

Thomas Mann's Wartime *Reflections*

by James Seaton

As World War I came to an end Thomas Mann's book of essays on the war, *Betrachtungen Eines Unpolitischen*, on which he had been working since 1914, was finally published. Thirty-eight years after the end of World War II the book was translated into English under the title *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*. What are we, now, to make of these 435 pages of passionate debate, whose conceptions of civilization, culture, and national character seem so extravagantly wrong-headed, so patently fallacious — and not merely fallacious but even dangerous? For that matter, why should anyone not a specialist be concerned with the book at all? Mann's great fiction needs no special rationale to attract the most diverse readers, but a long book of tortuous intellectual maneuvering devoted to justifying Germany's role in World War I is a different matter. I hope, nevertheless, to make a case for the contemporary significance of *Reflections*, not merely for Germans or Germanists but for Americans and, indeed, for all those concerned about culture and politics in the late twentieth century.

It is true, first of all, that Mann's great novels, particularly his two analyses of modern German culture, *The Magic Mountain* and *Dr. Faustus*, become even more impressive when read in the light of *Reflections*. A reader may recognize that the two novels dramatize the conflicts within Mann's cultural heritage, but until one knows *Reflections* one cannot see how deeply Mann's criticism of his culture is intertwined with criticism of his own past self. But *Reflections* is not important today only because of its influence on Mann's other works; Mann's passionate attacks on liberalism, on humanitarianism, on all progressivisms, are well worth considering in their own right, especially by Americans like myself who trace our intellectual origins to the conflicts of the sixties. It is symptomatic of *Reflections* that its greatest appeal must be, I think, to leftists ready for self-examination; conservatives looking for reinforcement will find little to their taste. The greatest importance of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* at the present time, it seems to me, is its demonstration of the power of self-criticism as a basis for cultural criticism. In this essay, then, I will first consider *Reflections* in relation to *The Magic Mountain* and *Dr. Faustus*, then as a critique of liberalism or "civilization," and finally as an example of that self-criticism without which cultural criticism becomes either presumptuous sermonizing or merely academic theorizing. I will quote liberally from *Reflections* because it remains little known in the West, because its views are so antithetical to our liberal orthodoxy, and finally because Mann's prose is so pungently eloquent that paraphrase alone cannot convey either the pointedness or the dialectical complexity of Mann's "reflections."

When early in *The Magic Mountain* Hans Castorp enjoys a Sunday

concert after the second breakfast regularly provided by the sanitarium, he is warned by Settembrini of the danger concealed behind this apparently innocent amusement:

Music? It is the half-articulate art, the dubious, the irresponsible, the insensible. . . . Let me state my point by the method of exaggeration: my aversion from music rests on political grounds. For you personally, Engineer [Settembrini's nickname for Hans Castorp], she is beyond all doubt dangerous. . . . I insist that she is, by her nature, equivocal. I shall not be going too far in saying at once that she is politically suspect.

Hans Castorp responds to Settembrini's words first by slapping his knee and exclaiming "that never in all his life before had he heard the like," then by laughing and, finally, when Settembrini expatiates at more length, by listening "without precisely following" (113-14). The general reader's reaction is likely to be similar. That is, Settembrini's characterization of music in general as "politically suspect" appears to be a rather comic example of the Italian liberal's characteristic verbal manipulation, an effusion with no particular point beyond demonstrating Settembrini's empty rhetorical cleverness and the corresponding naive astonishment and incomprehension of Hans Castorp.

But Settembrini's comments are far from an empty exhibition of rhetoric; they point to one of the key ideas of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, the thesis that music has a special connection with German culture, whereas literature is particularly emblematic of French civilization. For the Thomas Mann of *Reflections*, Germany is "The Unliterary Country" — "*Das Unliterarische Land*" — which cannot compete with the Entente nations in war propaganda, in the statement of ringing ideals, because its culture is characterized by "wordlessness and inarticulateness"; since the essence of German culture finds expression only in music, German opposition to Western values appears only as a "silent, inarticulate resistance" (31-32, *BU* 41).¹

In *Reflections* music is opposed not simply to literature but also to politics and even to civilization. Mann insists on this opposition,

the antithesis that this whole book struggles with — the antithesis that for cowardly reasons has been denied and disputed, but that is nevertheless immortally true, of music and politics, of German tradition and civilization. (18)

If *Reflections* is conservative, that is because the work sees the movement of the future as "the progress from music to democracy — that is what it means throughout when it speaks of 'progress'" (23). In imagining what a democratic Germany would be like, Mann

foresees politics

as the displacer of music, which up to then had usurped the highest position in the social-artistic interest of the nation — as its displacer, I say, in alliance with literature, which is to be understood as the twin sister of politics, *if not as identical* with it, and its natural ally in the fight against the predominance of music. . . . (220; here and throughout, emphases are Mann's)

Although Mann himself is of course a writer, a writer of literature, for him "*Music . . . is the purest paradigm, the sacred and fundamental type of all art*" (230). For Mann, "German music from Bach to Reger has been the . . . powerfully polyphonic joining of self-will and subordination, the image and the artistic-spiritual reflection of German life itself" (232). Therefore, it is quite appropriate that Mann envisages his opposite as "civilization's literary man," one who "hates music with his whole soul, thinking of it as a national stultifying drink and instrument of quietism" (232).

Mann's primary example of a German composer is Wagner, yet even a Russian musician like Tchaikovsky can serve to illustrate the basic conflict between music and the ideals of civilization — democracy, humanitarianism, progress:

Yesterday I heard Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathetique*, this thoroughly dangerous work in its sweetness and savagery, which one neither hears nor understands without experiencing the irreconcilable antithesis of the third movement with its *malicious* march music, which, if we had a censor in the service of democratic enlightenment, would absolutely have to be forbidden. So long as such things may not only be composed, but also performed; so long as this trumpet blare and cymbal clash is allowed among cultured people; so long, allow me to say, will there be wars on earth. Art is a *conservative power*, the strongest of all; it preserves spiritual possibilities that without it — perhaps — would die out. (290)

And Mann goes on to speak of the power of art and music, even in a future of a

pacified esperanto world . . . with electric television. . . . Art will still live, and it will form an element of uncertainty and preserve the possibility, the conceivability, of relapse. . . . It will speak of passion and unreason, hold primordial thoughts and instincts in honor, keep them *awake* or reawaken them with great force, the thought and instinct of war, for example . . . In short, then: war, heroism of a reactionary type, all the mischief of unreason, will be thinkable and therefore possible so long as art exists. (291)

Thus when the German composer Hans Pfitzner “while the surge of submarine warfare was at its height, demonstratively dedicated a work of chamber music to Fleet Admiral von Tirpitz” (313), Mann is unsurprised and even approving.

When Settembrini contrasts music unfavorably with “the Word, bearer of the spirit, the tool and gleaming ploughshare of progress” (113), he is taking up one of the leitmotifs of *Reflections*, voicing the opinions that in the earlier work were identified with the being who stood for all that Mann opposed — “civilization’s literary man,” *Der Zivilisationsliterat* (35, BU 45). But in *The Magic Mountain* Settembrini’s attitude towards music is justified some hundreds of pages after his original comments, when Hans Castorp comes to think over the significance of “a *lied*, one of those which are folk-song and masterpiece together, . . . Schubert’s ‘Linden-tree’ . . . the old favourite, ‘Am Brunnen vor dem Tore’ ” (650). His ability to consider the song’s meaning is a sign of his new maturity, as the narrator expressly notes, and Hans Castorp’s verdict is thus, in the context of the novel, not a one-sided, partial truth like that of Settembrini or his antagonist Naptha, but a sign of true wisdom:

May we take it [says the narrator] that our simple hero, after so many years of hermetic-pedagogic discipline, of ascent from one stage to another, has now reached a point where he is conscious of the “meaningfulness” of his love and the object of it? We assert, we record, that he has. To him the song meant a whole world. . . . What was the world behind the song, which the motions of his conscience made to seem a world of forbidden love?

It was death. . . . Spiritual sympathy with it was none the less sympathy with death. . . . This was a fruit, sound and splendid enough for the instant or so, yet extraordinarily prone to decay; the purest refreshment of the spirit, if enjoyed at the right moment, but the next, capable of spreading decay and corruption among men. . . . It was a subject for self-conquest at the definite behest of conscience. Yes, self-conquest — that might well be the essence of triumph over this love, this soul-enchantment that bore such sinister fruit. (651-53)

Hans Castorp’s self-conquest may be only temporary, may be shaken by world events, since at the very end of the novel, after Hans Castorp has come down from the magic mountain only to slog through the mud of World War I, he sings that *lied* as he runs and stumbles, sings “unaware, staring stark ahead . . . all unconsciously singing” (715). Apparently, however, Thomas Mann’s own self-conquest was more lasting. That “sympathy with death” which in *Reflections* is celebrated as “the formula and basic definition of all romanticism” (310, 312) and is contrasted with banal “democratic

health” (324), is now judged by an author whose hero has vowed,

I will let death have no mastery over my thoughts. For therein lies goodness and love of humankind and in nothing else . . . Love stands opposed to death. It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death. . . . I have taken stock. I will remember. I will keep faith with death in my heart, yet well remember that faith with death and the dead is evil, is hostile to humankind, so long as we give it power over thought and action. For the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts. (496-97)

Such a vow may seem platitudinous, may seem sanctimonious and empty. Only if we know *Reflections* can we appreciate what this vow cost not merely Hans Castorp but also his creator.

Music itself, unlike war, politics, religion, disease, and time, is not a major topic of discussion in *The Magic Mountain*. In *Doctor Faustus*, on the other hand, it is a German composer, Adrian Leverkühn, whose pact with the demonic powers parallels both the career of the original Doctor Faustus and that of the German nation, which, in the narrator’s words, attempted “to gain the whole world by virtue of the one pact she was minded to keep, which she had signed with her blood” (510). At first glance Mann’s decision to study the origins of Nazism through the career of a composer seems difficult to understand; high culture in general seems to have little to do with Nazism, either in its origins or in its years of power. However, a consideration of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* suggests two reasons for the choice: first, in *Reflections* Mann had argued that it was the German preference for music over literature which symbolized the nation’s rejection of the Enlightenment tradition on behalf of an alliance with the demonic powers represented in “culture” but not in “civilization”; second, *Dr. Faustus* is a work not of condemnation but — as Leszek Kolakowski notes — of “cultural self-criticism,” since Mann is more concerned to note any possible responsibility that he himself or his milieu bore for the fate of Germany than to consider all the reasons for the Nazi success. In Kolakowski’s words,

Thomas Mann was entitled to say that Nazism had nothing to do with German culture or was a gross denial and travesty of it. In fact, however, he did not say this: instead, he inquired how such phenomena as the Hitler movement and Nazi ideology could have come about in Germany, and what were the elements in German culture that made this possible. Every German, he maintained, would recognize with horror, in the bestialities of Nazism, the distortion of features which could be discerned even in the noblest representatives (this is the important point) of the national culture. Mann was not content to pass over the question

of the birth of Nazism in the usual manner, or to contend that it had no legitimate claim to any part of the German inheritance. Instead, he frankly criticized that culture of which he was himself a part and a creative element. (4)

Adrian Leverkühn develops the twelve tone row music of Arnold Schönberg; his creative genius is stifled from the results of a syphilis infection as Nietzsche's may have been, but in his artistic modernism, manifested in works maintaining an ironic distance from human feeling, he is surely Thomas Mann as well.

But if the present importance of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* derives in part from the ways in which Mann transcended his war essays in his later fiction, there is much in *Reflections* that seems relevant, even politically relevant, to our own time and our own society. I will offer three examples. Mann's evocation of the German character may seem more mystique than analysis, but his discussion of the psychological roots of humanitarianism is still convincing enough to be troubling. For Mann, the humanitarian lover of mankind is characterized most of all by hatred, of which his self-righteousness is but a symptom; American culture provides Mann with his most extreme example of National humanitarian self-righteousness. Second, *Reflections'* insistence on the dangerousness of high art may not be an indication so much of Mann's eccentricity as of the seriousness of his commitment to that art. And even though Mann's celebration of war was later tacitly rejected by Mann himself, comparison with texts from *The Iliad* to *A Farewell to Arms* will suggest that Mann's ideas are not restricted to German *Kultur* nor are they easily answered. In summary, although Mann's ideas are extremely vulnerable as assertions, they remain valuable as critique.

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Through *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* Mann returns to the point that "Humanitarian is not always the same as humane" — *Nicht immer is das Humanitare dasselbe wie das Human* (27, BU 37) — or "What is humanitarian is not always and everywhere the same as what is humane." (335). Mann insists that the proclamation of one's love for mankind is almost always characterized by a hidden hatred for actual human beings. Mann asks,

Could it be that universal love, love directed far away, only flourishes at the cost of the ability to love "closer at hand," there, you see, where love has its only reality? (138)

The most striking example of personal hatred combined with protestations of universal love is the writing of Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann's brother, apostrophized in *Reflections* as "civilization's literary man." Thomas Mann declares that "it was not the foreigner, not the 'enemy' who directed the most ferocious attacks

against the position I was pressed into by the times" (135). In his war book *Au dessus de la mêlée*, Romain Rolland

scolded and complained with strong words, but he did not hiss. . . . His purpose was not to dishonor, to kill — and to insinuate himself into the place of the dishonored and slain one with the introductory cry "Heed the one who loves!" It was left to a much closer person to have such a purpose, and such hatred. (135)

But Mann's thesis is not merely personal. For him progressive, democratic humanitarianism has always concealed an implicit hatred of actual human beings, a hatred made more vicious by hypocrisy. From its beginning, "resolute love of humanity has not been fearful of shedding blood" when the cause has been properly humanitarian. For Thomas Mann, the phrase "resolute love of humanity," or "*entschlossene Menschenliebe*" (42, *BU* 303), a phrase coined by his brother,

is the most terrible combination of words ever invented, the overpowering tastelessness of which assures its inventor, civilization's literary man and political prophet, immortality . . . (226)

Such "resoluteness" towards opponents combined with rhetorical assertions of universal love may, according to Mann, be

traced back to the French Revolution, so that the propaganda of the Entente in World War I reveals the resurrection of virtue in political form, the renewed possibility of a moral priesthood of sentimental-terroristic-republican stamp, in a word: the renaissance of the Jacobin. (279)

Mann notes that those who love mankind must inevitably feel superior to the great majority who do not share such exalted sentiments. Only those who share one's opinions are one's moral equals. Mann describes the "humanitarian progressive" this way:

He has the Jacobin's self-righteousness, his certainty and his sense of psychological security, which is intellectual callousness. Since he believes he possesses the truth, the "blind—ing—ly clear truth," his love of truth is in a bad way; for whoever is, so to speak, married to the truth, naturally has his role as lover and wooer far behind him. . . . All by himself he has worked out an intellectual-political world view that has long been known and long been named: it is called the cosmopolitan-radical view, democratic internationalism. . . . The childish man sees in the

unconditional acceptance of this idea the criterion of all decency, all intellectual honesty, integrity, and virtue; he imagines himself justified, yes, orally bound, to relegate to the deepest pit every way of thinking that cannot and does not want to recognize what glitters so absolutely for him to be the light and the truth. (282-83)

For Mann, the United States is an extreme example of a nation based on a republican ideology and, therefore, on that democracy.

which as such is equality and therefore hatred, ineradicable and jealous republican hatred of every superiority, every expert authority. (219)

Mann enjoys paraphrasing Schopenhauer's comments on the United States as a nation which has attempted "to let unalloyed, pure and abstract justice rule" (91). For Schopenhauer and for Mann

the example is not attractive; for, besides base utilitarianism, ignorance, bigotry, conceit, vulgarity, and simple-minded veneration of women, there is also enslavement and mistreatment of negroes, lynch law, unpunished assassination, the most brutal of duels, open disdain for justice and laws, repudiation of public debts, shocking political swindle of neighboring provinces, continually increasing mob rule, and more to boot in everyday occurrence. (91)

Some of the criticisms of Schopenhauer and Mann are outdated, others are intrinsically questionable, but Mann's repeated assertion that "humanitarianism is not always the same as humane" still bears repeating today, perhaps especially in the United States. Mann's personal tone calls for a personal response. I can still remember how difficult it was for me to accept the idea that those who supported the war in Vietnam or who believed in the rightness of segregation could be decent human beings, morally equal to those of us who knew the "blind—ing—ly clear truth[s]" that the war in Vietnam and the racial discrimination were alike morally intolerable. I still believe that both American participation in the Vietnam War and racial discrimination were and are, respectively, morally intolerable, but I am now aware of the possibility that a male supporter of the war in Vietnam, for example, could have loved his wife and cared for his children honestly and deeply; he need not have been an authoritarian patriarch who beat his wife and dominated his children.

Mann's criticism, although it is directed towards radicals, the political descendants of the French Revolution, today is applicable to both right and left wing. All struggles are now ideological, all sides now fight for freedom and democracy; Contras and Sandinistas share

the same rhetoric, killers in Belfast and Beirut act for democracy and profess to love mankind. If the United States aids "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan or first Marcos and then Aquino in the Philippines, it is on behalf of freedom and national self-determination in all cases. Nor does the Soviet Union act from any but the highest motives, whether in Eastern Europe or on behalf of its Jews. The United Nations, if it has accomplished little else, has certified the dominance of the kind of rhetoric Mann criticized in *Reflections*; but world acceptance has done little to advance the ideals enshrined in the rhetoric. It remains an open question whether an ideology of universal humanitarianism serves only to discourage violence or also to incite it.

If there is a world consensus about the ideals of democracy and humanitarianism, whatever the practice may be, there also seems to be a general agreement that art is a good thing, a device for strengthening human ties between nations and cultures. But Mann asserts that art is dangerous, that art should be identified with "war, heroism of a reactionary type, all the mischief of unreason" (291), that art, as typified by music,

will never be moral in the political sense, never virtuous. . . . It has a basically undependable, treacherous tendency; its joy in scandalous antireason, its tendency to beauty-creating "barbarism," cannot be rooted out, yes, even if one calls this tendency hysterical, anti-intellectual, and immoral to the point of being a danger to the world. . . . (289)

Surely this is not the view of art assumed by UNESCO or by the United States and the Soviet Union, who so often can agree about nothing else except the beneficial — that is to say, harmless — quality of cultural exchanges. Nor is this view prevalent among my colleagues in the liberal arts faculty, who are virtually unanimous in stressing the social virtue of art and literature.

Mann himself of course was no enemy of high culture; he took high culture with immense seriousness. Perhaps here is the point. For Mann art mattered so much, was so important, so central to his own life and, he believed, to the national life of Germany, that he could believe that German music inspired a war. We moderns — or rather postmoderns — care for art, love art, but perhaps we do not finally respect art, take art seriously. And neither do those national leaders who are willing to arrange for artistic exchanges, even if they can agree on nothing substantive. To believe that art is safe, is not potentially dangerous, is to adopt a condescending, patronizing view of art. Conversely, one of the most convincing testimonies to the power of modern high art occurs in Lionel Trilling's essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" when he, somewhat ruefully, compares a typical modern work to a "quinquereme or a howitzer or a tank" (11).

If one does not assume that great literature and great art must, in the last resort, exemplify and embody the ideals of civilization, then Mann's comments on the spiritual benefits of art do not seem so wrong-headed or so eccentric. Mann argues that war does not necessarily brutalize; instead, for the individual soldier,

the danger lies much more in the refinement of the individual man from such a long war experience, a refinement that may alienate him forever from everyday life. . . . It will be difficult for him to find his way again in the petty narrowness of everyday life. . . . The war has made him accustomed to freedom and absence of material concern — which form the soil in which higher humanity and sensitive culture thrive. He has led an extraordinary life — often ghastly, often numbingly heavy, but also highly tense, strange, shocking and educating in a thousand ways. . . . How will he like his home, which has remained narrow humble and full of petty cares, and in which he is now supposed to live again without danger and luxury, with the ideal of being a good burgher? What I am hinting at here, together with several other implications, is certainly disquieting enough; but it has nothing at all to do with brutalization, it would signify much more an elevation, an intensification and ennoblement of human life by the war. (338-39)

But writers like Erich Maria Remarque, Wilfred Owen and Ernest Hemingway have long since taught us to regard the First World War as a war totally without spiritual content, a war without a redeeming aspect. Hemingway's *In Our time*, with its title taken from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer's* phrase "Let us have peace in our time," is surely one of the works which most graphically depicts the meaninglessness and horror of modern warfare. And the story which depicts the hopelessness of the soldier back from the battle with the greatest finality is not "Big Two-Hearted River" but "Soldier's Home." Krebs, even more than Nick Adams, seems broken by the war: "He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences" (71). Yet Krebs' situation, the story suggests, is a result of an experience similar to that evoked by Mann in the above quotation. Krebs has done something worthwhile in the war, acted in a responsible and honorable way, "had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally when he might have done something else" (69-70). Now he cannot communicate that experience without distorting it, without trivializing it, nor is there anything he can do in peacetime, apparently, which matches what he did in the war.

From one point of view, of course, Hemingway's entire corpus stands as a vast reproach to Mann's willingness to talk on and on

about the spiritual meaning of World War I. The comments of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* still seem definitive:

I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (184-85)

Nevertheless, Mann's ideas, presented at a great length in a vocabulary of abstractions, are not so far from Frederic Henry's point. Mann praises the "wordlessness" of Germany, he excoriates the humanitarian rhetoric of the Entente and, as I have suggested, his comments about the spiritualization that war may bring about do not seem at odds with Hemingway's most pessimistic fiction.

But it is not only Hemingway, himself suspect as a humanitarian although like Mann gaining credentials as an antifascist, to whom one can turn on behalf of Mann's argument. Homer's *Iliad* is certainly an indictment of war and its wastes — as Simone Weil well knew — but it is also an affirmation of the beauty and excitement and natural, inevitable reality of war. And if contemporary literature finds little meaning and glory in war, that literature has certainly not renounced the exploitation of violence and cruelty as elements of art, neither in avant-garde nor in popular art. Mann's essay, I would suggest, presents some unpleasant, unfashionable truths, often in an objectionable way; they remain truths, nevertheless.

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Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man is flawed in almost every way that cultural criticism can be flawed. Its bifurcation of "civilization" and "culture" into two disembodied, largely symbolic entities makes serious social criticism impossible from the beginning; furthermore, the work is peopled with nationalities characterized without evidence but with easy certitude — not only the Germans and the French, but the English, the Russians, Americans, Blacks with their alleged "negrolike craving for pleasure" (360) and others:

There are highly “political” nations — nations that are never free of political stimulation and excitement, that still, because of a complete lack of ability in authority and governance, have never accomplished anything on earth and never will. The Poles and the Irish for example. (17)

Above all, there is Mann’s insistence that although the war is “to a great extent a war of bourgeois competition” (250), it is also and more truly “a war of ideas” (125), a war fought “not only for power and business, but also, and especially, for ideas” (140). It is “essentially a new outbreak, perhaps the grandest, the final one, as some believe, of Germany’s ancient struggle against the spirit of the West . . .” (29). Thus the war is both spiritual and barbaric — the combination seems to be what Mann intends by his conception of “culture.” Given such confusion, why is it that this work still seems valuable, still worth reading, while most of Mann’s World War II essays, written in defense of democracy, against barbarism, supporting civilization as well as high culture, now seem so dated? One answer, the answer that *Reflections* itself might suggest, is that the World War I essays are filled with a passion that is lacking in the more “correct” essays of the later period. That may well be, but *Dr. Faustus* certainly does not lack intensity, even though its values are those of the World War II essays. What is different, what is lacking in Mann’s World War II essays that is present in the *Reflections* — whatever its flaws?

I would argue that the overriding characteristic of the *Reflections* is that it is an exercise in self-criticism; its cultural criticism is throughout anchored in self-criticism. On the other hand, in World War II Mann knew that he was on the “right” side, the side of the angels; thus his wartime essays of the 1940’s have little of the nervous questioning and dialectical brilliance that pervade *Reflections*. Dwight Macdonald’s comments on Mann during World War II are suggestive. Macdonald’s essay, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” is dated April 1945:

The same issue of [New York newspaper] *PM* reprints as an editorial an article from *Free World* by Thomas Mann. The 20th century Goethe (pocket edition) pontificates about his fellow Germans (he doubts “the propriety of pity”) and regales us with selections from his diaries for the years 1933 and 1934. The key passage:

The lack of sense for evil that large masses of the German people have shown was and always will be criminal. The tremendous spree that this ever thrill-greedy nation imbibed from the poisonous gin of nationalism ladled out by fools and liars must be paid for. . . . It is impossible to demand of the abused nations of Europe that they shall

draw a dividing line between 'Nazism' and the German people. If there is such a thing as Germany as a historical entity, then there is also such a thing as responsibility — quite independent of the precarious concept of *guilt*. (102-03)

Macdonald comments:

Now Thomas Mann himself belongs to that "historical entity" called GERMANY, he uses the GERMAN language, he is a GERMAN. If we abandon "the precarious concept of guilt" and make an individual morally responsible for the deeds of the "historical entity" he gets himself born into, then I fail to see how Thomas Mann is not just as guilty as his fellow Germans trembling under Allied bombs and shells in the wreckage of their homes — those poor devils Mann has the bad taste and inhumanity to judge in so Pharisaical a manner. If we abandon "the precarious concept of guilt," then Mann's position over here becomes precarious indeed. Is he or is he not a member of that "historical entity," Germany? (103)

Contrast Mann's stance in the passage quoted by Macdonald with the position he assumes in *Reflections*:

And no matter how the war may now end: let us take the German share of the "guilt" upon us, each individual, with the exception, perhaps, of a handful of pacifists and literary saints — and not make some chance functionaries into scapegoats. (246)

One may also contrast Mann's World War II essay with the position he assumes in the novel *Dr. Faustus*, where he implicitly identifies himself with the course of German history, and where the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, makes his judgments as one of those "Germans trembling under Allied bombs and shells in the wreckage of their homes":

. . . I share with no small part of our population, even those hardest hit and homeless, the feeling that we are only getting what we gave, and even if we must suffer more frightfully than we have sinned, we shall only hear in our ears that he who sows the wind must reap the whirlwind. (35)

Throughout *Reflections*, Mann's essential argument is with himself. Although Mann presents himself as German patriot in contrast to "civilization's literary man" with his adherence to the French, Mann constantly questions his own credentials as a patriot. He champions

music as “the purest paradigm, the sacred and fundamental type of all art” (230), but he writes a book of mere prose, not even poetry, not a creative work, but a work of debate and discussion — the format most congenial to “civilization’s literary man.” Thus, Mann suggests that even as he asserts his conservatism, he, like his master Nietzsche, is helping the cause which he means to oppose. The large antitheses of the book — Germans vs. French, civilization vs. culture, music vs. literature — so questionable in themselves — take on meaning as opposing sides of Mann’s own psyche.

Mann emphasizes that the very “concept ‘German’ is an abyss, bottomless” (37), and that therefore it is a mistake to quickly judge anyone, even “civilization’s literary man,” as unpatriotic or “un-German.” As for himself, Mann admits that “my right to patriotism may with good reason be doubted, for I am not a very genuine German” (48). But he can console himself with the thought that

it is almost part of higher German culture to present oneself as unGerman and even antiGerman. . . . one must possibly lose one’s German character to find it. . . . Precisely the exemplary Germans were Europeans who would have regarded every limitation to the nothing-but German as barbaric. (48)

Mann calls himself a “half-Westerner” (65) and asks,

What do I basically have in common with this vigorous nation whose colossal ability today forms the horror and admiration of those who have joined together to destroy it? Chronicler and interpreter of decadence, fancier of the pathological and death, an esthete with a tendency toward the abyss; how could *I* come to identify myself with Germany? (110)

And if he can prove that he has a right to patriotism, then he must “doubt whether a person like me is ‘suited’ for patriotism . . . ” (115). Certainly a work such as “Felix Krull” reveals a critical, implicitly unpatriotic point of view, according to *Reflections*:

One has a part in the intellectual disintegration of the German character if, before the war, one was at the point of parodying the German educational and developmental novel, the great German autobiography, as the memoirs of a confidence man. (70)

Nor does Mann’s self-questioning revolve only around his past. For the very writing of a book of essays on political-cultural values is a proper task for “civilization’s literary man,” for a *Literat*, a *Schriftsteller*, not for a true artist, a poet or *Dichter*. On the other hand, Mann’s divided heritage provides a tactical opportunity, a way

of meeting his foes on their own terms:

I remembered the European literary man in me, of whom I am, admittedly, not too proud, and it occurred to me that I *could also do* what the bourgeois rhetoricians over there could do, that I had, after all, learned how to write just as well as they — and that this case, my case, in which Latin heritage of *esprit* was combined with a passionate, indiscriminate partisanship for Germany, was a rarity, an exception, to a certain extent a stroke of luck that had to become manifest. I thought that one had to meet those over there with their own weapons, with skill of a defense counsel, with intellect, antitheses, wit, verve, elegance, and dialectical parrying. (116)

But, more fundamentally, a work of discussion and debate will not further the education of “non-political” individuals; instead, it will inevitably strengthen the cause of politics and hence of democracy, no matter what opinion it avows, no matter what its short-term consequences may be. After presenting himself as a conservative for more than 400 pages, Thomas Mann says that, whatever his opinion may be, he cannot really be a conservative nor have a conservative impact in his writings:

Undoubtedly there is a certain antithesis between conservatism and writing, and literature. . . . For literature is analysis, intellect, skepticism, psychology; it is democracy, the “West,” and where it joins the conservative-national disposition, that schism of which I spoke appears, the schism between being and effect. Conservative? Naturally I am not; for if I wanted to be so in opinion, I would still not be so according to my nature, which, finally, is what has effect. In cases such as mine, destructive and conserving tendencies meet, and as far as one can speak of effect, it is just this double effect that takes place. (431)

Mann’s dilemma recalls the situation of Nietzsche, who, for Mann, represents (with Schopenhauer and Wagner) one of the supreme masters of German culture. In his opinions, Nietzsche is entirely conservative and national: “The colossal manliness of his soul, his antifeminism, his opposition to democracy — what could be more German?” (57). But the effect of Nietzsche’s writing has been something quite different, not because of any misinterpretation, but because of the ambiguous nature of Nietzsche’s legacy. In Mann’s words:

His [Nietzsche’s] impact on the German way of thinking was at least, at the very least, as strong through his extremely Western

method, his Europeanizing prose, as through his "militarism" and power philosophy; and his "progressive" civilizing impact consists in a colossal strengthening, encouraging and sharpening of the writing profession, of literary criticism and of radicalism in Germany. . . . the powerful strengthening of the literary-critical element in Germany that Nietzsche brought about signifies *progress* in the most dubious, most political sense, in the sense of "humanization," progress toward Western democracy. (60-61)

Surely Mann's work is subject to precisely the same judgment — a judgment he cannot reject because the "literary" part of his nature is ultimately as real as the conservative, patriotic side.

For Mann the war itself has this same double nature. On the one hand, it is "an unparalleled primeval eruption" (58), but on the other hand it means the acceleration of both technological progress and progress toward democracy. Thus Mann's attitude toward the war itself cannot be any less complex than his attitude towards himself:

[T]he war cannot fail, *must* not fail, to supply the conservative, delaying forces, and all irrationalism, all "reaction" as well, richly with new spirit, new blood. But I knew on the day of its outbreak that the war would above all signify a powerful step forward for Germany on the path to democracy. (240)

Thomas Mann is right in *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* to characterize his work, reluctantly, as a work of critique. He is wrong to suggest in *Reflections* that such critique can lead only to the dissolution of what is most valuable in human life. Instead, the personal and cultural critique which Mann performs in *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* and in his great novels provides the kind of insight made possible by the performance of the peculiarly human activity of self-reflection. So far no discipline and no science has discovered a methodology for generating such insights. Instead, we must depend on the old, unreliable sources: art, religion, philosophy, and the unclassifiable "reflections," both personal and cultural, of writers like Thomas Mann.

I will close on a personal note. Although I have quoted only one instance, several times *Reflections* points to the United States as the nation where a shallow literary, progressive humanitarianism has been taken furthest. Yet in a great speech advocating progress towards democracy and equality by perhaps the most acclaimed contemporary American "humanitarian," to use a term which has such pejorative connotations in *Reflections*, one can sense the meaning and positive value of that mysterious "sympathy with death" which Mann celebrates in *Reflections* and which he seeks to limit but not reject in *The Magic Mountain*.

The proclamation of an official holiday honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King may strengthen the perception in some quarters that King is the kind of official hero who is doubtless worthy but also rather dull: one can't argue with his advocacy of brotherhood, sisterhood, equality, justice, nonviolence, etc. — but that's just what makes it unnecessary to remember or re-read King's speeches, someone might argue. Why trouble about the obvious, about what everybody agrees with? Still, I can remember seeing the March on Washington on television and remember listening to Mahalia Jackson sing and wondering how anybody could top Mahalia Jackson — and slowly realizing that Martin Luther King was doing it. I still cannot hear the concluding phrases of that speech without getting a chill and the suspicion of tears. Certainly that response, one far from unique to me, is in part due to the knowledge of the coming assassination one now possesses when listening to the unmistakable "sympathy with death" which Martin Luther King affirms in the closing words of his speech, where the victory of a world of freedom and justice, of democracy and humanity, is evoked in "the words of the old Negro spiritual" now engraved, with only a change from the first person plural to the first person singular, on his tomb:

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" (726)²

A recognition that the same "sympathy with death" with which Thomas Mann once justified his support for Germany in World War I also appears, powerfully and climactically, in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech surely goes far to make the case for the continuing significance of *Reflections* as a whole, for Americans as well as for Germans and, indeed, for the rest of the world.

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Notes

¹In citations referring to both the English translation (*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*) and the German text, (*Betrachtungen Eines Unpolitischen*) the first page number given is that of the English translation, followed by the page number of the German text prefaced by the initials BU.

²Noting that "numerous published versions contain textual errors," Ronald R. Reid asserts that the text from which the quotation in the body of the essay was taken "is the most accurate available printed text of what King actually said." The sources for the printed text include "an audio recording purchased from the National Archives" and a videotape of the event (723).

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