

On Art and Liberalism: Thomas Mann and the Appeal of Ambiguity

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Abstract: Political theorists today seldom consider whether the experience of autonomous art might help sustain the values on which liberal societies depend. This paper turns to the novelist Thomas Mann to examine this possibility. For Mann, the ambiguity and estranging quality of art fosters habits of openness and critical distance that liberal societies ought to value and protect. Some commentators acknowledge the appeal of this view but argue that Mann's attempt to develop a broader anthropological ideal on the basis of art overstates what aesthetic experience can achieve in public life. While Mann's cultural outlook may not amount to a systematic political theory, I show how it gestures toward an alternative way of nurturing liberal civic dispositions. Even pessimistic forms of cultural criticism, by exposing when and why art fails to reveal the heterogeneity and inner conflicts of human experience, can serve as a resource within liberal life.

Introduction

Political theorists have long emphasized that liberal societies require more than well-functioning institutions and laws. As scholars in the liberal virtue tradition stress, the stability of liberal democracy depends on a cultural foundation that enables individuals to cultivate right dispositions of character.¹ Only when citizens are tolerant,

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¹ See, for instance, Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford University Press, 1990); William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cam-

open-minded, and civic do core liberal aims, such as minimizing suffering or enabling the non-coercive exchange of reasons, begin to seem like realistic aspirations. While commentators have debated which virtues liberal societies may expect of their citizens, they have paid less attention to the role that art might play in cultivating them.²

In this paper, I turn to a thinker who rarely features in political philosophy but whose reflections on the relationship between art and society may help reframe this debate: the novelist Thomas Mann (1875–1955).³ Throughout his writing, Mann emphasizes how the seemingly unpolitical experience of art could be valuable, and even necessary, to liberal society. When citizens encounter ambiguous art like his own, Mann suggested, they learn to appreciate how a given problem cannot always be resolved through a decisive course of action. In a way not possible in other realms of life including politics, aesthetic experience inclines us toward doubt and reflection and thereby prepares the ground for a more humane politics.

By linking the experience of autonomous art to a capacity for holding competing views and resisting the simplification of life, Mann raises a broader question about its social value. Revisiting this question within liberal theory is worthwhile, not least because reflection on art's civic significance has notably declined. Unlike Mann, few liberal theorists today would think to connect citizenship with art, and fewer still would treat it as the foundation for a broader anthropological vision. Even those who share Mann's sensibility about the wider importance of art, such as the philosopher Richard Rorty, have resisted turning it into a social ideal.

In his seminal work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty presents his own case for the value of autonomous art. Like Mann, he argues that encounters with art make possible a form of

bridge University Press, 1991).

² For an excellent overview of the debate on virtue pluralism, see Andrew Sabl, 'Virtue for Pluralists', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 2.2 (2005), 207–235. Martha Nussbaum has written in some detail about the role art, and especially literature, might play in liberal society. See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1996), and for an illuminating critique, consult Katie Ebner-Landy, 'A Critique of Martha Nussbaum's Liberal Aesthetics', *Political Theory* 52.3 (2024), 374–403.

³ A notable exception is Reinhard Mehring's sustained engagement with Mann's political philosophy. See *Das 'Problem der Humanität' Thomas Manns politische Philosophie* (Mentis, 2003); *Thomas Manns philosophische Dichtung* (Karl Alber, 2019).

self-creation without necessarily implying that any one set of values is superior to another. By fostering both individual autonomy and toleration, art—and especially the novel—helps to cultivate the kind of plural, open-minded, and questioning citizen required for cooperation in a liberal society marked by disagreement and diversity. In this respect, the arts fulfil a role that scientific rationalism, with its antipluralistic emphasis on the discovery of objective truths, cannot perform. Although steeped in the continental tradition and more inclined than many of his contemporaries to grant art a privileged place, Rorty ultimately restricts its significance to the private sphere. The process of self-creation, he contends, may lead individuals to values that cannot safely be generalized. Moreover, the aspiration to derive an anthropology from art replicates the metaphysical ethos that liberal societies aim to leave behind. Aesthetic experience, he concludes, should not be elevated into a public standard or treated as a model for civic life.⁴ It may be indispensable to individual self-formation, but it is not, for Rorty, a resource on which political life should depend.⁵

Mann, by contrast, never gave up the hope that an art detached from political statements or ambitions might nonetheless carry real weight in society. As Matthias Löwe has argued, by drawing attention to irresolvable and potentially tragic conflicts among ideas, actions, and forms of life, art for Mann serves to immunize people against reductionist and authoritarian worldviews that fail to acknowledge how heterogeneous and self-conflictual life can be. Because this kind of attentiveness to ambiguity is hard to come by within politics, art assumes an important political role in its own right.⁶ This political valorization of unpolitical art was embodied in Mann's own life. Although Mann thought deeply about politics, he did not theorize in an institutional register.⁷ From the 1920s onward, he recognized the

⁴ On this point see Matthias Löwe and Tilman Reitz, “‘Bescheidene Freiheit und ‘unendliche freye Thätigkeit’: Gegensätze zwischen Romantik und Liberalismus von Novalis bis Rorty’, in *GegenRomantik: Konfliktlinien in Naturwissenschaft, Politik und Ästhetik*, ed. S. Kerschbaumer, M. Löwe, and T. Reitz (De Gruyter, 2024), 144–164, at 162.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), xiv, 83, 87, 120.

⁶ Matthias Löwe, *Dionysos versus Mose: Mythos, Monotheismus und ästhetische Moderne 1900–1950*, Das Abendland N.F. 48 (Vittorio Klostermann, 2022), 603.

⁷ Amid the recent resurgence of interest in Mann's political thought, the exchange

need for stable parliamentary institutions and the rule of law. Yet he insisted that institutions alone are not enough to meet the challenges of liberal life. To address these, Mann turned instead to a ‘new anthropology’, a ‘humanism to come’.⁸ Within this paradigm, an art like Mann’s own, which mediates between reason and myth, is hoped to transform people’s longing for meaning into a resource for liberal society.⁹

If Rorty ultimately retreats from offering a postwar romantic liberalism, we find remnants of such a position in Mann. Mann shows how, even under conditions of plurality and disagreement, art might well be seen as part of the anthropological foundation that a liberal politics requires. This conviction remained with the novelist throughout his life, beyond his more conservative early phase, and continued to shape his cultural criticism, even as he came to witness how such a mode of thought could be misused or distorted. Although his reflections on the development of art and the state of *Bildung* often strike a pessimistic tone, they aim to draw attention back to the anthropological basis of humane politics and thereby to help sustain the foundations of liberalism.

As contemporary liberal democracies become increasingly polarized and politicized, it once again seems reasonable to doubt that institutional reforms alone will provide the needed remedies.¹⁰ For this reason, Mann’s broadening of political theory, his effort to view art as the foundation of a new humanism, and his willingness to critique art and culture when they fall short of this ideal all strike a particularly urgent note today. At the same time, contemporary art faces

between Kai Sina and Matthias Löwe on the question of democracy stands out as one of the most illuminating contributions. See ‘Was wir gut zu machen haben – Ein Gespräch über Thomas Mann und die Demokratie’, in *Thomas Mann, Zur Verteidigung der Demokratie: Politische Schriften*, ed. M. Löwe and K. Sina (S. Fischer, 2025), 263–85.

⁸ Thomas Mann, ‘Freud und die Zukunft’, in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, vol. 9 (Fischer, 1974), 500; qtd. in Löwe, *Dionysos versus Mose*, 562.

⁹ In a well-known letter to Karl Kerényi, Mann described his work on the *Joseph* novels as an attempt to deprive the fascists of myth by humanizing it: ‘den Mythos den fascistischen Dunkelmännern aus den Händen zu nehmen und ihn ins Humane “umzufunktionieren”.’ See ‘Thomas Mann an Karl Kerényi, 18. Februar 1941’, in *Thomas Mann / Karl Kerényi: Briefwechsel*, ed. C. König, 1967, 105.

¹⁰ See J. Benson, ‘Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization’, *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 4 (2024), 1719–1732.

its own challenges. Much autonomous art, especially of avant-garde pedigree, can seem self-referential and addressed only to a narrow circle of connoisseurs. In classical music, a culture of historicism prevails,¹¹ while more popular forms of art have become commodified, politicized, or dismissed as mere entertainment.¹² As the critic Anna Kornbluh has argued, what many now value in art are its contents and immersive qualities rather than its formal subtlety or aesthetic construction.¹³ This has made it increasingly difficult, as Namwali Serpell elaborates, to engage critically with art on a level that moves beyond its subject matter.¹⁴ Rather than treating such observations as irrelevant to liberal life,¹⁵ Mann's romantic liberalism helps us see how the criticism of art and culture might still play a role in sustaining its values.¹⁶

To illustrate how Mann's sustained interest in the ambiguity of art serves as the basis of liberal ideals, this paper turns first to his novel *The Magic Mountain*, showing how its music-loving protagonist acquires a critical and open-minded outlook on the world that

¹¹ As a 2023 report by the German Music Council documents, only one in five opera performances features a work composed after 1945, with contemporary pieces accounting for a mere six percent. Newly premiered works make up just two percent of the industry's annual ticket sales. See: 'Inszenierungen und Besuche zeitgenössischer Werke des Musiktheaters', Deutscher Bühnenverein, in Musikinformationszentrum (MIZ), *Deutscher Muskrat*, August 2023, <https://miz.org/de/statistiken/version/2023-inszenierungen-und-besuche-zeitgenoessischer-werke-des-musiktheaters>.

¹² See Christoph Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013), 11; Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012).

¹³ Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2024).

¹⁴ Namwali Serpell, 'The New Literalism Plaguing Today's Biggest Movies', *The New Yorker*, 8 March 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/the-new-literalism-plaguing-todays-biggest-movies>.

¹⁵ As Georg Bollenbeck in his history of cultural criticism notes, the increasing differentiation of social spheres made artistic criticism more specialized and in turn cast doubt on its ability to speak beyond its own domain. See Bollenbeck, *Eine Geschichte der Kulturkritik: Von Rousseau bis Günther Anders* (C. H. Beck, 2007), 273.

¹⁶ Rather than being 'romantically liberal', Mann draws from a romantic foundation to inspire a liberalism not altogether removed from the more pessimistic Cold War variants. See Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (Yale University Press, 2023); Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

his aesthetically indifferent peers lack. I then take up *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, Mann's political manifesto, where a sensibility like Castorp's is framed as an appealing orientation for society as a whole. Finally, I show how this perspective informed Mann's efforts to counter the cultural defeatism of Oswald Spengler and resurfaces in his explicitly liberal period.

The second section revisits the contrast with Richard Rorty and extends it to the work of sociologist Wolf Lepenies to raise a challenge to Mann's view. Both Rorty and Lepenies caution that treating the unpolitical experience of art as a social ideal may expose it to political co-optation, or else sit uneasily within a liberal society. On their view, there is a genuine difficulty in reconciling the opaque, metaphysical character of art with the ideals of transparency and public justification that liberal institutions require.

The third and final section offers a response to this challenge. Although Mann's outlook may not provide the basis for a systematic political theory, his willingness to see in the ambiguity of art a resource for broader cultural and anthropological insight is compatible with core liberal commitments. Through his character Hans Castorp, Mann helps us see how the experience of art can contribute to forming citizens who are capable of accommodating competing views and responding humanely to the moral dilemmas they inevitably face. Rather than treating art's nonrational and undidactic character as a source of political instability, Mann suggests that its unsettling qualities might support the cultivation of liberal values. In this way, he re-frames a familiar concern in political theory and illustrates how even pessimistic forms of cultural criticism may play an important role in sustaining reflection within liberal societies. In the conclusion, I take up this suggestion by considering what a renewed interest in art and cultural criticism might offer at a time when politically untethered, ambiguous art is rarely seen as capable of contributing to the kind of cultural outlook Mann envisioned.

1 Mann's Political Unpolitics

1.1 *A Music Lover on a Mountain*

Perhaps more than any other of Mann's characters, the music-loving Hans Castorp—the protagonist of *The Magic Mountain* (1924)—captures the appeal of a life grounded in the appreciation of ambigu-

ity. Castorp comes to recognize the complexity of the world, resists both narrowly political and purely hedonic outlooks, and encounters defining humane values. All of this remains inaccessible to his self-proclaimed tutor, Ludovico Settembrini, whose exclusive concern with politics and social progress is matched by a striking indifference to music and to art shaped by ambiguity.

In 1907, the 23-year-old Castorp—an aspiring naval engineer—travels to a Swiss sanatorium in Davos to visit his tubercular cousin. What was meant to be a three-week stay unexpectedly stretches into seven years, lasting until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The reader never quite learns whether Castorp is ill but closely follows his transformation. Arriving as a sober-minded burgher of Hanseatic stock, an unremarkable yet emblematic figure of his generation, he is not particularly eccentric but characterized by a receptive and inquisitive mind. On the Mountain, Castorp becomes entangled in spiritual reflections on life and death, considers the nature of time, develops a sense of care for his fellow patients, falls into an unusual love affair, and immerses himself in music and opera.

These experiences unfold amid, and often in contrast to, Castorp's encounter with two ideological adversaries: his self-proclaimed teacher, the aforementioned freemason Settembrini, and the more reticent but equally dogmatic Jesuit convert Naphta. Both characters orbit around grand questions of political philosophy, which they pursue through a series of drawn-out debates. Their provocations draw Castorp into an unexpected foray into the world of ideas. Yet he grows uneasy with the way their dogmatism is 'harass[ing] their own souls'¹⁷ and anticipates the catastrophic outcome of their restless intellectual combat. After one final insult, the two ideologues arrange a pistol duel. When Settembrini refuses to fire, Naphta, in a last gesture of contempt, turns the pistol on himself.

In the end, it is not through Settembrini or Naphta but through Castorp that the novel offers its subtler insights on the nature of time, love, the cycle of life, and the power of music. Although the young man never sets out to educate others, he emerges as the novel's most inspirational figure. Yet Castorp is not a mouthpiece for a philosophical treatise, but a character in a dense novel. As such, his example is as intricate as it is instructive. Over time, his initial sobriety gives

¹⁷ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, tr. J. Woods (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 459.

way to a strange sympathy for illness and death, which leads him to remain on the Mountain far longer than necessary. That sympathy casts a shadow over the novel's conclusion, as Mann brings Castorp's development to a devastating close: seven years after his arrival, he vanishes into the mud-spattered battlefield of the Great War, never to return.

The novel's pessimistic conclusion has raised the question of whether Castorp can truly serve as a model for others.¹⁸ Moreover, as several interpreters have pointed out, although *The Magic Mountain* falls within the tradition of the Bildungsroman, Castorp's eventual distance from his pedagogues, their fatal entanglement, and his own tragic death seem to turn that tradition on its head.¹⁹ An insightful intermediate position adopted by T. J. Reed acknowledges the novel's educational element yet takes it to communicate a critical attitude toward Castorp, who 'is left torpid on the Mountain as a warning sign against the sloth and quietism which Bildung in some circumstances may lead to.'²⁰

A less pessimistic interpretation, however, is also possible. Despite his frailty, unproductivity, and eventual tragedy, Castorp points to an appealing mode of life. Mediated through his experience of art, he shows what it takes to appreciate the inherent ambiguity of moral life, and in so doing discovers a deeper source of meaning. The value of this ideal becomes especially clear when set against Settembrini. What distinguishes Settembrini from Castorp is not merely his persistent call for politics, progress, and clarity, but his related indifference toward the values Mann associates with an art of ambiguity. To understand where these values lie, one must recognize that Settembrini is not indifferent to art as such. He openly praises literature and the novel in particular, seeing 'the word [as] the glory of humankind'.²¹ Observing how Settembrini lets 'his words roll and

¹⁸ Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk* (C.H. Beck, 1999). For a less pessimistic reading, see Reinhard Mehring, *Thomas Manns philosophische Dichtung*, 56; Dieter Borchmeyer, *Thomas Mann Werk und Zeit* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2022), 47.

¹⁹ T. J. Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Clarendon Press, 1996), 226.

²⁰ Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 273.

²¹ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 156.

bounce, like little rubber balls',²² Castorp even attributes to him a curious aestheticism. The point, however, is that Settembrini's appreciation for art depends on its usefulness. He sees value in its capacity to instruct, to edify, and to mobilize, but not in its autonomous or intrinsic qualities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his distaste for music. Unlike the novel, which Settembrini considers firmly grounded in representation, music eludes discursive clarity, operating instead at the fringes of rational understanding. Precisely because its effects on the listener are unpredictable, Settembrini regards it as irresponsible, so much so that he comes to harbour a political aversion to it:

Music is invaluable as the ultimate means for awakening our zeal, a power that draws the mind trained for its effects forward and upward. But literature must precede it. By itself, music cannot draw the world forward. By itself, music is dangerous. ... There is something dubious about music, gentlemen. I maintain that music is ambiguous by its very nature. I am not going too far when I declare it to be *politically suspect*.²³

Although reminiscent of Plato's familiar suspicion of art, Settembrini's views strike an unusual and provocative tone, especially for the child of German culture and Bildung that Castorp is. When he first encounters them, he cannot help but slap his knee and exclaim that he has 'never heard anything like that in all his life.'²⁴ In nineteenth-century German Romanticism, a culture of art centred around music had increasingly come to be seen as a potential substitute for religion.²⁵ The hope that culture might preserve religion's communal and spiritual functions without replicating its clerical hierarchy is very much present in Castorp, but it is firmly rejected by Settem-

²² Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 99.

²³ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 111-112. For a further analysis, see also Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 268

²⁴ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 111.

²⁵ Among examinations of *Kunstreligion*, see in particular Heinrich Detering, 'Was ist Kunstreligion? Systematische und historische Bemerkungen', in *Kunstreligion. Ein ästhetisches Konzept der Moderne in seiner Entfaltung*, Vol. 1: *Der Ursprung des Konzepts um 1800*, eds. A. Meier, A. Costazza, & G. Laudin (De Gruyter, 2011), 11-27. The second volume of this three-part series traces the radicalization of the term after 1850: *Die Radikalisierung des Konzepts nach 1850*, eds. A. Meier, A. Costazza, & G. Laudin (De Gruyter, 2012).

brini. While Settembrini shares the romantics' desire to overcome entrenched hierarchies, he is sceptical of their ambition to continue religion by other means. He values novels that aim to instruct and to spread Enlightenment ideals, and even music that 'awakens'²⁶ retains a place in his worldview. But when art leans on the opaque, the pre-rational, or the metaphysical—as music so often does—the advocate of secularism cannot help but remain wary.

Hans Castorp does not share these misgivings. Though a product of an age in which God has been pronounced dead, he not only continues the romantic project but inherits characteristically Protestant virtues. He cares for his fellow patients, is marked by inwardness, and displays a questioning disposition, even remarking that he 'might very easily have become a clergyman'.²⁷ As these traits make clear, the notion of Protestantism with which Mann operates is not a politics of rationalist revolt, originating in Luther, developing in Kant and shaping the present from there. It is rather one of inwardness and spiritualism that derives, as Hermann Kurzke observes, from a strikingly unpolitical picture of Luther.²⁸ Because music, to Mann, embodied these unpolitical qualities, he even came to associate the Protestant reformer with his ideal of a musical artist.²⁹

Castorp's fascination with music stems from this inheritance. He cherishes it for the way it conveys meanings otherwise found in religion (valuing the medium for precisely the reasons that make Settembrini wary of it). Music lies beyond the spoken word and in this way has the power both to estrange and to pacify, sometimes

²⁶ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 112.

²⁷ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 371.

²⁸ Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk*, 265.

²⁹ Christoph Schwöbel, 'Der "Tiefsinn des Herzens" und das "Pathos der Distanz": Thomas Mann, Luther und die deutsche Identität', in *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch*, Vol. 12 (1999), ed. E. Heftrich & T. Sprecher (Klostermann), 59–77, at 65. In *Reflections*, Mann notes that 'the education of the Germans to music began with Martin Luther', whom he describes as 'a pedagogue or defiantly national character, theosophist, religion teacher, and musician in one person'. 'Musicality and religiosity ... can scarcely be separated in him.' Luther, he adds, referred to music as 'close to theology'. It is due to 'Luther's religious-musical influence', Mann argues, that Germans came to associate the expression of the Protestant ethic with music, and that this tradition culminated in the fugues of Bach and Reger. See Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, ed. and tr. W. Morris (Ungar Publishing Company, 1987), 232–233.

achieving both at once. Castorp sees in its experience a promise of human closeness, noting that it is ‘a fine thing ... that people made music all over the world, even in the strangest settings, probably even on polar expeditions.’³⁰ Rather than seeking final clarity, as Settembrini and Naphta do in a manner so uncompromising that it leads to their fatal duel, Castorp flourishes in the ambiguity he finds within music.³¹

While the ‘blank page’,³² as Mann’s narrator calls Castorp, is open to the radical proposals that Settembrini and Naphta put forward, he does not adopt either easily. He maintains a healthy critical distance without falling prey to relativism, either.³³ Castorp comes to appreciate that human life is irreducibly heterogeneous and that not all its conflicts can be resolved through action or ideology. In doing so, he also encounters a form of spirituality that remains inaccessible to both Settembrini and Naphta (who, tellingly, is described as ‘completely unmusical’).³⁴ Castorp’s attachment to music serves as a metaphor for this broader mode of life marked by ambiguity, civility and an access to existential meaning. In such a life, there lies not only a distinctive social value but a possible basis for pluralism. Although readers may ultimately despair over how the journey of *Bildung* draws Castorp inward and leaves him to vanish on the battlefields of the First World War, they may nonetheless find in his character something to relate to and perhaps even to admire.

1.2 Political Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man

The model of an unpolitical life that Hans Castorp represents, and the contrast Mann draws with the politicized alternatives embodied by Settembrini and Naphta, is not conjured out of thin air or de-

³⁰ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 286.

³¹ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 157.

³² Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 98.

³³ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 379–380: Castorp rejects Ziemßen’s indifference toward Settembrini and Naphta, replying that a civilian like himself must take a position on the truth of their opposing views.

³⁴ Mann, *Magic Mountain*, 438. As Peter Ghosh notes, ‘Naphta is Settembrini’s dialectical opposite; but though he is contemptuous of progress and enlightenment, he too is a man of Geist, a politician, who is “vollständig unmusikalisch” (a crucial touchstone).’ See Ghosh, ‘Political and Unpolitical Germany: Max Weber and Thomas Mann’, *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 48.1 (2023), 84–127, at 90.

veloped from a neutral standpoint. It rather reflects concerns that preoccupied Mann throughout his early life, most explicitly in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918).³⁵ In this six-hundred-page volume, Mann invoked his attachment to *Kultur* to assert Germany's cultural superiority and to defend war as a means of safeguarding its underlying values—an argument that, for good reason, has been met with firm critique.

Mann himself would later come to regret the *Reflections*. Not only did he adopt a pacifist stance after the war, but in his 1922 speech *On the German Republic*, he replaced his earlier aristocratic leanings with support for Weimar's democratic institutions. In light of this transition, not to mention Mann's later emigration and resistance to National Socialism, it is tempting to treat the *Reflections* as an unrepresentative aberration. Yet Hans Castorp, as Peter Ghosh notes, is 'a more charitable but essentially unaltered representation' of Mann's position in this text.³⁶ Moreover, the attachment to Castorp's mode of life reappears, as I shall argue, throughout Mann's later work. By turning to *Reflections*, we can sharpen the contrast between Castorp and Settembrini and better understand why Castorp provides an ideal that resonates beyond Mann's early phase.

A natural starting point is the work's orienting contrast between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. Building on a familiar nineteenth-century distinction, Mann associates *Kultur* with activities pursued for their own sake, whereas *Zivilisation* is defined by its instrumental character, exemplified in the market, science, or political activism:

The difference between intellect and politics includes that of culture and civilization, of soul and society, of freedom and voting rights, of art and literature; and German tradition is culture, soul, freedom, art and not civilization, society, voting rights, and literature.³⁷

In Castorp and Settembrini, we have already encountered this con-

³⁵ There is some disagreement as to whether Castorp embodies aspects of Mann himself. By contrast, it is undisputed that Settembrini represents the fictional counterpart of the *Zivilisationsliterat* from the *Reflections*, modelled on Thomas's not-so-fictional brother Heinrich Mann. See Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 240–241.

³⁶ Ghosh, 'Political and Unpolitical Germany: Max Weber and Thomas Mann', 90.

³⁷ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 17.

trast. While Settembrini frames his actions in terms of their contribution to the purpose of social progress, Castorp devotes himself to pursuits that appear inconsequential or useless and serve only to deepen his private passions.

There is a reason why Mann repeatedly turns to the metaphor of music to mark this contrast. Music, especially in its instrumental form, leaves listeners' associations open. Its non-propositional and largely non-representational character allows for diverging and even conflicting interpretations to be attributed to a given piece. The kind of meaning listeners may find in music, moreover, tends to border on the ineffable and resists articulation through ordinary language.³⁸ In this respect, music seems particularly well suited to embody the values that the German tradition, beginning with Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, attributes to autonomous art.³⁹ On this view, art should unsettle familiar ways of seeing through acts of estrangement and defamiliarization, offering at least a fleeting sense of meanings that transcend ordinary understanding.

But Mann also understood that music's esoteric nature might limit these ambitions.⁴⁰ It is not always clear whether or how it can incite a critical rather than merely reflective attitude in its listeners.⁴¹ It carries the risk of lulling them into a quiet contemplation that becomes detached from action, as indeed happened to Castorp on

³⁸ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 23, 74, 231.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. P. Guyer, tr. P. Guyer & E. Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), §§1–5, 59–61.

⁴⁰ For such doubts early in Mann's life, and his attachment to intellectualism in art, see Thomas Mann, 'Über die Kritik', in *Essays I: Ausgewählte Schriften zur Literatur, Begegnungen mit Dichtern und Denkern*, ed. M. Mann (S. Fischer, 1977), 369–370; 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft', in *Essays II: Politische Reden und Schriften*, ed. H. Kurzke (S. Fischer, 1977), 326–336, at 330. It is, moreover, telling how in *Reflections* (53), Mann pictures his great influence Wagner not as an uncritical embodiment of romantic esotericism but as 'the most sensational self-portrait and self-criticism of the German character one can imagine', 'broken up in a modern way, decorative, analytical, and intellectual'. He even draws an analogy between Wagner, Ibsen, and Zola, whose works he suggests 'belong together' (56).

⁴¹ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 32: 'On the contrary, the relationship of music to humanitarianism is so much looser than that of literature that the musical attitude seems to the literary moral sense at the very least to be undependable, at the very least, suspicious. Nor to poetry, where the relationship is too much like that of music; in it words and intellect play a much too indirect, cunning, irresponsible, and therefore also undependable role.'

the Mountain. Other genres like the novel appear better equipped to meet this challenge. Being forced to say something about the world, the novel (as Settembrini stresses again and again) has the potential to foster a more critical readership.⁴² At the same time however, its representational nature makes it prone to falling back into mere reproduction and to the risk of being reduced to its contents. The answer Mann developed was that the novel, and other genres such as poetry or painting, should follow the model of music. Despite being closer to propositions or representations, they should aspire to a similar ambiguity and openness, resisting closure and inviting competing interpretations.⁴³

One important implication of this conception of art's autonomy is that while art should set itself apart from politics through its ambiguity, this does not mean that its content must be unpolitical. On the contrary, novels or plays may achieve their unsettling effects precisely by drawing their audience into confronting the existential dimensions of moral and political life. Mann was also sceptical when art adopted an artificially amoral or apolitical pose, taking it to lack depth.⁴⁴ This concern surfaces especially in his unfinished essay *Geist und Kunst* (1907), as well as in the play *Fiorenza*, written around the same time.⁴⁵ While Mann concedes that art is inevitably socially conditioned and infused with contemporary values, he insists that it should transform this awareness into an ambiguous interplay between moralizing intellectualism (what he called *Geist*) and a pure aestheticism that resists reduction to its intellectual or political content (*Kunst*). At its best, art avoids collapsing into either extreme. It is neither merely political nor merely entertaining but maintains a fragile stance in between. When it succeeds in doing so, it allows people to develop their judgments independently, to confront the inherent dilemmas of life, and to recognize complexity.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 274: 'the novel ... is nothing but dream, music, letting go, the floating sound of a post horn, wanderlust, homesickness, luminous balls of fireworks falling in a park at night, foolish blissfulness, so that one's ears ring and one's head buzzes with poetic enchantment and confusion.'

⁴⁴ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 73.

⁴⁵ For further discussion of this unfinished essay and its relation to *Fiorenza*, see T. J. Reed, "'Geist und Kunst': Thomas Mann's Abandoned Essay on Literature', *Oxford German Studies* 1 (1966), 53–101; Martin A. Ruehl, *The Italian Renaissance in the German Historical Imagination, 1860–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The most sublime works of art, Mann thought, would, although clearly recognizable as artificial, nonetheless appear natural. As he enthusiastically quotes Schopenhauer in *Reflections*:

Nature does not do as bad poets do, who, when they portray scoundrels or fools, do it so clumsily, so purposefully, that one sees, as it were, the poet standing behind each one, continually disavowing the character's attitude and speech, and calling out with a warning voice: 'This is a rascal, this is a fool; do not pay any attention to what he says.' Nature, on the other hand, does as Shakespeare and as Goethe do, in whose works every character, even if he is the devil himself, while he is on stage and speaking, *is right*; we are drawn to his side and are forced to sympathize with him because he is *grasped so objectively*: for he is developed from an inner principle, just as the works of nature are, and his speech and actions therefore appear natural and necessary.⁴⁶

Behind Mann's fascination with how art might blur the line between nature and artifice lay, as Thomas Khurana has argued, a striking realization.⁴⁷ Modern art, unlike that of earlier periods which sought to imitate nature, defined itself in conscious opposition to such mimesis.⁴⁸ And yet, at its best, it could still appear as though it could not have been otherwise. It hoped to be seen not as contingent but as necessary (*zwingend*), and thus as natural.⁴⁹ This was a marked achievement showcasing the distinctiveness of art as a human practice. Its production, execution, and reception is clearly intentional, but in serving no fixed or instrumental purpose, it significantly differs from other human pursuits. Rather than aiming to improve the self or to mould nature (what *Zivilisation* does), artistic practices prompt reflection on our inherent limitations (the aspiration of *Kultur*). Through art, as Mann envisions it, we learn to set aside relations of extraction and domination, dwelling in a zone of ambiguity and

⁴⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Counsels and Maxims*, Chapter III, §29, in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 2, tr. E. F. J. Payne (Clarendon Press, 2001); qtd. in Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 163.

⁴⁷ Thomas Khurana, 'Die Kunst der zweiten Natur und die andere Natur der Kunst', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 66, no. 3 (2018), 339–361.

⁴⁸ Khurana, 'Die Kunst der zweiten Natur und die andere Natur der Kunst', 344, 348.

⁴⁹ Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst*, 27–28.

free reflection that is too often lost in the modern regime of relentless instrumentalization and control.⁵⁰

Castorp's role is not merely that of an appreciator of art, but he himself comes to embody its values.⁵¹ His mode of life appeals because it resists the dual temptations of instrumentality and reductionism. The opposite holds for Settembrini and Naphta, whose politicized outlooks not only prevent them from appreciating art's openness, but also render them unfit as anthropological models. Castorp, who gestures toward a humanist ideal, does not seek to educate others through dogmatic instruction, nor does he aim to reshape the world according to a fixed vision of progress. Instead, through his receptivity, civility, and openness to existential meaning, he affirms life's irreducible complexity. In Castorp, I contend, Mann found the starting point for what he later called a 'new anthropology', a 'humanism to come'.⁵²

Reflections was written as a defence of this cultural mode of life. It responded to the fear that modern society's growing emphasis on utility and politics—epitomized by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—was leaving little room for the alternative vision of *Kultur* that had developed in Germany amid its nineteenth-century political fragmentation. As the country became increasingly politicized and as demands mounted that art serve political ends, the space for an estranging yet consequential art seemed to shrink. With the withering of such art and its experience, Mann feared that the broader anthropological aspiration underlying the ideal of *Kultur* would likewise fade from collective consciousness:

What is science today? Narrow and hard specialization for profit, exploitation, and control. What is culture? Humanity perhaps?

⁵⁰ See also Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kultur and Culture', tr. M. Kalbus, *Social Text* 27.2(99) (2009), 146–158, at 146–147.

⁵¹ Mann spoke with great fascination about Eichendorff's *Good-for-Nothing*—the protagonist of his *Memoirs of a Good-for-Nothing*—whose qualities closely mirror those of Castorp. 'It is a great poetic accomplishment', Mann notes, drawing a contrast between Eichendorff's version of the unencumbered self and figures like Siegfried, Parsifal, Mowgli, or Kaspar Hauser, 'that his purity does not have the effect of stupidity.' The good-for-nothing 'is a human being, so much so that he cannot and does not want to be anything else at all: this is exactly why he is a good-for-nothing.' See *Reflections*, 277–278.

⁵² Mann, 'Freund und die Zukunft' in *Gesammelte Werke*, 500.

Breadth and goodness? No, nothing more than a means for earning money and for dominance. What is philosophy? Perhaps still not a way of earning money, but also very narrow specialization in the style and spirit of the times. ... I am careful not to revolt against the necessary changes of the times, and I do not shed tears over things that are passé, but I will not be persuaded that progress is always progress toward something happier and better.⁵³

What was at stake for Mann was the very idea that a life like Castorp's reaches higher and deeper than one guided by rationality, utility, or progressive ideals alone. Yet this mode of life was increasingly threatened by politicization, paradoxically necessitating a political response. Insofar as the experience of art rested on a model of *Bildung* and an anthropological vision whose values seemed at risk of becoming unacknowledgeable, defending this vision became a political concern in its own right. As Dieter Borchmeyer has suggested, Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* might as well be called the *Political Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*.⁵⁴

1.3 Against Cultural Defeatism

The belligerent consequences Mann drew from his early defence of *Kultur* were not only morally regrettable but also logically contradictory. To defend a supposedly non-domineering worldview by so domineering a means as war quickly revealed itself as an untenable position. Yet as Mann, for good reason, distanced himself from any effort to justify political aggression on the basis of *Kultur*'s supposed priority over *Zivilisation*, his conviction about the value of ambiguity in art nonetheless remained central to his later thought. At its core lay what he would later call, in 1952, 'the problem of humanity'.⁵⁵ A

⁵³ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 98.

⁵⁴ I share much of Borchmeyer's interpretive approach. Despite its evident limitations, Borchmeyer regards *Reflections* as 'a highly respectable, linguistically and argumentatively fascinating work, that is worthy of its author, and from whom he rightly never quite distanced himself.' He concludes: 'Political shrewdness and literary irony reveal themselves as the twin pair [*Zwillingsgeschwister*], by which the humanity of centrism [*die Humanität der Mitte*] is defended against various radicalisms.' See Borchmeyer, 'Politische Betrachtungen eines angeblich Unpolitischen: Thomas Mann, Edmund Burke und die Tradition des Konservatismus', in *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch*, vol. 10 (1997), 83–105, at 83, 103–104.

⁵⁵ Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft', 333.

humane political theory, he then insisted, cannot sever itself from reflection on art and its cultivation of a sensibility for doubt and openness, thereby preparing citizens for life in a liberal and democratic society. Yet this conviction was already present in Mann's writings as early as his 1922 rebuttal of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918/22), written while he was still at work on *The Magic Mountain*.

Spengler had claimed that the longstanding European tradition of high art had come to an end, and that modern societies would be better served by turning to pragmatic concerns. 'In the shareholders meeting of any limited company, or in the technical staff of any first-rate engineering works', Spengler noted, 'there is more intelligence, taste, character and capacity than in the whole music and painting of present-day Europe.'⁵⁶ As 'civilized ... people' of 'late life', modern Europeans simply had to accept that 'of great painting or great music there can no longer be ... any question.'⁵⁷

Mann did not dismiss this bitter diagnosis lightly. As Barbara Beßlich's illuminating study reveals, he even showed sustained interest in Spengler's claims—sharing many of his misgivings about contemporary art and at times echoing thoughts of its impending decline.⁵⁸ This fascination, however, gave way to a decisive break once Mann realized that Spengler's statements were not tinged with irony but offered in earnest, with tangible political implications.⁵⁹

Spengler, in Mann's view, revealed himself not merely as a cultural defeatist who saw the arts as unable to bear their former weight, but as a political fatalist who accepted—and perhaps even welcomed—the displacement of older humanistic attachments by the demands of utility and power. This willingness to leave art behind was all the

⁵⁶ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, tr. C. F. Atkinson (Knopf, 1926), 293.

⁵⁷ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 40.

⁵⁸ In his diaries, Mann refers to *The Decline of the West* as a great work, going so far as to liken his reading experience to Thomas Buddenbrooks's lifechanging encounter with Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. What is more, Mann resisted scholarly critiques—by Keyserling, Marek, and Weber—which, even when presented in personal conversation, failed to tame his appeal. *The Decline of the West's* literary allusions and its synthesis of different spheres of thought gripped rather than alarmed Mann. See Barbara Beßlich, *Faszination des Verfalls: Thomas Mann und Oswald Spengler* (Akademie Verlag, 2002), 14, 20, 27.

⁵⁹ It was a conversation with the family's priest and close friend Georg Merz that convinced Mann of Spengler's sincerity. See Beßlich, *Faszination des Verfalls*, 31.

more troubling to Mann, who had expected someone shaped by the same pessimistic-humanist tradition of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to recognize how art might still serve as a source of ethical orientation. His disappointment culminated in the polemic ‘On Spengler’s Teachings’:

The complex and perverse nature of Spengler’s case lies in his unwillingness to stand up for culture and fight for its preservation, despite his love for it. ... That Spengler loves culture, however, is yet another appearance. Rightly viewed, he approves of its decline—an impression confirmed by his personality as much as by his writing! What his prophecies wish to deny, he himself represents: civilization! All that belongs to it—intellectualism, rationalism, relativism, the cult of causality, the natural law—pervades his teachings.⁶⁰

Mann’s point was not that cultural critique should be excluded from political judgment. On the contrary, it has an essential role to play in public affairs. But rather than encouraging readers, as Spengler did, to abandon the promise of art, critique’s task lies in prompting reflection on how that promise might be renewed under current conditions.⁶¹ If anything can make us see society’s decline in a new light, Mann believed, it is art. This conviction animates several of his later critiques, from his doubts about the value of technological progress in *Voyage with Don Quixote* to his concern with the erosion of cultural familiarity in his exchange with Adorno.⁶² Though Mann here strikes a pessimistic tone—worrying that higher literature has become a ‘parodic recapitulation of the western myth before the final onset of the night’, and lamenting the ‘masses who can no longer “recognize” anything’⁶³—his reflections aim to bring back into view the humanistic and anthropological ideals he continued to espouse.

Despite being aware of the risks of overstating art’s social im-

⁶⁰ Thomas Mann, ‘Über die Lehre Spenglers’, in *Essays III: Musik und Philosophie*, ed. H. Kurzke (Fischer, 1988), 151.

⁶¹ Beßlich, *Faszination des Verfalls*, 45, 47.

⁶² Thomas Mann, ‘Voyage with Don Quixote’, in *Collected Essays*, tr. H. Lowe-Porter (Secker & Warburg, 1958), 454–455; Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Mann, *Correspondence 1943–1955*, tr. N. Walker (Polity Press, 2006), 93.

⁶³ Adorno and Mann, *Correspondence 1943–1955*, 93.

portance,⁶⁴ Mann by no means abandoned his conviction about the need for art and cultural critique in the postwar era. He continued to see in the experience of art a chance for appreciating ambiguity, whose dismissal in the new age of democracy would amount to grave social and political failure. A reminder of this conviction comes in his 1952 speech *The Artist and Society*, delivered only three years before his death. There, Mann reaffirmed the artist's distance from moral instruction, insisting that the artist 'improves' the world by means quite different from teaching.⁶⁵ Rather than instruct, he must estrange—rediscovering his own naïveté with every new attempt at making art.⁶⁶ In this way, he becomes a 'benefactor to humanity'.⁶⁷ Although art cannot halt the 'dissemination of evil', it 'provides solace', rising to the level of 'a game of the utmost seriousness'.⁶⁸ In its essence, art is distinguished by a unifying effect that ensures 'humanity shall never turn its blame-tainted eye from [its own] innocence.'⁶⁹

This late speech captures how Mann's attachment to art laid the foundation for a broader anthropological ideal. Although this ideal may be difficult to translate into a concrete political program, it is illustrated and embodied in the life of Hans Castorp. As Reinhard Mehring has observed, Castorp 'remains a sacrificed precursor of a new humanity.'⁷⁰ His time on the Mountain comes to a tragic close, but in just this way it evokes an unrealized yet desirable ideal. Achievable but not yet achieved, the fragile accommodation of ambiguity for which Castorp stands assumes the character of a collective aspiration.

2. A Tension between Liberalism and Art

Whoever regards aesthetic experience as the foundation for a broad-

⁶⁴ Reflecting on how Nietzsche's unpolitical stance had paved the way for his later co-optation by the Nazis, Mann warned against the mistaken belief that aestheticism could offer answers to every challenge. As the atrocities of the Third Reich made all too clear, some situations call for expressly political solutions. See Mann, 'Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung', in *Essays IV: Nietzsche–Freud–andere Deutsche*, eds. H. Kurzke & S. Stachorski (S. Fischer, 2013), 11–78.

⁶⁵ Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft' 326–336.

⁶⁶ Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft', 327.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft', 336.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Mehring, *Thomas Manns philosophische Dichtung*, 56.

er social vision must, as Juliane Rebentisch argues, take seriously the longstanding critiques of society's aestheticization, dating back to Plato.⁷¹ This challenge is especially pressing in Mann's case, where the values of art and ambiguity initially supported an explicitly antidemocratic stance, only to later underpin a liberal and democratic vision. The question, then, is whether this shift succeeds—whether an anthropological model grounded in art can ultimately be reconciled with the principles and sensibilities of liberalism.

This concern is central to the work of Richard Rorty, who, despite sharing Mann's appreciation for a life shaped by aesthetic experience, ultimately rejects the idea that it should serve as the basis for an anthropological and social ideal like that of *Kultur*. For Rorty, the experience of art is crucial to individual self-creation, but there are no defensible grounds for elevating it into a spirit that shapes society as a whole. In the work of Wolf Lepenies, this anxiety is stated in even sharper terms. Lepenies suggests that an attachment to the opaque and metaphysical qualities of art not only sits uneasily with the ideals of transparency and public justification that liberal institutions require but may even expose them to political abuse.

2.1 Richard Rorty: Art for Self-Creation

Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* expresses attachments to an artistic culture that in many ways parallel Mann's own. Like the novelist, Rorty was sceptical of modern societies' aspiration to rationalism, whether metaphysical or scientific.⁷² Art, and especially the novel, offered a compelling alternative. Its values seemed better suited to life in a liberal society, which, on Rorty's pragmatist view, rested not on fixed truth claims but on the possibility of open-ended conversation.⁷³

Rorty assigns a central role to the poet in sparking and perpetuating this conversation. By giving form to what people already feel or intuit but cannot fully articulate, the poet enables new forms of self-description. While leaving interpretation and judgment to the audience, the most gifted poetic expressions convey the appeal of

⁷¹ See Juliane Rebentisch, *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, tr. J. Ganahl (Polity, 2016), 6.

⁷² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 53.

⁷³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 52.

competing ideas without endorsing any one of them.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly in light of these convergences, Rorty's liberal ironist is a figure much like Hans Castorp—someone whose encounter with art may, at any moment, unsettle their views and open them a kind of self-creation that would otherwise remain foreclosed.⁷⁵

Despite these parallels, Rorty ultimately departed from a view like Mann's. While he admired the aesthetic life and shared Mann's sense of its potential to unsettle fixed association, he rejected the idea that such a posture could serve as a model for society. As he put it, although 'ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault'—and he might well have included Mann—are 'invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image', they are 'pretty much useless when it comes to politics.'⁷⁶ However appealing Castorp's example may be, Rorty cautions, it would be misguided to conclude that his life offers a normative model for society as a whole.

Irony, for Rorty, is inherently private. Attempts to theorize its effects or elevate it into a public ethos inevitably falter.⁷⁷ The effort to construct a political philosophy around a life shaped by art replicates the very metaphysical error it claims to overcome. Ironist theory 'hoped to be both beautiful on a small private scale and sublime on a large public one', but this attempt was 'hopeless'.⁷⁸ In contrast, Rorty sees the modern novel as more relevant to politics, social hope, and human solidarity precisely because it avoids turning private irony into public principle.⁷⁹ Even Nietzsche and Heidegger—'as magnificent as Proust' when writing about their personal canons—'become at best vapid, and at worst sadistic' when addressing modern society or political destiny.⁸⁰

Rorty's departure from Mann becomes clearest when he turns to the role of cultural criticism. For Mann, judgments about art were inseparably bound up with political reflection. As we saw in his response to Spengler, whether a society made space for aesthetic meaning served as an indicator of its broader cultural and ethical orientation.

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 61.

⁷⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 93.

⁷⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 83.

⁷⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 87.

⁷⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 120.

⁷⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 119.

⁸⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 119-120.

On Rorty's more restrained view, cultural criticism should remain within the bounds of the arts, concerned with shifts in form, style, and expression.⁸¹ Its insights may be illuminating for those attuned to its vocabulary, but they are neither addressed to nor binding upon society at large. This limitation does not represent criticism's failure so much as sober recognition of the conditions under which liberal societies can endure. However rich or provocative, art criticism is not a platform from which social or political reasoning should proceed.

Rorty's stance rests on a sharper boundary between different domains of life, especially between art and politics, than we find in Mann. The vocabularies that govern these domains, Rorty argues, are 'incommensurable', and there is no meaningful way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory.⁸² The former is 'necessarily private, unshared, and unsuited to argument'; the latter 'necessarily public', 'shared', and dependent on 'argumentative exchange'.⁸³ Whereas Mann envisioned a synthesis between the cultural sensibility of Friedrich Hölderlin and the social ideals of Karl Marx,⁸⁴ Rorty explicitly cautions against such fusion:

If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that no theory about the nature of Man or Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx or Heidegger with Habermas, we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools—as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.⁸⁵

Beneath this insistence on separation lies a deeper warning. Promoting the importance, let alone the superiority, of the aesthetic life risks calling into question the values on which liberal societies depend. Only by keeping reflections on art distinct from thinking about justice, Rorty suggests, can both domains preserve their integrity and flourish on their own terms.

⁸¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 80-81.

⁸² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv-xv.

⁸³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv.

⁸⁴ Adorno and Mann, *Correspondence 1943-1955*, 99-100.

⁸⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv.

2.2 Lepenies' Warning Against Overstating the Importance of Art

In *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (2006), Wolf Lepenies formulates a similar concern, albeit with greater vehemence. While Rorty asked whether the call for autonomous art could coexist with political liberalism, Lepenies presents the ideal of *Kultur* as an uncompromising threat to liberal society. In a spirit reminiscent of Habermas, he remains wary of any suggestion like Rorty's that a liberal utopia might take the form of a 'poeticized culture'.⁸⁶ Such claims, he cautions, lend themselves all too readily to appropriation. However inadvertently, they risk fostering the aestheticization of politics.⁸⁷

Lepenies acknowledges that Mann's outlook—with its emphasis on irony, scepticism, and humanism—stood in clear tension with authoritarian efforts to co-opt culture in his time.⁸⁸ Yet he warns that Mann's position is beset with political pitfalls. The problem is not any overt desire to subordinate art to political control, but a tendency to assign its distinctive qualities a political function they cannot fulfil. While the estranging, metaphysical, or opaque aspects of art may well exemplify certain aesthetic values, those values lose their footing when drawn into the political sphere. That Mann failed to register this danger—and even sought to rebut the view 'that a politically powerful Germany would necessarily be opposed to intellect and culture'—amounted, in Lepenies' eyes, to a serious misjudgement.⁸⁹

In entertaining this reconciliation of culture and state, Mann departed from some of his most important influences—Schopenhauer, Burckhardt, and especially Nietzsche.⁹⁰ Like Mann, Nietzsche believed that art provided access to values otherwise foreclosed. But in his view, superior art could only arise in periods of decline, as the pursuit of a few.⁹¹ The idea that a tradition of high art can influ-

⁸⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 65-66

⁸⁷ Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 47.

⁸⁸ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 8, 46.

⁸⁹ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 28

⁹⁰ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 19.

⁹¹ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 20. Lepenies' interpretation might, of course, be contested. See, e.g., Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

ence an entire citizenry in a way that prevents culture from losing its footing seemed to Nietzsche a contradiction.⁹² In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, metaphysics, poetry, and music had acquired their weight precisely because politics could not fulfil important functions.⁹³ By the twentieth, not only had the role of politics changed, but so had the role of art. To retain its standing, the ideal of *Kultur* now had to be defined in opposition to rationalism, parliamentarism, or even ‘politics’ at large—something Mann’s *Reflections* stood for.

Germany’s path from a nation of culture to an empire of cultural might was already apparent in the widespread cultural justifications for the First World War. Yet the tendency to inflate art at the expense of a defensible politics did not end there. Despite the Nazi regime’s censorship of modernism and its ban on so-called ‘degenerate art’, its leadership styled itself as a cultural elite. Hitler was a painter, Goebbels a novelist, Speer an architect.⁹⁴ More importantly, their vision of the state was an aesthetic one.⁹⁵ As Lepenies observes, Hitler sought to dissolve the boundary between aesthetic and political value, transforming the world into a Wagner opera in which myth displaced moral justification.⁹⁶ The regime’s appeal lay not only in promises of order or employment, but in the metaphysical and aesthetic allure its ideology projected.⁹⁷

‘When culture was accepted as a substitute for politics’, Lepenies concludes, ‘the absence of morality in the public sphere was easily accepted as well.’⁹⁸ This indictment of German history, Lepenies thinks, brings forth the central tension in Mann’s position. An anthropological ideal grounded in art is insufficient to sustain allegiance to liberal democracy. Granted too much leeway, art may even attenuate the transparency such a society requires. Where public justification depends on shared reasons, aesthetic attachment remains opaque, inward, and not easily generalizable. Efforts to elevate the

⁹² Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 28-29.

⁹³ Such as helping German states unify or provide for the meaning once found in religion. See Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 19-20.

⁹⁴ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 36.

⁹⁵ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 49.

⁹⁶ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 39.

⁹⁷ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 6.

⁹⁸ Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, 47.

aesthetic life into a public ideal risk undermining the very conditions that make such life possible. As Rorty had likewise warned, when aesthetic views harden into a doctrine of political philosophy, they risk unsettling the liberal order.

3. A Case for Art and Cultural Criticism in Liberal Society

My argument began by tracing a contrast between two characters in *The Magic Mountain*. Whereas Settembrini regards art as, at best, secondary to civic formation, Castorp, through his interest in music, cultivates an appreciation for life's complexity that draws him away from the politicized outlook the freemason represents. Turning to Mann's essays and critical writings, I suggested that Castorp's example may be instructive for the anthropological and social ideal it brings into view. I then raised the challenge that, however appealing, treating this ideal of *Kultur* as a guiding principle for social life appears to conflict with core commitments of liberalism. For Rorty, the Castorpian model may serve as a meaningful resource for private self-realization, but it cannot be extended into a public ideal. For Lepenies, it assigns to art a social role it cannot safely bear.

But is the aspiration toward *Kultur* really incompatible with liberal values? In the final part of my argument, I want to respond to Rorty's and Lepenies' objections and suggest how Mann's vision might be rendered compatible with a liberal commitment to pluralism. It would be a mistake, I contend, to dismiss Mann's aesthetic outlook simply because it does not yield a concrete political theory. Castorp's example helps us see how core liberal aims might be pursued through means not typically recognized as capable of securing them. By inviting us to see the experience of art not as a threat to liberal values but as a potential resource for sustaining them, Mann reframes a familiar problem in political theory. In doing so, he also shows how cultural criticism might function as a legitimate mode of social reflection.

The disagreement between Mann and thinkers like Rorty and Lepenies is not over *what* values are central within liberal society, but *how* they are to be cultivated.⁹⁹ All three begin from the premise that

⁹⁹ Sabl frames the issue of liberal virtue as a 'which-one' question: which virtues ought citizens to cultivate? Yet even if we were to reach a tentative answer, a further challenge would remain: how should citizens cultivate these virtues in ways consis-

life in a pluralistic society is marked by persistent and often intractable disagreements. The appropriate response, they are inclined to agree, is not to enforce consensus but to create conditions in which individuals are protected from collective overreach and encouraged to adopt a tolerant, non-adversarial stance that can help temper polarization. Alongside a shared emphasis on institutional design, each affirms the value of individual character traits and commitments such as open-mindedness, restraint from violence, and willingness to co-exist across difference.¹⁰⁰

Yet this agreement gives way to disagreement when we ask how such values are best cultivated and whether, beyond the right set of institutions, art and culture have a role to play in this process. While Lepenies regards art as a source of confusion or even risk, and Rorty confines it to the sphere of private interest, Mann sees it as essential to a humane social order. It is precisely this divergence—sharing a commitment to liberal values while thinking in different terms about how they might be sustained—that allows Mann to be seen as offering a distinct ideal of liberalism. What distinguishes this ideal is that it not only grants greater latitude to forms of experience that remain irreducibly estranged from politics but also insists on maintaining the cultural conditions required for such experiences to take shape. In affirming this ideal, Mann calls into question whether the strict separation of value-spheres that both Rorty and Lepenies presuppose can ultimately be sustained.¹⁰¹

‘Liberalism errs’, Mann had remarked in *Reflections*, ‘when it believes it can separate religion from politics: Without religion, politics—domestic, social politics, that is—is in the long run impossible.’¹⁰² Rather than sidestep the enduring need for meaning, the more culturally attuned liberalism Mann envisions invites us to ask how this need might be nurtured in ways compatible with the de-

tent with liberal commitments? See Sabl, ‘Virtue for Pluralists’, 217, 235.

¹⁰⁰ Rorty also shares a broad range of commitments with Habermas, making their differences, as he puts it, ‘merely philosophical’ rather than ‘political’. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 66–67.

¹⁰¹ Mann himself captured this idea when he referred to ‘the problem of humanity’, rejecting what he called the ‘false separation’ between different spheres of life, which in his view ought rather to be seen as a connected whole. See Mann, ‘Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft’, 333.

¹⁰² Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 236–237.

mands of a tolerant society. Hans Castorp not only inherited such a longing but also offers a kind of practical example. He turned his search for meaning into neither dogma nor certainty but a form of openness from which liberal citizens might learn. Among those on the Mountain, it was he who proved most capable of subjecting competing positions to scrutiny, and it was his appreciation for art that helped make this possible.

Mann's cultural model for education, and his more romantic version of liberalism, may be neither sufficient on their own, nor equally accessible to all, nor always preferable to a more explicitly political posture. The first two of these shortcomings underscore the importance of democratic institutions—something Mann himself came to acknowledge in his later years, though not without hesitation.¹⁰³ As for the third, rather than claiming that Castorp's way of life is generally superior to Settembrini's, I want to make a more modest claim. One can recognize the limits of Castorp's example—his tendency toward inaction, inwardness, and vulnerability in moments of political crisis—without concluding that the model of his life holds no value for most of us, most of the time.

Consider the costs of parting with the ideal of *Kultur*, as Rorty does by confining the value of art to the private sphere. The refusal to endorse any individual or collective ideal beyond endless discussion may not suffice to prevent individuals from channelling their longing for meaning into beliefs and convictions that ultimately run counter to liberal commitments. A stronger safeguard is only possible if aesthetic forms themselves become a subject of social philosophy. Another concern is that if (as Rorty suggests) a liberal society makes space for lives shaped by self-creation rather than economic or practical pursuits alone, it must develop a capacity for collective reflection on art and its social effects. Yet such reflection becomes difficult when aesthetic experience is treated as so inherently private

¹⁰³ Matthias Löwe argues that in his liberal-democratic phase during American exile, Mann continued to present democratic life as requiring citizens capable of embracing inner plurality—something he regarded as more fundamental than the presence of the right institutional framework. Moreover, as Löwe shows, Mann doubted whether most people could attain such an inner condition without the example of a leader who embodied it himself. This helps explain Mann's admiration for Franklin Roosevelt, whom he evocatively described as a 'wheelchair Caesar'. See Löwe, *Dionysos versus Mose*, 624–627.

that it resists any shared evaluation.

Neither problem arises for Mann. He is, on the one hand, willing to articulate a standard capable of preventing the search for meaning from turning against liberalism—without suppressing that search. On the other hand, he considers critical reflection on art essential, in part because it draws attention to art's genuine social contributions—too often dismissed as useless and intangible.

Mann was more inclined to retract than to amplify the outwardly political elements of this project. Nothing like 'willing into existence' the conditions for a society of *Kultur* would, on his account, be justifiable, let alone possible. Nor, for that matter, did he quite break with Nietzsche in the way Lepenies suggests. Instead, he sought to forge with his nineteenth-century influences an alliance that left him wary of any attempt to co-opt culture for ideological or state purposes.¹⁰⁴ He also insisted on the continuing need for critique and remained committed to the idea that the experience of art might help foster such a spirit.¹⁰⁵ His irony, too, was not intended to simply parody or foreclose civil conversation, but to keep it alive.¹⁰⁶ Even the troubling way in which he tied his views to the cause of war was—paradoxically, indeed—accompanied by a commitment to protecting life's inherent ambiguities, a stance that would later make him a natural target of persecution under the Third Reich.

That Mann did not depart so radically from the liberal tradition implies, however, that he shares many of the difficulties that have long confronted liberal thinkers. Chief among them is the charge that liberalism's call to substitute command and control with critique and conversation is overly optimistic. Yet unlike many other liberals, Mann gestures toward an internal remedy for this problem. Rather than set aside experiences that speak to the most contested and private sources of meaning, he turns to the experience of art as a resource for transforming such longings into the sensibilities liberal societies require.

While art, on Mann's view, ought to remain at some distance

¹⁰⁴ Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, 153, 167.

¹⁰⁵ Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft', 330.

¹⁰⁶ Kurt Sontheimer, 'Thomas Mann als politischer Schriftsteller', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 6 (1958), 1–19, at 5; Jens Ewen, 'Erzähler Pluralismus: Thomas Manns Ironie als Sprache der Moderne,' *Thomas-Mann-Studien* vol 54. (Vittorio Klostermann, 2017), 12.

from everyday politics, precisely because it offers the kind of ambiguity and estrangement that political discourse tends to lack, its value depends on how it is situated within public life. For art to deliver on its promise, not only must each generation pursue its own artistic estrangement, but people must also be prepared to confront art in the right spirit: ready to critique but also open to being touched. That encounter, in turn, gives rise to cultural criticism which examines whether this attempt succeeds. Understood as sustained reflection on the forms and limits of aesthetic experience, criticism helps us discern when art's promise is being realized, and when it is not. In this way, the creation and critique of art is neither confined to the private sphere nor in tension with liberal commitments. Rather, it emerges as a natural mode of social inquiry within a liberal society and as one of the activities that may help sustain its core commitments.

Conclusion

Liberal democracies are becoming polarized and politicized in ways that raise doubts about whether institutional reform alone can offer adequate remedies.¹⁰⁷ While it would therefore seem natural to look beyond politics when asking how liberal societies might respond to these pressures and renew themselves, few voices in public debate or academic discourse have turned to the experience of art. The view that encounters with ambiguous, politically untethered art might help cultivate the dispositions on which liberal societies depend has faded from sight. As recent controversies over the defacement of artworks or the interruption of performances suggest, for art to have political consequence, it is expected either to carry a particular message or to appear within an expressly politicized space.¹⁰⁸

This broader shift in art's social role is related to how art itself is now produced and perceived. When art is subversive in form and avant-garde in spirit, it often becomes a niche pursuit, accessible only

¹⁰⁷ Anton Jäger, *Hyperpolitik: Extreme Politisierung ohne politische Folgen* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2023).

¹⁰⁸ Orlando Mayorquin, Lola Fadulu, Patrick Farrell, and Joshua Barone, 'Climate Protesters Disrupt Met Opera's "Tannhäuser"', *The New York Times*, 30 November 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/arts/music/met-opera-protest-tannhauser.html>; Damien Gayle, 'Just Stop Oil activists throw soup at Van Gogh's Sunflowers', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/14/just-stop-oil-activists-throw-soup-at-van-goghs-sunflowers>.

to a few. When it aspires to reach broader audiences, it tends to cater to the lowest common denominator and is easily dismissed as entertainment. In either case, while the experience of art may offer a momentary reprieve, it rarely leaves a lasting mark on society. As Christoph Menke has observed:

Art has never been so visible, present and malleable as it is today, and at the same time it has never been part of so many social processes: art is a commodity, a conversation, an opinion, an awareness, an act. The societal omnipresence of art accompanies the increasing absence of what we might call aesthetic power.¹⁰⁹

Drawing on the thought of Thomas Mann, I have suggested that the withering of a vibrant culture of autonomous art is not an incidental epiphenomenon of our political undoing but deserves renewed attention, especially within a liberal society. Asking how the experience of art might bear on the conditions of social life, as Mann's cultural critiques invite us to do, need not threaten our liberal commitments. It may instead offer a way back to liberal values at a time when they appear more fragile than ever.

Beneath this aspiration toward *Kultur* lies an insight into the value and necessity of accepting life's inherent ambiguities. Through the figure of Hans Castorp, Mann pointed to a mode of cultivating this openness in a way that has been largely overlooked within the liberal tradition. Precisely because Castorp's disposition remains detached from explicit political ends, it helps sustain a sense of meaning, foster reflection and critique, and deepen the forms of care and curiosity on which liberal societies depend. At the same time, it is easy to see how in times of crisis such a disposition might appear too tenuous, too indirect, or too porous to serve as a viable alternative to more overtly political forms of civic engagement. Notwithstanding these objections, the mode of life Mann sketches in his character is not one we should set aside too quickly. A century after the publication of *The Magic Mountain*, liberal citizens have something to learn from Hans Castorp.

¹⁰⁹ Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst*, 11. tr. Suhrkamp Verlag, <https://www.suhrkamp.de/rights/book/christoph-menke-the-power-of-art-fr-9783518296448>.