

Thomas Melle

THE WORLD AT YOUR BACK

Rowohlt•Berlin, fiction

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“If you’re bipolar, your life has no continuity anymore. The illness has wrecked your past, and it looms over your future even more threateningly. The life you knew is made more impossible with every manic episode. The person you think you are and know has no firm ground under their feet any more. You literally can’t be sure of yourself. In this short-circuited, manic state, what otherwise would have only briefly flashed through your head before instantly being discarded instead becomes action. Everyone probably has a chasm in their soul, which they reveal occasionally. Mania is when you go on a tour through that chasm. Things you’ve known about yourself for years become invalid. You don’t just start again from scratch, like when you’re bank account’s empty. No, you go down below zero, you’re in the red. You’re no longer connected to anything in a reliable way.”

This book offers exceptional insights into what sufferers go through, offering an arresting chronicle of a disrupted, broken life.

Thomas Melle was born in 1975 and studied applied literary studies and philosophy in Tübingen, Austin, Texas and Berlin. His 2012 debut novel, *Sickster*, was nominated for the German Book Prize. 2014 saw the publication of *3,000 Euros*, which was shortlisted for the German Book Prize. In 2015, Thomas Melle received the Berlin Arts Prize, awarded by the city in which he lives.

➤ **A sparkling narrative and a radical autobiography of extraordinary literary power.**



English sample translation by Steph Morris

1

I want to tell you about a loss. I'm talking about my library. That library no longer exists. I have lost it.

The subject came up at a dinner party held in my honour, as I now had a small achievement to my name. I hadn't been keen to attend, but I didn't want to spoil the fun the others thought they were bringing me. And in the end the evening was a success.

Next to me sat Henry, who actually has a much nicer name. For some while I'd had a soft spot for her. We talked quite intimately, though I suspected this intimacy derived more from her gentle, thoughtful manner, than from any real affection. As so often, we were talking about literature, and instead of showing her my better side – lightly falsified as such – I revealed that I no longer had a library.

I was simply following an impulse. For some time I had started being more open about my deficits and flaws, although such admissions were shameful and difficult. Broadcasting your personal calamities feels pushy, but not to address them is equally strange if their consequences have already come up. Bertram, the host, caught the detail from the other side of the table, and we talked about the slow but steady growth of libraries over the course of our lives, about the accumulation of things and matter altogether, which for some becomes, over the years, a significant part of their identities. We agreed such a loss must be pretty unbearable. Then the discussion disintegrated, and I turned back to Henry, to whom I would have to divulge the reason for my library's disappearance if our dialogue was not to be marked by a gaping hole. So I said to her, casually and softly, and I rarely speak so softly, – and she was speaking very softly herself, barely audible, especially as she was on my left, the tinnitus side – that I was bipolar. I guessed she already knew. Or she knew *something*. Everyone knew something.

In English there is the expression, 'the elephant in the room'. It describes a conspicuous problem ignored. You have an elephant in there, impossible to miss, but no-one talks about him. The elephant may be embarrassing, his presence all the more obvious as a

result. Perhaps people think the elephant will leave again, although he is forcing people to squeeze up against the walls. My illness is one such elephant. The china he has trampled crunches under his soles – if I may let him stomp through a further image. But why am I talking about china? It's me lying there.

I used to be a collector. Hungry for culture, over the years I had gathered an impressive library, which I continually updated and expanded. My heart was in these books, and I loved the sense I had these writers behind me: the ones who had influenced and enthralled me back in the day, and my colleagues, whose new titles continually reminded me time was moving on, things changing. I hadn't read all the books, but I needed them all, and I could consult any of them at any moment, and lose myself in a book – once more, or for the first time. My music collection had also been substantial: indie, electronic, classical... For me too, these collections of music and books were an aspect of my personality. Strange that we project our selves into the things around us. Stranger still to disperse these things, without really wanting to.

In 2006 I sold most of my library, above all the classics. Suddenly the books I had once loved seemed to me, the maniac, like baggage I must through off as soon as possible. In 2007, now depressed, I regretted this loss terribly. A collector had scattered the objects of his passion to the four winds, and it was impossible to reverse the situation. I stuck it out three years amongst the decimated collection, then became manic again and sold off most of my remaining library along with all the CDs and records the dealers would take. This was 2010. I threw the rest away, along with a large proportion of my clothes. In 2011 I woke from the frenzy again, distraught to have lost or flogged off everything I had once loved.

I still miss these books. Mostly of the time I persuade myself it's no bad thing even for someone with a normal mental constitution to trim their library (but just a trim!) or that I would sooner or later have had enough of the constant hoarding and archiving, and have sought the freedom of a new minimalism, white walls, sofa, table, with nothing but a Gerhard-Richter candle. But these decisions were conditioned by illness. They were not the result of free will, and the empty walls and the echoing flat mock me to this day, and illustrate, radically speaking, a failed attempt at living.

Henry didn't know exactly what she should say. She looked at me, nodding, and then assured me she had experience of such states, though of course she wasn't trying to equate my condition with hers. We continued talking about these states, these tremendous high- and low-

pressure zones of the psyche, although I didn't want to describe, and couldn't, the effect the illness really had on my life. None of the other cataclysmic details passed my lips; the mention of my library would have to do for now. But it didn't feel embarrassing to speak to her. The trust was palpable, along, however, with the growing distance. Addressed now, the illness stood all the more blatantly between us, yet I didn't regret having told her. Three or four weeks later we fell in love. But we didn't get together. She was worried about my illness. I was worried about her old money family, small minded, despite their urbanity. After a week spent in a dream, we realised there was no space for us in the real world, even if we persisted doggedly against every objection from others and ourselves. Since then I have only told her a few details of my story, although she would be someone I could tell everything, and should. This book is dedicated to such impossibilities. And to a love we retracted immediately.

2

When I had sex with Madonna, I felt briefly fine. Madonna was still incredibly fit, which didn't really surprise me. We'd all seen her mutate into a fitness machine around 2006, sweating it out with her splits and squats in the video for 'Hung Up', harder and harder, to the extremes, a rubber human, her body forming soft-focus curves through iron will, a kick up mortality's saggy arse. And now I had become the beneficiary of these efforts. Now I was reaping the rewards of her punishing exercise regime, I who had also slimmed noticeably in the past months, documenting the entire process on my blog, which I destroyed and restored daily. So now the time had come and I could pluck her from Oranienstrasse with absolute self-assurance. And why should I be surprised? She had been singing about me all her life.

Much like Björk. But she was getting on my tits. She would scurry around me in cafes and bars trying to use her brittle, elfin voice to reason with my heart. Hadn't she always been my true pop love, she seemed to be whimpering. Why Madonna all of a sudden? But unlike Madonna, Björk hadn't persistently worked on her persona, hadn't been constantly reinventing herself, shedding skins. Björk seemed to think that just with Selma's glasses from *Dancer in the Dark* and her scruffy, wasted, sympathy-vote appearance, she could rekindle my teenage love of her just like that. She would approach me in cheap, dingy cafes, leaves caught in her hair, cooing something incomprehensible, all of which got her nowhere. A bit like Courtney.

I have no real memory of the sexual intercourse with Madonna herself. It will not have been especially wild nor especially tame. Madonna is not in fact a sex bomb, just as Elvis wasn't. One of his lovers is known to have said she found him a helpless baby in bed, even showing a sucking reflex when presented with maternal breasts. Madonna was equally incestuous about it, still seeing me as her son, the fallen Christ she would bestow oral sex on: *I'm down on my knees / I'm gonna take you there*. And although our sex was infused with the scent of the forbidden, the heresy failed to give me a kick. I soon noticed the old woman beneath me, her flesh squashier and baggier once grasped, all masks dropped, crows' feet dug deep into her skin from all that laughing. All masks dropped, yes, except for that wolfish grin which had first beamed at me, reflected in the bookshop window. Madonna had bared her long teeth. Studying the books on display, our looks met, recognition in mine, a smirk from her side, and with no further signal we dashed to my flat at Kottbusser Tor, the wet asphalt a dark mirror beneath our feet. She just came with me. I remember I was amazed at first what good shape she was in, nearly as good as the nude shots from the late seventies, but I must say her breasts seemed more compact than I had been led to believe; blatant fraud on the part either of herself or the media. Subtract at least two cup sizes, then we're talking. But who was I to be getting pedantic, even if Madonna had crumbled, as it were, at one look from me? Or rather, who was I to disappoint her? We had both been waiting for this moment for decades. I ceased all reflection or evaluation, and gave her what she was taking. Next morning she was gone, as befit her status, without leaving her number. That's Madonna. I hadn't expected anything else.

I'd had this before, the celebs crawling out of the woodwork. Same old, same old. As soon as I was aware of my inexpressible function again, as soon as I began to send the right signals, they swarmed around me, like stars to their black hole. And I devoured them all. Before I picked up Madonna I had MCA trailing me – the godly former Beastie Boys MC, sadly now deceased – checking what I was doing on this godforsaken night. Unlike Werner Herzog however, lurking round every corner, MCA was a pure, upstanding spirit. With a swift thumbs up, he signalled that everything was ok, and Madonna and I could go for it with a clear conscience, because MCA was the personification of pop's conscience, and anything he gave the nod to was politically and morally correct – whatever the drag queens outside Roses hissed behind our backs, or the young Turkish guys outside Oregano, eying the drag queens incredulously and dissing them under their breath. Let them work out their hatred amongst themselves; it had nothing to do with us. Although perhaps it did, seeing as a few weeks ago

I'd helped the drag queens out, mediating between them and some brick-shithouse gangster-rapper types, then called the police when it came to blows after all. The police, me! A joke.

But the Turkish guys understood my position and didn't lay a finger on me. I grew up with them, after all. It makes a difference. To me, but above all to them. And the drag queens kissed me in gratitude.

Once Madonna was gone, she was gone. Nothing had happened. It was like this most of the time. I had an experience which in a preconscious phase would have caused a sensation and scandal, but now any potential hype vanished in a puff of smoke, whether I was detained in handcuffs or seduced by Madonna. I didn't tell anyone about it, or if so, only weeks later, lying wrecked from whisky in my bed, rumpled yet again by a stranger. The experiences were intense but without consequences. Every day was like a reincarnation, a fresher, keener stimulus needed to satisfy my consciousness, yesterday's suppressed like a war just lost.

3

The word alone, bipolar. It's one of those terms which suppress other terms, making everything seem more equitable by ridding the nomenclature of its discriminatory aspect: discreet euphemisms designed to take the sting out of their object by relabeling them. But in the end the previous term, 'manic-depressive', fitted much better, at least in my case. First I'm manic, then depressive: simple as that. First comes the manic phase, which lasts between days and weeks in most people, up to a year in a few cases; then come the minus-symptoms, the depression, the total despair, later replaced by an emotionless void, then reformed into something muffled and amorphous. These phases can also last anything between a few days and a couple of years, depending on the patient, sometimes even longer. I was dealt the card which lasts years. When I sink or soar, it's for a long time. Nothing can halt me then, whether in flight or free-fall.

Alongside the undoubted positive effects the renaming has achieved – such as the inclusion of multiple and milder manifestations of the illness – the word 'bipolar' is afforded a certain technicality which dampens the true, catastrophic substance of what it represents, allowing it to be classified and filed: disaster as consumer-friendly *terminus technicus*. The word is so insipid some still don't know what it really means. And this ignorance speaks volumes.

To an educated person the term ‘bipolarity’ says little, much like the syndrome itself. People still find such things wholly alien and weird – and no blame is intended here. The word is cheap but the facts are shocking. Here are the normal people, replete with neuroses, phobias and genuine craziness, but still totally loveable, integrated in a flash, all of them; over there are the insane, battling their incomprehensibility, simply impossible to categorise or make commensurable via irony or humour. That is the destiny of the mad: to be incomparable, to lose all connection to the life of society at large. The sick are freaks, and as such to be avoided, for they are the symbols of non-sense, and such symbols are dangerous, not least to the fragile construction of meaning known as everyday life. The sick, just like terrorists, have fallen through society’s system, fallen into a hostile abyss of incomprehensibility. And, cruelly, they are incomprehensible to themselves too. How are they then to make themselves comprehensible to others? They can only accept their incomprehensibility and attempt to live with it, because nothing is transparent to them any more; not their inner life, nor the world outside. The medical explanations are rationale-models for doctors, aiming to construct meaningful contexts to help the patient over the shock of self-loss: these neurons have sparked too hard, so the stress in question was counterproductive. Such substitute explanations have as little connection to the illness, as experienced, as a description of braking mechanisms does to the reality of a motorway pile-up. You stand in front of the accident with the instruction manual, searching the diagrams to identify the wrecked parts lying oh so physically in front of you. But you find nothing. The facts explode the explanation. The accident was not part of the design.

The best thing, assuming you have survived the phase at all, is to let yourself stand idle for ever as mentally ill and try to vegetate on to the end, without too much reflection or rumination. All is more or less lost anyway. To address your own illness actively and analytically is hard work, painful, and dangerous.

I have become a figure of rumour and stories. Everyone knows something. They have caught wind; they pass details on, true or false, and anyone who has heard nothing yet is informed in whispers. It has seeped into my books and cannot be removed. They are about nothing else, yet attempt to conceal it dialectically. This cannot go on. Fiction will have to take a break (while its influence continues discreetly). I must reclaim my own story, I have to uncover the causes – if they are impossible to illustrate, if they cannot be found in the technical diagrams –

through precise descriptions of the accidents.

Causes, causes, causes. Take ten therapists and you have a hundred causes. One thing continually posited is what's known as 'vulnerability', a violability literally, intended initially just to denote susceptibility to mental illnesses, but which can indeed be read to mean 'thin-skinned', a kind of over-sensitive receptivity, easily overwhelmed by the everyday world. Too many sensory perceptions, too many gazes, the thoughts of others always taken into account, so that the exterior perspective dominates the interior view. Someone with this vulnerability is immediately out of their depth on entering a public space, a theatre or bar, immersed in a social arena. The potential for danger encountered in this arena is wide-ranging. Small talk can become a trapdoor, the looks of all present seem like attacks, snippets of conversation disturb their concentration, simply standing around plunges them into oblivion. The vulnerable individual is constantly forced to defeat themselves if they are not to vanish into their own social phobia. In no sense robust, and confused by all that surrounds, they avoid social situations and lose such social skills as they ever possessed. Or they desensitize themselves with alcohol and other drugs. And in the process they mess up their neurone balance, till it gradually keels over. Maybe. Maybe one explanation, one cause.

Thus a number – sixty percent – of bipolar people have a previous history of substance abuse. Does the illness predetermine the abuse, or the abuse the illness, or is it reciprocal? It isn't easy to ascertain. Shed light on the causes and they become transparent and flimsy. On the one hand causes provide an explanatory model with which you can reassure yourself and others, deploying purported traumata as necessary. On the other hand nothing has really been gained: these are simplifications, magic spells, lies even. Medicine is still feeling its way as a science; it's been trial and error for centuries. Medication is largely discovered by chance. Psychology is imprisoned in the logic of cause and effect. Ultimately there is still no explanation even for yawning.

I can only say: this is how it was for me (and I hope it will never be like this again). What is cause, what is effect, and what is a factor unrelated to the illness, cannot be determined definitively. And so I have to storify it, to make it easier to understand.