

THE COMING VICTORY
OF DEMOCRACY

by

THOMAS MANN

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NEW YORK

ALFRED A KNOFF

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
AGNES E. MEYER

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*is the text of the lecture which, in slightly
abbreviated form, was delivered by Thomas
Mann on his coast-to-coast lecture tour
February to May 1938.*

THE EXPRESSION “to carry owls to Athens” is a familiar humanistic figure of speech in Germany. It denotes an act of superfluous effort, the transfer of an article to a place where such things already exist in abundance. As the owl was the sacred bird of Athena, owls were numerous in Athens and anyone who felt obliged to increase their number would have exposed himself to ridicule.

In undertaking to speak on democracy in America, ladies and gentlemen, I feel as if I, too, were carrying owls to Athens. It looks as if I were not aware that I am in the classic land of democracy, where the mode of thought and the type of social structure which are characterized by this name are

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essentially at home and a universally ingrained conviction; where, in short, democracy is an all-prevailing matter of course, upon which the American needs no instruction — least of all from a European. On the contrary, Europe has had much to learn from America as to the nature of democracy. It was your American statesmen and poets such as Lincoln and Whitman who proclaimed to the world democratic thought and feeling, and the democratic way of life, in imperishable words. The world has probably never produced a master of words who has known so well as Whitman how to elevate and translate a social principle such as democracy into intoxicating song, or how to endow it with such powerful emotional content, representing a magnificent fusion of spirituality and sensuousness.

No, America needs no instruction in the things that concern democracy. But instruction is one thing — and another is memory, reflection, re-examination, the recall to consciousness of a spiritual and moral possession of which it would be dangerous to feel too secure and too confident. No

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worth-while possession can be neglected. Even physical things die off, disappear, are lost, if they are not cared for, if they do not feel the eye and hand of the owner and are lost to sight because their possession is taken for granted. Throughout the world it has become precarious to take democracy for granted — even in America; for America belongs to the cultural territory of the Occident and participates in its inner destiny, in the ups and downs of its spiritual and moral life. It cannot isolate itself therefrom. It is not easy to speak on the coming victory of democracy at a moment when the aggressive brutality of fascism seems to be so distressingly triumphant. The moment, indeed, does not seem to be well chosen, and *European* democracy at least in its moral weakness seems to forbid any optimistic prophecy. Even America feels today that democracy is not an assured possession, that it has enemies, that it is threatened from within and from without, that it has once more become a problem. America is aware that the time has come for democracy to take stock of itself, for

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recollection and restatement and conscious consideration, in a word, for its renewal in thought and feeling.

The advantage, or the apparent advantage, of the tendencies that are hostile to democracy is, above all, the charm of novelty — a charm to which humanity always shows itself highly susceptible. What Cæsar said of the ancient Gauls, that they were *novarum rerum cupidi*, eager for new things, is true of humanity as a whole — for reasons which tend to support a pessimistic-compassionate judgment concerning its destiny. For it is the fate of man in no condition and under no circumstances ever to be entirely at ease upon this earth; no form of life is wholly suitable nor wholly satisfactory to him. Why this should be so, why there should always remain upon earth for this creature a modicum of insufficiency, of dissatisfaction and suffering, is a mystery — a mystery that may be a very honourable one for man, but also a very painful one; in any case it has this consequence: that humanity, in small things as in great, strives for variety, change, for the new, because it promises him an ameliora-

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tion and an alleviation of his eternally semi-painful condition.

I repeat: the greatest power, the essential fascination of the ideas and tendencies which threaten democracy today and render it problematical, is their charm of novelty. Upon this the fascists place their emphasis, of this they boast; their revolutionary demeanour, their attitude of youthfulness and opportunism, are meant to attract the youth of the world, and in Europe, at least, not infrequently succeed in doing so. In my opinion, youth is cheated when it surrenders to this fascination. Let me explain why this is so. I believe that the revolutionary opportunism and the glow of false dawn in these tendencies — it is obvious that I mean the fascist tendencies — are tainted magic. Not only in this respect, but particularly in this respect, fascism is so thoroughly false that honourable youth throughout the world should be ashamed to have anything to do with it. Moreover, susceptibility to it is not in the least a question of age or of youth. Older people are by no means excluded from this magic or invulnerable to it simply because

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they belong to another age and cannot keep up with the times and are thus obliged to leave this dew-drenched world of ideas, called fascism, to the young. For example, my great Norwegian colleague, Knut Hamsun, an already elderly man, is an ardent fascist. He gives active support to the fascist party in his own land and did not deny himself the satisfaction of openly ridiculing and insulting a world-famous victim of German fascism, the pacifist Ossietzky. However, this is not the conduct of an old man whose heart has remained particularly youthful but of a writer of the generation of 1870, upon whom Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche had a decisive literary influence. He has stuck fast in the movement of apostasy from liberalism generally characteristic of that period, without comprehending what is at stake today, and without realizing that he is hopelessly compromising his poetical genius through his political or, as I prefer to call it, his human behaviour. On the other hand, it can be established that the majority of youth throughout the world, in Europe and especially in America — indeed, it is safe to say the overwhelming majority

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— will have nothing to do with what are called fascistic ideas, and are battling spiritually and even physically for entirely opposite ideals. Obviously the susceptibility to the fascist miasma has nothing to do with age or youth; it is much more a question of intelligence, of character, of the sense of truth, of human feeling; in short, the decisive factors are characteristics which belong or do not belong to age or to youth, and from this point of view decidedly nothing can be proved concerning the revolutionary prospects of fascism.

That does not prevent its shrill propaganda of youthfulness, its publicity tricks, from presenting democracy as decrepit, decayed, out of date, stale, and hopelessly tiresome, whereas it pictures itself as highly amusing and replete with life and future possibilities, as its well-known successes are supposed to prove to us. Daring and clever as fascism is in exploiting human weakness, it succeeds in meeting to some extent humanity's painful eagerness for novelty to which I have already alluded. And what seems to me necessary is that democracy should answer this fascist strategy with a rediscov-

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ery of itself, which can give it the same charm of novelty — yes, a much higher one than that which fascism seeks to exert. It should put aside the habit of taking itself for granted, of self-forgetfulness. It should use this wholly unexpected situation — the fact, namely, that it has again become problematical — to renew and rejuvenate itself by again becoming aware of itself. For democracy's resources of vitality and youthfulness cannot be overestimated; in comparison, the youthful insolence of fascism is a mere grimace. Fascism is a child of the times — a very offensive child — and draws whatever youth it possesses out of the times. But democracy is timelessly human, and timelessness always implies a certain amount of potential youthfulness, which need only be realized in thought and feeling in order to excel, by far, all merely transitory youthfulness in charms of every sort, in the charm of life and in the charm of beauty.

I called democracy timelessly human and fascism, its opponent, which today is so triumphantly asserting itself, a transitory manifestation. In doing so I am not forgetting that fascism also has deep

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and perhaps indestructible roots in human nature; for its essence is force. It is in physical and mental oppression that fascism believes; this is what it practises, loves, honours, and glorifies. Oppression is not only the ultimate goal but the first principle of fascism, and we know only too well that force as a principle is just as eternally human as its opposite, the idea of justice. It is the stern fact-creating principle. It can accomplish everything, or practically everything. Once it has subjugated the body through fear, it can even subjugate thought. For man in the long run cannot live a double life; in order to live in harmony with himself, he adapts his thoughts to the manner of life that force imposes upon him. All this force can accomplish. Daily we see justice grow pale before it and perish, because force is oppressive materialism and in the field of experience is usually the victor, whereas justice is only an idea. But this "only," bitter and pessimistic as it may sound, is nevertheless full of pride and firmest confidence — confidence which does not arise out of puerile and artificial idealism, but is, on the contrary, based upon a greater knowl-

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edge of the nature and reality of man than the only semi-intelligent belief in force.

For it is a singular thing, this human nature, and distinguished from the rest of nature by the very fact that it has been endowed with the idea, is dominated by the idea, and cannot exist without it, since human nature is what it is because of the idea. The idea is a specific and essential attribute of man, that which makes him human. It is within him a real and natural fact, so impossible of neglect that those who do not respect human nature's participation in the ideal — as force certainly does not — commit the clumsiest and, in the long run, the most disastrous mistakes. But the word “justice” is only one name for the idea — only one; there are other names which can be substituted that are equally strong, by no means lacking in vitality; on the contrary, even rather terrifying — for example, freedom and truth. It is impossible to decide which one should take precedence, which is the greatest. For each one expresses the idea in its totality, and one stands for the others. If we say *truth*, we also say *freedom* and *justice*; if we speak of freedom and