but in symbols that, if need be, could write all the languages of all the peoples; for He is the Lord throughout the whole world, and for that reason His is the ABC, and His language – even if it is also intended for you, Israel – necessarily becomes a language for everyone'. The alphabet, then, in this lively recasting of the biblical story, is the formal manifestation of the universalism implicit in the message Moses brings to Israel.

**I**N THE BIBLE itself, there is a powerful tension between particularist and universalist visions. Both Isaiah and the unnamed prophet of the Babylonian exile whose soaring poetry is appended to Isaiah's book, grandly imagine the God of Israel as the God of all the peoples of the earth, inviting them to follow his teaching, whereas the story of the conquest of the land in Joshua reflects a ruthlessly uncompromising nationalism. Even within the Pentateuch, Abraham's covenant with God is set against a global background in which the first Hebrew patriarch will become a blessing to all the families of humankind, while Deuteronomy, alongside its moments of theological and moral grandeur, promotes a programme of genocide. Mann, writing in 1943, is perfectly justified in averting his gaze from the militant nationalism and celebrating the universalist current in the rival streams of biblical thought. He remembers from the Mosaic teaching the reiterated call to remember the stranger, for you, Israel, were once strangers in the

land of Egypt. He has his Moses assume a relaxed colloquial tone rather than a biblical one as he enjoins the Israelites: 'In general, when distinguishing between yourself and others, don't be so foolish as to think you are the only one who is real or who counts, and that the other person is just an illusion. Life is common to both of you, and it is only chance that you are not he.'

These words, and the novella as a whole, are a vigorous rejoinder not only to denunciations of the Judeo-Christian ethic, but a response to a broader development that had unfolded in Germany through the 1930s. Germany was the birthplace of modern biblical scholarship. The fact that a large part of the Bible recognised by Christians as canonical was written in Hebrew by people whose descendants were the despised Jews of modern Europe was a serious embarrassment. Many German theological seminaries and learned journals, including some that had been vital theatres of biblical scholarship, simply excised the Old Testament from academic consideration. Mann's reimagining of Moses sets Hebrew scripture in an antithetical perspective: it is not the benighted reflection of a perniciously self-absorbed people any more than it is the expression of a slave mentality. On the contrary, it articulates a hope for moral decency to be realised by all the nations of the earth, however deeply it is rooted in the experience of one particular people. Just as the novelist, reaching beyond the prison house of his own prejudices and subjectivity, with the aid of his formid-

able alphabetic resources, is able to conjure up a world of drastically different others, each with his or her own claim to legitimacy, the ABC of Moses is projected outward to the teeming variety of humankind.

*The Tables of the Law*, its argument stated this baldly, may sound more preachy than it really is. Mann manages to make it all believable and often delightful through the urbane playfulness of the narrator who frames everything in the novella. When Moses comes down from the mountain the first time, he witnesses a scene of general licence, an orgiastic flouting of the laws that he had delivered to Israel: 'You could see men offering their strength' – surely a sexual meaning is intended – 'to the bull, and somewhere one person was castigating his own mother.' And on the subject of Moses as writer, or at any rate as calligrapher in stone with his newfangled alphabet, the lawgiver says to the Israelites after having destroyed the first set of tablets: 'In the end, it was just as well that I shattered the first tablets in anger. A few of the letters on them were spoiled anyway. I have to confess that I was secretly thinking about that when I smashed them.' Moses, who brings a revolutionary ethical code and theology to the world, is also a finicky craftsman or artist who, like most artists, wants to leave to posterity a perfectly wrought product of his art. Such traits make him an almost endearing character, which is surely true of very few versions of Moses and of very few personages in the fiction of Thomas Mann. □