

Politeja

No. 3(72), 2021, pp. 5-20

<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.18.2021.72.01>

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AN ABSENT TEXT OF A CIVILISED LITERARY MAN

ON THOMAS MANN'S *REFLECTIONS*
OF A NONPOLITICAL MAN

ABSTRACT

In this paper the author tries to answer the question of what factors caused the great German author Thomas Mann to accept the official goals of World War I by focusing on his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*. It also discusses Thomas Mann's disagreements with his brother Heinrich Mann and his polemics with the ideas specific to the mainstream liberal thinking. Additionally, the article considers the context of the Polish reception of Thomas Mann. The author also discusses the problem of the topicality of the writer's attitude.

Keywords: politics, democracy, civilised literary man, First World War

During the First World War, Thomas Mann's vision of Germany and Europe differed from that of his brother, Heinrich Mann. While the latter, in his essay *Zola* (published in November 1915), advocated the values of the Age of Reason, democracy, politicization of the nation and democracy, thus accepting the values of the French Enlightenment, his brother wrote his war texts around the same time, which focused on values critical of Enlightenment. They included *Gedanken im Kriege* (*Thoughts in Wartime*) written in August and September 1914, *Gute Feldpost* (*Good News from the Front*) from October of the same year, the essay *Friedrich und die grosse Koalition* (Frederick and the Great Coalition) written from September to December, *Brief an den Svenska Dagbladet in Stockholm* (*The letter to the Svenska Dagbladet in Stockholm*) written in April and May 1915, *An die Armeezeitung A.O.K. 10* from the spring of 1916, and the monumental *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*) published in September 1918.¹ This essay is an afterword to the Polish edition of *Betrachtungen*. Its author does not deal with Mann's personal motives, as readers can find them in numerous monographies of the author of *Royal Highness*, notably in Hermann Kurzke's biography *Life as a Work of Art*.² His emphasis on Mann's Polish connections result from the German author's strong position in Polish intellectual life, both after 1927, the year of his visit to the Polish PEN Club, so important to Polish culture, and in the post-war period, even today. Apart from these Polish contexts, the aim of this essay's author is to demonstrate the timeliness of *Reflections*, a formerly marginalised work which provokes, inspires, rejects and fascinates.

It would be difficult to refrain from politics when writing an essay on this 'ruffian book,' a scandalous treatise, so greatly unmatching the democratic image of the great writer, polished later by the Weimar democracy and all great democracies, Western and Eastern alike (but mainly by the Eastern, real-socialist ones). After all, when carefully omitting the 'war episode' with its essays still disgraceful to the civilization's literary man,³ it would be possible to include Mann in the great stream of civilisation's writing, classify him as one who, having excluded his radical right wing views about nation, race, freemasonry, obvious in his references to Paul Lagarde, civilised the dark, threatening trends in the German 'spirit,' turning them invigoratingly democratic by means of incorporating into psychoanalysis and liberal progress. As a work of national pedagogy, *Doctor Faustus* (1947) is an exemplary rendering of taming the element of music by literature, the nation by created cosmopolitanism, referring, as in *The Magic Mountain*,

¹ All the information and quotations above come from: T. Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, commentary by H. Kurzke, Frankfurt am Main 2009 (T. Mann, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe Werke – Briefe – Tagebücher*, H. Detering et al. (eds.) in cooperation with Thomas-Mann-Archiv at ETH Zurich, vol. 13.2), p. 5. Later cited as *Kommentar*.

² H. Kurzke, *Tomasz Mann: Życie jako dzieło sztuki*, transl. by E. Kowynia, Warszawa 2005.

³ Cf. H. Orłowski, „Tomasz Mann – reprezentant narodu versus pisarz nowoczesny”, in T. Mann, *Moje czasy*, selection and introduction by H. Orłowski, transl. by W. Kunicki, Poznań 2002, p. 14. Very interesting, in this context, is the pair of oppositions constructed by Orłowski, which assumes implicitly that a 'representative of a nation' is not, or even cannot be, a 'modern writer'.

not necessarily to the tradition of the French Revolution, but to European humanism, to the taming of the depths of spirit by rhetorical democracy, and aestheticism by politics. How was, then, Thomas Mann domesticated in Poland, in details? We are going to refrain from the cruelty of quoting the journalists from the years 1944-1989, as that would be both too simple and methodologically tactless. Indeed, we are not in a position to criticise people of the bygone years for belonging to the bygone years. We will, therefore, focus on those who have been on the right side of progress, civilisation, rhetoric, Europeanness, that is, on those whose age still lasts, authorising us, people on the margins of society, sentenced, as followers of the nation, and therefore, as writers par excellence not modern, to oblivion by the raging cancel culture, to examine but several tiny elements of it with the use of the basic tool – critique. Hence, we will employ the practically forbidden methodology of fighting intellect with ‘the intellect’.

Let us go back in time to March 1927, when, on the occasion of Thomas Mann’s visit to Warsaw, our thoroughly liberal, as it is widely known, *Wiadomości Literackie*⁴ journal announced a brazen (to a reader of *Reflections*) half-truth, seemingly purposefully composed for the use of civilised and rhetorical literariness: *In the field of the artistic and intellectual German thought, Thomas Mann expresses the same qualities – if not the same ideals – as Romain Rolland in the sphere of French spirit*.⁵ Certainly, Emil Breiter does not write about Thomas Mann’s screeds in *Reflections* against the *deification of European cosmopolitanism*, and directed at Rolland, but about the Thomas Mann already democratically calibrated: about the *great, ultimate artistic work* of Thomas Mann that, in his opinion, *The Magic Mountain* was. And what about our *Reflections*? What is their place in Mann’s legacy? Breiter devoted half a sentence to them, namely: *in Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, he addressed all aesthetical, political and cultural issues that the state of war, ferocity and barbarism unleashed in life, literature and arts*. I do not intend to ridicule this rhetorical enthusiasm, or ironize it, because the interpretation of the words of Breiter, a lawyer and writer from an assimilated Jewish family, and a victim of Shoah, a man murdered by the world whose evil he precisely recognised as early as in 1927 when welcoming Thomas Mann as a writer visiting Warsaw in the days of raging nationalism both on the German and Polish side, is an interpretation that is valid even today, one that includes Mann in the world harbouring the illusion that ‘European cosmopolitanism’ can be a method of overcoming the ‘barbarianism of war’ in which Mann, in fact, participated. This interpretation, present throughout the issue of *Wiadomości Literackie* of 13 March 1927, focuses solely on Thomas Mann – the author of *The Magic Mountain* and, what is particularly important to Regina Reichertówna – on the author of *Pariser Rechenschaft* (*Parisian Account*, 1926), a book that, to her, cannot exactly serve as the evidence of Thomas Mann’s contact with the world of bolshevism, but rather as a lesson of how, in the face of Bolshevik crimes, not to fall in the trap of nationalism: having visited Shmelev, the author of *The Sun of the*

⁴ About Tomasz Mann and Poland, see: *Tomasz Mann w krytyce i literaturze polskiej. Antologia tekstów i dokumentów*, selected, elaborated and edited by R. Dziergwa, Poznań 2003.

⁵ E. Breiter, “Na przyjazd Tomasza Manna”, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 13 March 1927, p. 1.

Dead (1923, published in Germany by W S. Fischer Verlag 1925), a novel which is the most horrifying document of Bolshevik terror in Crimea, Mann writes in his *Pariser Rechenschaft*: Did you, out of the fear of the unhuman visions which is engraved on your face, Ivan Shmelev, allowed yourself to be pushed into other alternatives, into bourgeois, reactionary orientation?⁶ This characteristic reaction of a liberal to bolshevism – its condemnation – forces the acceptance of other worldviews, of which Mann mentions two, the mildest ones, in his opinion, and accepted by him, particularly when it comes to his bourgeois orientation, claiming at the same time, not unlike the majority of liberals then and now alike, that the ‘idea’ and ‘spirit’ are/were on the side of the Soviets, making this claim on the basis of, indeed, notes of the Soviet state to the *governments of the capitalist West and the Ligue of the Nations*. Perhaps it is a good thing that *Pariser Rechenschaft*, which was never published in the Polish Peoples Republic,⁷ has not appeared in print in this country after 1989, although, it certainly should have been.

That text was also Thomas Mann’s political tribute to France, her intellectualists, her values, only after a nine-day sojourn, although, certainly, Mann had been familiar with those values for a long time, and even pertinaciously contested them at some point. In the eyes of his Polish liberal admirers, Mann became closer to France and distanced himself from Russia, not only accepting her revolution, which is not that strange for a previously conservative writer who now, in a certain way, approaches another singularity of Russianness, trying not only to grasp that Bolshevik Russia, but also accept it for the sake of apoliticism. Hence, by reading Conrad, he abandons Dostoevsky. In his preface to Joseph Conrad’s German translation of *The Secret Agent*, also published in *Wiadomości Literackie*, he overtly claims, although maintaining a gradation of ‘greatness’ between Dostoevsky and Conrad: *Yet things have changed since then in our country; the rule of this epileptic-apocalyptic clairvoyance over the German spirit has been, to a certain degree, broken; we are in the process of returning from the Christian-Byzantine East to the ‘inside,’ to ourselves, and also to that in us what comes from the humanistic and liberal West.*⁸

Following this declaration, Polish and French liberal intellectuals were relieved not only in a cultural, but also in a political sense. Indeed, what they witnessed was a process of a desirable Franko-German friendship, translating into an increased understanding between the new liberal, Thomas Mann, and his Polish and French counterparts and admirers. Had his Polish friends possessed a better grasp of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, then perhaps they would have pondered the following sentence: *There are highly ‘political’ nations—nations that are never free of a political stimulation and excitement, that still, because of a complete lack of ability in authority and governance, have never accomplished anything on earth and never will. The Poles and the*

⁶ R. Reicherówna, “Ostatnie książki Tomasza Manna”, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 13 March 1927, p. 2.

⁷ Not published due to Ivan Shmelev’s anti-Bolshevik sentiment. In the Polish People’s Republic and in the German Democratic Republic only his novel *The Man from the Restaurant* was published (1960, 1st Polish edition 1928).

⁸ T. Mann, “Joseph Conrad i jego ‘Tajny agent’” [J. Conrad and his *The Secret Agent*], transl. by W. Horzyca, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 13 March 1927, p. 2.

*Irish, for example.*⁹ Elsewhere, Mann, indignant of the growth of the foreign, Polish element, offers some unpleasant verses in *Reflections*, noticing a Polish state, very politically looming on the horizon, which, if it comes to exist, then at the expense of its partitioning powers. Or when he rejects the newly introduced (in 1917) free and equal electoral law: *At the right moment I notice a newspaper item that speaks quite remarkably to the point. It concerns a petition to both houses of the Prussian state parliament; it is from the German occupants of the Prussian eastern marches, and it has found more than sixty thousand signatures. The petition, it says, expresses the 'deep concern' the eastern march Germans have about the imperial government's policy; that 'the imminent change in Prussian suffrage and its logical consequence, the change in communal suffrage, will lead to a strengthening of the Polish influence in the Prussian state parliament and to the complete Polonization of the hitherto German administration of the great majority of our cities.*¹⁰

Is it possible that Mann was free of these worries ten years later, post factum, in 1927, when he visited Warsaw as a man of the West, who accepted the Polish statehood? Hardly. Never did he say, in fact, that he accepted it; he accepted, however, the manner in which Joseph Conrad was seeing Polish Russophobia through the eyes of the West. That view is already civilised, *his antipathy towards all that is Russian found its outlet in this novel in a British manner*,¹¹ that view is undeniably a diagnosis and, in a way, a recommendation for his Polish hosts to perceive Russia, the Soviet Russia now, in the same manner as he does, a liberal writer, civilised and cultured, who found his way to Conrad's novels thanks to personal impulses received from John Galsworthy and Andre Gide.¹² In fact, there was no need to repeat this to Mann's hosts in Warsaw – the readers of the same issue of *Wiadomości Literackie* also found two discussions of two novels written by one of Bolshevik incendiaries, Ilya Ehrenburg. And now we are going to skip several decades and go straight to 2002.

⁹ T. Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, H. Kurzke (ed.), Frankfurt am Main 2009 (*Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe Werke-Briefe-Tagebücher*, H. Detering et al. (eds.), in cooperation with Thomas-Mann-Archiv at ETH Zurich, vol. 13.1), p. 32. Later *Betrachtungen*. The passage was not commented on. However, it results from a clear change of sides in Polish politics (the imprisonment of Piłsudski by German authorities in 1917).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 289. English translation: T. Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, transl. by W.D. Morris, New York 1987, p. 221. The commentator, clearly indignant, asks a rhetoric question: *The fear of 'Polonization' makes Thomas Mann avoid any reflection on the issue whether the lands settled mostly by Poles should be also governed by Poles. Kommentar*, p. 378.

¹¹ T. Mann, "Joseph Conrad...", p. 2.

¹² The interesting report of the Polish consul A. d'Ormesson on Thomas Mann's visit to Warsaw proves that the novelist drew highly political conclusions from it: *He received a good welcome. The writer observed the strong anti-Russian sentiment (...) in Polish society. He noted that negative emotions towards Germans and Germany are less prominent. He also noticed the impact of German culture on Polish society. He left our country convinced that Poland remained fairly peaceful, and that it was less militarised than he had thought (...). He considered the existence of the 'Polish Corridor' inadmissible. He wrote that in this disastrous case, the positions of both parties are based on interests and arguments that are entirely opposite, although equally important and worthy of respect.* Cf. M. Kornat, *Niższość cywilizacyjna wrogości narodu. Niemieckie dyskursy o Polsce i Polakach 1919-1945*, Warszawa 2020, p. 159.

The German philologist Hubert Orłowski, sensitive to the issue of 'nation' in Thomas Mann writing, lists Mann's essays written during the war and for the war, however, carefully omitting *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*. Let us mention it again: *His journalistic discussions of a just war, such as Gedanken zum Krieg, August-September 1914*, *Friedrich und die grosse Koalition* (Frederick and the Great Coalition, *September-December 1914*) and several less important texts, such as the letter to the *Svenska Dagbladet* in Stockholm (*Brief an die Zeitung Svenska Dagbladet, April-May 1915*) – provoked a vehement reaction of his brother Heinrich. Eventually, however, the developments that follow his great transformation require another conclusion by Orłowski: *In prestigious liberal democratic press, Mann undeniably is considered a writer of an epochal scale*. Nothing more, nothing less, in fact, Mann is considered a 'civilization's literary man,' as one of those whom he fought fiercely in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*; indeed, he was considered as such by *prestigious democratic-liberal press*. What about non-democratic, non-prestigious, non-liberal press? We will return to this question. For now, we need to add something for the sake of fairness: Orłowski not only suppressed *Reflections*, but, as the first German philologist in Poland, he discovered, in the most exquisite manner, the war-time essay *Frederick and the Great Coalition*, incorporating it in the self-published selection of Thomas Mann texts, most of which had been unknown in Poland.¹³

RUSSIA AS A CONSERVATIVE AND ANTI-WESTERN POWER IN REFLECTIONS OF A NONPOLITICAL MAN. GERMANY AS A PROTESTANT POWER THROUGH THE EYES OF DOSTOEVSKY

Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man is a wartime treatise.¹⁴ Symptomatically, in the first chapter, the author writes about a 'protesting kingdom' as a reference to Fedor Dostoevsky's political article written in 1877, just a few years after the unification of Germany by Bismarck. Mann considered Dostoevsky's expression brilliant.¹⁵ The Russian author wrote: *The most characteristic, most essential trait of this great, proud, and special people has always been, since the first moment of its appearance in the historical world, that it has never, neither in its destiny nor in its principles, wanted to be united with the*

¹³ T. Mann, *Moje czasy...*, pp. 71-127.

¹⁴ H. Kurzke, *Dostojewskij in den Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, in E. Heftrich, H. Koopmann (eds.), *Thomas Mann und seine Quellen: Festschrift für Hans Wysling*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 138-151.

¹⁵ The commentator of *Reflections*, Hermann Kurzke thinks that Mann became familiar with Dostoevsky thanks to Alfred Weber's article, *Zukunftiges* (*Die Neue Rundschau, September 1915*). See: *Kommentar*, p. 168. See S. Łozowski, "Mit Dostojewskiego w ideologii 'konserwatywnej rewolucji' w Niemczech", *Studia Historica Slavo-Germanica*, vol. 14 (1985), pp. 223-239. The work of the late Pomeranian historian from Wałcz demonstrates how difficult it was to write anything in this subject even in the late Communist era – the argument about the similarity between Russian and German imperialism, also in the revolutionary forms, certainly would have not won recognition of censors, hence in the discussion of Moeller van den Bruck's ideas not a trace of political connotations can be found.

far Western World, that is, with all the heirs of the ancient Roman destiny. Throughout all these two thousand years, Germany has protested against this world, and even if she did not express her own word – and has still never expressed it at all, her own sharply formulated ideal as a positive replacement for the ancient Roman idea she destroyed – still, I believe – (this is a powerful passage; one realizes suddenly where one is: with the foremost psychologist of world literature!) ‘still,’ he says, ‘I believe that in her heart she has always been convinced that one day she will once again be in a position to proclaim this new word and to lead mankind with it.’¹⁶ Thomas Mann found in the great writer a formula which allowed him to establish a sharp contrast: the protesting German empire and the world of Western civilisation. Certainly, the German author of *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice* was perfectly familiar with the Western world, knowing that it represented the element most specific to himself, namely literature. For that reason, when replying to Romain Rolland in his *Reflections*, he says that the current war is a family dispute, as only similar cultures, as opposed to alien cultures, can persist in a dispute and hatred. Nevertheless, in Mann, that ‘German war’ was seeking (and finding) its justification in Dostoevsky, the ‘greatest psychologist in world literature,’¹⁷ according to Nietzsche, taking over consecutive elements of his thinking and processing them for its own needs. However, Mann allows himself to carry on a polemic with Dostoevsky, claiming that he does not see a difference between the Catholic Church and Christian faith, points to religious elements in Rousseau’s philosophy, and, in his mind, even the momentum of the French Revolution is not equivalent to creating a Western empire, nevertheless, he politically evaluates Russia and its role in the war, praises the withdrawal of its five divisions from the western front, because the developments in East Prussia could not continue as they were. *But this does not negate the fact that in the present war, dangerous, clumsy Russia is merely the tool of the West; she can only be considered from an intellectual point of view today to the extent she is liberalized in a Western manner.*¹⁸ Dostoevsky’s diagnosis of Germany as a protesting kingdom is of a central importance to Mann – it explains the purpose of its endurance between East and West: let us examine Mann’s expressions, excellent sentences, in which he develops the central point of resistance against his own conscience of a writer: *Indeed, Dostoyevsky’s formulation of the German character, of German primeval individuality, of what is eternally German, contains the whole basis and explanation of the lonely German position between East and West, of Germany’s offensiveness to the world, of the antipathy,*

¹⁶ *Betrachtungen*, p. 51. Mann used, certainly, the famous edition of Dostoevsky by Moeller van den Bruck, that is: F.M. Dostojewski, *Die deutsche Weltfrage. Deutschland, die protestierende Macht*, in idem, *Politische Schriften*, introduction D. Mereschkowski, München 1907, p. 69 (= F.M. Dostojewski, *Sämtliche Werke*, in cooperation with D. Mereschkowski, M. van den Bruck (eds.), vol. 13). Mann probably read the edition from 1907 or 1913, without Moeller van den Bruck’s preface, *Die politischen Voraussetzungen der Dostojewskischen Ideen* (1922 edition, pp. IX-XXIV). T. Mann, *Reflections...*, p. 26.

¹⁷ F. Nietzsche, „Gotzendaemmerung“, in *Nietzsche’s Werke*, vol. 8, Leipzig 1899, no. 45 „Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemäßen“, p. 158.

¹⁸ *Betrachtungen*, p. 51. Idem, *Reflections...*, p. 27.

*the hatred she must endure and defend herself against – in bewilderment and pain at this universal hatred that she does not understand because she knows little about herself and has not developed very far at all in matters of psychological understanding – the basis and explanation also of her enormous courage that she has unflinchingly displayed to the surrounding world, the world of the Roman West that today is almost everywhere, in the East, the South, even in the North and across the ocean where the new Capitol stands – of that blind-heroic courage with which Germany is striking out everywhere with a gigantic reach.*¹⁹ Undoubtedly, Thomas Mann read the entire excellent and prophetic text by Dostoevsky, although he did not account for everything in his *Reflections* as a work maintaining the fighting spirit. He failed to cite the great Russian thinker's scepticism, who wrote dryly: *In the years 1870-71, Germany defeated not France, but Napoleon and his institutions.*²⁰ And: he did not believe that German conceit would lead to the genuine unification of the nation: *The German is, by his nature, haughty and obstinate. Moreover, the current generation of Germans has been bribed with successes, intoxicated with pride and ruled with an iron fist of his leader.* However, in future, this mechanical unity may wane. Thirdly, and conclusively: Germany is, according to Dostoevsky, a country of the centre: *in spite of their might, France is on the one side, Russia on the other. It is true that Russians are temporarily polite. But what will happen when they discover that they do not need an alliance with Germany, and instead, Germany needs an alliance with Russia, and also: that the dependence on the alliance with Russia has been clearly the most sinister destiny of Germany since the Franco-German War?*²¹ To Dostoevsky, this clash of civilisations translated into the confrontation of Eastern Christianity with Western antichrist; what will happen, then, if Germany surrenders to the Western world embodied in the current enemy (of Bismarck as well) – the papacy? Will Russia stop being polite then? Such questions were not yet asked by Thomas Mann as a representative of the 'protesting' world who should seek its ally in the West-opposing Russia, although Russia, seduced by the West, is not an ally yet. *Reflections* are a work of secularised consciousness, which was evident in the attempts to find primarily religious substance in Rousseau's philosophy and in the French Republic. The world of Dostoevsky is a religiously marked world – while in Mann, one trait of this world's reception is its secularisation, maintaining the non-religious perspective within the limits of political valuations, confirming the necessity of a close Russo-German alliance. By this we certainly do not exhaust the Russian issue in the work of the great writer, but merely signal its presence in his most important political treatise.²²

¹⁹ *Betrachtungen*, p. 54. Idem, *Reflections...*, p. 31.

²⁰ F. Dostoevsky, *Die deutsche Weltfrage...*, p. 75.

²¹ All citations *ibid.*, p. 77.

²² It should be added here that Thomas Mann coined the term 'conservative revolution' in his essay "Russische Anthologie", in T. Mann, *Große Frankfurter Kommentierte Ausgabe. Werke – Briefe – Tagebücher*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, vol. 15.1, p. 339. In his article "Zum Geleit", in *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, he wrote: *It is enough for conservatism to possess spirit in order to become much more revolutionary than any positivistic-liberalistic enlightenment and Nietzsche himself was from the beginning nothing other than Conservative Revolution* – as cited by A. Mohler, K. Weissmann, *Die konservative*

A question can be asked here, why Thomas Mann's treatise is a conservative-revolutionary one? Of central importance here is the conviction about the values which should emerge on the foundation of the idea of nation. Such is the intent of Thomas Mann's treatise, and as such, it will mark consecutive stages of thinking and conservative-revolutionary stances in the 1920s, despite the fact that Mann, by keeping to his valuations and perspectives, will adopt liberal and democratic views, not losing sight of what is dark, chthonic, connected with the unconscious and earth. We will discuss these two issues later in our considerations on Thomas Mann's *Reflections*.

SAVAGERY AND ORDER

The penetrations of Russian culture by Thomas Mann in his *Reflections* are a quest and penetration of 'savagery,' the same savagery that is attributed to the 19th century, his century, the one that shaped him. *In Wagner, Dostoyevsky, even in Bismarck, the 19th century unites the height of a giant with an utmost refinement, ultimate sophistication of means, which was also connected with something repelling and barbarian.*²³ This mixture of 'savagery' with 'sophistication' or 'aestheticism' will be translated apologetically by Ernst Juenger into the related notions of elementary sphere and extreme aestheticism, to an organic construct, beauty and danger. Mann refers to this 'savagery' on many occasions, notably in his polemic with Romain Rolland, a polemic that is unpolitical, because it seeks common aspects as well: *When he says that the societies most steeped in superstition have been the great patrons of art, then it is culture that he ascribes to these superstitious societies, and he means the same as I do when I say that culture does not exclude 'bloody savagery,' while civilization softens savagery, clarifies superstition, discourages passions.*²⁴ He mentions this 'savagery' in the interpretation of the antithesis of art and literary virtue: *Yesterday I heard Tchaikovsky's Symphonie Pathetique, this thoroughly dangerous work in its sweetness and savagery, which one neither hears nor understands without experiencing the irreconcilable antithesis of art and the spirit of literary virtue. I am thinking of the third movement with its malicious march music, which, if we had a censor in the service of democratic enlightenment, would absolutely have to be forbidden.*²⁵ Why? Well, because as long as such trumpet blare and cymbal clash exist, there will be wars. Not the other way round! For that reason, as the nondemocratic and nonpolitical Mann reasons, *Art is a conservative power, the strongest of all; it preserves spiritual possibilities that without it – perhaps – would die out.*²⁶ What else is forbidden, apart from 'savagery' and 'art,' asks

Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch, vol. 6, completely rev. and expan. ed., Graz 2005, p. 66.

²³ T. Mann, "Joseph Conrad...", p. 2.

²⁴ *Betrachtungen*, p. 197 [p. 122] (Page numbers in square brackets refer to the English translation *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 430 [p. 290].

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Mann, if *politics against the polis (...)* is allowed. To have intellect against 'the intellect' is not allowed.²⁷

*What is otherwise at times claimed for literature is immoral estheticism, decorative work at best, not what is necessary. What is necessary is at bottom not art at all but the manifesto, the absolute manifesto in favor of progress, the proclamation of the intellectuals through intellect.*²⁸

And here we arrive at the central problem of *Reflections*, so much valid even today. Not only the question of what the guardians of literary virtue consider 'forbidden,' not only the emotional and conservative value of art, saving 'savagery' and 'life,' but also the question of the author who, with the aid of spirit, that is, intellectuality, criticises exclusive claims of an enlightened spirit.

A CIVILIZATION'S LITERARY MAN

In the case of Thomas Mann's war texts, the problem of his liberal commentators is their amazement at how such an outstanding writer, whose works are translated and published all around the world, including France, a first-class literary man, orator and stylist, the author of *Buddenbrooks*, a work equal to great French, English or Russian novels, and hence a quintessence of a writer, could, with such a cruelty, caricature that 'civilization's literary man' along with his 'literary virtue' which draw its power from politics, that is from democracy, fraternity, freedom, and hence from what the 19th century acknowledged as the achievements of the French Revolution.

*I remembered the European literary man in me, of whom I am, admittedly, not too proud, and it occurred to me that I could also do what the bourgeois rhetoricians over there could do, that I had, after all, learned how to write just as well as they – and that this case, my case, in which a Latin heritage of esprit was combined with passionate, indiscriminate partisanship for Germany, was a rarity, an exception, to a certain extent a stroke of luck that had to become manifest.*²⁹

If it were merely a poor polemic, worthy to be ignored, condemning itself, by its incompetence or political provoking, to oblivion... But no, a monumental treatise emerged, containing not only a fratricidal polemic with Heinrich Mann or Romain Rolland, but also some arch-important self-interpretations of his own writings or the characteristics of those intellectuals who shaped the spiritual profile of Thomas Mann: notably Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. He devoted three great essays to all of them in the 1920s and 1930s. As we can see, his polemic with a civilization's literary man is a polemic with himself.

However, a question arises in the heart of his reflection, about how an artist not only can, but also should be associated with his nation, particularly during a war

²⁷ Ibid., p. 439 [p. 295].

²⁸ Ibid., p. 338 [p. 225].

²⁹ Ibid., p. 177 [p. 116].

determining its survival – or demise. It is not a question about a political involvement, on one side of a worldview or economic conflict, but about a nonpolitical involvement, allowing him to see the nation as one in its diversified cultural profile, different from other nations which for this reason, also for the sake of these differences, wage war with it. Thomas Mann's differentiation between culture and civilisation takes on the traits of a pattern differentiating spontaneous and musical Germany from literary, rational France, since:

Culture is unity, style, form, attitude, taste, is some spiritual organisation of the world, however eccentric, grotesque, savage, bloody and frightful it may be. Culture can include oracles, magic, pederasty, Vitzliputzli, human sacrifice, orgiastic cults, Inquisitions, autos-da-fé, St Vitus' dance, witch trials, poisoning, and the most colourful atrocities. Civilisation, however, is reason, enlightenment, mildness, morality, scepticism, dissolution – spirit.

Yes, spirit is civilian, is burgherly: it is the sworn enemy of the instincts, of the passion, it is antidemonic, antiheroic and I am only apparently contradicting myself when I add that it is, moreover, anti-genius.³⁰

A civilization's literary man is someone whose inspiration has not ended during the age of dictatorship and the rule of liberalism which both demonstrate that the 20th century is much harder than the preceding one. Civilization's literary man is a type of a literary man that is politicized, despite his affiliation or ideological banner. Mann characterises him as someone who adopts a certain external reasoning against the will of a considerable part of his own nation, which at the time of tragic historical developments:

Germany's radical literary man belongs, then, body and soul, to the entente, to the imperium of civilization. Not that he has had to struggle with himself, that the times have torn him in painful spiritual conflict; not that his heart is bound here and there, that he is trying by admonishing, punishing, appeasing, and preaching to pacify both sides, placing himself, like gentle Romain Rolland, above the fray.³¹

What a moderation in a lack of extreme stigmatization: the writer escapes from the predicate 'non-German,' escapes from the predicate 'non-national' – he draws *his own* situation from the particularity of German spirit, perceiving passionate politicization as a burden for the French Revolution, as a passion destroying not only the nation's unity, but also its spirituality. Despite strong criticism, there is no exclusion, cancel culture, erasing here: *It is, of course, not at all as if he were a bad citizen and patriot who did not care about Germany. On the contrary! He cares about her with all his might. He feels himself to the highest degree responsible for her fate.* [Reflections p. 45] Mann obviously shuns national pride which, at the times of crisis, would have justify his criticism of the enlightenment formation. *To dissolve in the nation with a battle cry – this is a fairly good way for us and others to forget about our own weaknesses.*

³⁰ T. Mann, "Gedanken im Kriege", in idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 13, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 528. See also: D. Borchmeyer, "Gedanken im Kriege – Ein Bruderzwist im Haus Mann", *Jahrbuch der Bayrischen Akademie der schönen Künste* 28, München 2014, pp. 36-61.

³¹ *Betrachtungen*, p. 64 [p. 38].

However, the personal fate of a civilization's literary man is his extreme politicization, or losing human and artistic substance in the heat of a passionate fray between worldview factions. I suppose the structure of a 'civilization's literary man' is not of a nature connected merely with the historical situation of Germany during the First World War: it emerges in all the places where internal, centripetal forces fight for identity with identity-based exclusion by forces posing for advocates of progress.

What Mann writes about in his essay is, on the one hand, a defence of the German national profile, while on the other, a manifesto of cosmopolitanism, distinguished by him from internationalism. For that German maintaining of the tradition, including the cosmopolitan tradition of Wagner, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, a term 'Sonderweg' was coined in the second half of the 20th century, meaning a particular, own course.³² When Mann took the side of the category of nation, his reasoning was nothing exceptional in Europe, particularly during the First World War, when the belligerent sides strived to universalise their own national orders. And this is exactly how Mann saw these processes: *Why this war, to which Germans prepared distrustfully and conscientiously, and which they would never want if they were not forced to want it, why Germans accepted it with enthusiasm and identify themselves with when it broke out? – Because they recognized in it something that brings about the Third Empire (Das Dritte Reich). – A what is that Dritte Reich of theirs? – A synthesis of power and the spirit, – their dream and demand, their ultimate goal of the war – that, and not Calais or the enslaving of peoples or the Congo.*³³ Mann's Third Empire is an expression of the national will of a 'third course' between the nationalism of the East and the rationality of the West, realized within a 'people's state' (Volksstaat), by means of acceptable leadership rather than political democratization. That is one side of Germanity, the national one, whose validity Mann will also emphasize in the speech delivered to his Polish friends from the Warsaw PEN-Club with a certain hint of criticism: *One is faithful to his own nation in the same extent as to himself. For a creative person, it is enough to be and to act in order to be faithful to the nation, since, as it is, in national issues everything depends on being and acting, while nothing depends on speeches, beliefs, bragging and preaching – and therefore from awareness.*³⁴ However, another, cosmopolitan side exists, which Mann already identified during the war in the cultural mediation between the East and the West, between rationalism and 'savagery', between 'culture' and 'civilisation' which, to him, also has an utterly spiritual aspect.

³² An important volume presenting the complex question of the debate over the German 'separate way' in history is: H. Orłowski (ed.), *Sonderweg. Spory o "niemiecką drogę odrębną"*, transl. by J. Kałużny, Poznań 2008. Pages 77-118 contain extensive passages of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* by T. Mann.

³³ T. Mann, „An die Redaktion des 'Svenska Dagbladet', Stockholm“, in idem, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 14.1: *Essays II (1914-1926)*, H. Kurze (ed.) in cooperation with J. Stoupy, J. Bender, S. Stachorski, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 120.

³⁴ T. Mann, „Rede gehalten beim Festessen des polnischen P.E.N.-Klubs in Warschau“, in idem, *Die Forderung des Tages. Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1925-1929*, Berlin 1930, p. 57.

POLITICIZATION

When translating the title of Mann's essay I decided to use the version *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, instead of 'Unpolitical'. First, "unpolitical" means someone distant from politics, while 'nonpolitical' employs its double meaning: at odds with politics, and not concerned about the refinement of sophisticated words referred to today as political correctness. From that perspective, it is a treatise presenting the results of passionate and unprofessional manner of doing politics, such as those we deal with today almost all around the world, the results connected with democratization, hence with the situation where *everyone can ask everyone else a question*, where everyone feels authorised to evaluate and comment, to rhetorical gestures and insults, while being profoundly convinced about their being right.

As things stand, no demand is more ridiculous and impudent than the one calling for the 'politicization of intellect' – as if intellect had to be politicized because politics is not capable of intellect and is degenerating more and more into a type of rhetorical vulgarization. But intellectual life is national life, and it is this one must separate from political life – a decision that may and must admittedly seem difficult or impossible to the conservative politician. But let them consider that the national culture not only can reach out more extensively than the state, than public, legally organized life (it does so in the case of the German Reich, which, of course, does not at all encompass the German cultural area), but that it also – and this in any case – is more extensive, more personal than the legal system, and this is why one would do an injustice to ascribe to the latter an exaggerated importance for the higher and true life of the nation.

This diagnosis about the necessity of the nation's domination and the withdrawal of politics, partisan politics in particular, associated by Mann with democracy, was nothing exceptional in the context of the intellectual reactions to the First World War in Germany. As early as during the war, the philosopher Georg Simmel distanced himself from the political actions detrimental to the nation's unity. This call for a genuine unity, combined with the conviction that certain changes are taking place in Germany during the war, was expressed by Georg Simmel in his speech in Strasbourg in November 1914.

*We only know, the outstanding philosopher said, that even the most fortunate success will not be able to allow a simple resurrection of the unspeakably dismembered former structure of Germany, it only promises that Germany will become complete different.³⁵ This is as far as changes are concerned, however, Simmel perceives unity as the overcoming of individualism, possible only in times of crisis: *What many of us were aware of, at least theoretically: that the existence of an individual contains only a limited part of a genuinely individual owning, resting upon itself – the individual in question does not gain any considerable awareness in the everyday peace, as in its scope what really differentiates people is**

³⁵ G. Simmel, *Deutschlands innere Wandlung. Rede, gehalten zu Strassburg am 7. Nov. 1914*, Strassburg 1914, p. 10.

a subject to practical interest and acts in a practical manner. It takes strong blows to the mutual foundation in order to experience it, in order to know: if it subsides to agitation when obtaining a new shape, then the isolated part of your personal existence will not be merely a part of someone else, but you have a new existence, in which what is most extremely individual and the most universal merge together, making up a new unity of life.³⁶ Certainly, Simmel's stance is not a political one, however, it opens, on the ground of philosophy of life, a perspective similar to that found in Thomas Mann's essay: gaining an existential capability of living in societies and upheavals.

After the war, conservative intellectualists, on the one hand, derided the members of Weimar Reichstag to the point that the book obviously failed to come to the attention of the general public, as none of them quoted Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Non-political Man*,³⁷ but on the other, the treatise must have affected the most notable proponents of the 'new nationalism,' or, using the widely discussed today and frequently rejected notion, 'conservative revolution'.³⁸ His impact was in the presentation of a civilization's literary man, so close to the Russian and *mutatis mutandis* Polish version of an educated citizen/member of intelligentsia, his roots being in the bestiality of Pyotr Verkhovensky in *Demons*, the cynicism of Bazarov from Turgenev's masterpiece *Fathers and Sons*, where all of Mann's fondness is on the side of the conservative character, similarly, the 'ape of the West,' Panshin from *Home of the Gentry* demonstrates caricatured traits of a bourgeois 'zapadnik' ('westernist'). This civilization's literary man brings into the nation – particularly in a critical situation – foreign valuations, distances himself from the community, strives to annihilate the national state, postulates the forming of political communities along worldview lines, thus making partisan politics, which dominates the national politics. Secondly, Mann believed, not unlike Simmel, that the war *destroyed the materialism of the times of peace* by creating a *new awareness of the community*,³⁹ which, in September 1918, following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia, for a month continued to hope for a success in the fight against the Western world, however, a certain tone of resignation is already present, a position of non-acceptance, but accepting the valuations of the West:

*This yes-and-still-no is my case. I have myself to blame for this self-contradiction that is reconciled not in logic but in national feeling, just as my opponent's is reconciled in anti-national feeling: it is the self-contradiction of this book, which at most presumes to present it, not to solve it.*⁴⁰

However, these contradictions, the greatest of which, that is, those between music and literature, between the world of the West and the monarchist-conservative state of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ G. Quabbe, *Tar a Ri. Variationen über ein konservatives Thema*, Berlin 1927, p. 5.

³⁸ When writing in the Foreword to his comment on the conservative revolution's attitude towards Thomas Mann, Kurzke mentions Heinrich von Gleichen, Wilhelm Stapel, Rudolf Thiel and Rheinland Schneider, but not Ernst Jünger, who was an avid reader of *Reflections*. See: E. Jünger, *Publicystyka polityczna 1919-1936*, Kraków 2007, p. 255.

³⁹ A. Mohler, K. Weissmann, *Die konservative Revolution...*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ *Betrachtungen*, p. 264 [p. 191].

the people founded on militarism, the contradiction between intellect and power, allow, firstly, to grasp the profound structures of Germanness, held in the vice of national pedagogics, in which Mann himself will participate following the outbreak of the war. Secondly, and, perhaps, more importantly, they form a refreshing perspective to look from at the DOGMATISM of liberal stances, which, growing from revolutionary traditions, increasingly abandon the conservative component, evident in today's drifting of formerly bourgeois, conservative political parties in the West to the left. Mann's declaration that he seeks these contradictions in a 'national sense' – no matter how we evaluate his aestheticism and his 'yes-and-no' – is difficult to overrate today.

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