

# The Writer Apart

Mark Lilla

Who is the “nonpolitical” man Thomas Mann tried to defend even as he couldn’t escape politics?

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I want to say everything—that is the purpose of this book.

—Thomas Mann,  
*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*

On August 4, 1914, German troops invaded neutral Belgium, and by day’s end Britain and Germany were at war. Three days later, in an otherwise perfunctory letter to his brother Heinrich, Thomas Mann made an uncharacteristic confession:

I still feel as if I’m dreaming.... What a visitation! What will Europe look like after, inwardly and outwardly, when it is over?... It is fairly certain that if the war lasts long, I shall be what is called “ruined.” So be it! What would that signify compared with the upheavals, especially the large-scale psychic upheavals which war must necessarily bring? Shouldn’t we be grateful for the totally unexpected chance to experience such mighty things? My chief feeling is a tremendous curiosity—and, I admit, the deepest sympathy for this execrated, indecipherable, fateful Germany.

Mann was thirty-nine. His first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901, had made him famous throughout Europe and would earn him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929. Though he did not write another novel for two decades, his short stories and novellas, including *Death in Venice* (1912), kept him at the center of literary attention. Mann was a



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Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Berlin, circa 1920

respected member of the German cultural establishment in Munich, where he lived. He attended concerts, he befriended composers, he read Goethe, and he never expressed any views about politics. He was, as he wryly put it, a good German burgher.

All that changed in 1914. Why is anyone's guess—it was as if some inner diabolus had been released. From one month to the next Mann became an intransigent and inflammatory defender of the German cause internationally, writing articles and giving speeches that made him a favorite on the volkish nationalist right. As the war dragged on, he put aside his literary projects to devote himself entirely to *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, a defense of Germany against the onslaught of “alien” Western ideas of enlightenment and democracy.\* It arrived in bookshops in October 1918, a few weeks before the armistice was signed—an untimely birth.

If Mann thought that *Reflections* would mark his escape from politics, he was very much mistaken. Politics would never have done with him. Postwar Germany was immediately plunged into economic uncertainty and political chaos, as violent right- and left-wing radicals tried to bring down the young Weimar Republic. This crisis finally compelled Mann to distance himself from many of the reactionary political views he had expressed in *Reflections*. In 1930, after the National Socialists won a disturbingly large number of seats in parliament—a storm warning, he called it—he delivered an address titled “An Appeal to Reason” that exposed the fanatical reactionary state of mind behind Nazism: “Fanaticism turns into a means of salvation, enthusiasm into epileptic ecstasy, politics becomes an opiate for the masses, a proletarian eschatology; and reason veils her face.”

When Hitler came to power in 1933 Mann was on a European tour lecturing on Wagner, and within days family and friends were urging him not to return to Munich. He never did. Settling eventually in the United States, he became a major voice in the émigré intellectual community. When war finally came, he made pro-democratic propaganda speeches around the US and delivered regular German-language broadcasts that were transmitted into his former homeland. He received many honors, met with President Roosevelt, and became a US citizen in 1944.

In many ways *Reflections* proved to be the pivot around which his destiny as a writer turned. Not only did it force him to engage with the powerful historical forces of the age, it also seemed to unblock him as a novelist. Once it was finished, Mann turned back to a sketch he had written before the war for “a satyr-play...a droll conflict between macabre adventure and bourgeois sense of duty” that he saw as a comic pendant to *Death in Venice*. Six years later it appeared as *The Magic Mountain*, that magnificent, comic-tragic *millefeuille* of a book that seems to be about everything: time, eros, body and spirit,

humanism, death, enlightenment, politics, and snow. He spent the next decade and a half on his ambitious biblical tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers*, with the last volume appearing in 1943. And to general astonishment he delivered his last great work, *Doctor Faustus*, only four years later.

Yet despite its significance in his life, *Reflections* is the least read and least loved of Mann's works. Most readers today will find the views he expressed in it repellent, as Mann himself eventually did. That is why the book's readership has generally been limited to historians interested in the German intellectual climate during the war and the Weimar period, or those who find moral or political lessons in Mann's transformation into a supporter of democracy. What tends to get lost to view, though, is any sense of what Mann wanted to defend in the book. Yes, he opposed revolution, democracy, liberalism, internationalism, the French Enlightenment, and British unregulated capitalism. Yes, he defended Germany's cause in the war. But who is the "nonpolitical" man he thought needed defending, and why?

For all that has been written about *Reflections* as a historical and biographical document, it remains an undiscovered book—and a timely one. For buried within it is a serious argument about art's relation to politics. Mann wrote at a moment, like our own, when artists were under great pressure to declare their political allegiances and shape their work accordingly. He would always resist that pressure and encourage others to do the same. But it took the experience of two world wars for him finally to recognize just how large a stake the artist has in healthy politics. That is the lesson of this wild and petulant *apologia pro vita sua*.

Thomas Mann was born into a respectable mercantile family in Lübeck in 1875. When their father died unexpectedly in 1891, Heinrich, who was four years older than Thomas, left home and became a literary nomad, living in different cities and countries for short periods while turning out biting left-wing satires of Wilhelmine society and politics. Thomas had his own literary ambitions, which proved both a bond and source of contention with Heinrich. For a little over a year, beginning in 1895, the brothers lived together in Italy, mainly in the town of Palestrina, just outside of Rome. They wrote, they read each other's work, they played chess. They also had memorable arguments that revealed their temperamental differences. Heinrich was outgoing and drawn toward life in the south, which he found erotically and aesthetically stimulating. He was *mondain* and wrote easily—too easily, felt Thomas, who found almost everything his brother was publishing distasteful, superficial, rushed.

Thomas was more reserved and introverted. His homoerotic tendencies—a necessarily guarded secret—may have had something to do with it. Equally significant was his early and highly developed sense of artistic probity. Heinrich had no complexes about being an engaged public intellectual. Thomas was more old-fashioned and felt no attraction to *l'art pour l'art* bohemianism or revolutionary politics. He came to see his natural detachment as the source of his freedom and the condition of all serious art. As he put it in *Reflections*, “The exquisite superiority of art over simple intellectuality lies in art’s lively ambiguity, its deep lack of commitment, its intellectual freedom.” To become committed is to abandon one’s post as an artist.

Yet in August 1914 Mann abandoned his post. His enthusiastic response to the war, though hard to comprehend now, was perfectly conventional at the time. Heinrich, by contrast, was one of the few German intellectuals to speak out immediately and publicly against the war and to declare his hope that Germany would be defeated and a democratic republic established. Thomas was infuriated by Heinrich’s position, which he dismissed as “*bellezza* radicalism” and an expression of hatred toward all things German. Heinrich, in turn, dismissed his younger sibling as being out of his depth, writing to a friend that he “enjoys the war esthetically, as he enjoys everything.”

Heinrich’s existence as (in his eyes) a *faux artiste* seemed a perpetual challenge to Thomas’s sense of his own calling. In a revealing and very angry letter he wrote, “You cannot see the right and the ethos of my life, because you are my brother.” Heinrich showed remarkable restraint and never lost his patience. “I have been aware all along of the antagonism in your spirit,” he wrote, and he expressed hope that “you might realize that you needn’t think of me as an enemy.”

But Thomas was the kind of person (we all know at least one) who needs an adversary in order to develop his own identity. And when war broke out, the image of Heinrich as his artistic enemy became blurred in Thomas’s mind with that of Germany’s military enemies. He admitted in one letter that “the need to regard things in intimate terms...long ago led me to see [Germany’s] fate symbolized and personified in my brother and myself.” Even for a writer, he was an extraordinary solipsist.

Three intense months after the outbreak of the war, Mann published his first political article, “Thoughts in Wartime,” which scandalized not only his brother but international literary opinion. How, his fellow European writers asked, could the author of the supremely well-crafted and subtle *Buddenbrooks* write sentences like these?

We hadn't believed in the war; our political thinking was incapable of recognizing the need for a European catastrophe.... Deep in our hearts we felt that the world, our world, could no longer go on as it had. We were familiar with this world of peace and frivolous manners.... A ghastly world that no longer exists—or will not exist once the storm has passed! Wasn't it swarming with vermin of the spirit like maggots? Didn't it seethe and stink of civilization's decay?

The article was nothing less than a declaration of war—in Mann's terminology, a war for “Culture” against the pretensions of “Civilization.” In this by now tired trope, Civilization stands for reason, skepticism, humanitarianism, democracy, and progress, while Culture is more primordial, drawing energy from the dark side of human nature and producing greater depth of feeling, and therefore greater art. What the French and the English and Heinrich wanted, Thomas believed, was to destroy cultured Germany and remake it into a domesticated, politically democratized, decadent capitalist nation of bourgeois philistines. “They want to make us happy,” he writes contemptuously, but we Germans refuse “to succumb to the civilizing process.”

“Thoughts in Wartime” is the best introduction to the diffuse *Reflections*. Yet that later work might never have been written had it not been for a dramatic intervention by Heinrich. Provoked by “Thoughts” and a lecture Thomas had given on Frederick the Great, he published a long polemical article in 1915 that targeted nationalistic intellectuals like his brother. Titled simply “Zola,” it is a melodramatic recounting of Émile Zola's role in the Dreyfus Affair, implicitly comparing pro-war German intellectuals to the dishonest, reactionary anti-Dreyfusards in France. Thomas took it as a deeply personal attack. Particularly wounding was Heinrich's remark that the anti-Dreyfusards, and by implication Thomas, “belonged to the common herd, the herd that will one day disappear. They had chosen between history and the moment and had shown that with all their talents they were but entertaining parasites.”

After reading this passage Thomas broke off all relations with his brother. Though they lived less than a mile apart in Munich, they did not speak again until 1922. They passed each other silently at the opera, saw each other from a distance at funerals, but that was all. Heinrich continued to work on his novels and became an even more prominent engaged intellectual on the left. Thomas withdrew into himself and focused single-mindedly on setting the record straight.

*Reflections* is not a conventional treatise, composed in order to persuade readers of a particular position. It is the record of an angry mind seeking self-understanding, an unsettled mix of elevated discourse and saber thrusts, detachment and polemic, even

cruelty. There are memorable digressions on the German character, European history, Russian literature, and Mann's guiding intellectual lights, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche. But then there are paragraphs that almost seem drawn from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* or Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, mixing lucidity and fantasy and spleen in such a way that readers never know which of the author's personalities to expect next. At times one feels like an analyst listening to a highly associative monologue that revolves around a still-undiscovered center; at others, like a witness to an exorcism.

Read as a political pamphlet, *Reflections* is a classic statement of modern reaction. All the familiar themes are here: the volkish nationalism, the romanticization of war, the disdain for reason, the hostility toward democracy, the contempt for humanitarianism, even laments about Americanization. As in "Thoughts in Wartime," declarations like these abound:

Away, then, with the alien and repulsive slogan, "democratic!" Never will the mechanical-democratic state of the West be naturalized with us. Let one Germanize the word, let one say "national" instead of "democratic."

The teleological function of war in general has been seen to be the confirmation, preservation, and strengthening of the national character: it is the great defense against the rationalistic breakdown of national culture.

The most difficult thing to understand about *Reflections* is how Mann thought polemical statements like these could serve to defend the "nonpolitical" man. What, one wonders, does he mean by "politics"? We must read a third of the way into the book before finally being told this: "Politics is the opposite of aestheticism." This is surely the most idiosyncratic definition anyone has ever thought to give the term. But it reveals that "politics" here is really an umbrella term for all the forces in modern life that Mann sees threatening what the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott, in an inspired phrase, once called "the voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind." This *ur*-distinction between aesthetics and politics stands behind countless oppositions that litter the book: art versus intellect, soul versus society, irony versus moralism, nation versus republic, the ideas of 1914 versus the ideas of 1789, and so on. What I, the "nonpolitical man," oppose, Mann seems to be saying in this flurry of verbal gestures, is *all that*. (Every reactionary has an *all that*.)

Who, then, is the intellectual proponent of “politics”? Mann calls him the *Zivilizationsliterat*, an unlovely term even in German, which the English translator, Walter D. Morris, renders as “civilization’s literary man.” (A better translation might simply have been “Heinrich.”) Mann meant the term *Literat* to be derogatory, indicating a self-righteous, dilettantish scribbler who feels called upon to be the world’s moral tutor. This human type believes in justice and progress and democracy, but above all he believes that art has no end in itself, that it is a mere tool for advancing civilization and reaching humanitarian political ends. The *Literat* is the opposite, indeed the enemy, of the serious artist; he is an evangelical who would “commit intellect and art to a democratic doctrine of salvation.” And as this type becomes emboldened, the cultural space in which serious artists operate becomes stifling and hostile. One passage could have been written today:

The outlawing and expulsion of those who disagree is completely consonant with his concept of freedom.... Since he believes he possesses the truth, “the blind-ing-ly clear truth,” his love of truth is in a bad way.... He imagines himself justified, yes, morally 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. There is only a “yes” or a “no,” sheep and goats, one must “come forward.” Tolerance and delay would be a crime. He believes he has to save his soul by not spending one more hour of even apparent companionship with obstinate fools who do not see what he sees.

What disappears in such a setting is the particular vision of the artist himself: “One forgets that convictions lie on the street and that anyone can pick them up and make them his own.”



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Thomas Mann, circa 1916

Yet what is *Reflections* if not a manifesto? And what is it stuffed with if not convictions found lying on the streets of every German town and village in 1914? Mann's complete lack of self-awareness on this point is what makes *Reflections* the riveting psychological case study it is. For much of it he ceases to be an artist and becomes a mere countertype, the reactionary. It would take some years for him to recognize this.

The world *Reflections* was born into was unlike the one in which it had been conceived. The shock of Germany's defeat and the punitive Versailles Treaty, compounded by hyperinflation, transformed the ideological landscape. To his chagrin Mann now found himself associated with figures on the right whom he loathed, like Oswald Spengler, and burdened with admirers who had taken all too literally the rhetorical flourishes in *Reflections* about civilizational decay and the demonic roots of culture. By 1922 he felt it imperative to act. He delivered a lecture, "On the German Republic," that endorsed Weimar democracy and put himself on record against the reactionary passions that he called "sentimental crudity." But the speech changed no minds; it simply put him in the crosshairs of radical right-wing newspapers, one of which ran the headline "Mann Overboard!"



It was in *The Magic Mountain* that his real reckoning with the reactionary mind played out. The original novella was to have revolved around a young, slightly dreamy burgher named Hans Castorp who lands in a Swiss sanatorium and finds himself the pedagogical object of a mock political-philosophical battle between an Italian rational humanist named Settembrini (a comic version of Heinrich) and a conservative Protestant pastor named Bunge (some version of Thomas). Since Mann's notebooks for this period were lost or destroyed, we don't know how the novella was supposed to end. What we do know is that as the ideological atmosphere became more toxic in the early Weimar years, Mann turned his story into a more ambitious novel reflecting the current situation. Mild Pastor Bunge was transformed into one of Mann's most memorable fictional characters, Leo Naphta—a bitter, ugly Jewish dandy trained as a Jesuit who preaches an eccentric blend of Catholic integralism and Marxist revolution and who longs for a bloody apocalypse to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.

Naphta's arguments with Settembrini begin as serio-comic performances to win over Hans. But as the story progresses it becomes clear that neither character is entirely consistent in his views and that the differences between them go deeper than mere arguments. Settembrini may be a naive rationalist, but he knows himself. Naphta is possessed by a dark spirit that will grasp on any idea that feeds his cosmic resentment—hence the syncretic reach of his ideas, from medieval theology to *Das Kapital*. Naphta had grounds for hating the world—as a boy he had seen his father crucified in a pogrom, and he himself was now dying of tuberculosis—yet his response was to transform his anger into a murderous political theology. He is neither a man of the conventional conservative right nor the left; he is a “revolutionary of reaction” whose aspiration is to capture the future by fathering a civilizational rebirth from the womb of a lost past. Mann captures this outlook perfectly in a speech of 1930:

There was proclaimed a new mental attitude for all mankind, which should have nothing to do with bourgeois principles such as freedom, justice, culture, optimism, faith in progress.... It expressed itself as an irrationalistic throwback, placing the conception *life* at the center of thought.... It set up for homage as the true inwardness of life the Mother-Chthonic, the darkness of the soul, the holy procreative underworld.

As the author of *Reflections*, he understood this “new mental attitude” from the inside.

When Naphta finally puts a bullet through his head near the end of *The Magic Mountain*, one cannot help thinking that Mann has finally killed off something within himself. This also seems to have been the judgment of Walter Benjamin. In a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1925, Benjamin wrote that though he had loathed the author of “Thoughts in Wartime,”

he had fallen in love with *The Magic Mountain*: “I can only imagine that an internal change must have taken place in the author while he was writing. Indeed, I am certain this was the case.”

Mann had indeed undergone an internal change since 1914. But not a complete one. The essay “Culture and Politics” (1939) is the closest thing he ever wrote to a *mea culpa* for the political ravings in *Reflections*. In it he describes how his entire upbringing had trained him to see democracy as a threat to culture and to the inner freedom of the artist. Yet “of the connection between moral and social freedom I understood little and cared less.” The legacy of the nonpolitical German that Mann had once extolled was, he now recognized, a world-historical nightmare:

His elegant disdain of democratic revolution has made him the tool of another revolution; an anarchic one, running amok to threaten the foundations and props of all our Western morality and civilization; a world revolution to which no invasion of the Huns in olden times can even be compared.

Yet Mann never disowned the aesthetic ideas in *Reflections*. Nor did he express regret for his criticism of the politically committed artist. It is worth asking why.

“Objectivity is freedom”: this phrase serves as something of a mantra in *Reflections*, and by it Mann meant something different from what some people mean by scientific objectivity. Rather than provide a distanced, nonperspectival view of reality, artistic objectivity is what keeps us close to the this-ness of things; it implies concreteness, thickness, impartiality, actuality. It means, you might say, letting things be what they are, not appropriating them for some narrow purpose and thereby delimiting their connotations and meanings. What Mann loved about the literature of the nineteenth century, as opposed to that of the eighteenth, was what he called its greater subservience to reality, by which he meant its ambiguity, its resistance to formulas. The writers he most admired—among them Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev—saw life stereoscopically, from multiple standpoints at once. So did Tolstoy, Mann notes, until he donned an ill-fitting Christian monocle and became a bore.

The political artist has an overriding mission: he must transform three-dimensional reality into a simple two-dimensional sketch that teaches a lesson. Such an artist is under the illusion of creating freely, when in fact he is indentured to an idea. Any aspect of reality that does not serve that idea is forbidden to him. The aesthete draws freely from reality

and filters it through his imagination, always aware that it might appear different from a different angle. His gift is “to represent points of view, to deal in dialectics, always letting the one who is speaking at the time be right.”

Mann develops this point in an illuminating digression on Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, which was roundly criticized when it first appeared because none of the story’s characters behaved as they were expected to by partisans in the great “nihilism” debate that roiled midcentury Russia. Love, resentment, and self-deception keep getting in the way. The public, Mann observes, would not forgive Turgenev for having treated with equal sympathy the conservatives, the reactionaries, the liberals, and the revolutionary radicals. The book was badly received because its readers expected a manifesto. They found themselves saddled instead with a work of art.

Mann eventually learned that political freedom and artistic freedom are compatible. But he never abandoned the conviction that artistic freedom can serve as a check—quite literally, a reality check—on the claims of politics. Even, or perhaps especially, in times of crisis and great injustice, some inner distance from the maelstrom is called for. It is significant that while Thomas Mann the artist became a political democrat, he never became a democratic artist—a subtle but crucial distinction.

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This essay will appear, in somewhat different form, as the introduction to a new edition of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, which also includes Mann’s essays “Thoughts in Wartime” (1914) and “On the German Republic” (1922), to be published by New York Review Books on May 18. Copyright © 2021 by Mark Lilla. ↩