Freedom and Homelessness
The Historical Ground of Political Life [1]

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Abstract

This essay asks about the "ground of history", and examines how this question is answered by Thomas Mann. The paper positions Mann not only as a novelist but as a self-consciously paradigmatic production of modern liberal consciousness: a subject both constructed by his own times and the technical apparatus of those times (political apparatus, publishing apparatus, and the construction of a willing audience to hear him) Mann is posited as a self-constructing subject who simultaneously reveals the impossibility and necessity of grounding political and historical life through narrative. Liberalism, in this account, is not merely a political doctrine of individual liberty but a historical phenomenon itself: a metaphysical stance to organise the self and the world through representational willing, culminating in the emergence of what is now at times described as a global "world civilisation."

By situating Mann within a broader intellectual genealogy that includes Hegel, Nietzsche, Kant, and Heidegger – as well as interlocutors such as Jünger, Strauss, and Strausz-Hupé – the essay articulates a critique of modern liberal political ontology, understood as an incessant production of grounds in response to a constitutive groundlessness. It argues that this metaphysical predicament undergirds the political forms of modernity, from totalitarianisms to liberal democracies, each offering a form of "homecoming" in response to the alienation that is their shared premise.

The essay draws upon Heidegger's notion of letting-be to propose an alternative to the will-to-ground that animates modern political life. Rather than seeking to overcome homelessness through new foundations: political, theological, or aesthetic, the essay suggests that genuine freedom might instead consist in learning to dwell within the clearing of presence itself: to let the past presence without mastery, and to receive the ground not as something posited, but as something given. This ontological shift gestures toward a different thinking of community, history, and politics, beyond the metaphysics of the autonomous subject posited in the forms of political liberalism.

Keywords: Thomas Mann; Liberalism; History; Heidegger

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[1] This paper was originally presented to the Philosophy Department of the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, at the kind invitation of Professor Demur Jalaghonia, Head of the Department, in January 2024. It has since been published both in Georgia and under this title in Aaron Turner, ed., *The Essence of History* (London: Routledge, 2026), pp. 156–171.

Ich aber will dem Kaukasos zu! [2]

The simplest questions are invariably the hardest. If we took at random an undergraduate student and asked them: "explain what history is", we might watch that student struggle. I know this, because these simplest of questions I have also found to be the most difficult to clarify, and their resolution lies in the most confounding confusion. In periods of transition, like the one in which we find ourselves now, these questions present themselves again, bringing with them their attendant darkness, and they beset us. For many who offer answers to these questions, it can be a source of disappointment or irritation that we do not quickly or unquestioningly embrace the answers they supply. Why do their answers not satisfy?

Or first we might ask: why and how did they appear, these questions, and *when*, when do they first make their presence felt? Have they always beset us? Or if not, then who first asks them, and why does their asking have its own time? Does transition itself bring with it questions, *pushing us into position* as questioners? What transition is then named, when we ask: *whose* history puts itself before us? Or are these questions a return, a return of very ancient riddles that gnaw and have gnawed at the hearts of men and women from the beginning? Beginning of what, and when? Are these questions the way a certain kind of being-together addresses us, are they the shape it takes in confronting us? Arising on the basis of what manner of our being together? How?

One who stands within the modern asking of these questions is Thomas Mann, who, opening the first of his *Joseph* novels, says: "Very deep is the wellspring of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?" [3] A historian friend of mine, very sharp of mind, suggests that these words name the question of history itself: it asks, he says, "where, with history, do we begin?", or (but this is my addition), keeping in mind our other question, it also asks: "when with politics, does 'we' begin?" How might Mann's words help us in these questions?

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[2] Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Die Wanderung' (FHA8), p. 609–619. This song of Hölderlin's, speaking as it does of the meeting of the two wings of Europe, east and west, lays out the foundation of Europe as a myth, a hymn of foundation beginning only once a founding silence has fallen on the founders, from out of which, and after which, they speak (as one).

[3] Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder I / Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (GWE), p. 1. "Tief ist der Brennen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?"

Mann wrote these words at a mid-point, shortly after the end of the Great War and on the precipice of the events that would flow from that undecided end, engulfing the world in a second, wider conflict, one that would suspend the possibilities of three forms of politics, whose differences are even now concluding their working-out in what some would call the emergence of a "multipolar" world, but that names the emergence of what can (and has been) summarised as the "beginning of the world civilisation grounded in Western European thinking".[4] The thinking that goes under the name of "Western" here is neither a political nor a historical rule: it is even more decisive than that. This world civilisation names a global metaphysics governing every aspect of life: of law, governance, economic organisation and transaction, and the structure, control, distribution and exchange of information and beyond that what a certain class of contemporary thinker has delighted to call "power". It is a representational grasping of the whole globe. This "world civilisation" is nothing the opponents of "Eurocentric" or "Western" hegemony seek to challenge in the pursuit of "decolonisation": rather is this an empire to which they also bow every time they set up a web-site with the bank accounts behind it to collect the means – the money – to pursue their emancipatory aims. Nor is it one rejected by those who support the emergence of new centres (poles) of global influence to replace North America and Europe – China, Russia, the Arab Middle East, Iran. The one who summarised all this was Martin Heidegger: he named its unifying thought "a new fundamental science [of] cybernetics", and more importantly for us today, "the end of philosophy". This end is not a terminus, but is that "end" that Francis Fukuyama names with his "end of history", and we would add, is the "end" of politics, namely a "place" and "history" in which something is "gathered in its most extreme possibility",[5] and presses in on what has gathered.

Mann writes these words, however at an even stranger mid-point, as one who follows in the footsteps of Nietzsche (while softening the imprint), and so in the wake of that one who proclaims the death of God and teaches the doctrine of the eternal return of the same. Mann does not ask the question *when* – "when did we discover that the wellspring of the past is bottomless?" – but offers the question as one that has always been in waiting. For when Mann

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[4] Martin Heidegger, 'Zeit und Sein (1962)' (GA14), p. 73. "Beginn der im abendländisch-europäischen Denken gegründeten Weltzivilisation."

[5] Martin Heidegger, 'Zeit und Sein (1962)' (GA14), p. 72. "d[ie] neuen Grundwissenschaft [. . .] die Kybernetik heißt"; p. 70 f. "Das Ende der Philosophie ist der Ort, dasjenige, worin sich das Ganze ihrer Geschichte in seine äußerste Möglichkeit versammelt. Ende als Vollendung meint diese Versammlung."

writes of Jacob, of the patriarch and his history, he writes from out of a tale whose origin is itself a tale *of* the origin, namely, the biblical book of Genesis. How strange, then, that Mann should declare the past to be a *bottomless* well, except that the four books of *Joseph and his Brothers* refashion this tale as one whose origin has, of necessity (since God is dead), fallen away. The bottomlessness of the past is the transformation of Jacob's experience of God into an anthropology, and in a way completely faithful to the Nietzschean proclamation, a psychology, of how God and the gods came to occupy a place in the human psyche. The bottomlessness of the past is a question only newly arrived: the origin itself has fallen away and is no longer in our grasp or sight. Thus the alpha and omega of the biblical God has become what "the A[lpha] and O[mega] all our discoursing and questioning constructs".[6] The beginning and the end is, thought like this, a construction (vision – *ein Bild*) entirely of man's own making: it is what he posits it to be. Thus every *particular* myth is itself an answer to this bottomlessness, or put another way (let us put it as Mann himself puts it) "thus there are beginnings of a provisional kind" which each *point*. To where do they point? To the *unreachable* beginning (the *Ur-beginn*, as Mann calls it) of the bottomless well.[7] And they do so provisionally, until a successor power re-points them all over again. And yet they point always to the same place, namely, *the very* provisional beginning, in an eternally returning of the same (that *same*, if *provisional* – i.e., *posited*, postulated, beginning). The beginning is posited for the sake of (in consequence of) the same: and yet the manner of proceeding makes it *appear* to be the other way around (the provisionality is accorded precedence *over* the same as the unchangeable self-same). We know this "beginning" must be "there", but it presents itself only as a mystery (which any given *I* with the means – the power – to do so, may solve: at least for a while).

Put another way again, every historical tale, every myth, posits provisional origins, because the metaphysics of the origins and finality of all things being contained (which means, have their absolute and final being) in the mind of God have been brought to an end. God is no more, to be such a containment. Mann's explanation is an anthropology inasmuch as it transforms human experience into that of "the specific tradition of a particular community,

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[6] Thomas Mann, *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (GWE), p. 1. "Das A und das O all unseres Redens und Fragens bildet."

[7] Thomas Mann, *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (GWE), p. 1. "So gibt es Anfänge bedingter Art [. . .]". See also note 8 (below).

nationhood or family of faith",[8] but it is above all a psychology because what Mann really concerns himself with is the self-positing of every particular *one* who experiences and stands in the need to give account of himself from out of the mid-point formed by the positing of mythical or provisional origins and finalities. But the psychology is of every *one*, and thus no particular one as such (someone, himself). To be *in-midst* is to experience this need for the positing of provisional beginnings and ends, and to *take over* this in-midst, to realise it fully, is to explain the experience of being *in* this in-midst at all. The taking-over is therefore wresting ones origins and ends from the hands of a god and placing them into one's own: and the finding of a way to realise the telling of this wresting. *This* is Mann's task in setting out to *re*-tell the history (*Geschichte*) of Jacob, and the tale of Joseph and his brothers.

All of this stood before Mann at the point of his opening, an opening which poses not the oldest, but in fact the *newest* and latest of historical questions: "Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?" Here these words are taken from Helen Lowe-Porter's translation,[9] published shortly after Mann's German text appeared in 1933. The German is more dramatic: "Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?" *Brunnen* is more than a well, it is a flowing source. The word "bottomless" renders "unergründlich": more than merely "groundless", as a negation ("un"), followed by the intensive "er" prefixed to "ground", it refers to what is *unable* to be given a ground. Fathomless, in the sense that what cannot be fathomed cannot even be thought. *Sollen* points to more than *should*, and asks: *ought not* this deep wellspring be named as what in overflowing can nevertheless provide no means to find its ground?

This sentence names modernity, and it names its conundrum. When for modernity did politics begin? When did it find it was historical? From whence or how can it found itself – what is its ground? In one way both these terms are new ("politics", "history"), or in modernity newly understood. Modernity's political forms have been forged in long successive waves of insurrection (real and forced), foreseen by Rousseau and Voltaire, beginning in the United

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[8] Thomas Mann, *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (GWE), p. 1. "[Der] Ur-Beginn der besonderen Überlieferung einer bestimmten Gemeinschaft, Volkheit oder Glaubensfamilie."

[9] Lowe-Porter was Mann's translator from 1925 until 1960. The first volume of the four-volume series, *Die Geschichten Jakobs*, was begun in 1926, and appeared in English until the title *The Tales of Jacob* in 1934. The last volume was finished in 1942. All were written to recount Mann what called "the primitive occurrences of human life . . . a humorous song of mankind . . . that [came] into being in the turbulent circumstances of these years 1926 to 1942." *See* 'Foreword' to *Joseph and His Brothers*, p. v.

States (unless one dare include the English Civil War and Restoration) and then France, across the Europe of 1848, and Russia in 1905 and 1917 and Germany in 1918 (a transformation all too often barely noticed, or deliberately ignored).[10] Halford Mackinder, while not ignoring the issues of economic contest between the British and the German empires,[11] gives far greater weight to a different cause to the war that unleashed the greatest wave of change and destruction in Europe and beyond. He says (in an argument now rarely rehearsed) "the recent [1914] Great War arose in Europe from the revolt of the Slavs against the Germans", a consequence of, among other things, "the alliance of Russia with France in 1895".[12] These movements unbound your own country from Imperial Russia in 1918 and opened the door to the founding of this university. "History", as modernity understands it, emerges out of these insurrectionary movements as the need to account for the rapid change it must describe: but the change that is the unfolding of that history is at the same time a "politics", namely the struggle to establish and legitimise what follows from the collapse of the old orders: of tyranny, and aristocracy, and every form of inherited governance that modernity sweeps away in the making of its new foundations.

Might we justifiably say, then, that Mann's "wellspring" is itself the movement and aspirations of peoples, their gathering in to become great masses, and the appearance of their new fates? Deep, indeed, but also wide, in that it relentlessly reaches out, grasping and taking

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[10] The so-called November revolution of 1918 was itself almost without bloodshed, with fully democratic elections in January 1919 sweeping away Bismarck's 1871 aristocratic constitution. Friedrich Ebert's welcome to the returning army forces at Berlin on the 10th December 1918 contained the words "Kein Feind hat Euch überwunden [. . .] Neues ist geworden, die deutsche Freiheit ist erstanden" ("No enemy overcame you [. . .] something new has arrived, German freedom is arisen"). The significance of these words cannot be underestimated: Ebert pointed out what the troops themselves already knew: *they* had brought the war to an end by their own refusal to fight any longer for the old (undemocratic) constitution – *they* were the victors in a newly accomplished German freedom. *See* Friedrich Ebert, 'Ansprache an die Heimkehrenden Truppen', pp. 94, 95. Had this been properly acknowledged by the Allied Powers (supposed upholders of the very kind of democracy these troops had won for themselves), and a just settlement reached in the negotiations of 1919, no second war need ever have been fought.

[11] Mackinder refers to these economic effects as the market consequences of the "Going Concern" (his capitalisation). Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, pp. 180–190.

[12] Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 178. To understand this argument requires understanding how Mackinder saw (as a geographer, and as an elected politician during the Great War) the position of Russia in relation to Germany, and where Britain's interests lay in relation to the Russo-French alliance. Mackinder notes "British and French policy for a hundred years past [took] on a large consistency. We were opposed to the half German Russian Czardom because Russia was the dominating, threatening force both in East Europe and the Heartland for half a century. We were opposed to the wholly German Kaiserdom, because Germany took the lead in East Europe from the Czardom, and would then have crushed the revolting Slavs, and dominated East Europe and the Heartland. German Kultur, and all that it means in the way of organisation, would have made that German domination a chastisement of scorpions as compared with the whips of Russia."

hold of the globe so that in modernity we see it for the first time as a single whole. This is Hegel's *Weltgeschichte*, "world history" unfolding, but now deprived of its absolute, God as such (or absolute *Geist* – take your pick, but bear in mind that Hegel made no such distinction), and so in its now degenerated form of endless human progress, a progressivism subtly espoused as inexorable from the nineteenth century onwards, in the writings of figures like Mill and many others. This is that form of politics, Liberalism, which even today Fukuyama and others have announced as the inevitable fate for the world as a whole: this is what is meant by "world civilisation". Is this how Mann himself understood it?

Mann follows these opening words with two paragraphs elucidating what he means with them. He speaks of the human being (*Menschenwesen*) as a *Rätselwesen*, a riddle-being of our "naturally needy and abnormally miserable existence". Of the withdrawal of history always again and even more into the *Bodenlos*, the groundless. We find and can give ourselves, he says, only "provisional" (*bedingt* – "conditional", and so *posited*) beginnings.

What Mann names here is the homelessness of modern humanity, always stretching forth to find its home in progress. Too polite to speak aloud the death of God that for Nietzsche consummates this homelessness (too polite, but, keen reader of Nietzsche as he was, fully in the know), Mann left it to others to summarise the religious detachment inferred in this conditional future: and they duly have. If Werner Frizen lays out in academic detail how the figure of Joseph will, in the novels to which these words are the opening, function as an anti-Christ,[13] Mann delivered already a deadlier blow: he handed the matter of religion over to the anthropology of myth. However, it is indeed Nietzsche who stands behind Mann, naming the collapse and the sweeping away of the old grounds.[14]

Is it the case that the movement of peoples, and the ceaseless change that movement brings, uproots humanity from everything it can call secure, and deprives it of every possible ground – even that of God? Is this how we should we address what Mann asks? "Very deep is the wellspring of the past. Should we say it is without a ground?" What ground could ceaseless movement, a ceaseless ferment of historical and political life, possibly have?

Before we address this question more directly, let us first ask: why begin with Thomas Mann? Is there anything in Mann himself that provides us with a way to understand his

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[13] Werner Frizen, 'Thomas Mann und das Christentum', in Helmut Koopman (ed.), *Thomas Mann Handbuch*, pp. 316–320.

[14] Mann's remarks on Plato (see note 19 below) make this abundantly clear.

question? He is, great stylist that he is, no philosopher, no theorist in the grand style. What is it that pushes Mann to the fore? Like Ernst Jünger and Henry Louis Mencken he read a Nietzsche not yet tamed by the need to be disentangled from dishonest Nazi connections.[15] Again, like Jünger, Mencken, Jaspers, and Heidegger, Mann had the background classical education to read Nietzsche not only as a philosopher but also as a classical philologist: moreover he knew and had access to the sources from which the edifice of Nineteenth Century German classicism had been constructed: Erwin Rohde, Jacob Burckhardt and others. In contrast Mann disliked and was unconvinced by Hegel, once noting "the likes of me are anything but Hegelian minded. I do not find that the state is 'to be admired as something earthly divine'." [16] It is Mann's "unpolitical" affectation ("my relationship to *politics* in good German fashion, is an unrelationship") [17] that betray the limits of his understanding of Nietzsche, who had said "we Germans are Hegelians, had there never even been a Hegel".[18] This was as true for Germans then as for contemporary Europeans now: we live in an entirely Hegelian world, whether we've read a word of him or not (whether he'd even never written one). Yet Mann really was no profound philosophical thinker: his expositions of Plato and Schopenhauer, popularised in essays widely published in the United States, are quite unexceptional.[19]

Which is the point: Mann, consummate stylist and novelist, is a *deliberately* indifferent essayist (they are so written for the sake of his audience, who were themselves quite ill-prepared for the technicalities of any advanced thinking): Mann's intellectual authority was entirely derived from his literary achievement and not the other way around. In this he is a truly modern soul, akin in our own day to the former footballer who retires to become a fount of political punditry. When accused by an American journalist of expressing "middle-class"

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[15] These connections were largely the work of Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, the one who had welcomed Adolf Hitler to the Nietzsche Archiv in Weimar in the 1920s, opening the door to Nietzsche's appropriation by Alfred Baeumler and lesser Nazi apparatchiks.

[16] Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, p. 149. "Und meinesgleichen ist nichts weniger als hegelisch gesinnt, ich finde nicht, daß der Staat 'wie ein Irdisch-Göttliches zu verehren'." The citation is from Lasson's 1911 edition of Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (SWL6), p. 357 (164: Zusatz zu §272), text slightly modified, presumably by Mann himself.

[17] Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (GWE), p. 149. "Mein Verhältnis zur *Politik* auf gut deutsche Art ein Unverhältnis ist" (Mann's emphasis).

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' (KSA3), p. 599. "Wir Deutsche sind Hegelianer, auch wenn es nie einen Hegel gegeben hätte."

[19] See 'Schopenhauer (1938)' in *Essays of Three Decades*, pp. 372–410 (= 'Schopenhauer', in *Leiden und Große der Meister* [GWE], pp. 664–716; 667 ff). The discussion of Plato begins at p. 374.

(middlebrow) ideas Mann responded by arguing "what the high-brow journalist was characterising as 'middle-class ideas' is actually nothing else than the liberal tradition".[20] A truer word was rarely uttered. His principled, if complex, opposition to the Nazis and his exile from Germany from 1933 onwards, followed by his relocation to the United States in 1938 meant (as he lamented to his American publisher a year later) "my books – which are all very German works indeed – today are almost non-existent in their original languages and live their uprooted and necessarily imprecise life practically only in translation".[21] The Mann who achieved the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929,[22] was, after the Nazi rise to power, effectively censored in his own land. Alfred Knopf, the publisher in question, constructed from Mann's exile the figure of an *American* celebrity: a conservative, but not fascist, German – one who embodied in himself a fully American longing to fulfil itself through appropriating the "greatness" of the European liberal tradition – which he was made to embody. Mann became *that one* through whom the answer to his own question could be fulfilled, one capable of making visible how every individual, every community, every family of faith and every nationhood in whom the need for beginnings and ends, however provisional and mysterious, could *posit* the telling of the history that is *theirs* as a provisional (conditioned) affair.[23] Now it is not *history*, but the person of the *historian*, the one capable for the telling of the tale, who comes to the fore. The historian is not the one who makes present, but the one who constructs (*bildet*), the history that will be told. This is the myth of Liberalism, as the summation of every attempt, every "provisional" postulation of beginning and end as such, so that as *that one* who brings before us the question of the "bottomless", groundless, ground of history, he is at the same time the highest and most universal of those to do so. He *becomes* the ground it-(him)-self. He is *that one* in whose person *how* the question can be answered comes most fully to be constructed. And how we all applaud.

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[20] See Tobias Boes, *Thomas Mann's War*, p. 65, quoting a post-war 'Address Delivered at the Library of Congress (1942)', p. 24.
[21] Thomas Mann, letter to Alfred Knopf, translated and quoted in Tobias Boes, *Thomas Mann's War*, p. 65.
[22] largely for the novel *Buddenbrooks*.
[23] This is the essence of psychology: that its inner working, its metaphysics, is derived, not from the individual, but the mass, and the individual only insofar as he or she *relates* to the mass. Every psychology is thereby a politics, and every politics is now become psychology, or, to give it its modern name: "marketing", that is, the commodification of "governance" shaped in anticipation of the tastes (and the assumptions behind them) of mass consumption.

This same fullness of construction provides for the towering place that Mann would come to occupy in a reconstructed German intellectual life after 1945. This reconstruction was, by design, American to its core.[24] Mann was neither a communist nor tainted by the Hitler regime, nor did anything he thought represent upheaval or intellectual revolution. Inasmuch as he represented continuity with an older Germany, and with its two centuries of striving to reconnect itself with – above all Greek – classicism, he also embodied the limitation, the *taming*, of that connection (a Goethe carefully and safely reconstructed in the same vein was also promoted through this American reconstruction).

It could, and has been argued that in his novella *Death in Venice* Mann explored the strains of Greek homoeroticism which had also found a revival in the work of Hans Licht (Paul Brandt), a strand that had not been shied away from by Hölderlin in his *Sokrates und Alkibiades* and especially the third of the *Empedocles* Trauerspiele,[25] and which had energised the Stefan-Georg Kreis, which marked the work of Trakl, and for which Kurt Hiller had been persecuted by the Nazis.[26] Mann took this remarkable opening toward what lies within and behind the *Symposium* of Plato, the eroticism of Sappho, the *mania* of the *eros*, the love, that is spoken of by Pindar, Solon, and the whole Greek Lyric and Elegiac record, and reduced it to the sentimental aesthetics of an unfulfilled (entirely self-contained and sanitised – *tamed*) paederasty. In the telling of this tale no-one is *touched*, there is no crime, no sin is committed: only a feeling, from within an entirely interiorised (*bedingt*, conditional) world. This is how to contain the *mania* of classical *erôs* within the modern liberal polity.[27] Mann was self-consciously constructed as the living embodiment of intellectual restraint, the epitome of bourgeois (or in his own words, "Liberal") sophistication, of what "the unconscious – the primitive spontaneity of life" looks like when safely trussed up within the confines of a linen suit.[28] For the essence of that which cannot be fathomed, which can find no ground of its own,

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[24] Even Adorno and Habermas and the Frankfurt school represented the kind of "communism" with which American liberalism could deal: melancholically socialist (and so thoroughly bourgeois) in everything and absent any genuine political goals, which were repressed and held in check by the DDR and Sovietism to the East, and Americanism to the West.

[25] Friedrich Hölderlin: 'Sokrates und Alkibiades' (FHA8), pp. 455–457; 'Dritter Entwurf' in *Empedokles II* (FHA13), pp. 883–948, esp. 932–940.

[26] Hiller loathed Mann, naming his "*Unpolitische Betrachtungen*" in London in 1945 as "more dangerous than Jünger". See a note by Timothy Sean Quin in his translation of the Heidegger–Jünger correspondence, p. 5, n. 4.

[27] Not for nothing did Nabokov, who had had the courage to explore these themes with rather sharper honesty, denounce Mann as another "formidable mediocrity", calling *Death in Venice* "asinine". Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 57, reproducing the script of a television interview in the United States in 1965.

[28] Thomas Mann, 'Address Delivered at the Library of Congress 1949', p. 24.

is that it *can* above all else become a style (what is a "conditional", provisional thought but a style, a fad, a passing frenzy), and can be so delimited. Do I assault Mann unduly? But let us remember it was *Mann* who seized the name "middle" and privileged it to live above the high. It is *Mann* who privileges the mean, the in-between, *over against* the "high-brow", over against all that must be cleared away: and not once, not as a mere rhetorical flourish, but across his essays and in the aims of his non-fiction writings. This is the Mann, one who once dismissed Americans as a "childish race",[29] in a fateful echo of Hegel's dismissal of southern Africans on almost the same terms (did he really never read him?).[30]

I repeat my question: why this excursus into the life and work of Thomas Mann? Let us recall Mann's words: "Very deep is the wellspring of the past. Should one not name it as ungroundable?" Who is this *one*? For with this *one* we reach the paradox of the "ground" of modernity: surely this "naming" is *itself* a grounding, the grounding of the "subject" attributing the name. This naming arranges, and then lifts, the veil of confusion that lies over the character of history itself in the very naming of it as unclarifiable. Is this not how the λόγος of naming, of logic itself, is brought to bear? The *one* that Mann names as the *one naming* is *I*, that *I* that precedes every individuated *thing* and represents it to itself. Surely, therefore, the *I* provides the ground? We recall here the *ego cogito* of Descartes, in its highest formulation in the words of Kant: "the: 'I think' that must accompany all my representations".[31] Every thinking of this form is, as a representing, a positing: a setting-forth. As this, it produces what it at the same time asserts. Heidegger observes that "the proper being of the 'I' is not so much the *I think*, but the 'I act', I give myself the law from the ground of being itself [das Wesen], I am free". Heidegger concludes, in a way that perfectly sums up the meaning of his later term *Ge-Stell*, "the I as 'I pro-pose (represent)', the idea conceived in this way is above all grasped as freedom".[32]

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[29] Thomas Mann edited by Peter de Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1974), *Reden und Aufsätze II*, vol. 10, p. 703. A remark from 1929.

[30] G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte: Erster Band, Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* edited by Georg Lasson (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1917), pp. 204–5. "Das eigentliche Afrika . . . soweit die die Geschichte zurückgeht . . . das Kinderland." Hegel repeats this in almost identical terms in lectures of 1824/25 and 1830/31. *See* G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte: Gesammelte Werke*, No. 27 (4 vols. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2015–20), 27.2 (*Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters 1824/25*), p. 516; 27.4 (*Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters 1830/31*), p. 1222.

[31] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 131. "Das: Ich Denke, muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können."

[32] Martin Heidegger, *Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (GA42), p. 159. "Das eigentliche Wesen des 'Ich' nicht das *Ich denke* ist, sondern das 'Ich handle', ich gebe mir selbst das Gesetz aus dem Grunde des

Let us ask again, who is the *I* in question here? Mann: hence we uncover why this is an imperative – *sollen nennen – ought* we [not] name? But every imperative of this kind is at the same time a standpoint that secures itself on the basis of what it represents *to* itself. Is the ground of history, even the ground of politics, as nothing other than the *Ich denke*, the representing self? Have we solved our conundrum, the very riddle of history and politics itself, that each representing *Ich denke* is *free*, standing under its own law of freedom, to ground itself? In one way, yes, but in another no.

The *I* of the *Ich denke* is in reality not an *I* at all, but, as we have seen, a *one*. This *one* that is clearly marked out and named by Mann himself. Which, or who, is this "one"? In each case, as Mann frames this question, the *one* must be made, *it* must become: *it* becomes an *I* (this is Nietzsche's point: the *I* is a work of art, and so an artifice). In this Nietzsche and Hegel are shown always to have been in perfect accord: *it* must be willed so, and this willing is a kind of work. The *I* accomplishes the "one" that it is through the work of the will. We can trace in the "history" of Thomas Mann that we have, albeit very briefly and inadequately recounted, the accomplishment of this willing. So is it Knopf, Mann's publisher, who does this work (is everything just an effect of capital after all)? We might well say that Knopf played an essential part, but *essentially*, primordially, *no*.

The *I* of the *Ich denke* can ground *itself*, in the sense that it can freely posit for itself what it at the same time strives to produce. Of this, Mann is a master. But *only* through the same positing can this *I* form the basis of a ground not just for the *I*, but for the *we* within which it necessarily finds itself. The unity of the self with others cannot be found *for itself*, it is *unergründlich*: as such, it is not to be searched for, found, and found out. Otherwise no: rather must it be *produced* (constructed), and that means *posited*. It must be *put* into place. Because we already know that every human life is finite and will come to an end, *it* is finite, and what *it* puts into place is finite. This is the very provisionality (conditionality) that we have seen Mann already name. But for as long as it *is*, and can *posit*, it posits its own grounds and plugs the unfathomable reach as *in itself* a grounding voice, especially inasmuch as it can draw others to itself and gain a following, an audience.

Wesens, ich bin frei. [. . .] Das Ich als 'Ich stelle vor' [. . .] wird jetzt von der Freiheit her begriffen" (Heidegger's emphasis). As an aside, what we see here is the perfect structure of the feedback loop later as discussed by Norbert Wiener. The *I* that posits, posits at the limit of its capability for positing, and at the same time asserts that this positing is enough (it secures what it has posited as "justified", a Nietzsche might say). It satisfies itself with what it receives back *from* itself.

Moreover, it is *essential* that this be so, which is why what unfolds in modernity is a constant striving-forth which is at the same time a containment. The universal *one* must set forth grounds for the unity of all that it will become. That unity must be accomplished. Kant resolves this problem through the "moral" solution of equalising each of us, so that in setting the law, that law which, while it is a freedom for every "each" of us, must at the same time be *capable* of being applied to all. But there is no necessity to this requirement, or rather the requirement itself will find no ground: specifically, it need not be a *moral* ground that is presupposed in such a position (again, this is Nietzsche's confrontation with Kant – there is no *necessity* that grounding be a moral act). Moreover (and here we hearken to Nietzsche again) this is most successful not when enforced, but when it quite spontaneously draws all, the *all there is*, to itself. Mann was just such a one capable of such an audacious drawing (he is its highest form, he is delightful, he is the most accomplished), that is his triumph.

What triumphs in Thomas Mann? That is to say, why do we not only remember him, but set him before ourselves as a pinnacle of German literature and intellectual achievement? Mann stood at a particular point in the history, not only of Germany, but also of Europe, and indeed the West. When he wrote these words "very deep is the wellspring . . ." something was yet to be decided. The Bolshevik revolution lay undecided as charting the course of human history itself, and yet it reached forth to do so. The fascists had come to power in Italy and the Nazis were only poised and ready to pounce in Germany, coming forth just as Mann's words also reached their first public: their crimes were yet to come. And there was a third force, what Ernst Jünger was (with Heidegger and others) to call Americanism, which then became (especially after all world warring was done) "world democracy" – "world civilisation": globalisation.

These forms, all of them, are each a form of Liberalism. All these political forms for the accomplishment of freedom have therefore been laid out as emancipations, as liberations, as, we might say, homecomings. From an originary uprootedness and homelessness, measured out as an almost "scientific" concept in Marx's taking up of the Hegelian terms *Entäußerung* and *Entfremdung*, themselves renderings of the English *alienation*, the most accomplished political forms have held themselves out as the overcoming of this originary displacement, and so as homecomings.

Many textbook formulations of Liberalism describe only one half of what Liberalism names: they concentrate, exactly as the French theorists after Rousseau did, on the question of *individual* liberty. Liberalism is never merely a problem of the individuality of the individual,

of the isolated *self*. The problem is the political realisation of selfhood, *Ichheit*, as such: of the universalisation of the *I* in the aggregated "each" in the many: the individual's realisation and accomplishment (*Bildung*) of the universal. This is individuality as an accomplishment of the *total* lawfulness of freedom. Nowhere is this more true in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, who even better than Hegel, understands the fundamental condition of the willed character of all things as what sets and generates hierarchy and order, precisely *through* constant becoming: the *work* (the construction) that willing is.

Mann comes to prominence in the course of the upswing that will lead eventually to the triumph of one of these forms: Americanism, world-democracy, world-civilisation, call it what you will. He comes to prominence *knowing* and forthrightly *naming* this Liberalism that triumphs. In this I have no interest in denigrating Mann's accomplishment, which is immense. Not for nothing does he win a Nobel Prize: so fine a coat was never fashioned from a shabby cloth. Mann's life, in ways that have fascinated his biographers ever since, is a cunning combination of the power of the dissemination of literary form, and the harnessing both of the power of those who opposed and sought to censor him, and of (American) state power in the name of the production of an intellectual giant. Not accidentally did he speak decisively, by invitation, at the Library of Congress in Washington DC. It is not enough to say that Mann is a construct of publishers and state-machines (although he is): he is above all and first *self*-constructed. His was the deepest study of Nietzsche. He is Zarathustran to his core. This heroism is recognisable in its artifice, to which any and all may yet aspire. Moreover, we have seen Mann assert that this is the very basis for what he knows, it is the representing of himself to himself (this is what he means by "nothing else than the liberal tradition").[33] To take up a standpoint is to be self-assertively *self*-grounding.

It was Martin Heidegger who equated Russian Bolshevism with Americanism (to the annoyance of all who read it), arguing that metaphysically understood, they were both the same, "the groundless (*bodenlosen*) organisation of the average man".[34] The political meaning of this is spelled by Robert Strausz-Hupé out in the following way: "Organization is quantitative. The mass is a quantity; it is shaped by political and social organization designed to integrate, release, and curb its latent forces. [. . .] Modern propaganda, political slogans,

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[33] See note [15] above.

[34] Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (GA40), p. N29. "Der bodenlosen Organisation des Normalmenschen."

advertisement are, no matter how low or high their intellectual contents, primarily addressed to the anonymous, the anonymity of the urban masses. Were these appeals not keyed to the statistical notion of the average man, they would fail in their purpose. Then voters would not vote for the right program . . .".[35]

Mann posits the history that is Europe, as the pretext for the establishment of a ground. It is as good a provisional history as any. That we can *find* no ground (*unergründlich*) means we must produce (*begründen*) the ground. The ground must be taken from the wellspring that continuously wells up, that gives an unlimited supply of the matter to be grounded, but must *itself* be given a ground. This ground is *organisational*: it must be supplied by willing as *planning*. This positing arises precisely on the basis of the groundlessness for history (and political life) that Mann announces through the words we have been considering. This organisational performance is grounded in what we can variously call Liberalism, or world democracy, or world civilisation: that seizing of the planet that emerges on the basis of the metaphysical securing of freedom given in the *I think*. Liberalism, that essential metaphysical problem of the impossibility of grounding the *I* together with the *we* – except through the projection of the will, whereby all things appear through this willing – has barely even begun.

Let us return to Mann's words one last time, to ask: what else is concealed within them, what else might they say? "Tief ist der Brennen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?" Let us translate them again, this time for ourselves: "Very deep is the wellspring of the past. Should *one* not name it as ungroundable?" For we have so far, as he commanded us, agreed with him: one *should* name the wellspring of the past as ungroundable. Or should we?

What constitutes the past as *wellspring*? The historian who drew me to these lines understands them as pointing to the question of an (unreachable) origin, the "point in time" of the beginning of history itself. That this "point" can never be exhibited provides everything that is done in history's name with the possibility that it could be *other*: everything we know of it can *always* be "rearranged", even if only "conditionally". This is the way in which we "change" the past, and deprive it of its necessity (I can hear you say already "we can never

[35] Robert Strausz-Hupé, *The Zone of Indifference*, p. 103. This is as prescient an explanation of "marketing" as anything Vance Packard or Marshall McLuhan ever wrote.

"know the necessity of the past: every moment in it was contingent", with not the slightest sense of your sleight of hand). We exhibit that the past itself is without a demonstrable ground.

We could think that Mann asks: how do we locate the origin, so that it presences as a ground? The peculiarity of the past is not that its ground lies in the past, but that it *here* comes forth to greet us. It presences *with* what it holds, namely what persists of a present that is past. Only if the past can hold itself as an arriving presence, can we have access to it: we have no access to the past *except* that in what remains to us in its presencing in the present. It presences *as* past. Every record of the past – even the fragile record of memory – presences only in the present. There are those places, those relics of the past, that withhold themselves completely from us: we do not know who built them, or what they were for, or in some cases, even when. Their relics and traces are "here", but they arrive only with nothing positive: they belong to no wellspring.[36] The strangeness of the pastness of the past is that inasmuch as it belongs to the wellspring, it does not leave us, it still presences *now* as being-past. This is its depth, it still pours itself out for us, because it *yet* presences. This opens the question: from *where* does the ground emerge and lay itself forth?

Surely, what presents itself to us in presencing is at the same time what provides the ground: the address, that calls us to question, to *be questioned*, by what still, and yet, arrives? The presencing present, the *wherein* within which we find ourselves already together and able to find out the *name* that being together is what can constitutes a ground for who we are. The Greeks called this, very simply, σύνειμι, being-with, "being-with-one-another".[37] To be with one another, however, requires a letting-be, which is the opposite to an accomplishing and a positing – it opens us to have to face what presences as *question*. How should we hear this word *unergründlich*? For what *we* cannot ground for ourselves, must be allowed to *let itself be grounding*. That which lets itself be grounding is what lets itself come to presence, lets itself be, and so addresses us – at times shockingly, even violently, at times not – as what we *must* find out. It is a *need*. It brings *us* before our own questionable presence in *its* presencing. What brings us to presence is what calls us out, into the openness of presence itself, namely: *that there is presencing*: that we are *addressed* and *called* into a time and place of question. That we live in *need* (of "answers", or better put, *understanding*). Understanding is not a

[36] In Britain, Stonehenge would be one such place. Everything that is and can be said about it is conjectural, prefaced by "may have been", "could be thought as".
[37] κοινωνία, τὸ κοινόν.

faculty of reason (as Kant thought), but is *need* itself, the arriving future's need (this is its gift) *for* us.

Willing is always understood as a *moving*, as a putting into place (positing). But we cannot will into place what is already *here* for us, namely, *that there is presence*, and that within the *present* of presence there lies how the past still *needfully* presences. We do not simply move, but far more often *are*, as being-moved. Letting into presence therefore is a letting-be-for-us, which is not what *we* move, and secure and lay down, but which moves *us*, moves us *into* the question (our *need*) of what it is. More original than grounding, is therefore, *letting be grounded*. But even more original, more primordial than this, is *that there is ground at all*. That presencing presences. Its *how* is what we must find out.

We can find confirmation of this understanding in a late text of Martin Heidegger's to which I have already referred, *The End of Philosophy and the Task for Thinking*. At a certain point Heidegger seeks to explain what he means by *die Lichtung*, "the clearing" (that life is open for and be-fore us). Above all the clearing names the present, not in its actuality, but in its possibility, its letting-be, its throwing (us into its) open. Here he distinguishes the two possibilities contained within this single German word, *Lichtung*: namely light, and openness. He observes:

> The light can specifically pour into the clearing, into its openness and within it allow the brightness to play with the dark. But never does light first create the clearing, but the light requires that this clearing [is already] there.[38]

Here then, is what stands before us: to uncover all over again what has gathered us already into one. To find this out. In this would lie a homecoming.

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[38] Martin Heidegger, '*Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens* (1964)', p. 81 f. "Das Licht kann nämlich in die Lichtung, in ihr Offenes, einfallen und in ihr die Helle mit dem Dunkel spielen lassen. Aber niemals schafft das Licht erst die Lichtung, sondern jenes, das Licht, setzt diese, die Lichtung, voraus."

All translations of works cited are my own, unless otherwise expressly noted to the contrary. I provide below details of English translations where they exist, but these are quoted or cited in the text only when expressly indicated. Dates given for publications refer in the first instance to the actual version consulted or cited, and then (if given in brackets) indicate the year in which the text was originally published (if known, or relevant). Abbreviations are in most places indicated before individual volumes for multi-volume editions of collected works or of specific collections: in the footnotes these are given after either the overall volume title, or the specific section of the volume.

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