

# The Dubious Magic of Male Beauty

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**THE DUBIOUS MAGIC OF MALE BEAUTY:  
POLITICS AND HOMOEROTICISM  
IN THE LIVES AND WORKS OF THOMAS AND KLAUS MANN**

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Homosexuality has a notable presence in the lives and works of both Thomas and Klaus Mann. Yet at first glance, when considering the ways in which each expressed his sense of homosexuality, it is hard to conceive of a larger difference between father and son. Thomas Mann (1875-1955), the prototypical German bourgeois paterfamilias, largely sublimated his homoerotic desire in his art and political writings. In many of his novels, novellas, and essays, he tended to broach homoeroticism in veiled language and to link it with one of his recurrent themes: the dichotomy between the ordinary man and the artist. But in his personal life he kept homosexuality at a scrupulous distance, despite - as his posthumously published diaries reveal - deeply-felt homoerotic sentiments and several brief love affairs in his youth that continued to hold a fascination for him throughout his life. He openly expressed his homosexual feelings only in his diary. One of the factors that prompted him, in 1945, to destroy most of his diaries written before 1933 may well be that he felt that too many passages were too frank and would damage his reputation.

By contrast, the life of Klaus Mann (1906-1949) can easily be interpreted as an act of defiance against his father's conservative, detached stance. Whereas Thomas Mann chose to marry and to entrust his private feelings regarding male beauty only to his diary, Klaus was more or less open about his own homosexual preference, seeking actively to make it an integral part of his private and public life. In response to his father's Wilhelmian, bourgeois milieu, he embraced an unconventional, bohemian life-style, feeling very much at home in the fashionable Berlin of the 1920s.

On closer inspection, however, and if their senses of homosexuality are seen against the backdrop of developments in their political thinking, the distinction between father and son seems less clear-cut. Following the rise of Nazism, both of them gave up their initially more or less apolitical stance, came to adopt similar political views, and publicly denounced Nazism. Both Thomas and Klaus Mann nevertheless did not connect homosexuality and democratic political activism. Focusing on the way both authors linked the personal and the political, I will argue in this article that it is not possible to understand their ultimately pessimistic perception of homosexuality without taking into account the development of their political views on National Socialism.

**Thomas Mann: Erotic Irony**

In one of Thomas Mann's early works in which homosexuality figures prominently, *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), it is closely associated with decadence and a deadly Dionysian intoxication. The protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, is a celebrated author who has produced an impressive oeuvre thanks to his ascetic way of life. But the price he has had to pay for success is his alienation from ordinary life: he lives in a purely mental world. While on

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holiday in Venice, however, he is completely thrown off balance by the physical beauty of young Tadzio. Aschenbach falls hopelessly in love with the boy and stays on in cholera-stricken Venice. Just before he dies, he arrives at the conclusion that 'wir Dichter nicht weise noch würdig sein können.... Dass wir notwendig in die Irre gehen, notwendig liederlich und Abenteurer des Gefühls bleiben' (522).

In *Der Tod in Venedig*, Thomas Mann offers a bleak image of how he might have ended up as an artist if he had not secured a bourgeois life-style through marriage. Before marrying Katja Pringsheim in 1905, he maintained a close friendship with Paul Ehrenberg, a painter one year his junior. Ehrenberg was instrumental in dissolving Mann's depression and the sense of solitude that troubled him during his early writing career. But from the beginning, their relationship - probably characterized by an erotic rather than sexual dimension - was also under much stress. Their personalities were quite different and Ehrenberg elicited contradictory feelings in Mann, feelings of affection but also of jealousy and contempt. More than once, his love for Ehrenberg caused him great despair, until his engagement with Katja put an end to their relationship.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the strong emotions that young men aroused in Thomas Mann, as countless entries in his diary demonstrate, his love for his wife was mainly characterized by dispassionateness.<sup>3</sup> Mann's homoerotic desires, however, seem never really to have threatened his relationship with her: their stable marriage provided him, as he claimed, "sober happiness" (Mayer 1980: 477). He became the proud father of six children, and he eagerly posed as head of the family. In his 1925 essay "Über die Ehe," he acknowledged that he had already opted for a marital relationship before meeting his future wife. Significantly, in this very essay he also set forth his views on homosexual relationships: these are bound to fail because of their precariousness. Whereas marriage embodies social morality and ordinary bourgeois life, based as it is on mutual faithfulness, responsibility, and fertility, homosexuality can thrive only on beauty. Mann reflected on homosexual relationships solely in terms of aesthetic fulfillment and barren *l'art pour l'art* and as such, he believed, they can only result in loneliness, melancholy, and death. In "Über die Ehe," he clearly indicated that as an artist he needed the stability and social security of marriage and family in order to protect himself from the tragic fate of Gustav Aschenbach.

Despite his critical view of homosexuality, Thomas Mann did not unequivocally reject it, even though he could write in a bantering tone about his "faible" (*Tagebücher 1949-1950*: 212; cf. Zijderveld 1993). On the contrary, his diaries show how he cherished his homoerotic desires and felt they were important to him: "es gibt im Grunde nichts 'Schöneres'," so he wrote, "dieser allem zum Grunde liegenden, wahnhaften und doch leidenschaftlich behaupteten Enthusiasmus für den *unvergleichlichen, von nichts in der Welt übertroffenen Reiz männlicher Jugend, ... von jeher mein Glück und Elend.*"<sup>4</sup> In a letter to the poet Carl

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<sup>2</sup> See *Tagebücher 1918-1921*: 301, 652; *Tagebücher 1933-1934*: 411; "Lebensabriss": 107; *Briefe 1889-1936*: 27-28, 45-46, 53.

<sup>3</sup> For Mann's responses to young men, see *Tagebücher 1918-1921*: 111-12, 166, 181, 235, 282, 287, 290, 293, 379, 453-54, 470, 474, 530, 535, 540, 544; *Tagebücher 1933-1934*: 185, 296, 397-98, 411-12, 482; *Tagebücher 1935-1936*: 58, 306, 369, 409; *Tagebücher 1949-1950*: 207-16, 219, 220-21, 230, 238-40, 246-48.

<sup>4</sup> *Tagebücher 1933-1934*: 309, (cf. 412); *Tagebücher 1949-1950*: 239. Toward the end of his life, he wrote about his love for a young Swiss waiter: "Weltruhm ist mir nichtig genug, aber

Maria Weber, he pointed out that male love may not be natural, but that that is precisely the reason for its spiritual and cultural significance (*Briefe 1889-1936*: 178). Because homoeroticism lies at the root of both art and social ties, according to Mann, it is superior to ordinary, progenital, and essentially insipid heterosexuality (cf. Sommerhage 1983: 139). Clearly Mann's attitude toward homosexuality was ambiguous. On the one hand, he was infinitely fascinated by it, for it constituted, as I will explain, an important source of inspiration for his literary work as well as his political views. On the other hand, from a personal standpoint, he experienced his own desire as troubling, and as a bourgeois citizen he could only distrust it. He could never fully disavow his homosexual sentiments, though, if only because it would have meant a denial of his identity as an artist. He did, however, maintain a reserved stance: his stance toward homosexuality was that of the (ironic) observer. Producing literature and political commentary functioned as means of both expressing and controlling his desire (cf. Böhm 1991). The way he recreated his relationship with Ehrenberg in *Tonio Kröger* (1903) and, much later, in *Doktor Faustus* (1947) is indicative of this attitude.

Mann's representation of his friend is marked by a mixture of desire and contempt. Ehrenberg, whose appearance and charm captivated people's attention immediately, was to Mann a model of carefree life in which he, as an intellectual artist, a man of the mind (*Geist*), could never partake. Mann strongly felt, however, that Ehrenberg failed to understand what inspired him to be a writer; intellectually speaking, he had no respect for Ehrenberg. Because his love for him went hand in hand with contempt, he also felt somewhat humiliated (Feuerlicht 1982: 89-90). This split between art and life, which dominated his relationship to Ehrenberg, constitutes the main theme of *Tonio Kröger*. The novella's protagonist of this name, who, like Mann, considers himself an outsider because of his artistic aspirations, longs for friendship with the blonde, uncomplicated, and sprightly Hans Hansen:

... meine tiefste und verstohlenste Liebe gehört den Blonden und Blauäugigen, den hellen Lebendigen, den Glücklichen, Liebenswürdigen und Gewöhnlichen. ... sie [die Liebe] ist gut und fruchtbar. Sehnsucht ist darin und schwermütiger Neid und ein klein wenig Verachtung und eine ganze keusche Seligkeit. (338)

At the same time, however, Tonio understands that Hans remains beyond his reach: "Ich stehe zwischen zwei Welten, bin in keiner daheim und habe es infolgedessen ein wenig schwer" (337).

In *Doktor Faustus*, Ehrenberg reappears as the charming Rudi Schwerdtfeger, who tries to seduce the brilliant and unapproachable composer Adrian Leverkühn, the prototypical German artist. The boyish Schwerdtfeger, a blue-eyed "Blondkopf" who, according to Leverkühn's jealous bosom friend Serenus Zeitblom, lacks any sense of intellectual complexity or literary sensibility, endangers Leverkühn's artistic need for solitude. The light-hearted Schwerdtfeger evokes a "schwermütige Neigung" in him that has all the characteristics of "erotischer Ironie" (265-66, 467, 551). Eventually, Schwerdtfeger fails to break Leverkühn's self-chosen isolation.

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wie gar kein Gewicht hat es mehr gegen ein Lächeln von ihm, den Blick seiner Augen, die Weichheit seiner Stimme!" (*Tagebücher 1949-1950*: 215). Well on in years, Mann's homosexual sentiments often gave rise to melancholy self-reflection and sad pondering on his past life.

A leitmotif in Mann's work is the opposition between artist and bourgeois citizen, or between *Geist* (creative mind) and ordinary life. He tries to maintain a balance between the two by means of irony. This irony primarily betrays a relativist stance: the mind is seen as relative to life and vice versa. However, by using irony Mann also evokes a certain amount of tension, one that in his case is often charged with erotic energy. In *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918), he describes his use of irony as the voice of a creative mind that is life-preserving and inspired by Eros. He speaks of a longing which oscillates incessantly between life and mind. These two forces constitute, as he points out,

Zwei Welten, deren Beziehung erotisch ist, ohne dass die Geschlechts polarität deutlich wäre, ohne dass die eine männliche, die andere das weibliche Prinzip darstellte: das sind Leben und Geist. Darum gibt es zwischen ihnen keine Vereinigung, sondern nur die kurze, berauschte Illusion der Vereinigung und Verständigung, eine ewige Spannung ohne Lösung. ... Es ist das Problem der Schönheit, dass der Geist das Leben, das Leben aber den Geist als 'Schönheit' empfindet. (569)

Later, in an essay on Schopenhauer, Mann would characterize the artist not only as a mediator between mind and sensuality but also between male and female:

Genau dies denn also ist die Stellung der Kunst zwischen Geist und Leben. Androgyn wie der Mond, weiblich im Verhältnis zum Geiste, aber männlich zeugend im Leben ..., ist ihr Wesen das eines mondhaft-zauberischen Mittlertums zwischen den beiden Regionen. Dies Mittlertum ist die Quelle ihrer Ironie. ("Schopenhauer": 535)

As a sign of his ambivalence with respect to homosexuality, irony plays a key role in Mann's work. Irony and aestheticism generally provided him the opportunity to keep a distance and express both fascination and mistrust. In terms of his sexual feelings, Mann was in fact quite sensitive and vulnerable. He could not dispense with these stylistic means for they provided the only way to simultaneously conceal and express such sentiments.

### **Klaus Mann: Aestheticism and Politics**

Whereas Thomas Mann sublimated his homosexual desire by hiding it behind a facade of respectable bourgeois life, Klaus Mann strongly resented his father's Wilhelmian milieu. "I prided myself on being disorderly and eccentric, as my father is punctual and disciplined. I reveled in mysticism, for I thought him a skeptic," he wrote in his autobiographical *The Turning Point* (196; cf. Härle 1988). During the 1920s he led a bohemian existence, emphasizing his role as outsider and openly parading his sexual preference. Like so many artists and intellectuals of the Weimar Republic, young Klaus Mann was skeptical about politics and bourgeois life with its typical sense of security.

... unsere sozial-politische Verantwortung - eine verdriessliche Sache, aber nun einmal nicht aus der Welt zu schaffen. Solange wir uns mit diesem öden Zeug beschäftigen (man kommt nicht immer darum herum), lasst uns also denn recht brav und nüchtern sein! Wenn das leidige soziale Pensum erledigt ist, werden wir uns wieder mit unseren Ekstasen amüsieren dürfen. (*Der Wendepunkt*: 224)

The themes of his literary work involved personal and existentialist problems, such as love, eroticism, solitude, and death. He belonged to the post-World War I generation, which no longer had an optimistic belief in reason and social progress. Influenced by Nietzsche and such poets as Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis, Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine, Walt Whitman, and Stefan George, he was attracted to a decadent sensuality, flirting with the irrational vitalism then popular among young Germans. In his first autobiography, *Kind dieser Zeit* (1932: 179-80), he wrote that he preferred "Das Extravagante, Exzentrische, Anrühige gegen das massvoll Gehaltene; das irrational Trunkene gegen das von der Vernunft Gebändigte und Beherrschte." In his early work, the collection of stories *Vor dem Leben* (1925), the play *Anja und Esther* (1925), and the novel *Der fromme Tanz* (1925), youthful rebelliousness goes hand in hand with an almost unconstrained experience of (homo)eroticism - an affront to most in the contemporary critical scene.

Thomas Mann was far from pleased - to put it mildly - with his son's unconventional way of life. The essay "Über die Ehe" may be read as a rejection of Klaus's life-style which, in fact, basically depended on his father's fame and financial support. However, his doublehearted criticism of his son - as Thomas Mann was also fascinated by (male) beauty, sensuality, and decadence - soon lost its validity. After the rise of Nazism, Klaus gradually abandoned his apolitical aestheticism, irrationalism, and vitalistic glorification of youth and the body. Literary authors like Gottfried Benn and Ernst Jünger, for whom truth and justice were subordinate to style and intensity and with whose aestheticism and anti-bourgeois attitude he had formerly felt a close affinity, were vigorously attacked by him in the early 1930s (cf. Kerker 1974; Ipema 1985). In a letter to Benn, Klaus Mann criticized his naive sympathy for the Nazi regime:

Es scheint ja heute ein beinahe zwangsläufiges Gesetz, dass eine zu starke Sympathie mit dem Irrationalen zur politischen Reaktion führt ... Erst die grosse Gebärde gegen die Zivilisation ...; plötzlich ist man beim Kultus der Gewalt und dann schon beim Adolf Hitler. (Quoted in Spangenberg 1986: 45)

Earlier, he had attacked Ernst Jünger because of his vitalistic glorification of war as a source of renewal:

Den Atavismus im enormsten Ausmass als 'Fortschritt' bezeichnen? ... Machen wir uns nicht besser als wir sind. Wir haben alles in uns. In unseren Träumen ist jede Greuelthat vorbereitet. Nichts ist viehish, nichts pervers, sondern alles natürlich: 'natürlich' freilich im schlimmsten und tiefsten Sinne des Wortes. Der Mensch ist nicht gut, da die Natur es nicht ist. Grausamkeit und Lust gehören zusammen. Wenn die Hemmungen fallen, kommt die Orgie des Sadismus. Kultur hat die Hemmungen als Basis ihres Bestandes. Man kann die Katastrophe wollen - und Ernst Jünger zum Beispiel will nichts als sie -, aber es ist entschieden Heuchelei, sie als Fortschritt zu bezeichnen. Zurück zum Tier! wäre die konsequente anarchistisch-kriegslüsterne Parole. Nur ist das entfesselte Tier in seinen Bestialitäten naiver und nicht halb so einfallsreich wie der wieder entfesselte, seiner Hemmungen beraubte Mensch. ("Krieg und Sexualität": 85-86)

Clearly, following such an argument, it seemed difficult to draw a line between unfettered sexual passion, glorified by Klaus Mann earlier, and the atavistic, destructive urges so characteristic of Nazism. Therefore, the aspects of homosexuality which he found so alluring

- including its anti-bourgeois hedonism, flagrant promiscuity, excessive waste, and an unproductive and merely lust-oriented sexuality - were bound to become a source of anxiety to him.

Whereas during the twenties he largely lived a literary dandy's carefree, individualistic, hedonistic life, Klaus Mann changed into an antifascist political activist in the early 1930s, at a time when his father still hesitated to commit himself politically (cf. Kerker 1974, 1977). As a spokesman of the better Germany in exile, Klaus Mann edited two journals, *Die Sammlung* (1933-35) in Amsterdam and *Decision* (1941-42) in New York, both of which aimed at fighting fascism and increasing political consensus among émigrés. His 1936 novel *Mephisto* related the story of actor Hendrik Höfgen, who after the Nazi takeover refuses to give up his career ambitions and thereby becomes an opportunistic supporter of the new regime. Despite his private dislike of Nazism, Höfgen is put in charge of the state theater company thanks to his friendship with one of the party leaders. Although Klaus Mann insisted from the beginning that his novel was not a *roman à clef*, suggesting that Hendrik Höfgen represented only a certain type of character - that of the artist-intellectual who, blinded by ambition, renounces his principles - it was clear to everyone that Höfgen was modeled after the actor Gustav Gründgens, who had become superintendent of the Prussian State Theater thanks to his good relationship with Hermann Goering. During the 1920s, Klaus Mann had worked quite closely with Gründgens: the two men admired each other and collaborated in the controversial performance of Mann's play *Anja und Esther*. Mann's sister Erika, who was also involved with the performance, was married to Gründgens for some time. Mann's thinly veiled condemnation of Gründgens in *Mephisto* was meant as a critique of the apolitical attitude of the many German artists who held on to the belief that art had an autonomous value that transcended everyday political realities.

### **Thomas Mann: Homoeroticism and German Nationalism**

During the 1930s, Thomas Mann would arrive at similar political views, yet the development of his political thinking was more intricate than that of his son Klaus. Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918), which breathes the spirit of Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophies, illustrates how much Mann was a product of the Wilhelminian *Bildungsbürgertum*. This book appeared in the wake of the First World War and was a response to the democratic activism of his brother Heinrich - the prototype of the accursed *Zivilisationsliterat*. In this book, Mann revealed himself as a conservative nationalist who passionately defended German culture against Western liberal democracies - notably France - which he felt were displaying signs of moral decay. According to Mann, democratization entails the abolition of the distinction between internalized, spiritualized *Kultur* and the world of pragmatic politics directed solely toward at superficial social and economic realities. The collapse of this distinction results inevitably in a lowering of artistic standards and a politicization of art. Basically, his defense of the authoritarian Wilhelminian German tradition is a plea for the autonomy of art. Mann supports his nationalist preference for (German) Romanticism over (French) Enlightenment with an appeal to the spirit of irony. Irony excludes, as he puts it, all forms of political activism or efforts at improving society because such activism denies the rich and contradictory diversity of life. In addition, there is the danger of radicalism and fanaticism that inevitably results from univocal views or a simplistic moralism.

Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, in which he defines conservatism as "erotische Ironie des Geistes" (569), can also be read as his political pledge of affectionate

allegiance to the blonde, blue-eyed German male hero. The book's homoerotic nature derives from its misogynist stance and its celebration of heroic, militaristic masculinity and male bonding among soldiers. It is abundantly quite clear that Mann was fascinated by the German-nationalist ideal of the *Männerbund*. Soon after the publication of his political essay, he saw his own views confirmed in Hans Blüher's two-part work on homoerotic male bonding, *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* (1917-1919). Blüher was one of the leading right-wing ideologues of the *Männerbund*: he favored a purification of German society under the guidance of elitist, all-male brotherhoods whose members would be bonded to one another by homoeroticism and charismatic leadership. According to him, sublimated homosexual feeling was an important factor in binding groups of men together, from the sanctity of religious orders to the masculine ethos of military organizations. Thomas Mann was deeply impressed by Blüher's work, which he praised as "entschieden gross und tief germanisch" (*Briefe 1889-1936*: 177). In his diary he noted: "Las ... Blüher. Einseitig aber wahr. Es unterliegt für mich selbst keinem Zweifel dass 'auch' die 'Betrachtungen' ein Ausdruck meiner sexuellen Invertiertheit sind" (*Tagebücher 1918-1921*: 303).

In many respects, the strong anti-feminist and anti-democratic overtones of Blüher's ideal of male bonding are reflected in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. Mann saw a diametrical opposition between democratic progress and homoerotic masculinity. Whereas he assumed the German state to be homoerotic in nature, he pejoratively associated French cosmopolitan civilization with the feminine and a vulgar heterosexuality. "Man versteht sich kaum auf die Demokratie, wenn man sich auf ihren femininen Einschlag nicht versteht," he wrote. The French political system he described as "die Politik mit Damenbedienung," adding: "'Die Freiheit und die Hure sind die kosmopolitischen Dinge unter der Sonne.' Welche Internationale war es, die selbst im Weltkriege hielt? Die waagerechte" (307).<sup>5</sup> Mann was in full agreement with Blüher who - contrary to common opinion - linked homosexuality with German culture's alleged innate masculinity. Moreover, he could identify with Blüher's views because the ideal of male bonding did not exclude the idea of the nuclear family. Blüher felt that the *Männerbund* and the family were complementary, that a man could participate in both spheres. In "Über die Ehe" it becomes clear that Mann applied this idea to his own situation by characterizing the artist as the (ironic) mediator between bourgeois life and artistic mind, or between a heterosexual and homosexual sphere (cf. *Briefe 1889-1936*: 178).

In the same essay, Mann suggested that the relationship between the (German) state

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier, in an essay on Frederick the Great, Thomas Mann had introduced the contradiction between German militaristic masculinity and what he thought of as French feminine civilization, thereby hinting at the Prussian king's homosexual preference: "Eine tiefe Misogynie ist ... von seinem Wesen untrennbar. ... das andere Geschlecht liess ihn nicht nur kalt, er hasste es, er verhöhnnte es, er duldet es nicht in seiner Nähe. ... Offenbar wurde Friedrichs Männlichkeit von dem weiblichen Gegenpol nicht in der üblichen Weise angezogen. Es ist denkbar, dass sein langes Kriegertum dazu beitrug, seine Instinkte dem anderen Geschlecht zu entfremden. Es hat mehr Kriegersleute gegeben, die Weiberfeinden werden oder wurden. Vielleicht gewöhnte die Lageratmosphäre vieler Jahre den Sinn dieses Zöglings französischer Frauen dermassen ans Männliche, dass er das Weib am Ende 'nicht mehr riechen' konnte, - und dies in dem französischen Jahrhundert, einem rechten Weibsjahrhundert, welches von dem 'Parfüm des Ewig-Weiblichen' ganz erfüllt und durchtränkt war" ("Friedrich und die grosse Koalition": 43-44; see also Mann's "Gedanken im Kriege": 20-21, 23).



and homosexuality was an ambiguous one. On the one hand, the state sought to oppose homosexuality for reasons that have to do with its population politics, but, on the other hand, the state's functioning was rooted in homoerotic bonds of men. This shows the extent to which Blüher's ideology of male brotherhood affected his political thinking, even after Mann went on in the 1920s to repudiate some of his conservative views as put forward in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (cf. Wisskirchen 1992). His famous speech "Von deutscher Republik" (1922), in defense of a democratic Weimar Republic, also bears the stamp of the ideal of male bonding. Before an audience that included Social-Democratic President Ebert, Mann argued that homoeroticism was not only reserved for the reactionary *Freikorps* that fought against a democratic Germany in the aftermath of World War I. German democracy, too, had an erotic dimension. Mann explained how his republican sympathy was inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman, who had glorified male love as the basis of American democracy. Whitman's homoerotic ideal, according to Mann, could serve as guiding principle for the Weimar Republic because of the numerous similarities between the American poet's world view and the early nineteenth century German tradition of romantic nationalism. The patriotic *Burschenschaften* and German poets like Novalis and Goethe would have favored a "social eroticism" in order to do away with the gap between the personal and the political. In his speech, Mann called upon Germany's youth to link up with this tradition.

Thomas Mann was particularly interested in reaching the younger generation, because its members would be capable of displaying more openness in sexual matters than the older generations. In this context, he once again referred to Hans Blüher who as a young man had caused an uproar with his book about the German youth movement, *Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung als erotisches Phänomen* (1912). In this book Blüher claimed, on the basis of his own experience, that homoerotic friendships, fostered by sex-segregated education in Wilhelmian Germany, were essential for the cohesion and popularity of the *Wandervogel*. Mann also indicated, however, that he no longer shared Blüher's rejection of the feminine. In "Von deutscher Republik" and, three years later, in "Über die Ehe" as well, he interpreted social tolerance toward same-sex relationships, which he felt was growing among young people, in light of the emancipation of women, the weakening of gender differences, and the modern ideal of androgynous beauty. Mann thought that in a democratic, egalitarian Weimar Republic, the so-called natural bisexuality of human beings, discovered by Freud, could come to fruition and would fulfill an essential precondition for realizing "social eroticism." In contrast to his standpoint in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, Mann demonstrated in "Von deutscher Republik" a positive attitude toward the sensuous aspects of homoeroticism. Sensuality is no longer derogated as intrinsically foreign to spiritual German *Kultur*; instead, by bridging the gap between mind and life, it would guarantee its humanism. Sexuality is seen as a social phenomenon.

Despite his siding with democracy and his positive outlook on increased sexual freedom, and although there was a multifaceted sexual reform movement in Germany during the 1920s, Mann was far from advancing (homo)sexual emancipation. In his political essays, homoeroticism played a prominent role, yet he was hardly concerned with the social position of homosexuals and their emancipation. He did sign a petition of the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* in which the German government was asked to abolish the illegality of "unnatural vice" (under Paragraph 175 of the Penal Code), but he spurned Magnus Hirschfeld's biological and emancipatory theory of the third sex, which understood homosexuality as a certain feminization of the man and a masculinization of the woman. Mann's only substantial contribution to the homosexual movement, a brief article objecting to

Paragraph 175, appeared as "Protest der Prominenten gegen die Beibehaltung und der Verschärfung des Paragraphs 175" in *Eros*. This journal was published by Adolf Brand, whose *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* favored a cultural-aesthetic and masculine-nationalist approach toward homoeroticism, thus demonstrating an antagonism toward the views of Hirschfeld, a medical doctor and Social Democrat.

Homosexuality plays such a significant role in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* and "Von deutscher Republik" because Thomas Mann regarded politics from the angle of aesthetics (Sommerhage 1983: 123, 222-23). It is in this light that we should read his comments on his altered political views but unchanged creed, which appeared in the preface to the book publication of "Von Deutscher Republik": "Ich habe vielleicht meine Gedanken geändert, - nicht meinen Sinn" (116). This unchanged conviction consisted of a call for a harmonic bridging of the contradiction between life and mind, a view largely derived from Goethe's humanist *Bildungsideal*. (Cf. Mann's "Die geistigen Tendenzen des heutigen Deutschlands": 229; and his "Brief an Hermann Grafen Keyserling": 603)

This essentially apolitical approach toward politics is also evident in *Der Zauberberg* (1924). In this novel, Mann presented the development of his views on homosexuality in quite a veiled manner.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist, twenty-three-year-old Hans Castorp, travels from Hamburg to a sanitarium high up in the Alps to pay a visit to his cousin who suffers from tuberculosis. His planned stay of three weeks will last seven years. Castorp breaks the habit of his *low country* bourgeois existence because he is fascinated by the alienating life of the sanitarium and by one of its patients in particular: a young Russian woman with Asiatic eyes and wide cheekbones who enjoys slamming with doors and despises all bourgeois conventions. Castorp falls in love with this woman, yet this love has a clearly homoerotic dimension, not only because of the boy-like features which Mann uses to describe her and the phallic symbolism he employs. By meeting Clawdia Chaucat, Castorp retrieves a lost and forgotten youthful passion as he discovers, half-dreamingly, that she reminds him of Pribislav Hippe, a boy in school to whom he was silently attracted ten years before. "Wie merkwürdig ähnlich er ihr sah, - dieser hier oben! Darum also interessiere ich mir so für sie? Oder vielleicht auch: habe ich mich darum so für *ihn* interessiert?" (174). Briefly after he arrives at this awareness, his lungs appear to be affected, his temperature rises, and he completely falls under the spell of the thin air of the sanitarium, its atmosphere saturated with disease and death as well as sensuality. Castorp's love for Clawdia Chaucat, whom he adores from a distance and who serves as an object for projecting his memories of Pribislav Hippe, corresponds with features that Mann associates with homosexuality in "Über die Ehe": it is insecure, infertile, unsocial, and without prospects. As the narrator comments: "dass ein Mann sich für eine kranke Frau interessiert, dabei war doch entschieden nicht mehr Vernunft, als seinerzeit bei Hans Castorps stillem Interesse für Pribislav Hippe gewesen war" (182-83).

After he has declared his love to Clawdia Chaucat, just prior to her - temporarily - leaving the sanitarium, Castorp regains a certain emotional balance. With great interest he listens to the heated political debates between two fellow patients: the enlightened humanist Settembrini, who presents himself from the beginning as a sort of mentor to Castorp (suggesting a kind of pedagogical eros), and the sinister Jesuit Naphta, who seeks to undercut Settembrini's sense of rational certainty. Inspired by Naphta's religious background, Castorp becomes interested in male bonding. He perceives an analogy between Naphta's Jesuit order, the army in which his already deceased cousin was an officer, the Freemasons of which

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<sup>6</sup> For the next three paragraphs, I rely on Böhm 1985 and Härle 1986 and 1992.

Settembrini is a member, and the fraternity which the bragging medical director of the sanitarium seems never to have left. Here *Der Zauberberg* clearly betrays, again, the influence of Blüher: in the second part of his *Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft*, he discusses these four male organizations as classical examples of *Männerbünde*.

When Clawdia Chaucaat returns to the sanitarium accompanied by a lover, the Dutch coffee trader Peeperkorn, Castorp turns his back on male bonding and, consequently, on politics. The influence of male bonding can still be felt however, in one respect: he has - in a Freudian sense - sublimated his sexual desire. Clawdia Chaucaat no longer confuses him as he reconciles himself with the idea that she (and hence Pribislav Hippe) is unattainable for him. At the same time, he downplays his masculinity by adopting a passive, detached stance regarding sexuality. This is expressed in particular through his aesthetic idealization of androgyny and his reflections on beauty and hermaphroditic phenomena in nature. Eventually, Hans Castorp is neither interested in embracing a male or female identity, nor a heterosexual or homosexual identity.

Autobiographical elements of Mann's life are echoed in the development of *Der Zauberberg's* protagonist. The political discussions that fill a good part of the novel are a reflection of his own views during and after the World War I. It is striking that Castorp, though closely following and sometimes participating in the debates between Settembrini and Naphta, ultimately ignores politics. By and large, Castorp - characterized by Mann as "problem child of the times" - remains aloof from all contemporary social issues during his stay in Davos.<sup>7</sup> The isolated mountain sanitarium, affected by disease and death, symbolizes a specifically German view of culture of which Mann himself was an exponent. It was the tendency in German artists and intellectuals, and to some extent of the entire German *Bildungsbürgertum*, to hide behind a sense of moral superiority and inhabit a singularly intellectual and aesthetic universe. This resulted in a rather naive and unpragmatic understanding of actual political realities.

As pointed out above, Thomas Mann himself approached politics largely from an aesthetic angle. In his comments on the democratic Weimar Republic in "Von deutscher Republik," he did not invoke the ideals of the French Revolution, liberalism, or socialism, but instead the world views of poets like Novalis, Goethe, and Whitman who couched their humanism in various, partly erotic, aesthetic ideals.<sup>8</sup> Mann's siding with democracy was based on the ideal of *Bildung* and homoerotic aesthetics, just like his conservative-nationalist appeal in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. Idealization of male beauty made him view homoeroticism as an essential part of the identity of the German nation, irrespective of the political status quo. Although he resolutely disapproved of National Socialism from the beginning, he claimed that this ideology's homoerotic dimension was abundantly clear in the

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<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Mann calls the Germans "rechte Sorgenkinder des Lebens" because of their tendency to turn to "den Mächten des Unbewussten und des vorkosmisch-lebensträchtigen Dunkels" which is a "Tendenz zum Abgrunde, zur Urform, zum Chaos" ("Die Wiedergeburt der Anständigkeit": 229).

<sup>8</sup> Later, Thomas Mann acknowledged to his son Golo that his declaration of sympathy for the Weimar Republic was of a purely literary nature. "It was a combination of beautiful quotations from romantic poets, such as Novalis and others, with no relation whatsoever to reality," according to Golo Mann (see Hanssen 1985: 15).

prominent role that male bonding played in the Nazi movement.<sup>9</sup>

Als ob die Homosexualität nicht wesentlich dazu gehörte! Sie ist ja nicht immer Effeminiertheit, sondern oft auch Übermännlichkeit und gehört zur militaristisch-heroischen und Kriegsmanns-haltung ... Sie gehört zum Kriege, stammt aus ihm und ist bei militaristischen Völkern zu Hause, zum Beispiel beim deutschen, das, im Gegensatz zu den weibliebenden und galanten Franzosen, ein homoerotisches Volk ist. ("Leiden an Deutschland": 734)<sup>10</sup>

Evidently, this perspective was at odds with Klaus Mann's antifascist activism which came to the forefront in the early 1930s.

### **Klaus Mann: Homosexuality and Antifascism**

When Klaus Mann was about to emerge as one of the leading intellectuals of Germany's antifascist exile community in Europe, he published an essay entitled "Die Linke und das 'Laster'" (1934). In this essay he spoke out against the political use of homosexuality in the antifascist camp; he characterized homosexuals as the "Jews of the antifascists." During the early 1930s, German Social Democrats and Communists alike seized upon the homosexual orientation of some Nazi leaders, especially Ernst Röhm, with the aim of discrediting the entire National-Socialist movement. They constructed a highly pejorative stereotype of Nazism by linking it with homosexuality. Antifascist leftists created the impression that homosexuality was widespread in Nazi organizations. The homophobia of German Social Democrats and Communists was bolstered by developments in the Soviet Union, where "pederasty" was criminalized in a new law, promulgated in 1934. Contrasting the purity and healthiness of socialist ethics with the moral corruption of Nazi Germany, the renowned writer Maxim Gorky placed homosexual activities on a par with bourgeois decadence and fascist perversion.

In his article, Klaus Mann put on record that in Western Europe as well as the Soviet Union, there was a general tendency among socialists in the 1930s to identify homosexuality

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<sup>9</sup> See *Tagebücher 1933-1934*: 470, 497, 592. Mann criticized the various "nationalistisch-völkisch" movements, Nazism in particular, for violating the values of German *Kultur*. Against the irrational vitalism they advocated (a one-sided and barbaric view of life in Mann's eyes), he emphasized from the mid-twenties onward that humanism and democracy were secured by the rational and enlightened spirit. He also came out in favor of closer ties between the German *Kultur* tradition and the Western European sense of Enlightenment, notably the French one. See: "Das Problem der deutsch-französischen Beziehungen"; "Deutschland und die Demokratie"; "Die geistigen Tendenzen des heutigen Deutschlands"; "Deutsche Ansprache. Ein Appell an die Vernunft"; and "Die Wiedergeburt der Anständigkeit."

<sup>10</sup> While in exile in Bern, Mann wrote after seeing a German movie: "Wobei mir wieder auffiel, dass die deutschen Filme mir etwas entgegenbringen, was die anderer Nationalitäten kaum aufweisen: die Freude an jugendlichen Körpern, namentlich männlichen in ihrer Nacktheit. Das hängt mit der deutschen 'Homosexualität' zusammen und fehlt unter den Reizen französischer und amerikanischer Produkte" (*Tagebücher 1933-1934*: 308-09; see also *Tagebücher 1935-1936*: 258).

with Nazism. He especially criticized the leftist ploy of automatically equating the fascist *Männerbund* with homosexuality. While acknowledging that male bonding played a significant role in the Nazi movement, Mann argued that it was not unique to fascism: the example of the American poet Walt Whitman provided evidence that the ideals of male bonding and friendship could also have a democratic character. He also referred to the German poet Stefan George, whose glorification of the *Männerbund* was aristocratic but definitely not fascist.

Klaus Mann's essay on homosexuality and Nazism bears testimony to his courage. It is important both as a document testifying to the homophobic atmosphere in leftist circles at that time and also because of Mann's attempt to critique it. In leftist circles, homosexual rights were scarcely acknowledged to be a valid political cause. On the contrary, prejudices against homosexuality were indeed part and parcel of socialist thinking - it tended to regard homosexuality as something belonging to the antisocial domain of the unproductive, uncontrollable, and irrational - and they became even more deep-rooted among leftists as a consequence of the ideological and moral confrontation with National Socialism. Against the presumed immorality and perversion of the Nazis, the antifascists stressed their own rationality and purity. For Klaus Mann, the leftist, antifascist strategy linking homosexuality with Nazism was all the more embarrassing because as a member of the socialist camp, he endorsed the Marxist analysis that capitalism was the underlying breeding ground for fascism - "... dass Hitler ... nicht deshalb zur Herrschaft kommen konnte, weil 'die deutsche Jugend homosexuell verseucht ist,' sondern weil Thyssen zahlte" (678) - and even more because he believed that a "humanist socialism" was the only hope for an alternative to fascism.<sup>11</sup>

The leftist aversion to homosexuality (and in fact to all sexuality that was not conventional, i.e., monogamous and heterosexual) had dire consequences for those antifascist activists who were homosexuals themselves. For most of them, criticizing the prejudices of their heterosexual comrades in the struggle against Nazism was inconceivable, which makes Klaus Mann's essay exceptional. He himself knew how it felt to face moral pressure from his fellow antifascists. One of his political friends, for example, the writer Hermann Kesten, who gave him the idea for his novel *Mephisto*, proposed to him: "Sie sollten den Roman eines homosexuellen Karrieristen im dritten Reich schreiben ... Satire auf gewisse homosexuelle Figuren" (Quoted by Spangenberg 1986: 85-86). Although the protagonist in *Mephisto* was modeled on homosexual actor Gustav Gründgens, Mann transformed him into a heterosexual masochist. "Ich versuchte es, seinen fürchterlichen Ehrgeiz aus Minderwertigkeitskomplexen - die teils soziale, teils erotische Ursachen haben - zu erklären," as Mann claimed, thereby suggesting that sexual aberration was a psychological cause of political short-sightedness ("Selbstanzeige: Mephisto": 53).

As far as his own life-style was concerned, Klaus Mann was forced to go on the defensive and to pay lip service to leftist morals. In the twenties, he had lightheartedly celebrated homoeroticism and decadence, but when he turned to political activism after leaving Germany in 1933, his advocacy of hedonism was supplanted by a far more reticent, cautious attitude, as can be seen in the novels written in exile, such as *Symphonie Pathétique* (1935) and *Der Vulkan* (1939), as well as his essay on the Röhm affair and his second and

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<sup>11</sup> In Klaus Mann's opinion, Marxist socialism was too one-sidedly aimed at economic relationships, thus failing to take into account the personal or existential problematics of people. The humanist socialism he advocated would put more emphasis on the individual's self-development. See his "Der Kampf um den jungen Menschen."

third autobiographies, *The Turning Point* (1942) and *Der Wendepunkt* (1949). In *Symphonie Pathétique* he suggested that homosexual intercourse can only be morally affirmed if it is based on a stable relationship and a sense of inner connectedness. This view, however, does not square with his own life, in which casual sexual contacts were important if only for their physical pleasure. In *Der Vulkan*, which is set in a milieu of German émigrés, the two male protagonists share in a rewarding homosexual relationship until one of the two becomes a drug addict and dies. The surviving friend arrives at the insight that he has been leading a loose and parasitical life, after which he decides to go to Spain to fight Franco. "He had become a man after all," as Mann writes. No more attention is paid to homosexuality, the message being that political activism requires the suppression of such desire.

It is striking that Klaus Mann chose not to publish his polemical essay "Die Linke und das 'Laster'" in *Die Sammlung*, the journal he himself edited in Amsterdam, but instead in a less prominent Prague journal, so it could be ignored by the German exile community and sink into oblivion.<sup>12</sup> Mann felt that *Die Sammlung* was to be a broad-based forum for antifascists, which also meant that prejudice against sexual orientation would not constitute grounds for refusing any article. He appears however, to have expressed to a German Communist his willingness not to stir up any disputes about this subject, thus seeking to avoid the impression that he placed a higher priority on his personal interests as a member of a sexual minority than on resistance to Nazism (Naumann 1984: 72).

Moreover, in this essay he described homosexuality only in abstract terms, not as an overtly practiced life-style. From a socialist perspective, the body was primarily a tool for labor and production; lust was suspect as an antisocial force, and sexual liberation as a cause in itself could only be viewed as a symptom of bourgeois decadence and selfish individualism. Therefore, Mann was under strong pressure to justify homosexuality socially and morally so as to neutralize socialist objections to its uselessness and unproductivity. He defended homosexuality only as an innate phenomenon, emphasizing that it could be useful to the community because of its cultural fertility and should therefore be integrated into a future socialist society. He had little to say, however, on how this integration could be implemented (Mattenkloft 1979). In fact, Klaus Mann, like his father, always paid scant attention to the social repression and discrimination of homosexuals. He evidenced no activist concern at all for emancipation. Although Klaus Mann, unlike his father, did not hide his homosexual preference, he refused, for example, to accept an invitation from Hirschfeld to give a lecture on homosexuality and modern literature at his *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*. Also, he regarded the praise he received in Adolf Brand's journal *Der Eigene* as "compromising" (Zynda 1986: 49). Yet he was much more positive about Hans Blüher, whom his father also admired. Because of Klaus Mann's independent and privileged position as a bohemian and artist, he never felt any need to justify or defend his sexual preference. Essentially, he embraced quite an elitist stance by adopting an excentric life-style and writing about such "great men" as Alexander the Great in *Alexander, Roman der Utopie* (1930) or Tchaikovsky in *Symphonie Pathétique*.

Although Klaus Mann was courageous enough to expose the homophobia of his fellow antifascists, he could not escape tormenting doubts about his own sexual proclivities. The mixed feelings with which he looked back upon his youthful celebration of sensuality in *Der Wendepunkt* is typical of his ambivalence. The chapter in which he records his first love

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<sup>12</sup> The manuscript was rediscovered and reprinted in 1969 and again in the 1970s ("Homosexualität und Faschismus").

affair - the object being an athletic, "strong and supple" fellow student - begins with an elaborate description of his generation's world view in the years right after World War I, casting an unfavorable light on sexual candor:

War meine Generation ..., die während des ersten Weltkriegs heranwuchs - unordentlicher und frivoler, als die Jugend es im allgemeinen ist? Trieben wir es besonders liederlich und zügellos? ...

Die moralisch-soziale Krise, in deren Mitte wir stehen ... war doch damals schon in vollem Gange ...

Die Tiefen des organischen Lebens sind unordentlich - ein Labyrinth, ein Sumpf der tödlichen Begierde und schöpferischen Kraft. Die Wurzeln unseres Sein reichen hinab ins Trübe, Schlammige, in den Morast von Samen, Blut und Tränen, wo die Orgie der Wollust und Verwesung sich ewig wiederholt, unendliche Qual, unendliche Entzückung ...

Von unseren Dichtern übernahmen wir die Geringschätzung des Intellekts, die Akzentuierung der biologisch-irrationalen Werte auf Kosten der moralisch-rationalen, die Überbetonung des Somatischen, den Kult des Eros ...

Damals freilich, in den Tagen politischer Unschuld und erotischer Exaltation, fehlte uns jede Vorstellung von den gefährlichen Aspekten und Potentialitäten unserer puerilen Sexualmystik. Immerhin konnte ich nicht umhin zu vermerken, dass unsere 'Körpersinn'-Philosophie zuweilen von recht unerfreulichen Elementen vorgespannt und ausgebeutet wurde. Die Glorifizierung physischer Tugenden verlor für mich jeden Reiz und jede Überzeugungskraft, wenn sie sich mit einem militant-heroischen Pathos verband, was leider häufig der Fall war. (125-27)

In a similar vein he wrote rather guiltily about his sexual experiences in the Turkish baths during a 1937 visit to fascist Hungary:

Es tat sich was ... in den türkisch dekorierten Bädern, deren Dämmerung - geil gesättigt vom Dampf der heilsam-heissen Quellen - zur schamlos kollektiven Orgie lud.

Wer wollte da den Spielverderber machen? Nicht ich, den diese Exzesse einer vulgär-kommerziellen und doch auch wieder grossartig elementaren, im antik-asiatischen Stil hypertrophierten Sinnlichkeit durchaus sympathisch waren. Erfüllte, derb ausgelebte Unzucht ... erheiterte mich als die einzig unschuldige oder doch relative harmlose Manifestation unserer tierischen Komponente ...

Freilich, ich weiss - und war auch im frivolen Budapest nicht frivol genug, es je zu vergessen -: vom Animalischen, das ich gerne habe, ist's wohl nicht gar so weit zum Bestialischen, vor dem mir graut. Wenn es sich so verhält, dass die Triebbefriedigung von destruktiven Impulsen ablenkt oder diese ins Positiv-Libidinöse wandelt, so ist doch auch nicht zu leugnen, dass entfesselte Sexualität die fatale Neigung hat, ihrerseits ins Sadistisch-Zerstörerische auszuarten. Die Massenorgie, an der ich mein halb ironisch-bitterliches, halb süss-ordinäres Vergnügen finde, enthält in sich den Keim zum Massenmord; jeder Rausch ist potentieller Blutrausch, eine Konstatierung, mit der ich meine Eulogie der Wollust zwar nicht revozieren, aber doch schicklich modifizieren möchte. (390)

Klaus Mann's antifascist activism gave rise to a reconsideration of his view on

homosexuality. Although he criticized the homophobia of Social Democrats and Communists alike, he did endorse the leftist ploy to expose Nazism as a pathological and irrational political system, in which barbaric passions reigned and brutish lusts were satisfied by violence and destruction. For antifascists, it seemed easy to prove that fascism was a sign of perversion, sadism, and masochism, from which it was only a small step to homosexual vice. In light of this view, it was difficult for him to reconcile his earlier affection for what he called "die ästhetisch-religiös-erotische Sphäre", for a life full of passion, with moral and political responsibility (453).

Aber wenn das 'Irrationale' mir in seinen zärtlich-träumerischen, erotisch verbindenden Erscheinungsformen behagt hatte, so erschreckte es mich in seinen aggressiv brutalen Manifestationen, besonders wo diese den Charakter zerstörerischer Massenhysterie anzunehmen drohten. (265-66)

Homosexual practices increasingly perturbed him. The way in which he voluntarily joined the American forces during World War II - it required quite some effort on his part to be let in - seems to suggest that this was a contrived attempt to avert inner conflicts as well. In *Der Wendepunkt*, he associates homosexuality repeatedly with solitude and social isolation - a predicament which he tried to escape by his political activism. His army life was diametrically opposed to his earlier bohemian life-style, yet at time, as his brother Golo Mann (1985: 75) aptly put it, "the slavery of the army was a kind of liberation to him." During this same period, Klaus Mann also seriously considered joining the Catholic Church. In 1949, he committed suicide.

### **Thomas Mann: Aestheticism and Nazism**

Whereas (homo)sexual lust became a problematic issue for Klaus Mann because he saw National Socialism as a movement that catered to the dark urges of people, homoeroticism became tainted for his father as a result of the fascist aestheticizing of politics. The rise of the Nazi movement forced Thomas Mann to seriously reconsider his views on the relationship between *Kultur* (or aesthetics) and politics. As a link between these two realms, homosexuality could not be left out of the equation. This is already clear in a 1930 lecture by Thomas Mann on the poet August von Platen (1796-1835) whom he much admired. In this lecture delivered before the Platen-Gesellschaft he expressed his delight about the opportunity to speak freely of Platen's "exclusively homoerotic leanings," the understanding of which he believed to be essential for a proper appreciation of both his poetry and his tragic yet grotesque life. Mann praised Von Platen's strictly classical poetry, but as he dug deeper into the poet's sexual preference it became clear that his lecture as a whole was far from an uncritical tribute. Implicitly Mann questioned the way Platen had viewed and experienced his homosexuality. Elevating it to a superior, singularly spiritual form of love, Mann argued that as Platen's spiritualized cult of beauty grew more masculine, the more he grew estranged from the ordinary life of his fellow men. Having become unapproachable, imprisoned in an ivory tower, Platen retained little of his humanism, disdain being his only response to ordinary life. Thomas Mann characterized Platen's radical aestheticism, which ultimately caused the severe solitude that brought his downfall, as amoral and adverse to life. As he put it in his lecture: "... die Ritter der Schönheit, sind Todesritter" ("August von Platen": 271).

In "Über die Ehe," Thomas Mann had also established a close connection between death and a homosexual longing for beauty, but in this earlier essay he had associated



homosexual aesthetics with artistic calling in a favorable manner through the use of irony. What stands out in his lecture on Von Platen, however, is the idea that from the angle of political morality an exclusively aesthetic attitude toward life, which had been his own all along, carries great dangers. It is significant that there is a striking silence about homosexuality in Mann's political writings that appeared after World War II. In these essays - some held as lectures - that mainly deal with Germany's recent past, Mann presented himself not only as a champion of humanist and democratic values but also as a critic of the infertile aestheticism that he considered so characteristic of German *Kultur*. This new attitude implied a tacit condemnation of his own political past, in which he had idealized the German state as a homoerotic phenomenon. This idealization was grounded in the assumption that political and moral values could be based on aesthetic *Bildung*. In his opinion however, National Socialism proved that such an approach to politics was based on a horrible misunderstanding. In "Nietzsche's Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung," a lecture delivered in Zürich in 1947, Mann claimed that there is ample reason to reflect on the relationship between aestheticism and barbarism. He had touched upon this theme once before, in his novella *Mario und der Zauberer* (1930), which put the magic of art on a par with the fatal attraction of fascism. Obviously, his comparison of Hitler and the artist, as in "Bruder Hitler" (848), as well as the highly gifted German artist Adrian Leverkühn's pact with the devil in *Doktor Faustus*, should also be seen in this light.

After World War II, both in his political essays and his novel *Doktor Faustus*, Mann put forward that the German disaster had taken place partly because of the gap between political reality and the world of the artistic mind. Most German artists and intellectuals lacked a sense of social responsibility and democratic pragmatism because of their "aristokratische Einsamkeit ... und ihre leidende Abgeschiedenheit vom Leben," according to Mann ("Goethe und die Demokratie": 759). Because they retreated so often into purely intellectual or aesthetic spheres, the humanism of German political life failed to be strong enough to counter the vitalist and aggressive tendencies of nationalism. In this respect, as he emphasized in his Nietzsche lecture, the poets, philosophers, and composers, and all those representing German *Kultur*, were equally responsible for Germany's atrocities. In this lecture he described Nietzsche as a radical aesthete and compared him to the homosexual dandy Oscar Wilde. Wilde's view that there is no reality behind appearances, Mann argued, corresponds well with Nietzsche's view that spiritual and moral values contain as much truth - or as little - as works of art and myths. Both Wilde and Nietzsche saw life as a game that should be played with grace and, in the case of Nietzsche, with a sense of heroism. In Mann's final novel, *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, which he called his "homosexueller Roman," he further explored this theme (*Tagebücher 1949-1950*: 295). The main character, Felix Krull, turns his life into art, considers his own life as if it were a work of art. Yet as an artist he is neither saint nor prophet, but a hustler who deludes the world, partly thanks to his (homoerotic) charms.

In his Nietzsche lecture, Mann pointed out the social dangers of such an attitude toward life. He criticized Nietzsche for his glorification of instinct over intellect and for his negative evaluation of morality which he saw as hostile to life. Mann argued that reason, morality, and a sense of proper living should be at the service of humanism and democracy, as a unified force against aesthetic intoxication, which in real life always entails barbarism and death.<sup>13</sup> "Der wahre Gegensatz ist der von Ethik und Ästhetik. Nicht die Moral, die

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<sup>13</sup> As early in 1926, in a lecture delivered in Paris, Mann had pointed to the dangerous aspects of aesthetic intoxication: "Die germanische Neigung zum Rausch, zur Trunkenheit kann

Schönheit ist todverbunden", he writes, adding that the Jewish people with their stern sense of morality have lasted longer than the "liederliche Ästheten- und Artistenvölkchen der Griechen" (696-97). He did not put it in so many words, but it seems clear that he no longer supported his former celebration of homoeroticism, as embodied in the German ideal of the *Männerbund*, and modeled on ancient Greek examples. As a consequence of the terror of National Socialism and because of his own deep involvement with German history and culture, Mann felt it incumbent upon himself to take an ethical stance, one that it was difficult to reconcile with ironic detachment and an aesthetic approach of politics in which homoerotics played a key role.

### Conclusion

It is striking that in his political essays Thomas Mann devoted much attention to German *Kultur*, *Bildung*, art, and aesthetics while seldom directly addressing actual social and economic realities or political hierarchies. His analysis of National Socialism was largely conceptualized in the context of his changed perspective on aestheticism, decadence, and the two dichotomies life versus art and beauty versus morality. Throughout his life, in fact, he continued to reflect on political issues from the (elitist) perspective of the artist. The same holds true for Klaus Mann, despite his lip service to the ideal of a socialist society in which social inequality - in his view one the main causes of Nazism - would be abolished. Although during and after World War II both embraced some form of humanist socialism and flirted with communism, Thomas and Klaus Mann never showed signs of experiencing a deeper connection with active political life. They never involved themselves with leftist political parties or the labor movement, nor with other social emancipation movements. Social divisions played only a marginal role in their political analyses. Projecting public issues back to intimate needs and fantasies, the political thinking of both authors is indeed strongly marked by their own personal problematics. Their tendency to consider National Socialism primarily as the product of a deeply rooted cultural crisis for which especially intellectuals were to blame is closely tied to their preoccupation with the social role of the artist-intellectual. In choosing this perspective, I would argue, they tended to overestimate the influence of art and abstract ideas in modern mass society.

The similarity between the homosexual sensibilities and political concerns of Thomas and Klaus Mann is far greater than it may seem at first glance. For both of them, homosexuality belonged to an aesthetic sphere, one that was ultimately hard to reconcile with moral and political responsibility. Thomas Mann, who always privately struggled with his homoerotic desire, more or less discredited homosexuality as a phenomenon typical of German culture once he came to feel that the Third Reich illustrated how easily the cult of (physical) beauty, in combination with a primitive vitalism, could turn its back on moral

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als das Heiligste und als das Schlimmste sich offenbaren; sie kann höchste Lebensfülle bedeuten oder jene Faszination durch den Tod, die ästhetischen und orgiastischen Wesens ist, die alles Ethische, den Gedanken der Lebenspflicht als spiessbürgerlich verneint und das Religiöse selbst als Widerpart des Sittlichen sieht. Vielleicht ist das eine Krankheit, die man gehabt haben muss, um heute in Dingen des Lebens mitreden zu dürfen. Vielleicht ist es nötig, im Zauberberge des romantischen Ästhetizismus seine sieben Sündenjahre abgedient zu haben, um nach neuer Empfängnis und Ausbildung des Menschlichkeitsgedankens wahres Verlangen zu tragen" ("Die geistigen Tendenzen des heutigen Deutschlands": 234).

values. Starting from a similar line of reasoning, sexual liberation became problematic in an ethical and political sense for Klaus Mann. National Socialism was evidence to him that irrational urges could quickly gain the upper hand in mass society and degenerate into barbarism. In Klaus Mann's view, fascism proved how easily sexual instincts could be distorted, manipulated, and employed for atrocious political ends. This explains why as an antifascist activist he failed to link sexual liberation and democracy and why he saw no way of integrating it into his ideal of humanist socialism. Whereas Thomas Mann believed that National Socialism partly thrived on the aestheticizing and homoerotic tradition of the *Männerbund*, Klaus Mann considered fascism a dangerous sexualizing of politics. It did not so much attract people on the basis of its ideology but because it played along with their emotions and subconscious urges. Based on their experience of homosexuality - no matter how much, or how differently, valued by each in private - it was Klaus and Thomas Mann's stand against Nazism, that caused them both to end up tragically with a pessimistic vision.

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