

# Thomas Mann's Retreat from Irony in Politics

## La renuncia de Thomas Mann a la ironía en la política

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### Abstract

Thomas Mann developed one of the most subtle theories of irony during World War I, concluding that the best irony was irony against both sides of any issue. Such irony was not inconsistent with love for humanity, and even for both sides. He may well have been justified in using irony against both sides in that war. But with the rise of the Nazis, he abandoned two-sided irony and used his irony mostly against them. On the one hand, this meant a better political position, but on the other hand irony was almost absent from many of his wartime essays and declarations. That may have been justified in such a time of danger, but it meant less art and subtlety in his political writings.

**Keywords:** Irony, Thomas Mann, politics, theory.

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## Resumen

Thomas Mann desarrolló una de las teorías más sutiles de la ironía durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, declarando que la mejor ironía era la ironía contra los dos lados de cualquier asunto. Tal ironía no era incompatible con el amor por la humanidad, y aun por ambas partes. Podría justificarse a Mann por usar la ironía contra ambos bandos de esa guerra. Pero tras el ascenso nazi, Mann abandonó la ironía contra los dos bandos e ironizó solo contra el de los Nazis. De una parte, fue esa una posición política mejor, pero de otra perdió casi todo el uso del tropo de la ironía en sus escritos políticos y declaraciones durante la guerra. Cabía justificación, cierto, a causa de la gravedad del momento, pero sus escritos políticos perdieron en arte y sutileza.

**Palabras-clave:** Ironía, Thomas Mann, política, teoría.

Critics of skeptics, cynics, and ironists often say that these positions may be indulged in normal times in wealthy countries when nothing important is at stake, but that they become dangerous and subversive in times of crisis. A version of this point can be made for Thomas Mann: that he was an ironist during World War I, when no principle was at stake, but that he drew back from irony after the rise of Nazism. I want to explore that point here.

Considering how much he wrote, and the evolution of his thought over time, one could say that there are many Thomas Manns. So I am going to have be selective in terms of issues and evidence in order to make this exploration manageable. It can be described as focussed on what we can call the “American” Thomas Mann, his writings from the Princeton years (1938-40) and the first eight years that he lived in Pacific Palisades (1941-1949). I will start back in the German years, and mention a few things from the first Swiss years, but I will not go beyond 1949.

Within these limits, I am going to argue for some long-term trends in Mann’s thinking. One is that a theory and practice of irony was one of his best literary, philosophical, and political achievements, but that the more he got involved in politics the less he could afford to give that irony free play. The more he turned from the early influences of the Romantics, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche to the values of the Enlightenment, the less convincing his interpretations of figures such as Goethe became. The better adjusted to and more involved in democratic politics he was, the less believable his political positions became. The more he took sides against Nazi Germany, the less sensitive he was to flaws in the politics of America, England, and Russia.

## Irony against both sides

Mann developed a profound and philosophical theory of irony during the first World War, expressed in his *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (1918).<sup>2</sup> The largest purpose of this book was to distinguish his own art and German *Kultur* from the art and political leanings of his Francophile brother, Heinrich Mann. His brother was the activist, taking the side of the *Entente*, claiming that they represented civilization. So Thomas developed the idea that Germany represented *Kultur*, deeper than the superficial civilization of the West. He found a great deal of use for irony in the book, and then evidently reflecting on it, developed a theory about it.

An intellectual has the choice “of being either an ironist or a radical”, by which he meant a political activist (419). It is not wholly clear how it follows that “radicalism is nihilism”, but the point is that Mann is against it (419). On the other hand, “the ironist is conservative” (419); this must mean something to the effect that the ironist is not a political activist. But conservatism does not mean quietism or lifelessness: “irony is eroticism”, Mann insists (419).

Now, I am not entirely sure how to interpret irony as eroticism, but I do think that a key to understanding these distinctions is Mann’s assertion that “irony is always irony toward both sides, something of a mediator” (63), repeating the point later: “irony is always irony toward both sides” (422). This I think I understand. On the one hand, Mann is unhappy with German militarism, and asserts that “I doubt whether a person like me is ‘suited’ for patriotism” (115). On the other hand, he is just as unhappy with French and English militarism: “France not aggressive!”, he ironizes (131; cf. 259). On the one hand, he observes wryly that democracy and imperialism are not a contradiction in England (134). On the other hand, he distinguishes himself from Gabriele D’Annunzio, who is an inciter to war (426). The list of his ironies against both sides could go on and on. His own work is “candid irony towards both sides” (73).<sup>3</sup>

Mann’s theory of irony against both sides can be contrasted with Wayne Booth’s theory, which holds that good irony is always irony against one side, supporting the right against the wrong.<sup>4</sup> Booth is clearly uncomfortable with and cannot cope with one sort of irony that he identifies as “unstable” irony (240ff.). In such irony, “the author... refuses to declare himself, however

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Berlin: Fischer, 1918). Cited by page number in parentheses from the English edition: *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (New York: Ungar, 1983). I prefer a more literal translation, so I refer to the book by the short title *Unpolitical Man* in the text.

<sup>3</sup> See John Christian Laursen, “Thomas Mann y la espada de doble filo de la ironía en la política” in Nicolás Sánchez Durá, ed., *Cultura contra civilización: En torno a Wittgenstein* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2008), 57-66.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (University of Chicago Press, 1974). Cited by page number in parentheses.

subtly, *for any stable proposition*” (240). This sort of irony is “the ultimate negation of everything. The only meaning is that there is no meaning” (259). Booth does not like “the bogs of unstable irony” (62). His unstable irony seems similar to Mann’s irony against both sides.

For Booth, unstable irony is irony that does not see the world in those easy colors of good and bad that enable one to ironize against the bad and in favor of the good. He seems to assume that the world will always consist of clearly identifiable good and bad. Mann’s irony cannot find a clear good and a clear bad, and thus is turned against all sides. Booth may not like it, but it just might be the appropriate response in many political situations. I am going to argue that Thomas Mann had the right idea when he ironized against both sides in World War I. If I am right, Mann’s *Unpolitical Man* has been misunderstood, unfairly maligned, and underrated. The book, and its theory of irony, may in fact provide a model for an appropriate response to situations where neither side is a paragon of virtue.

Part of the hostility to Mann’s book may be something as simple as anglophile and francophile bias. Let me take as an example a prominent critic’s observations. T. J. Reed’s “Mann and history” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* asserts that “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”.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say that “any defense of the status quo, however allegedly unpolitical, is in practice political conservatism” and that “if enough people hold a view, however out of touch with realities, it becomes itself a political factor” (8). Finally, “Mann was far from alone in his kind of conservatism” (8). There are many things to unpack here.

Reed does not spell out what “out of touch with realities” means. One clue is his mention of Mann’s later acknowledgement, and we shall return to this. We shall also return to what “conservatism” may mean. But for now, let us start with other clues as to what “out of touch with realities” may mean. Reed quotes Heinrich Mann for thinly veiled references to “Thomas’s own moral failures and corruption as a writer who has gone along with the saber-rattlers of the Wilhelmine second Empire” (7) and “the historical truth about Wilhelmine Germany: that it had been a society of conformists replicating from top to bottom the Kaiser’s arrogant attitudes” (8).

Recall that Mann’s theory and practice in *Unpolitical Man* was to criticize both sides. Was that such a moral failure and example of corruption? If the Wilhelmine regime had been the only saber-rattler, Germany had been the only conformist society, and the Kaiser the only arrogant leader, Mann might have been vulnerable to these charges. English, French, Russian, and American war

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Reed, “Mann and history” in Ritchie Robinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7. Cited by page number in parentheses.

propaganda certainly promoted this take. They used Boothian irony on behalf of the good (England, France, Russia, and the United States) and against the bad (Germany, the Hapsburgs, and the Ottomans). But what if the English, French, Russians, and Americans were just as militaristic and saber-rattling as the Germans? What if they were just as conformist, just as arrogant, just as authoritarian?

The case was made not too long ago that World War I was by no means the product solely of German corruption. Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* (1999) evens the moral balance on many dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Germany was actually more democratic than Britain according to such dimensions as percentage of the population qualified to vote for the lower house (29). The socialist party had a higher percentage of the vote than in France or Britain (29). France had a higher population under arms in peacetime (93). Britain and France had higher military spending per capita (107), and France and Russia had higher military expenditures (110). The evidence goes on and on: the Germans were no more militaristic, anti-democratic, or otherwise corrupt than the French, British, or Russians.

At the time, and also later, Western critics blamed the war on the privileges of the aristocratic Junkers and greedy German industrialists. But it is no secret that Britain and Russia also had their own privileged and titled nobility, and all of the Western Powers had war profiteers. It is almost too easy to do what Thomas Mann did: to show that the propaganda claims of the West do not hold up. On the softer issues such as conformism, arrogance, and authoritarianism, no scientific case that I am aware of has been made that Britain, France, Russia, or the United States on the whole were less conformist, arrogant, and authoritarian than Germany and the Hapsburgs, and it is hard to believe that one could be made. As Ferguson shows us, literature and popular culture were equally nationalist and militarist in all of the major countries (1-15). Western Entente ministers and officials easily matched the Germans for bellicose public statements.

After Ferguson's analysis, one might conclude that Heinrich Mann was the one who was out of touch with reality. Of course other historians will disagree with Ferguson, and there is no such thing as a thoroughly objective historian. But does it sound like human nature and the ordinary course of history to think that all of the saber-rattling, arrogance, nationalism, and even "conservatism" were on one side? Couldn't we say about any member of the Western Entente that they were "a society of conformists replicating from top to bottom the [Prime Minister's or Tsar's] arrogant attitudes"? Couldn't all of Heinrich Mann's and T. J. Reed's charges be retorted on the Western Entente? Well, that is what Thomas Mann did.

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<sup>6</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 1-15. Cited by page number in parentheses.

Let me note that I am aware that WW I caused an immense amount of human suffering. When I said, above, that no principle was at stake, I did not mean that it was not a horribly destructive event. I meant only that as a matter of principle both sides were more or less equally at fault; neither side represented unalloyed truth and justice; and that a different outcome of the war might not have made a difference of political or moral principle. Double-edged irony might well be the best response to this sort of situation. It seems to have still been Mann's aesthetic preference in 1924, when he published *The Magic Mountain*. In that novel, Hans Castorp characterizes Herr Settembrini's one-sided irony as pedantic.<sup>7</sup> Although the novel has been read as a moralistic critique of one side only, it can also be read as a fine irony against every side. But things had already begun to change in Mann's understanding of the political context and his role in it.

The most thorough analysis I have seen of Mann's irony is Irvin Stock's *Ironic Out of Love: The Novels of Thomas Mann*.<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the title is that irony is not just about hate against one side: it is about love for both sides. For Stock, Mann "wants to say yes—to opposing propositions", which requires him to say "yes, but" to almost everything, recognizing something good about the opposite side (47). He has a "tendency to see truth on both sides of an argument" (47). So "Mann says 'yes, but' even to his own conservatism" (48). This "conservatism" is "intellectual and ironic" and has the paradoxical outcome of requiring him to "work on the side of 'democracy', of criticism and change" (49). Thus "Mann's irony is not the 'classic' device valued by Settembrini; it is the ambiguous kind the humanist sternly warns his pupil against. It is irony that goes both ways" (61). It is not nihilistic, as some people claim: Mann's "irony always implies an affirmation", at least of human possibilities and of a "loving response to the world" (73). It is "love of the human [that] saves his irony from nihilism" (159).

If such an abstract discussion is hard to relate to, Stock provides some good examples of what Mann's irony can mean. Joseph's machinations in Egypt can be described as manipulation for selfish purposes although he describes them in terms of higher purposes. Mann warns us, tongue in cheek, "that to call Joseph 'coldly calculating' would be 'precipitous and censorious', that 'the situation was too complicated for such moral judgments'" (103). And Stock concludes that the point of the irony is "that our con-man's calculation *does* coexist with sincerity" (103). At another point the Pharaoh demands the pure and one-sided, and "cannot accept that irony goes both ways" (116). "Mann's irony... qualifies every judgment of what is by a smiling awareness of its origins and of what it

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 218.

<sup>8</sup> Irvin Stock, *Ironic Out of Love: The Novels of Thomas Mann* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1994). Cited by page number in parentheses.

may become” (139). Such irony is more realistic than ironies that depend on an assumption of holiness or truth on one side that will never change.

Foreshadowing the theme of this essay, Stock observes that Mann's narrator in *Doctor Faustus* recognizes the limits of two-sided irony. Mann's "narrator says -and the point will recur in a way that shows he speaks for his author, 'but when it becomes [that is, when things become] serious, then one rejects art", and here I would add, one rejects irony, "and is not capable of it" (151).

## Back to the Enlightenment

As we shall see below, Mann soon turned to one-sided irony in defense of the Weimar republic and against its enemies. Hans Rudolf Veget explores the changes between Mann's politics in the two world wars and complains that Mann's longer-term evolution away from the Romanticism that he finds to be "uniquely German" in *Unpolitical Man* and toward an alternative tradition is never convincingly explained.<sup>9</sup> Veget observes that Mann's alternative tradition draws on Goethe and Schiller, and that he had learned from Troeltsch about the pre-Romantic "common European heritage of the Enlightenment" (17). He then concludes that Mann found that there "was once another, saner, Germany, humane, rational, Europeanized" (18), but does not spell it out that this rational Germany was the Germany of the Enlightenment. There is plenty of material in Mann's writings that would justify this assessment.

From very early in his career, Mann admired Nietzsche, Wagner, and Schopenhauer. These were evidently liberating figures for him intellectually, and in *Unpolitical Man* they take an influential position. But the current of influence on him from Enlightenment writers such as Lessing and Goethe eventually became just as strong.

In 1925 Mann wrote an essay on cosmopolitanism in which he claimed that "Goethe, Lichtenberg, Schopenhauer – there is no help for it, these are European prose, in the original German".<sup>10</sup> "What then, is the cosmopolitan spirit? Perhaps nothing but the spirit of life and change" (256). Rather than the conservatism mentioned more often in *Unpolitical Man*, Mann was now getting used to the idea of adapting to change. He was also claiming his favorite authors for the Enlightenment. Later, he wrote that Goethe "was a follower of

<sup>9</sup> Hans Rudolf Veget, "The Steadfast Tin Soldier: Thomas Mann in World Wars I and II" in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, eds., *1914/1939: German Reflections of the Two World Wars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 13. Cited by page number in parentheses. Like Reed and many others, Veget thinks that *Unpolitical Man* was "highly apologetic and self-congratulatory, politically naïve, and morally questionable" (9).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Mann, *Past Masters and Other Papers* (London: Martin Secker, 1933), 253. Cited by page number in parentheses.

Spinoza”, that philosopher who is now said to be the founder of the Radical Enlightenment (106).

In 1932 Mann expanded on this characterization of Goethe as a cosmopolitan in an essay on “Goethe as Representative of the Bourgeois Age”.<sup>11</sup> This, and some later essays, can be understood as an effort to rescue Goethe from irrelevance and from the nationalists. It is a hard sell because, as Mann admits, Goethe was no democrat, no socialist, even anti-political. His novel, *Elective Affinities*, “belongs no longer to the eighteenth century and its sober rationalism” (68). But Mann struggles to save him for the bourgeoisie, and for enlightened values. He finds that Goethe redraws the boundaries: his anti-politics and anti-democracy is not aristocratic (77-8). He is middle class and bourgeois in the intellectual and cultural sense, if not in the political (78). His irony approaches nihilism, Mann admits (81, 82), but he invented the term “world literature” (87), and at the end of his life he admired “all technical progress and civilization and communication” (90). In what can only be described as conceptual gymnastics, the essay ends with Goethe somehow justifying the bourgeois republic (Weimar), and claims that “the bourgeois attitude passes over into that of a world community by virtue of its technical and national utopianism; it passes over... into the communistic” (91-2).

In an essay of the same year, “Goethe’s Career as a Man of Letters”, also published in *Essays of Three Decades*, Mann uses Goethe’s ironic attitude toward the people as a way of rejecting the contemporary turn to the *Völkisch* (58). Goethe was against both the national and the democratic (62). Mann endorses the anti-nationalism.

Another of Mann’s efforts to recruit Goethe for enlightenment was first published in 1938. In a lecture on “Goethe’s *Faust*” at Princeton, also published in *Essays of Three Decades*, Mann admits that Goethe “makes fun of the Enlightenment” and freed himself from its “dry, pedantic spirit” (10-11). But he observes that today, in an “epoch of legend-building quackery”, we are not as “firmly anchored to the rational” as preceding centuries, and Goethe never lost that anchor even as he explored the irrational side (11). So Goethe needs his diabolic side: Mephistopheles is “the ironic self-corrective” to his “youthful titanism” (21). The “ironic self-abnegation” of the devil means that “quite in the spirit of the Enlightenment [he] regards his own existence as a superstition” (22, 23). Again, Mann finds some humanism in this: “he would stir our emotions against the cruelty of human society” (36). Mann’s essays are *tours de force* designed to make Goethe into a defender of Enlightenment against the Nazis.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades* (New York: Knopf, 1947). Cited by page number in parentheses.



In his Princeton lectures of 1940, Mann pointed out that his political writings were an important part of his self-image as a writer: "I do not hesitate to consider this critical-polemical aspect as an inalienable and essential ingredient of my being – and not only a matter of sense of duty".<sup>12</sup> As he put it, in *Unpolitical Man* "I opposed that which I called 'Democracy', --that is, the permeation of the intellect by politics" (66). But "I was fighting for Goethe's Germany, not for the Kaiser, not for Ludendorff" (67). Now he can admit that it was "an error of the German bourgeoisie to think that one could be a non-political man of culture": if he had remained in that mind-set, "where would I be today, on what side would I find myself if my conservatism had remained with a Germany all of whose spirit and music could not prevent it from sinking into lowest reverence for force and into a barbarism that threatened the foundation of western morality?" (68).

By 1929 Mann identified with another cosmopolitan: that archetype of the Enlightenment, Lessing, noted wielder of the Enlightenment trope par excellence, irony. In an essay published later in *Past Masters* he observed that Lessing "called patriotism a 'heroic weakness', and declared that nothing was further from his desire than to be praised as a patriot, a man who would forget that he should be a citizen of the world" (119). He observed ruefully that "The enlightenment whose true son and faithful knight Lessing always... remained, is today intellectually out of date; it has made way for a fuller-blooded, deeper, more tragic conception of life" (137). But Lessing "would still, I think, be minded to enter the field against the fuller swing of the pendulum. We are so far gone in the irrational... that it now looks like an evil and dangerous rebound, and a rebound against the rebound will by degrees become inevitable" (137). This becomes explicit criticism of the rising Nazi movement: "In Lessing's name and spirit let it be ours to aim beyond every type of fascism at a union of blood and reason, which alone merits the name of complete humanity" (137-8).

By the time of some of his World War II writings, Mann's identification with the Enlightenment is strong. The Forward to *Order of the Day* (1942) specifies that it is Mann's goal to "contribute through language to the enlightenment of the world".<sup>13</sup> In *Doctor Faustus* he takes it for granted he is writing as and for "friends of the enlightenment".<sup>14</sup> In the same period, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno blamed the Enlightenment for much that was wrong with the modern world. They did not withhold their criticism, and their irony, from the Allies just because it was wartime. Their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in 1943-4 in Los Angeles (published in 1947), does not give America

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Mann, *Thomas Mann: On Myself and other Princeton Lectures*, ed. James Bade (Frankfurt: Lang, 1996), 66. Cited by page number in parentheses.

<sup>13</sup> T. Mann, *Order of the Day: Political Essays and Speeches of Two Decades* (New York: Knopf, 1942), v. Cited by page number in parentheses.

<sup>14</sup> T. Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 41. Cited by page number in parentheses.

and American culture any slack.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they wrote of the “tireless self-destruction of enlightenment” (xiv), and of how “in the unjust state of society the powerlessness and pliability of the masses increase with the quantity of goods allocated to them” (xv). In their view, “Enlightenment is totalitarian”; for it, “anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion” (4). The “endless process of Enlightenment” has meant that “even the concepts of mind, truth, and indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic” (7). The authors fear that enlightenment “is turning itself into an outright deception of the masses” (34). Although Mann recognized the dangers of excessive rationality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in his 1943 address on “The War and the Future”, published in *Essays of Three Decades*, he added that “there is not the slightest danger that reason will ever gain complete ascendancy, that there could ever be too much reason on earth” (25-6).

Mann was in frequent contact with Adorno in Pacific Palisades, and had a copy of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s manuscript as early as 1944,<sup>16</sup> but he clearly thought they were exaggerating. Katia Mann reported that Mann said that he did not understand *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and that is why he had Golo Mann write a review that was published under Thomas’s name.<sup>17</sup> It seems more likely that he understood it well enough, but was put off by both its content and its style. At one point in *Doctor Faustus* he ironizes against the younger generation for its pedantic and pretentious vocabulary, such as “‘ontic naturalness’, ‘logical dialectics’ and ‘objective dialectics’”, and one cannot help but think he may have had *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in mind (133; cf. 129: “learned jargon”, “bombast”, “stilted, pretentious phrases”).

## Irony against one side: in defense of the democratic republic

Mann’s attitude toward irony and politics began to change rather soon after WW I. In 1923 he took a stand in favor of the Weimar Republic, against vocal opposition in the Berlin hall where he gave a speech entitled “The German Republic”, later published in *Order of the Day*. “My aim, which I express quite candidly, is to win you... to the side of the Republic; to the side of what is called democracy, and what I call humanity” (11). Citing Novalis and Walt Whitman at length, there is plenty of sincerity, of indignation at the opponents

<sup>15</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Cited by page number in parentheses.

<sup>16</sup> T. W. Adorno and T. Mann, *Briefwechsel 1943-1955*, eds. C. Gödde and T. Sprecher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 12; see James Schmidt, “Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann, and Schoenberg” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. T. Huhn (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 148-180.

<sup>17</sup> K. Mann, *Unwritten Memories* (London: Deutsch, 1975), 140.

of democracy, of warmth in the cause of peace. But there is not much irony, and almost certainly no irony against the democratic side.

Mann knows that some of his audience know him as the anti-democratic author of *Unpolitical Man*, and they will think of him as a traitor. He claims that he is still that author. "I retract nothing. I take back nothing essential. I told the truth, and I tell it today" (12). But society and politics have changed, and a changed response to them is required. Mann insists that he is still "a conservative... my natural occupation in this world is to preserve" (12). But he admires conservatism "not in the service of the past, but in the service of the future" (13).

The essay calls for a European union (9, 29), dismisses Spengler's theory of the radical differences among cultures as "rubbish" (37), and tars nationalism as French, not German (45). Speaking as a writer, he candidly admits that one of the reasons he prefers a republic is that "respect for the writer rises immediately in a republican state" (5). None of this is irony against both sides: it is only occasionally ironic against the enemies of the republic.

A few years later, in "An Appeal to Reason" (1930), also published in *Order of the Day*, Mann had become even more partisan, one might even say stridently partisan. He accuses the rising Nazis of fanaticism and "orgiastic denial of reason" (57). Nationalism is a "disease" (59). Marxism and the social democrats are cleaned up as seeking only to improve the workers' lives, defend democracy, and maintain world peace (60). "The political place of the German citizen is today with the Social-Democratic Party": he might as well have been writing propaganda for the party (67). This is all consistent with being "a son of the German bourgeoisie": "never have I disowned the spiritual traditions which belong to my origin" (49). All of this may be true, but there is probably no intended irony in it.

I shall only cite from a few more of Mann's many essays of the 1930's to make the point that Mann was no longer ironizing against both sides, and why. In "Europe Beware" of 1936, also in *Order of the Day*, he cites Goethe against the rejection of personal responsibility and the "comfort in the 'collective', the group" of the Nazis (71). He relies on Ortega y Gasset for a critique of the mass mentality they rely on. He reports that at the time Ibsen was writing, Europeans could appreciate irony and ambiguity, but now they cannot (74) – a paradox here is that now Mann cannot, either: he sees no ambiguity.

In "I Stand with the Spanish People" of 1936, also in *Order of the Day*, he starts with a signature line which might have been taken from *Unpolitical Man*: "I was not born a political man" (83). But nowadays, "an artist who in our time avoids the issue, shirks the human problem when politically presented, and betrays to interest the things of the spirit is a lost soul" (84). Irony against one of the sides is now bad: in Spain, "freedom and progress are conceptions not

yet vitiated by philosophical irony and scepticism” (85). The Spanish Marxists stand for “a better, juster, more human order” (87). Recent historians have observed that that may not be all of what the Marxists stood for, but Mann has no patience for irony against both sides now.

“A Brother” of 1938, also in *Order of the Day*, is an irony against Hitler, in the one-sided sense of the term. Mann admits to hating Hitler, but finds that this stifles his spirit and makes him long for the “freedom for objective contemplation – in a word, for the irony which I have long since recognized as the native element of all creative art” (134). So he searches to understand Hitler as a human being who could be his brother. He even recognizes him as a kind of artist and genius, although of the evil variety. Needless to say, this particular essay was not widely admired in the West precisely because it was not wholly anti-Hitler.

Some of the later essays display rather more of a commitment to propaganda – and with that, no irony. “This Peace” of 1938, also in *Order of the Day*, blames the rise of Hitler on the English ruling class, who sought to use him against socialism (167-185). “This War” of the following year flips the valence: now England can be trusted. Its assertions that it would have shared the resources of the earth with the Germans “are sincerely meant”, and the English “are not an emotional or boastful nation” (206, 209). They exercise power “in the gentlest and most unobtrusive manner, with the least possible display, and safeguarding as much freedom as possible” (210). This might sound like irony, but in the context there is little doubt that it is not.

It is worth observing that Mann self-consciously recognized that irony was no longer in order in 1941. In “Thinking and Living”, also in *Order of the Day*, he wrote that the Nazis are so base “that we have resolved on the good – quite simply, without any irony, and in a way which, not so long ago, we should not have considered ‘intellectual’” (261).

A repudiation of the separation of art and politics that he had argued for in *Unpolitical Man* is consolidated in the late-1930’s essays. In “The Coming Victory of Democracy” (1937), published in *Order of the Day*, he repudiates the “German” separation of politics and art (151). “Culture and Politics” (1939), also in *Order of the Day*, makes it explicit: “there is no clear dividing line between the intellectual and the political”, and he admits he was wrong when he thought he could equate democracy and politics and steer clear of both of them (228-9). Now, “to be a-political simply means to be anti-democratic”, and he is not (231). Germans who followed his earlier advice and remained politically passive and uncommitted to democracy had become the enemies of mankind (232, 236). In “The War and the Future” (1940), in *Order of the Day*, he insists that “it is not possible today –if it ever was- to draw a line between the realm of art, culture, and the things of the mind, and the realm of politics”

(239). Note the interpolated phrase: “if it ever was”. I have been suggesting that Mann was right to ironize against both sides in WW I when neither side deserved an intellectual defense, and that it was an intellectual’s rejection of politics. This “if it ever was” may have been a sort of implicit admission that he should not have tried to stay out of politics at that time, but should have pushed his irony against both warring sides even further, into a case for peace.

### **Irony against one side: the Library of Congress lectures**

Mann’s writings during World War II maintain the one-sided stance. He did not ironize against the Allied Powers in the annual lectures he gave at the Library of Congress. The first of these was not directly and only political: it was about his work in progress, the last *Joseph* novel.<sup>18</sup> Note that irony has not disappeared. In fact, the book is ironical throughout, amusing, even funny. As Mann says of all the realistic details in the novel, “humor, despite all human seriousness, is their soul” (5). One particular form of humor is irony: “scientific treatment of wholly unscientific and legendary matters is pure irony” (6). It is intended to be humanistic: it is “inspired by an interest in humanity transcending the individual – humorous, ironically-softened- I am tempted to say: a bashful poem of man” (7). But if there is irony in the expression and in the rhetoric, there is none in the politics. We can find politics in the analogy to the life of Jacob and his sons, but Mann spells it out: the true religion of these patriarchs is “attentiveness to the inner changes of the world, the mutation in aspects of truth and right” (15). “To live in sin is to live against the spirit, to cling to the antiquated, [the] obsolete” (15). If you are wondering where this is going, Mann tells us that “Europe, the world, was full of stale and outworn things, of evident obsolete and even sacrilegious anachronisms” (LC 16), and if you are still wondering, it finally becomes clear when he says that “in this book, the myth has been taken out of Fascist hands and humanized” (17).

Mann claims to be vindicating a true “conservative revolution”, wresting it from the hands of the fascists, who also claim that title. Citing American Vice President Henry A. Wallace with approval, Mann claims that his own “conservative revolution” amounts to “unification of tradition and revolution in the sphere of the Humane; the stirring proof that today the conserving and the revolutionary will are one and the same, are simply the *good will*” (17). Unpacking this, we can see at least two things. Mann is concerned that “conservatism” may be taken to be stagnant and opposed to change, and that is

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Mann, “The Theme of the Joseph Novels” in *Thomas Mann’s Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress*, ed. Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Bern: Lang, 2003), 1-19. Cited by page number in parentheses.

not his understanding of it. And he is unequivocally opposed to the fascists, not ironizing against their opponents.

The next year, in “The War and the Future”, also in the Library of Congress addresses, Mann claimed that an artist should be “committed to no cause except that of freedom, of ironical objectivity” (23). This vocabulary skates close to deliberate paradox, but at least it reinforces the point that irony has a privileged role in Mann’s mental universe, associated in some sense here with both freedom and objectivity. But a crucial move here is a limit that Mann imposes: there are “historical conditions, in which it would prove to be weak, egoistic and wholly untimely to insist upon one’s freedom of criticism and to shy away from a confession of faith. I mean THOSE moments and THOSE historical conditions in which Freedom itself, by which the freedom of the artist also exists, is endangered” (24). The enemies of freedom “are only too happy if mind considers nothing but the ironical attitude worthy of itself, if it despises the distinction between good and evil, and considers the preoccupation with ideas such as freedom, truth, justice as ‘bourgeois’” (24). So “in certain conditions it is the duty of the intellectual to renounce his freedom... [and] to find the courage to affirm ideas” (24). And the ideas that Mann thinks should be affirmed without irony are those of “the liberal tradition... the complex of ideas of freedom and progress, of humanitarianism, of civilization” (24). So here we have it: irony must disappear when the liberal tradition is at stake the way it was not at stake in WW I and was at stake in WW II.

Mann recognizes that one of the sources of liberalism, eighteenth-century rationalism, went too far (25). But that is no excuse for irrationalism. Mann does not seem to recognize the sardonic humor in his alleviation of possible concerns: “there is not the slightest danger that reason will ever gain complete ascendancy... [and] there is no danger that people will some day become emotionless angels” (25-6). No danger indeed.

The future, Mann tells his audience at the Library of Congress, will bring forth “a social democracy and a humanism” (26). This from a man who was called, and called himself, a conservative. There is a way in which he retains an older kind of conservatism, *noblesse oblige*. Democracy is, he recognizes, “a justified demand from below”; “but in my eyes it is even more beautiful if it is good will, generosity and love coming from the top down” (38). Anyone who can say something like this has left ironic criticism far behind.

Some of his discussion in this address replicates the interest in the anti-political or un-political of his 1918 *Unpolitical Man*. Germans, he writes, are “essentially indifferent to social and political questions” (32). They are philosophical, not political, and in much of German history “politics were understood as a realm of absolute cynicism and Machiavellianism” (33). But in their defense, they have a democratic side, not just a national socialist side

(33). Very little of this is ironic – it is all deadly serious. But perhaps because of that it is more one-dimensional, less interesting, than the two-edged irony. It even borders on delusional, such as his suggestion that the Russians are going to compromise with the West. But maybe this was necessary: to paraphrase the way he put it earlier in this speech, in wartime when serious principles are at stake one should not ironize against one's allies.

And the next year, his address on “Germany and the Germans” is similarly one-dimensional. It is pro-American, and recognizes only the positive side of America: “As an American I am a citizen of the world” (48). He does not like Martin Luther, but nevertheless manages to defend him as advancing the cause of European democracy (53). He likes Goethe, described as a “conservative revolutionary” (53). Art is described as “creatively mediating and actuating irony”, but there is little of it in evidence: this is a sincere, and even agonizing, defense of the good side of German culture (58). It is a man embarrassed by his nation grasping for reasons why it should not be wholly execrated. Irony surely did not seem appropriate in May of 1945. Enlightenment was what was at stake in the rise of the Nazis and WW II, and Mann did his best to defend it.

## America and Russia

Mann's wartime propaganda was very generous, to the point of naivete, to both America and Russia. Concerning America, he was naïve in two ways: one, in evaluating America's values and politics as unidimensionally benign and progressive, and two, in believing that it would go along with his calls for social democracy.

There is much pro-Americanism in the 1930's essays. “The Coming Victory of Democracy” (1937), published in *Order of the Day*, predicts that “the centre of Western culture will shift to America” (152). “The War and the Future” (1940), in *Order of the Day*, continues his praise of America. “The intelligentsia of America” have been “simply admirable” in their criticism of the Nazis, and their work is “without its equal in any other country” (238). He could have allowed himself some irony against one aspect of America, but he does not. His mild criticism of “America First” xenophobia is expressed with simple sincerity: it is “a little suspect; too much like an old-fashioned nationalism that has nothing to do either with the American pioneer spirit or with the wave of the future” (245-6).

In a 1940 radio address titled “I am an American”,<sup>19</sup> Mann waxed effusive about the United States: it “has made remarkable progress toward the solution

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Mann, *Essays*, eds. Hermann Kurzke and Stephan Stachorski (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996), vol. 5, 132-35. Cited by page number in parentheses.

of some of the great problems which face us today” (133). It represents democracy, and “Democracy’s task is to defend civilization against barbarism” (133). “Americans are very reasonable and charitable” (134); “America may yet stand forth in an abandoned and ethically leaderless world as the preserver of a faith which is proved sound and utterly necessary to human life, faith in goodness, in freedom and truth, in justice and peace” (135). Mann as much as admits that he is writing propaganda: “There is no reason why Democracy should not enlighten its people by all the modern means at its disposal, by propaganda even” (133).

In “The Theme of the Joseph Novels” he mentioned Goethe’s claim that America was the hope for the future of Europe (18). The 1942 address concludes with praise for his hosts. He has written his last Joseph novel “in contact with the American myth... The pioneer-like optimism and hearty faith in man, the mental youthfulness, the benevolent and confident ideas and principles upon which the Union was founded by the fathers... the American myth, which is alive today” (18). In the light of “American Studies” today, this might be suspected of irony, but I am convinced it is not. In the Forward to *Order of the Day* he praised “the native and unmistakable national open-heartedness and liberality” of the US (xv).

Surely Mann was overly optimistic when he wrote in several places in *Order of the Day* that a confederation of Europe would be based on an “optimistic, human, kindly vision which promises ease, freedom, justice, individual happiness” (221). It is hard to believe that he received much sympathy in America for his repeated claims that social democracy was the order of the day (214) and raved about “A bourgeois-socialist alliance, a compromise between democracy and socialism, which today the whole world sees as the indispensable condition of future well-being” (x).

Mann was generous about the Russians, too. “The Coming Victory of Democracy” of 1937, in *Order of the Day*, defends Russia: “One may wholly disapprove of the example which it sets for internal politics and fear this example. But it must be admitted that the moral nature of all real socialism is substantiated even in the case of Russia; one must recognize it as a peacefully disposed nation and admit that, as such, it constitutes a reinforcement of democracy” (136). The division of Poland in 1939 must have put an end to that idea. He continues: “It is not by accident nor a mere question of politics but one of morality if Russia aligns herself with the big and little democracies: England, France, America, Czechoslovakia. When peace is endangered, socialism and bourgeois democracy belong on the same side” (136). “I have perhaps an insufficient awareness of the menace emanating from Russia towards the capitalistic social order, for I am no capitalist. But at least I can see that Russia does not imperil the essential upon which all else depends – namely, peace” (136-7).



Even after 1939 Mann is still naïve about the Soviet Union in the Library of Congress addresses. He wants to unite the wartime allies in more than a temporary alliance of defense. “Certainly there are differences of ideology and world policy between Russia and its allies, but this war is amongst other things a means of conciliating those differences – a conciliation between socialism and democracy upon which rests the hope of the world” (37-8). He warns Americans that “I cannot help feeling that the panic fear of the Western world of the term communism... is somewhat superstitious and childish” (39).

But having warned them that communism is not the danger they say it is, he veers back into his defense of America. He admires the American college student who works his way through school, oblivious to European class dignity (40). He endorses the erosion of private property through taxation (41). But then it is back to older values: “what needs to be reestablished more than anything else are the commandments of religion, of Christianity, which have been trod underfoot”; and for a universal Magna Charta of human rights, “may the American Bill of Rights serve as a model” (42).

## Recruiting for the Enlightenment and Democracy

Mann's last lectures for the Library of Congress were part of a project of cleaning up and presenting two of his favorite authors for two of his favorite causes. In his 1947 lecture on “Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Contemporary Events” he did his best to interpret Nietzsche as an enlightener.<sup>20</sup> The fascist interpretation of him was a product of the fascists, not Nietzsche (93); he was just as much a progenitor of socialism as he was of fascism (95); he will be misunderstood unless it is understood that much of what he says is said in the deepest irony (99); and he was “profoundly unpolitical” (100). Finally, and after much twisting and turning, “he must accept being called a humanist, just as he must suffer having his criticism of morals understood as a last form of the enlightenment” (102).

Mann's 1949 lecture on “Goethe and Democracy” relies on similar summersaults to purge Goethe of romantic and aristocratic elements. “I am well aware that we have to penetrate very deeply into things and to make the definition of democracy very broad in order to include Goethe in it. For in the narrower sense and on the surface there is overwhelming evidence of his antagonism to democracy, political and moral” (113). He sanitizes the author by insisting that “Goethe resisted the German-Romantic cult of death” (112). There is a question, Mann admits, “how far greatness is compatible with democracy” (116). He recruits Goethe for democracy by insisting that “his

<sup>20</sup> Tolzmann, ed., *Thomas Mann's Addresses*, 67-103.

contempt of ideas, and his hatred of the abstract” are precisely what enable him to avoid the “fundamental difficulty of democracy” which “threatens to lead to a fearful altercation between the revolutionary principles of equality and of liberty” [Russia vs. the West] (117). Having to admit that Goethe’s “quietism and political apathy” led him to “oppose the national democratic idea” and that “he was opposed to freedom of the press, opposed to free speech for the masses, opposed to constitution and rule of the majority” (118) means that it will be difficult to recruit him for democracy, but Mann makes the attempt.

Anti-liberal and aristocratic, “the better part of Goethe’s] life was devoted to his personal culture... not to the improvement of the world” (121). Although Goethe called himself a “decided non-Christian”, Mann finds a deeper Protestant Christianity in his way of thinking, and it is a civilizing and democratic force (121-123). Luther stands for religious democracy (!) and so does Catholicism (124). This is ideological gymnastics. Goethe’s knowledge of the rise of trade, wealth, and liberalism “is tantamount to progressiveness” (126). If it is true that Goethe’s theme of renunciation “leaves very little of the individualistic, the ‘liberal’, the bourgeois ideal” (127), Mann still wants to recruit him as an endorsement of those ideals. The clincher is Goethe’s remarks on America: it “had become the goal of his inner flight”; “no more democratic word can be imagined!” (128). Goethe’s enthusiasm for America and for life “prove that European democracy may claim him as its own” (131). Finally, “everything in the dialectic of Goethe’s personality that sounds and looks anti-democratic belongs to the part of Mephistopheles and is intended only to give dramatic justice to the negative” (132).

## Conclusion

Mann never abandoned his theory of double-sided irony, at least for his fiction. Written in Pacific Palisades, *Doctor Faustus* is a deeply ironical novel. In the book he wrote about this book, *The Story of a Novel*, Mann wrote of his hopes that this novel about a “radically serious, menacing subject” would “partake a little of artistic playfulness and jest, irony, travesty, higher humor”.<sup>21</sup> He added that “in matters of style I really no longer admit anything but parody” (54). But that had not been the case in his political writings of the pre-war and war period. Nor was it to be the case in later years when he was confronted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, but that is another story. My point is that Mann seems to confirm the rule that true, deep, unstable irony

<sup>21</sup> T. Mann, *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*, tr. R. and C. Winston (New York: Knopf, 1961; orig. 1949), 54. Cited by page number in parentheses.

against both sides is probably appropriate in politics when not too much as a matter of principle is at stake, but that it is not appropriate when deep and important issues are at stake.

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