Chapter 1

Introduction

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With the possible exception of Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann (1875–1955) is the best-known German writer of the early twentieth century. Unlike Kafka, however, who was known only to a small circle of admirers until more than a generation after his death, Thomas Mann was famous from the time that he published his first novel in 1901. Mann's cultivated manners and elegant clothing betrayed his patrician origins, and he wrote with the stylistic virtuosity of a nineteenth-century realist, but his works captured the anxious spirit of modern times, full as they were of gender confusion, artistic crisis, physical decline, and moral decay. Had Mann died in 1913, he might have been remembered as a significant writer with a limited range, the author of undisputed masterpieces in *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*, 1912), but also of a disappointing second novel, a failed drama, and several half-finished projects. He was well-known in literary circles and popular among general readers, but he was not yet the iconic figure who became known as the living embodiment of German national culture.

History changed all that. When war broke out in August 1914, Thomas Mann – who had never taken much interest in politics – found himself writing patriotic essays. As the war dragged on, Mann wrote page after page of his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, a work that established his credentials as a leading right-wing intellectual. To everyone's surprise and to the great disappointment of his fellow conservatives, Mann reversed course just four years later to voice his public support for the fledgling democracy of the Weimar Republic. To his own surprise, Mann found himself in exile little more than a decade later, stating sadly in his public break with the Nazi government that he was better suited to be a representative than a martyr. Within a few years, the quintessential German found himself living in California as an American citizen; the "nonpolitical man" was delivering political speeches on a regular basis. Meanwhile, the writing continued and the accolades rained down: novel followed novel, from *The Magic Mountain* through *Joseph and his Brothers* to *Doctor Faustus*;

the honorary degree that had been revoked by the University of Bonn in 1936 was soon replaced by others from Berkeley, Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge.

Although celebrated like few other writers, Mann also generated controversy and even inspired hatred. To Bertolt Brecht, Mann was a pompous ass, the embodiment of bourgeois respectability and the antithesis of all that the leather-jacketed, cigar-chewing radical represented. Fellow German exiles resented his fame and fortune. Some suspected him of harboring clandestine Nazi sympathies, while American McCarthyites thought he might be a communist. The posthumous publication of Mann's diaries has kept the controversies swirling into the twenty-first century. They have confirmed the extent of his homosexual desires, shed new and sometimes unflattering light on his role as the patriarch of what was often referred to as his "amazing family," and raised new charges of anti-Semitism.

This volume provides a succinct introduction to Thomas Mann's life and works. The primary focus is on his literary texts, but it also touches on key stages in his personal development and on his evolution as a public intellectual. The book presupposes no prior knowledge of Thomas Mann, but it may serve as a useful reference for those who know his works well. As the book is intended for the general public as well as an academic audience, I have kept quotations and footnotes to a minimum, although I do include suggestions for further reading. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Keywords

Thomas Mann experienced more than his share of personal and political upheaval in the course of his long life. In his late teens he moved from his native city of Lübeck to Munich, which in terms of local customs and dialect was about as far as it was possible to move and still be within the German Reich. After more than forty years in Munich he was forced into exile, living first in Switzerland and then for more than a decade in the United States. He returned to Europe in his final years, but not to Germany: he died in Switzerland as an American citizen. Over the years, Mann evolved from a self-absorbed artist with little interest in politics to a prominent public intellectual and a leading voice in the campaign against German National Socialism. This volume will trace Mann's evolution as a writer in response to changing personal circumstances and unfolding historical events, but we begin with an overview of certain aspects of his work and his outlook on life that remained constant in the face of change. For the sake of convenience, I have chosen seven keywords that point to distinct yet interrelated aspects of Mann's fiction and his outlook on the world.

Distinction. In a letter to his brother Heinrich of January 8, 1904, Thomas Mann wrote that his "old prejudice as a Senator's son from Lübeck, an arrogant Hanseatic instinct" had led him to believe "that in comparison with us everything else is inferior." Thomas Mann was raised in a comfortable home with servants in the heart of the city at a time when class distinctions were more rigid than they are today, and he felt throughout his life that he was not cut from common cloth. His father, Thomas Johann Heinrich Mann, was one of the wealthiest men in Lübeck and a high-ranking member of the local government. Years later, Heinrich Mann recalled the extreme deference with which his father was greeted by his fellow citizens. "He was a senator, which at that time did not depend on party affiliation or public elections. It depended solely on the family. Either you were or you were not – and once you attained membership in the Senate, you had the lifelong authority of an absolutist minister."[1] When he died at the age of only fifty-one, the entire city participated in the funeral rites. The death led to the dissolution of the family business and a considerable loss of income, and yet Mann's mother was still able to afford an eight-room apartment when she moved to Munich. "We are not rich," she explained to her children, "but we are well-to-do."

Heinrich and Thomas received monthly allowances from the family estate that were sufficient to support a modest bachelor existence, particularly when they traveled to Italy, where things were cheaper. Unlike Hermann Hesse, who spent years working as a bookstore apprentice, or Franz Kafka, who spent his entire adult life working for an insurance agency, Thomas Mann never held a job. His first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, sold slowly at first, but soon became a best-seller that provided a steady source of income. Mann also married into one of the wealthiest families in Munich. The Mann family lived in a large villa in a fashionable district in Munich; Mann also owned a summer cottage in rural Bavaria and a house on the shores of the Baltic Sea. The commercial success of *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and the Nobel Prize for Literature (1929) brought further fame and fortune. Even in exile, Mann lived well. His novels sold well in English translation and were sometimes featured by the Book of the Month Club. He had the loyal support of Agnes Meyer, a wealthy and politically well-connected Washington insider who eased bureaucratic tensions with American government officials and provided substantial financial support. While many members of the exile community lived in abject poverty, Mann was able to purchase ocean-front property in Southern California, where he wrote in his custom-designed home.

Mann enjoyed the finer things in life. He was a meticulous dresser with a flair for style. One typical photograph of 1929 shows him with his wife Katia in Berlin. Mann is dressed in a double-breasted overcoat and wearing

a dapper fedora; he holds a leather briefcase in his left hand with an umbrella hanging from his forearm. His feet are crossed, revealing shiny patent leather shoes and white spats beneath his dark trousers. Although he was only about 5ft 7ins tall, Mann maintained an erect posture and trim figure throughout his life that gave him a more imposing presence than might have been expected for a man of his average stature. Mann liked to travel first class, stay in elegant hotels, and eat at fine restaurants. He also enjoyed his contacts with the rich and famous. In a diary entry of September 12, 1953, for instance, Mann noted with evident satisfaction that he had spent the evening at Charlie Chaplin's estate in Switzerland. "Picked up in Chaplin's car at seven. Short drive through his splendid estate with a gigantic park … My most pleasant evening in a long time. Delighted by the luxury." In January 1941 Thomas and Katia were the private guests of President and Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House; in April 1953 Mann received a private audience with Pope Pious XII. Throughout his life, then, Mann enjoyed the distinction of one to the manor born; as Tonio Kröger puts it, "after all, we're not gypsies in a green caravan."[2]

Stigma. Despite the advantages of birth, financial success, and public acclaim, Thomas Mann led a difficult life. His sexual desires were a source of constant conflict. As his fiction often suggests and his posthumously published diaries confirmed, Mann was passionately attracted to young men throughout his life. Had he lived in the twenty-first century, he might well have been a practicing homosexual, but the general consensus of his biographers is that he probably never acted on his homosexual desires. There were good reasons to prevent him from coming out: most obviously, homosexuality was illegal and socially unacceptable. Oscar Wilde's sensational trial in 1895 had led to his imprisonment and contributed to his early death; in Germany, Maximilian Harden had exposed a group of homosexuals at Kaiser Wilhelm II's court in a highly publicized scandal that led to lawsuits and public humiliation for the individuals involved, as Mann was well aware. The ambitious young writer was not willing to risk his reputation, and the very sense of distinction that encouraged Mann to cultivate an aura of impeccable taste and middle-class respectability contributed to his sexual reticence. His emphatically heterosexual brother Heinrich suffered from no such shyness, discovering the delights of Lübeck's brothels at an early age and writing lurid fiction that seemed calculated to shock the bourgeoisie. In contrast with Hesse, who interspersed his bouts of drinking and womanizing with soul-searching retreats to the alternative community of Ascona, Switzerland, or Stefan George, who conducted his homosexual toga parties in Munich, Mann lived an outwardly austere and inwardly tormented existence.

Mann's calling as an artist also conflicted with the expectations of his respectable upbringing. His father was outraged when Heinrich quit school and announced his plans to become a writer; in his final will and testament he urged his son's guardians to discourage Heinrich's "literary activity." Although Thomas shared his brother's desire to become a writer, he was also well aware of the dubious social status of the artist in the eyes of the patrician class in Lübeck. As a result, he became something of an artist with a bad conscience, careful to maintain a respectable façade as a well-dressed man with a wife and children, while devoting his creative energy to themes of decadence.

A third stigmatizing factor in Mann's life was his mother's partial Portuguese heritage and his own belief that he was of mixed race, a dark-haired outcast among the Nordic denizens of Lübeck. Thomas Mann's maternal grandfather left Lübeck for Brazil in 1820. There he made his fortune and married the daughter of a Creole plantation owner of Portuguese descent. Mann's mother Julia was sent back to Lübeck at the age of seven after her mother died, and she arrived to a strange new world of unknown relatives, speaking at first only Portuguese. Julia often told her children stories about her childhood in the tropics, growing up as the privileged daughter of a plantation owner surrounded by African slaves and the Brazilian jungles. This family history contributed to Mann's sense of being unlike his fellow youths in Lübeck and made him sensitive at an early age to others who, like himself, seemed marked by sexual "deviance" or racial difference; he had a particularly complicated relationship with German Jews.

Representation. When Mann arrived in the United States on February 21, 1938, a reporter for the *New York Times* asked him "whether he found his exile a difficult burden." Mann admitted that it was difficult, but given the "poisoned atmosphere in Germany," it was just as well to be away. And yet, he continued, he was in a certain sense not away at all: "Where I am, there is Germany. I carry German culture in me." Mann's famous declaration can be read in two ways, either as a modest, matter-of-fact statement that he was so steeped in German culture that it made no difference where he was in any given moment, or as a grandiose claim to be the living embodiment of the German nation. Seen in the larger context of his career, it becomes evident that Mann meant these words in both senses, referring simultaneously to his personal embeddedness in one cultural tradition and his conviction that his own struggles and preoccupations were representative of the nation as a whole. Mann always strove for more than personal success; he also wanted to be Germany's most representative writer. In later years, Mann often intervened directly in political affairs, but he was convinced throughout his career that he was a cultural seismograph – an artist who was intuitively in touch with the spirit of the age

and spoke as the voice of the nation, even in literary works that seemed on the surface to have little or nothing to do with current events.

The notion of the writer as a representative of the people has multiple roots in German culture. Readers outside Germany may not realize the high social status of writers and the important role they play in political debates. For instance, the events that led to German Reunification in 1989–90 were accompanied by an impassioned debate among artists and intellectuals about the nature of the German nation in the light of its troubled past. Günter Grass, one of the leading opponents to Reunification at the time, made headlines again in 2006 when he admitted that he had been a member of the Waffen-SS – after spending decades castigating others who had been less than entirely honest about their involvement in the Nazi past. The revelations became the focus of a media frenzy in Germany not only because they revealed what some felt was evidence of personal hypocrisy, but also because of Grass' immense cultural prestige as a Nobel Laureate and Germany's most recognizable postwar writer. The individual became a public symbol for Germany's ongoing attempt to come to terms with the past.

Thomas Mann played a similarly representative role in earlier twentieth-century German culture, continuing what was already then a long tradition. Eighteenth-century aristocrats led what Jürgen Habermas has described as a representative existence.[3] Unlike members of the modern middle class, who tend to identify with their professions and define themselves by what they have learned to do, aristocrats display who they are as a result of the privilege of birth. As the son of a quasi-aristocratic member of Lübeck's oligarchy, Mann inherited vestiges of this ethos: "I do have a certain princely talent for representation, if I am more or less in good form," wrote Thomas with smug satisfaction to Heinrich on February 27, 1904, after his first appearance in the glittering salon of his future in-laws in Munich. The notion of the writer as sounding board of the social conscience also has roots in post-revolutionary romanticism. As the authority of the Church and monarchy was challenged, poets tried to find meaning in a world turned upside down, a process that was by nature fraught with difficulty. Romantic writers alternated between moments of exhilaration and despair, between the proud conviction that they were the new, if "unacknowledged legislators of the world," as Percy Bysshe Shelley put it, and the fear that they were adrift and "alone, alone on a wide wide sea," to quote Samuel T. Coleridge's ancient mariner. As a writer who reflected throughout his career on the problematic relationship between the artist and society, Thomas Mann was a direct heir to the aesthetics of German romanticism. Mann's conviction that he was a representative of the German people has still a third, more sinister connection to the *völkisch* ideology of

late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Writers such as Paul de Lagarde, Julius Lahnbehn, and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck conceived of the nation not as a group of citizens with a common commitment to the principles of democracy, but as a people (*Volk*) bound together by blood relations, rooted in the ancestral soil, and imbued with a common spirit. The writer served as the mystical conduit for the general will, the spiritual medium for the collective unconsciousness. Mann was deeply influenced as a young man by such writers, and even when he had made his decisive break away from what Fritz Stern has called "the politics of cultural despair,"[4] he insisted that he should not be viewed as "the good German" who condemned Germany's descent into barbarism from the perspective of a detached observer. "Nothing that I was able to tell you or suggest about Germany came from an alien, cool, detached intellectual perspective," wrote Mann in 1945 toward the end of his speech to an American public on the topic of "Germany and the Germans." "I have it all in me, I have experienced it all myself."

Confession. In May 1945, Thomas Mann's son Golo saw his father walking back across the lawn of their property in Pacific Palisades, California, from the direction of an incinerator used to burn unwanted documents. A look into the oven revealed that Mann had just burned a large amount of paper, although exactly what he had destroyed remained unclear until the publication of his diaries many years later. "Carried out an old resolution to destroy old diaries," we read in his entry of May 21, 1945. "Burned them in the incinerator outside." This was not the first time that Mann had destroyed all-too-private documents. Already in 1896 Mann confessed in a letter of February 17 to his boyhood friend Otto Grautoff that he had burned his diaries. "Why? Because I found them annoying … And what if I suddenly died? It would be embarrassing and unpleasant to have left behind such a large quantity of secret – *very* secret – writing." During the first months of exile in 1933, Mann was terrified that the diaries that he had left in Munich might fall into the wrong hands; fortunately, Golo managed to smuggle them across the border unread. Mann wrote in his diaries only when he was alone and undisturbed, and no one, including his wife, was allowed to read them. He nevertheless decided in 1950 that he would preserve the diaries that he had begun in 1933, although he sealed them with the instruction that they were not to be opened until twenty or twenty-five years after his death: "Let the world know me," he noted on October 13, 1950, "but only when everyone is dead."

Mann's fluctuation between a need to confess and an impulse to conceal extended to other aspects of his life and works. He once referred to *Doctor Faustus* as a "radical confession," but the same could be said of *Tonio Kröger* or *Death in Venice*, both of which draw directly on Mann's own experience. Mann

also felt free to exploit the private lives of family and friends for his fiction: he outraged his uncle by portraying him as the dissolute Christian Buddenbrook; he worked some of his own love letters to his future wife into *Royal Highness* (*Königliche Hoheit*, 1909); and he transcribed verbatim the description of his sister Carla's suicide into *Doctor Faustus*. Mann's essays about other writers are often also indirect self-portraits. Even the homosexuality that he was at such pains to conceal was an open secret to his wife and his daughter Erika, and homoeroticism abounds in his literary works – hence his biographer Anthony Heilbut has aptly termed Thomas Mann "the poet of a half-open closet."[5]

Mann's confessional impulse is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition that was of particular importance to the eighteenth-century German Pietist movement. Pietists rejected what they felt had become the stultifying rituals of the official Protestant Church and infused religious experience with enthusiasm and introspection. Believers were encouraged to look within themselves and to record their spiritual progress from sin to salvation in autobiographical narratives. Another source of Mann's tendency toward the autobiographical in his writing lay in his desire to emulate Goethe, who had famously termed his own literary productions "fragments of a great confession" in his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth* (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*). If Mann were to become modern Germany's most representative writer, then he had to become the Goethe of his century. Yet the very desire to imitate Goethe suggests that there is an element of dissimulation or role playing combined with the soul-baring impulse of the confession. Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull* continues the literary tradition of the fictional autobiography, and yet Mann's protagonist is without psychological depth and as malleable as a chameleon. Like Goethe, whose stylistic virtuosity allowed him to write seemingly naïve German folksongs, highly stylized "Roman" elegies, and pseudo-Persian poetry, Mann was a master of deception as well as confession. Mann's correspondence, for instance, reveals diplomatic skills that contrast markedly with the unvarnished revelations of his intimate diaries. His many letters to his American benefactress Agnes Meyer are full of flattery to the point of obsequiousness, although the relationship was often tense. When Golo told his father that Mrs. Meyer suspected that Mann actually despised her, he was impressed: "Since my letters are full of devotion, admiration, thankfulness, concern, and even gallantry, that is a very intelligent observation" (diary entry of February 14, 1944).

Entertainment. Late in life, Mann reacted angrily to the charge that his style was "ponderous" or "pompous." "None of these attributes are in the least pertinent, believe me!" he wrote (in English) to Kenneth Oliver in a letter of May 4, 1951. "Complete lucidity, musicality, and a serenity that lightens what might otherwise be heavy – this is what my prose has always tried to

achieve. In addition to that, I admit, there is a playful tendency towards irony and subtle parody upon tradition." Despite these denials, Mann is still frequently associated with Teutonic humorlessness, and the diaries reveal an often moody, at times even clinically depressed, individual. Yet Mann was not always full of gloom and doom. "He could be very funny indeed," Katia recalled after his death,[6] even if his sense of humor was sometimes in questionable taste by today's standards. His younger brother Viktor recalled that Mann had his family and friends in stitches when he appeared for a costume party in formal evening dress but wearing the mask of an idiot. Mann reduced the group to gasps of hilarity by absent-mindedly scratching his deformed nose with a hand encased in an elegant lace glove, a gesture that Viktor suspected – probably correctly – Mann had practiced in front of a mirror before entering the room.

Mann was an entertainer. Throughout his career he gave public readings of his fiction, usually to packed houses, and he was disappointed if an audience seemed unresponsive or failed to call him back for several curtain calls. He was also keen to stress the comic elements in his fiction. "I wish I knew why I give the impression of Olympian pretentiousness!" he complained somewhat disingenuously in a letter of July 17, 1944 to Agnes Meyer. "I really just want to make people laugh and otherwise I try to be the personification of modesty." Mann's writing can indeed be funny. It contains a number of broadly comic scenes, such as the side-splitting depiction of unruly students tormenting their hapless teachers in *Buddenbrooks* and Felix Krull's performance of epilepsy in front of the draft board, as well as subtler elements of irony and parody throughout his work. Unlike James Joyce or the German Expressionists, Mann never wrote experimental prose. His sentences may be long and his syntax complex, but he is never grammatically incorrect. His works have layers of symbolic density and display philosophical profundity, but they can always be read for the plot as well.

"I want to appeal to stupid readers too," Mann once wrote half-seriously to Hermann Hesse (letter of April 1, 1910), referring to his appropriation of Richard Wagner's "double optic," that is, music or prose that appeals simultaneously to high-brow intellectuals and the general reading public. There are a number of reasons for Mann's adoption of this strategy. One lies in his personal temperament, his desire to at least appear reasonable and respectable in his prose style as well as his personal appearance. Another may be found in Mann's need to earn a living from his prose. He had a wife and six children to support, after all, and he was also quite generous in his contributions to other family members, friends, and public causes. Finally, Mann took seriously the classical dictum that the poet is to delight as well as instruct; he was

also convinced that the true virtuoso should be able to make the most difficult tasks look easy. Mann's goal, in short, was to treat "heavy" themes lightly, to cloak modernist prose in the garb of nineteenth-century realism, to tell sad stories that make people laugh.

Discipline. Together with the penchant for introspection that Mann may have inherited from his Protestant ancestors was a daily commitment to hard work. Or perhaps he was still trying to please the father who had died when he was only fifteen. In a speech delivered in Lübeck two months before his death, Mann wished that his father could have been present to see his son proclaimed an honorary citizen of the city. "I can say this much: his image has stood behind everything I have done, and I have always regretted that I gave him so little cause for hope when he was alive that I would ever achieve any sort of respectability."[7] If he could not be a successful businessman or senator, at least he could work like one, and he did. Klaus Mann has left a memorable description of his father's workday: between the hours of nine and twelve each morning the children understood from an early age that their father was not to be disturbed: "To enter his studio while he is mysteriously occupied there would be as blasphemous as to invade the temple when a secret ceremonial is taking place."[8] Mann's children called him "The Magician" (*Der Zauberer*), a nickname that derived from an outfit he once wore to a costume party, but that captured the aura of mystery that shrouded his morning work hours. Mann evidently enjoyed the name, as he often signed letters to his children with a simple "Z."

Mann wrote slowly but kept most of what he wrote. He must have had a clear conception of the entire work before writing, because he would sometimes send early chapters of a novel to the typesetter before having written the conclusion. He wrote by hand on large sheets of paper in a cramped handwriting that is difficult to decipher. Writing was a sober affair, reserved for the morning hours, and never stimulated by alcohol or other drugs, although he did smoke cigarettes and cigars throughout his life. Afternoons were reserved for the noon meal, a long walk with his dog, reading and correspondence, with the assistance of a secretary or Katia in later years – Katia learned how to type so that she could assist her husband and often wrote letters in his name – and a nap. As Klaus recalled, the magician's naptime was as sacrosanct as his work time, and the children knew that their father was not to be disturbed. Evenings were often an opportunity for socializing with friends or attending performances of classical music, the theater, or the opera; Mann also enjoyed the movies and playing records of classical music on his gramophone at home. If all went well, Mann was up and writing in his office the next morning.