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It is paradoxical that a body of work which begins by being so narrowly preoccupied with problems of the writer's self, and which to the end centres on characters expressing his intimate and unchanged concerns, should also contain so much history. Partly it is a matter of natural growth, the widening range of experience in increasingly turbulent times, which a novelist of all people could hardly ignore; but it also sprang from a remarkable congruence between Thomas Mann's themes and the patterns of twentieth-century German history. His work, with all the traditions, ambitions and temptations that lay behind it, was representative of fundamental German situations and responses before he set out consciously to represent them in fiction. When awareness dawned and representation became deliberate analysis, he was able to represent those phenomena with such depth of insight because he had been so deeply part of them and they of him. We can read him for pleasure, but also for understanding. *Crede experto*: believe the man who has gone through it himself. He can offer, in a word that is central to both Mann's art and his ethics, *Erkenntnis* (a complex concept which embraces knowledge, insight, analysis, understanding). Two of Mann's novels in particular are impressive reports – they are a great deal more than that, but they are that too – on crises of modern history: *The Magic Mountain* of 1924 on pre-1914 Europe and on the conflicts, especially acute in Germany, which were left unresolved by the First World War; and *Doctor Faustus* of 1947 on the long roots of Nazism in German culture and society.

There is already history of a kind in Mann's precocious first masterpiece, the family saga *Buddenbrooks* (1901). The novel preserves in amber the commercial and private lives and attitudes of a German nineteenth-century city state (plainly Lübeck, though only its streets and landmarks are ever mentioned, not its name) and displays them in their full dignity, idiosyncrasy and sometimes tragedy. From the grand scenic opening where the city's merchant class and their professional friends gather for a lavish Buddenbrook house-warming, down through four generations of the family and all their

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vicissitudes to a final bleak scene where only spinsters, divorcees and a widow are left, everything Mann narrates and describes is concretely characteristic of its time and place: the place he knew as the scene of his early years, and the times he had heard tell of or could be informed about by his older relatives.

Recording history was not, however, Mann's aim. He drew on the rich materials to hand for quite different purposes. *Buddenbrooks* is a history of decline and rise: the decline of the family's old vitality and outward standing (the 'Verfall' of the subtitle), and the rise (nowhere so precisely labelled) of inward qualities – intellect, artistic sensibility, creative potential. These new and subtler strengths did not necessarily follow from the waning of vitality, but it seemed in some mysterious way to be their cause when they did arise. That, at any rate, was a common perception of the period; in the wake of Darwin and Nietzsche and their popularisers, heredity and decadence were common coin in the cultural debates of the 1890s. Nietzsche gave the terms a deeply ambivalent sense, decrying mankind's loss of healthy primitive instincts, yet at the same time recognising that the human animal only became 'interesting' when 'sick', that is to say, when instinct had been tamed and transformed into spiritual systems, however perverse.¹ So the thesis of decline and its problematic compensation is itself a piece of history that Mann's first novel enshrines. If the idea was not original, it certainly seemed to fit his own case as an artist sprung from an old merchant line. In *Buddenbrooks*, under the narrative's social surface, he was writing the history of his own talent. The novel grew indeed from the idea for a novella wholly devoted to a sensitive latecomer, a last-generation figure. This would not have been very different from other early stories of Mann's about suffering outsiders. They are all set in the present, with no space for more than a gesture towards causal explanation – accident, illness, mixed parentage. The novel form, in contrast, gave Mann room to show how this human type gradually came about. But the family's genetic history inheres in and interacts with social history. Tracing that inner history down through time by subtle hints and touches, the novel also registers external changes as it goes along, not least the hardening of an older commercial tradition into more hard-nosed business practice. These things compose a varied historical reality which is part of the novel's triumph and a large part of its readers' pleasure. This was not, for Thomas Mann, its point. It is symptomatic that as significant an event as Europe's 1848 revolutions is treated in an offhand, if beguilingly humorous way (1, 181–94; Part 4, Chapter 3).

Buddenbrooks remains Mann's one large social canvas. Though his interest in society and the political forces that shape it later became intense, he never again treated social reality head-on on such a scale. That approach

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belonged to a nineteenth-century realist tradition he had left behind, having just this once used its means for his own ends. It is ironic that his fullest portrayal of society was achieved, and in masterly fashion, when he was least concerned with it for its own sake.

Elsewhere in Mann's early work up to 1914, society is presented unambiguously as the outsider's antithesis and sometimes his antagonist. Society and its members have something he lacks: an unthinking normality and order, what in *Tonio Kröger* (1903) is called a 'seductive banality' (VIII, 302). For the excluded or self-excluding outsider, the 'joys of ordinariness' (*ibid.*) become an object of yearning. Mann, like Kröger, idealises its fair-haired, blue-eyed representatives. In another mood he pillories its less ideal embodiments, like Herr Klöterjahn and his alarmingly robust baby son in 'Tristan' (also 1903). Yet whether it is soft-focus idealisation or the sharp outlines of satire, these emblematic figures are ultimately biological rather than social types, animals living out their unimpaired vitality, as the figure of the infant Klöterjahn makes clear. Behind ideal and satire is a single reality; they are the contrasting faces of the life-force. As Mann later half-ruefully said, the leitmotif of blondness in his ideal figures was a harmless remnant of the 'blond beast', the vitality-symbol Nietzsche had set against modern decadence (XI, 110). Nietzschean vitalism is constantly present behind the young Thomas Mann's judgements and self-judgements.

Both the finished works and the unfinished projects of the years between *Buddenbrooks* and the First World War show the same inward-looking focus that scarcely engages the outside world. On the face of it, Mann's second novel, *Royal Highness* (1909), is a romantic comedy in which the prince of a small Ruritanian state saves its fortunes by marrying one. Mann had just consolidated his own fortunes by a good marriage. Private reference does not stop there. The tale's point is the allegorical equation of prince and artist: both are purely 'formal' existences, with no real function in society. Ruritania likewise has no real history. This slight idea is worked out over some 350 pages, a mass that did not prevent critics finding it too light from the author of *Buddenbrooks*. Mann did soon afterwards plan a novel about a prince of quite another calibre, Frederick the Great, which would have offered real historical substance and demanded a quite different treatment, but it came to nothing. The writer's points of contact with the subject were too limited and self-referential: the King's ascetic self-discipline and heroic 'ethos of achievement' (i.e. yet more of the prince-writer parallel), and perhaps the homosexuality common to them both.

A second project that seemed to promise and demand substance was the novel 'Maya', conceived as a tapestry of Munich society, a kind of Bavarian *Buddenbrooks*, though with a more calculated philosophical theme:

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social ‘reality’ as a veil of illusion, for which ‘maya’ is the Buddhist and Schopenhauerian term. Moreover, the central interest, as the surviving work-notes show, is the fictional projection of Mann’s intense relationship with his painter friend Paul Ehrenberg, to which society functions as an episodic background. This plan too came to nothing, though four decades later Mann set some of its episodes, with their now historical patina, in the narrative of *Doctor Faustus*.

One aspect of Munich did achieve brief but brilliant realisation in a finished work. The short story ‘Gladius Dei’ (1902) satirises the Bavarian capital as a reproduction Renaissance Florence: it too is devoted to a cult of visual art that refuses to look into the depths of suffering beneath life’s beautiful surface. To complete the parallel, a monkishly costumed outsider rails against the city’s wicked sensuality like some grotesque latter-day Savonarola. These echoes from the past serve the very specific protest of a displaced person from Lübeck whose own more probing and compassionate literary art is neglected by Munich in favour of the fashionable visual genre. Mann also treated the theme in its original period in a costume-drama, *Fiorenza* (1905). Despite the added historical distance, the message sounds more vehement, the identification with Savonarola’s vengeful will to power is more patent, when narrative detachment is replaced by direct dialogue. The bite of the short story is lost in wordiness; what is left, as the theatre critic Alfred Kerr cuttingly wrote, is so much dutifully read-up Renaissance.²

The satire on modern Munich is linked with Mann’s other main uncompleted project of these doldrum years, the essay ‘Intellect and Art’. As the extensive work-notes show, this was to be a major treatise taking issue with the state of German culture around 1910: literature, theatre, music, art, crafts; trends and attitudes, fads, fashions and influences; major figures of the present (Max Reinhardt, Stefan George, Richard Strauss) and of the recent past (Nietzsche, Wagner); and some ancestral voices (Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, the Romantics) prophesying modernity.³ The tone is critical, at times polemical, for in all the observed phenomena Mann made out something deeply inimical to his own art: a new wave of taste for the unproblematic beauty of modern (but not too modern!) visual art and music, and a rejection of analysis, social criticism, pathology and decadence – in short, of everything the writers of his generation had concentrated on.⁴ The anti-literary trend he had first spotted in Munich now seemed to him an anti-intellectualism pervading German culture. As he was very much an intellectual writer, the new spirit was a threat to his values, hence to his popularity and so in the most practical sense to his career. Personal concerns again, then – but through the lens of the private he was at least starting to perceive external change. If he had completed the essay, it would have been a historical document

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(even the work-notes, in their rough form, are that) and perhaps a compelling historical diagnosis of society and culture around 1910.

The trouble was, where did he really stand? Was he committed to being only ever the cool analytic mind, the intellectual writer? Other kinds of literature were possible, and rising – writing that aimed to be fresh and unproblematic, healthy and poetic, ‘Plastik’ rather than ‘Kritik’, celebrating life in the way visual art was currently assumed to do. New writers were coming along to challenge the old. Some of his own generation – Gerhart Hauptmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal – seemed to be adapting so as not to miss the bus. Should he polemicise against all this, and thereby publicly set himself against his times? Or should he follow suit and emphasise anything in his own work that was healthy? It was a classic case of beat them or join them. Mann was torn. The self-concern that was too narrow to base substantial novels on was also too uncertain of its direction to allow a clear public statement. The essay too was duly aborted.

Working on this project had involved looking in breadth at current social phenomena, and looking back in time at their historical roots. This was of course only literary and cultural history. Only? There is no clear dividing line between the merely cultural and the allegedly more real forces that make history. It was to be a key element of Mann’s later *Erkenntnis* that every cultural or intellectual attitude is latently political: ‘in jeder geistigen Haltung ist das Politische latent’ (x, 267). Certainly in Germany, so he would write after the German catastrophe, ‘das Seelische’ – spiritual, cultural, emotional impulse – was the prime moving force, and political action only came after, as its expression and instrument (vi, 408).⁵ These were truths derived from his own past, as well as from wider experience.

Death in Venice (1912) has a place in history in two distinct ways. In social terms, as a classic of homosexual passion which yet makes enough show of moral judgement not to seem a direct plea or cause a public scandal, and which has been made into a film and an opera with a prestige of their own, it has probably done more to edge homosexuality into the common culture than any other single work of art. The remark of Mann’s old enemy Alfred Kerr, that the story ‘made pederasty acceptable to the cultivated middle classes’, was meant to be sarcastic but has proved prophetic.⁶

The novella has, secondly, something to say about political history, even though the sole mention of the public sphere is the threat of war in its opening sentence – the truncated date ‘19..’ could refer to any one of several pre-1914 crises. Otherwise the themes are internal, first artistic, then emotional, and the hidden depths are moral and psychological. With his artistic discipline collapsing, Aschenbach travels to refresh his creative system, but instinctively is seeking a deeper release (as witness the alarming jungle vision of

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Chapter 1). In Nietzschean terms, Dionysus is reasserting his power against too harsh a rule of Apollo; in Freudian terms, it is a revolt against repression. Mann was consciously using Nietzsche, but probably did not yet know Freud; on this his own accounts vary. The Polish boy's beauty does, briefly, inspire new writing, but then becomes an obsession overcoming all rational self-control (as witness Aschenbach's dream-vision of a Dionysian orgy in Chapter 5).

The issues become political only if the collapse of a disciplined individual life is read as a symbol of forces waiting to be unleashed in society. Georg Lukács was the first to see this angle, albeit by trial and error, first stressing Aschenbach's Prussian discipline. 'Prussianism' is an old bogeyman for historians of Germany, not because of any breakdown, however, but because of its ruthless persistence: Wilhelm II's provocation of crises until one of them led to war; the increasing Prussian military control of policy during 1914–18; Hindenburg's selling out of the fragile Weimar democracy to Hitler in 1933; the Wehrmacht general staff holding the candle to the devil of Nazism through the thirties and forties, until the belated conspiracy of a group of officers which nearly killed Hitler. What really matters, as Lukács eventually sees, is not the old Prussian discipline, but the emotional and social forces whose tool it increasingly became, the 'barbaric underworld' which the Venice novella suggests is lurking under the surface of an ordered life or, by implication, of an ordered society.⁷ Even that stops short of Mann's own later insight. The solutions to his artistic difficulties that Aschenbach casts around for – rejecting the psychological analysis and understanding he practised in his early work, simplifying morality, abandoning himself to the dark emotions he no longer even wants to control – these things would later strike Thomas Mann, in exile from Nazi Germany, as a clear proto-fascist syndrome. The emotional nexus had taken on political form in the Nazis' violent attacks on reason and intellect, the whipping up of atavistic mass feeling, the collective unreason of enthusiasm for Hitler. Insofar as Aschenbach's problems and temptations had been Mann's own – 'I had these things in me as much as anyone', he wrote to his American patroness Agnes E. Meyer on 30 May 1938 – he shuddered to think he had embodied the coming politics of the age.

The 'socially responsible Apolline narrative'⁸ that eventually takes over *Death in Venice* and consigns Aschenbach to a tragic death had not disposed of the potential for atavistic feeling in Mann himself. Within two years, the war that looms in that opening sentence had broken out and Mann was carried away, like most intellectuals in the combatant nations, by the nationalistic emotions of August 1914. Where Mann-Aschenbach's Venetian 'visitation' ('Heimsuchung') by homoerotic passion had been kept in moral

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check, this new and larger one could be welcomed and embraced. Mann uses the word 'visitation' again prominently in 'Thoughts in War', the article with which in 1914 he leaped to defend his country against the accusations of Entente propaganda: that Germany had provoked and begun hostilities, had flouted morality and broken international law by invading France via neutral Belgium, and was now committing atrocities. Such charges made much of the contrast between the true Germany of culture (Beethoven, Kant, Goethe) and the new Germany of ruthless *Realpolitik* (Nietzsche, Treitschke, the politicians and generals round Kaiser Wilhelm). Mann denied this distinction: true culture was compatible with and in touch with the terrible realities of life; all else was shallow or feigned, mere Western 'civilisation'. In *Frederick and the Grand Coalition* (1915) he drew a parallel with Prussian history: however 'enlightened' the philosopher-prince had been before acceding, the soldier-king was right to be ruthless once he was on the throne. Prussia's destiny was at stake, the outcome justified him. The same applied to Germany now – or, come to think of it (and he clearly did), to Thomas Mann's own transformation.

With these two pieces early in the war, Mann might have shot his political bolt, if his brother Heinrich – an increasingly radical left-wing writer, and now an outspoken critic of German actions – had not countered with his own historical parallel. Heinrich's essay 'Zola' celebrates the French novelist's political commitment, especially to the anti-militarist cause in the notorious Dreyfus affair. More generally, it is about the moral demands on writers in a sabre-rattling society like the French Third Republic and then, back to specifics, it uses personal allusions nobody else would recognise to condemn Thomas's own moral failure and corruption as a writer who has gone along with the sabre-rattlers of the Wilhelmine Second Empire. A long-smouldering conflict between the brothers was now flaring openly.

There were, however, no more exchanges of public rhetoric. Instead, deeply wounded, Thomas withdrew into a long, brooding examination of the essential, 'unpolitical' Germany and its necessary conflict with the political West; also of himself as a writer who, for all his intellectuality and enlightened modern views, had secret roots in that German essence. In a clear-sighted retrospect, he reads Tonio Kröger's nostalgic wish to preserve the innocent world of Hans Hansen against the influence of literature and intellect (i.e. against himself) as instinctive political conservatism (XII, 586, quoting VIII, 303). Yet the title of the enormous book that came out of these broodings was *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. The title was both accurate and inaccurate. On the one hand, Mann's image of Wilhelmine Germany, of how it got into the war and of what was at stake, was seriously out of touch with realities, as he later acknowledged. His antithesis of Germany and

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‘Western’ civilisation was old polemical stock stretching back to the German Romantics, born of the humiliating defeat by Napoleon in 1806 and of the long frustration of German hopes to become a nation-state and not just a ‘cultural nation’. The book was also unpolitical in being too long and too late to affect any debate that now mattered: much of its content had been overtaken by events, the war was already lost when it was published. Not for nothing did nineteenth-century laws dispense books over twenty printer’s sheets in length from censorship: anything that long must have fallen behind the burning issues of the day. On the other hand, Mann’s position was deeply political in two senses: first, any defence of the status quo, however allegedly unpolitical, is in practice political conservatism, as he recognised by quoting that *Tonio Kröger* passage; secondly, if enough people hold a view, however out of touch with realities, it becomes itself a political factor. Mann was far from alone in his kind of conservatism. It was to be a major factor in the politics of the Weimar Republic.

In 1918 Thomas Mann found himself among the losers, the more embittered because he saw his brother among the winners. Heinrich denied any triumphalism, but his satirical novel *Der Untertan* [The (Kaiser’s) Subject], blocked by censorship in 1914, could now be published and widely acclaimed as the historical truth about Wilhelmine Germany: that it had been a society of conformists replicating from top to bottom the Kaiser’s arrogant attitudes. Now the Kaiser had gone and a democratic republic had come – just the development the unpolitical Mann had feared. Faced with historical change on that scale, he retired hurt and wrote two idylls, both published in 1919. *Master and Dog*, begun in the last weeks of the war, was a prose sketch of the relationship with Mann’s best friend; there followed, of all things, a poem in hexameters, *A Birth and a Christening*, about his new baby daughter. These minor pieces were a strange response to events: walks with his dog Bauschan on the banks of the Isar were no distance from political upheaval, and hexameters made an odd counterpoint to the machine-gun fire audible across Munich as a Soviet-style *Räterepublik* was first established and then overthrown. Mann was taking refuge in the small area of everyday stability the times had left.

He emerged from this spiritual retreat in 1920 to take up the fiction abandoned under the stress of war in 1915, *The Magic Mountain*. He had begun it in 1912 as a novella, a companion-piece to *Death in Venice*: after the tragic destruction of a great writer’s ordered life, the comic break-up of a banal bourgeois existence – this time the central figure was one of those normal blond-haired young northerners. For was there really such a thing as normality? Hans Castorp was to be disoriented and undone, like Aschenbach, by the forces of Eros and illness. The setting was a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium

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full of characters and caricatures from almost every European nation, where Castorp only ever meant to visit his cousin but stays on as a patient. High on the Mountain, he would learn deeper truths than are dreamt of in the Flatland's philosophy. The coming of war in 1914 force-fed the planned short work with topical meanings. Those deeper truths would now be the ones Germany was, in Mann's view, fighting for. The Mountain would be the moral and cultural high ground where the views of an Italian liberal, akin to brother Heinrich's 'Western' views, would be answered by a German pastor. Clearly the ending must now be the outbreak of war. Since Germany at that early stage seemed to be winning, this would have been historic confirmation of the rightness of the Mountain and its lessons.

But Germany had now lost the war, leaving the Mountain's lessons no longer backed by history. Or had history made a mistake? Either way, the novel's conception seemed hopelessly dated. Mann began to write again with no clear sense of direction. His political attitudes were meantime as much in turmoil as the politics of post-1918 Europe. His diary shows him toying with everything from a dissolution of the present German state and an eventual new Pan-Germany, to a communist Danube federation of Bavaria, Austria and Hungary. In practice he cast his vote for the conservative Bavarian Deutsche Volkspartei (diary, 12 January 1919); and he was openly relieved when the anti-revolutionary forces of General Epp put a violent end to the Munich republican experiment (diary, 7 May 1919).

Violence of a different kind broke into Mann's post-war waverings and resentments almost as dramatically as 1914 had activated his latent nationalism. Political opposition in the Weimar Republic early took the extreme form of political assassination. The murder of the Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922 was not the first such act, but it was what changed Mann's allegiance.⁹ He now concluded that the Republic, however 'un-German' in origin (it was widely felt to have been imposed by the victors, and its constitution had been drawn up by a Jewish jurist), must be supported against subversion and filled as far as possible with German cultural values, so that Germans would willingly embrace it. Mann took that unpopular stand in a Munich speech of the same year, 'On the German Republic'. It was a startling change. If his wartime stand had come as a shock to those who thought him a liberal intellectual, his new position was an equal shock to those who had come to rely on him as a conservative nationalist. He was back roughly where he had started.

Mann's changed political position inevitably began to reshape the novel – its inner meaning, that is, for the outward narrative shape stayed as it was: the Mountain, the hero's educative disorientation through disease and love, the arguments between a liberal and a conservative, the outbreak of war

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in 1914 as the end of the story. But the point of the education was now to inculcate the balance and tolerance needed in a new political world; the arguments would point in a different direction; the war's end would open, not foreclose the large questions. The novel also began to grow inordinately. Back in 1917 Mann had said that writing the *Reflections* was vital if the novel was not to be overloaded (to Paul Amann, 25 March 1917). Now that the issues argued out in the *Reflections* were being rethought, he brought back his more extreme wartime and post-war notions and put them in the mouth of the conservative debater, no longer the German Pastor Bunge but a more disturbingly extreme figure, a Jesuit with leanings towards communism. In this bizarre mixture (gratuitously complicated by Naphta's Jewish descent) the common factor is a fiercely anti-humanist view of society and politics that links the pre-individualistic Christian Middle Ages with the post-individualist dogmas of totalitarianism. The individual counts for nothing, the impersonal collective is all; ruthlessness, whether revolutionary or reactionary, is the only realistic or desirable policy. Leo Naphta would be a caricature if it were not for the fact that such ideologues have been real in our century. Over against him stands, still, the old-fashioned Italian liberal, Lodovico Settembrini. First conceived as decidedly a caricature of Heinrich Mann's politics, he is one no longer. Though intellectually less sharp than Naphta and more often the loser in their convoluted debates, Settembrini is the more sympathetic figure, for Hans Castorp and probably for most readers. Since Castorp is anything but an intellectual, and the debates are often way above his head, he is left deciding the issues less on clear-cut contest points than by gut feeling – not altogether misguidedly either, since intellectual constructs normally have an emotional commitment as their unspoken premiss. Castorp is also shrewd enough to notice how both debaters get tangled in their own concepts, so that their positions are not simply opposed but seem at times internally inconsistent. It all seems to him a grand confusion. Perhaps political issues can never be fully resolved in the abstract? Yet Naphta and Settembrini stand for a real and fundamental antithesis which has underlain much of twentieth-century history. Could there be a humane politics in modern mass societies? Was there any future left in Enlightenment humanism, liberalism and democracy? Or was Naphta's ruthlessness, that is to say totalitarianism of the right or the left, the inevitable shape of things to come?

These were issues of the twenties, far more than of the war years in which the novel first took a political turn. So although it still evokes pre-war European society and ends in 1914, the book published in 1924 resonates with the crisis of the post-war years, the first third of the twentieth century, as Mann later said (XI, 602). No wonder the 'debate' sections stretch