

JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2014

Volume 3 Issue 5

Item 4

– Section 3: Notes –

Research Report | Does a method for
interdisciplinarity exist?

Questions and research perspectives from
Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*

by

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JIHI 2014

Volume 3 Issue 5

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Research Report | Does a method for interdisciplinarity exist?

Questions and research perspectives from Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* *

Elena Alessiato

*The author expounds the methodological outlines of her research study on Thomas Mann's political-philosophical essay *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Considerations of an apolitical man). The peculiarity of this study consists in analysing Mann's work from a point a view which combined the history of political culture with thematic issues typical of political philosophy. In this way it has been possible to show the mutual integration and the close connection existing between Mann's political stance and the cultural-historical context at the time of the First World-War. Highlighting research issues and work perspectives, which have built the thematic and methodological frame of the study, is a chance to reflect upon interdisciplinarity, its risks, limits and research potentialities.*



O INTERDISCIPLINARITY is an easy word and a challenging concept. What it means was not at all clear for me, when I began my long-term work on the un-political thought of the German writer Thomas Mann at the time of the First World War.

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In my case, interdisciplinarity was a necessity, since I was a postgraduate student of philosophy devoting herself to study an author which is not immediately to consider like a philosopher.

How to transform interdisciplinarity from a heuristic need to a research method is something I had to learn.

An illuminating cue for me was the Italian scholar and thinker Norberto Bobbio. Introducing his analytical reflection on the juridical positivism Bobbio, after having made a distinction between the “proper method” and the “way to approach the study of the right”, specified that neither the techniques nor the intellectual tools as a whole were the center of his scientific interest. What was important to him, was to pinpoint the “boundaries of the research matter” in a way that “reveals a certain stance towards the study of some problems and not of others and a certain attitude towards the function of the research itself”¹.

The present report aims to clarify these issues with regard to my research matter.

Considering Bobbio’s words, I would say that my research began as a paradox: at least in the preliminary stage, the “boundaries of the research matter” were marked by expanding the research field and by broadening the spectrum of the questions to deal with. Widening thematic and problematic issues to consider and to explain caused a substantial increase of sources, reference material and literature to examine and to take into consideration. A lot of factors lead to this extension of the thematic field: first of all, the author at the center of the study, secondly, his literary production.

The question, referred to my work, whether a method for interdisciplinarity exists implies the attempt to answer the question about how it is possible to use the work of an artist—a first-class artist outstandingly playing with words—in order to focus and clarify the intellectual, philosophical and political benchmarks of the particular historical period in which he lived and worked. The main thesis of my research on Thomas Mann at the time of the First World War has been that this type of connection between a non-fictional work of an artist and a broadly considered philosophical background is possible. Showing how that connection has been studied and problematized is the main goal of this report.

¹ N. Bobbio, *Giusnaturalismo e positivismo giuridico* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011), 87.

1 THOMAS Mann was a thinker working with intuition and fancy rather than with strictly logical connections, he was not a school philosopher, but a novelist with a masterful ability to bend highly conceptual frameworks into imaginative situations and to shape philosophical questions by means of creative words. Every philosophical work about him requires the need to distinguish the idea from the image, the thought from the representation. Mann was a very prolific writer: his work covers a long period of time, extending from the last years of the 19th century up the first half of the 20th century. It deals with a lot of multidisciplinary matters and interdisciplinary subjects from aesthetic to philosophical issues, from metaphysics to politics, from theatre to music. Moreover, the variety concerns not only the themes and fictional motifs he narrated, but also many literary genres with which Mann challenged himself. In most cases he did it with exceptional results: long and short novels, short stories, political and literary essays, letters and diaries, celebratory speeches and radio addresses.

Thomas Mann is one of those gifted authors, whose written pages have the power of opening doors wide upon “the abyss”—or, to use a word loved by him: *Abgrund*. He was an ambitious storyteller who went so far as to say: “Where I am, German culture is there”. A striking sentence that, besides displaying Mann’s immoderate narcissism, discloses a high measure of representativeness, which he sought to embody. Representativeness is a big ‘issue’ innervating Mann’s work. Hence, it explains why every work on Thomas Mann is like a challenge: representativeness is like a double-sided medal. At least for my work it constituted a problem and an interpretative framework, a limit and an inspiring research opportunity.

It is obvious where the problem lies. If one aims to explain what Thomas Mann represented for the German culture, in order to give an all-embracing account of the Germanness, there are two risks to beware of and, if possible, to avoid: on the one hand, a know-all attitude missing important points, and on the other hand, a bombastic ‘museumification’ of what the author gives expression to. The Italian germanist Claudio Magris is right when he remarks that during his literary career Thomas Mann transformed himself into the representative of the world that he had narrated and that he had creatively contributed to shape: he passed from being a “poet” to feel and portray himself as a “custodian and a

pedagogue”¹, from being an artist to act as a shrewd manager of his own name and fame.

However, it is not this side of Thomas Mann I wanted to consider.

In my view, the representativeness he expressed was to understand in its genuine and primitive meaning and in the immediacy of its emergence, before it became self-congratulation or self-museumification. Only in this way its historical and symbolic significance could be grasped in its proper “representational” meaning and consistently used as an interpretation key for the related cultural context. In real and methodological terms, this assumption means that the effort to understand and interpret Thomas Mann cannot be detached from the effort to sift and extract from his work motifs and ideas echoing in the German culture of that time, particularly in the political culture. The fact that Thomas Mann was, acted and was universally recognized as an outstanding representative of the German mind means, from this point of view, that his work has to be understood not only as an inspiring “narration of stories”, but also as an enlightening “narrative of history”. This is the reason why I took into consideration not only Mann’s novels but also, and most of all, his essays and non-fiction writings.

Screening and highlighting the ideas having resonance in the German contemporary culture does not necessarily mean the aim neither to carry out a research on the critical reception of Mann’s works nor to make an articulated reconstruction of Mann’s relationship with the *deutsche Kultur*². What I meant with that does not concern the way in which Mann’s ideas, words, thoughts, remarks and images have been ‘received’, understood or misunderstood, worked out, developed and transmitted by his contemporaries or posthumous readers: this reconstructive examination has been made by meticulous scholars of Thomas Mann specifically for each of his books. On the contrary, my interest was focused on pinpointing and distinguishing what was a constitutive component of Germany’s spiritual condition and a pregnant feature of its coeval cultural and political scene from what represents Mann’s individual refashioning of that condition and of those ideas. Hence, the aim of this probing work was

¹ C. Magris, *L’infinito viaggiare* (Milano: Mondadori, 2005), 177.

² This kind of analysis has been recently carried out by Philipp Gut in his study *Thomas Manns Idee einer deutschen Kultur* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2008).

to make a reconstruction, as systematically as possible, of the correspondences, gaps, similarities, resonances and differences emerging between the collective and the personal level.



2 CONSEQUENTLY, the leading questions of my research have not been only whether and under which conditions Mann built and developed his cultural and political stances, but rather: to what extent were they new and original? How free, personal and consistent with the common or the majority's way of thinking were Mann's opinions? How much were they influenced by the contemporary debates and, in turn, to what extent did they help common outlooks and popular feelings to grow and spread? How far official and esoteric was Mann's thought and how marginal and exoteric was it?

Bearing in mind this comprehensive context, in my research Mann has been observed through a twofold interpretative lens: both as a privileged witness and a creative actor of a national way of being, as a highly representative member of a spiritual community and an extraordinarily respected representative of a shared culture, who autonomously shapes the contents and their meaning. In my research, the inquire into Mann's representativeness has been oriented to deeply understand the embracing culture in which Mann's peculiar stances developed and matured. From here, and in order to avoid the risk of generalization, it has been necessary to localize, inside Mann's broad production, a restricted genre section related to a defined temporal section and to a limited geographical experience, still particularly revealing and extraordinary meaningful: this choice involved the time corresponding to the First World War (temporal segment) and the way in which it has been experienced and conceptually elaborated from a German point of view (geographical segment).

Both temporal and spatial limitations marked out methodologically the framework of the research by setting the boundaries inside which the sources have

to be searched for and collected. The sources were mostly German, with some other ones from other cultural and linguistic areas like Italy, France and Austria. This delimitation of the source field is consistent with the need, recommended above by Bobbio, to “mark the boundaries of the research matter”.

However, the identification of a specific research section did not originate the reconstruction neither of Mann’s subsequent political path nor of his civil and artistic development. On the contrary, the singularity of that stage and its importance for Mann’s later growth and development as a man, as an artist and as a political actor were emphasized in order to draw a sort of a conceptual and symbolic “map” of the intellectual and political culture of Mann’s time.

This double movement combining the selection of thematic field and the delimitation of the research section and of corresponding sources resulted in a further boundary-setting, this time regarding the work genre. As research object a book of Mann was chosen which combines together political, aesthetic and philosophical non-fiction: the *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. This polemical essay of around 600 pages, begun in autumn 1915 and published in October 1918, gives voice in a passionate tone to Thomas Mann’s feelings and opinions regarding Germany’s grounds for the war and German national culture.

From my point of view, “war” is the fundamental category through which the *Betrachtungen* have to be read and interpreted and this is what my work intends to show. Nevertheless, instead of explaining different ways and levels, in which the category of war builds the argumentative structure of the essay¹, I have focused on the role and on the position of the *Betrachtungen* inside a historical, political and cultural context strongly affected by the war as a highly dramatic historical event.

In fact, the *Betrachtungen* were not simply conceived as a personal, atmospheric report of a talented author speaking of the war in a war time. For the purpose of my research they have been presented as a receptive, interpretative and argumentative summary of the German conservative culture and spirit, so as it developed at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly during the years of the Great War. The preliminary assumption of my research was that the *Betrachtungen* should be considered as a synthesis, no matter how chaotic

¹ At least four levels of meaning are to distinguish: historical, psychological, metaphysical, spiritual. The explication of them builds the object of the second chapter of my study.

it would be, of their contemporary political culture. They represent the stage where many attitudes, ideas, senses and world views typical of that historical season—mainly typical of the conservative intellectuals, but revealing *ex negativo* concerns and feelings related to the opposite political ideology, that is the socialist-progressive doctrine—have been concentrated and reflected. For this reason, Mann’s book deserves an outstanding position inside war literature.

3 AT this point the following question is well-founded: namely, why Mann? Was his self-judgment enough in order to make him gain such prominence? I would answer that his self-opinion is not sufficient, but it helps to support his acknowledgment. In fact, Mann shows a strong and out of the ordinary aptitude by making contact with the spiritual situation of his time. What he, in an autobiographical essay speaking of himself, called “seismographic sensitivity” (*seismographisch-anzeigende Empfindlichkeit*), hints at the power of sensing and registering the major spreading feelings, moods and mental attitudes of his time in order to refashion, reshape and enrich them with deeper meanings and more variegated motifs. These are eventually given back to the public by means of the narrative literature or by the form of critical essays. Actually, all the stages of Mann’s long-term work give evidence of such a spontaneous and sophisticated ability. And precisely this capacity gives reason to the preliminary assumption of my research, which in turn accounts for the argument that describes Thomas Mann as “the prototype of the German attitude in the period between 1914 and 1918”: “he expressed what million people experienced in that time”¹. Reading the *Betrachtungen* as a book where the echoes of the multiple voices concerning the reflections, the anxieties and the expectations related to the war are settled is equivalent to considering Thomas Mann as an exceptional exponent of the so called “Ideas of 1914”², that is those ideas used by the Ger-

¹ F. Glum, *Der Nationalsozialismus. Wegen und Vergehen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1962), 25.

² The expression was very common on war time: for some particularly significant examples, see J. Plenge, *Der Krieg und die Volkswirtschaft* (Münster i.W.: Borgmeyer, 1915); R. Kjellén, *Die Ideen von 1914. Eine weltgeschichtliche Perspektive* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1915); E. Troeltsch, *Die Ideen von 1914, in Deutscher Geist und Westeuropa. Gesammelte kulturphilosophische Aufsätze und Reden* Tübingen: Mohr, 1925), 31-58. For an historical examination of this matter: S. Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat. Die “Ideen von 1914” und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003).

man intellectuals to give the war a spiritual meaning and ennobling grounds for justification. With reference to this perspective, the aim and the orientation line of my research can be summarized in the principle according to which reading Thomas Mann and his un-political reflections implies the possibility of “reading” and understanding better his time. *Ex pluribus unum*, and vice versa.

This idea can seem self-evident and obvious. However, it has not been followed by the majority of the mannian critics, even less by the orthodox ones¹. In fact, in my context-oriented perspective, Thomas Mann loses the position of the last and major analysis object: he becomes a functional part of a larger cultural and political discourse which relativizes him while considering him not only as an outstanding German speaking author, but as an outstandingly representative interpreter of the German culture.

From the methodological point of view, the goal of reading Thomas Mann as a special spokesman of his time could be reached by interpreting his texts by means of two combined perspectives. Figuratively speaking, they correspond to the integrated movements of contraction and dilatation: systole and diastole.

According to the first one, understanding issues and interpretative questions ought to be “contracted” within Mann’s text, so that questions like: ‘which problems did Mann deal with?’, ‘what answers did he give?’, ‘by means of which arguments did he uphold his stances and opinions?’, become important. The textual analysis of the *Betrachtungen* is here completed through the reference to other works of Mann’s, essays and novels, which still have a secondary role compared to the main subject. Compared to Mann’s text, this accounts for the “inside-perspective”.

The second interpretative movement consists of linking up not only “Mann’s word”, but mostly the “spirit” of that word with the “spirit”, that is the spiritual atmosphere of that historical time: what this precisely means, is to put in relationship Mann’s thought with the opinions and the positions of other intellectuals who can be considered as particularly influential and/or exemplary for the way of thinking of that historical period. They were intellectuals with whom Mann had direct acquaintance or indirect knowledge. Among the names that I selected for my comparative research I shall mention Ernst Bertram, Friedrich

¹ With “orthodox critics” I refer to the large and authoritative group of Germanists attending to the publication of the current critical edition of Mann’s works by the Fischer publishing house.

Meinecke, Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Simmel, Paul Natorp, and Max Scheler. Compared to Mann's text, this builds the "outside-perspective". It is aimed to identify similarities and correspondences between different authors and thinkers, so that it becomes possible to form and outline the plural galaxy of ideas, values, moods, interpretations, expectations, fears, mental images and intellectual frames modelling and marking that historical period.



As already noticed, this double work of hermeneutical concentration and dilatation, of conceptual framing and linking, is generally overlooked by the traditional mannian critics. This was exactly the point where I experienced that interdisciplinarity can represent an opportunity to stimulate the understanding, but it can also lead to a confusing and risky position generating the lack of comprehension: incommunicability between different disciplines arises when they claim the exclusive interpretation right to the studied subject or author. Therefore, the possibility to connect different disciplines with each other and to cross their restrictive confines involves the risk that one may become a scholar without discipline: the risk of finding oneself out or beyond any scientific boundary. The attempt to get out of the magic circle of the official "thomasmannology", where Mann's word is set in the middle of the analysis, involves this risk.

I have experienced it and I consequently tried to face it by passing from the analitic understanding of Mann's word to the comprehensive reconstruction of his world. This passage has been accomplished by combining two methodological coordinates, which have built the structural frame of my research: *contextualization* and *categorization*, respectively corresponding to the historical and to the conceptual perspective.

The necessity of using these two coordinates was due to the particularity of *Betrachtungen*. In fact, in order to understand thoroughly the meaning of Mann's polemical essay, it has to be put in connection with two of the most important phenomena of that time, although the first one is a proper historical event, while the second one is a cultural trend. They are the First World War

and the opposition between the two conceptual categories through which the world and the history were interpreted at that time, namely *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. As a consequence of the fact that the military conflicts fought by the European countries were enriched with spiritual meanings, these two phenomena were so strictly related that they can be almost considered as synonymic. However, beyond the wounds caused by the undeniable cruelty of the fight, these meanings became almost preponderant for the common perception. The imagined continuity between historical-political and ideological level, between geopolitics and cultural view was so powerful that the fight between competing countries and opposed armies was transfigured into a clash of contrasting national essences and incompatible spirits, into a war of rival world views, and finally, into a competition between two alternative ideas of progress and modernity. According to the interpretation proposed by intellectuals and coming from official sources, the “German war”—as the war was called—brought to manifestation the special character of the German culture and Germany’s diversity: this stood out through the comparison with the way of being of the other European countries, following the common trends of the Western civilization, which, on the one hand, was associated with the political democratic, republican and egalitarian culture started with the French Revolution, and, on the other hand, with the liberal mind and the capitalistic system built up by Great Britain.

Considering these conditions, I set myself the goal of giving a methodical and systematic account of the different meanings and interpretations which have been attributed by German intellectuals to the war and to the categorial antinomy of *Kultur* and *Zivilization*. In both cases, my research has attempted to integrate the two perspectives of interpretative contraction and comprehensive reconstruction with the purpose of giving mutual completion to the attempt of decoding Mann’s intertextual complexity by linking it to the plurality of extratextual references typifying the German war culture. These references have been identified by collecting war speeches, propagandistic booklets, academic addresses and essays, articles from reviews, journals and newspapers.

4 THE research that followed from that approach was like a round-trip ticket: it started with the textual analysis of Mann’s argumentative use of ideas and categories like *Kultur*, *Zivilisation*, war, German spirit, nation,

State, democracy, and so on, and it was carried on through the search of echoes and correspondences of those ideas in the contemporary war propaganda. The research's aim was to test how much and to which extent those ideas were "hermeneutically fecund" within the historical, political, cultural and ideological context in which they were formulated and used. This does not mean only to establish how often some words, concepts and reasoning patterns occur in the public discourse of that time. Most of all, it implies the attempt to verify which was the impact of those ideas within the war context, how and how much significant an idea was or became working as a part of a collective discourse aiming at upholding intellectually the war mobilization, to which extent an idea can explain the passionate and overwhelming enthusiasm with which the German (and not only German) intellectuals welcomed the outbreak of the war, finally, what role such ideas played trying to justify the German war spiritually and intellectually. In few words, the combination of contextualization and categorization was oriented to pinpoint and verify the position and the impact of a whole of ideas, emerging in and from Thomas Mann's text, within a specific cultural frame marked by a traumatic event like the war.

However, another problem, that my comprehension/interpretation effort led to, was the fact that the reference frame for the experience of war and its interpretation/transfiguration was the *deutsche Kultur*, the German culture, even conceived like a hypostatic essence. Exactly this idea of *Kultur* was already the outcome of a stratified process of conceptualization, selection, interpretation, reworking, revision, and adjustment of themes and ideas coming from a specific national tradition. It condensed also in itself moods and feelings marking a specific historical season. But let consider that one of the most influential and dominant idea of that time (the idea of the German culture), identifying the hermeneutic horizon for the world comprehension and for the interpretation of history, has been selected in my research for working as orientative concept by the systematization of the German war culture. This concept itself—this is to notice—results from the historical and ideologically oriented crystallization of ideas and interpretations. This means that the selected instrument to interpret a national ideology, which in my work is all one with the object of the historical comprehension research, turns out to be the product and the expression, the most significant one, of that ideology: to be ideology itself.

As evidence of how stratified and equivocal the research topics were, it is

enough to consider how Thomas Mann defines the main categories of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* after complaining about the lack of certain definitions: “Culture means unity, style, form, decorum, taste, it is a certain spiritual organization of the world, although the whole can seem hazardous, vulgar, wild, bloody, terrible. [...] Civilization, on the contrary, is reason, Enlightenment, domestication, refining, scepticism, dissolving, *esprit*”¹.

These definitions are vague and evocative, not sufficiently clear and schematic to be used as paradigmatic or exhaustive models of explication. They are the definition of an artist, who Thomas Mann basically was.

My research has been compared to a round-trip ticket. And in fact, after having followed the way going from Mann’s word to Mann’s world and to Mann’s contemporary cultural framework, the research vector was directed towards Thomas Mann again. The question may be here: “What for?”. And the answer is: To carry out a conceptualization oriented at picking out the original and innovative part of meaning which Thomas Mann places and introduces in his personal comprehension of history and modernity, in his peculiar understanding of the German political culture and tradition, in his view of the future of Europe. What is exceptional in Mann’s case is that his distinctive contribution to shape and the understand the German culture comes from his singular and exceptional nature: from the sensitivity of an artist, and masterfully talented as well.

According to Thomas Mann, art is not only something to think about, neither is it a form of cultural expression. It is rather an existential attitude impacting his whole being as a person and as a German. Consequently, it intensively affects his way of thinking and his way to understand life situations, basically, his way of living and experiencing the reality, his way of interpreting and conceiving politics, without excluding his behaviour as a political thinker and his way of acting and speaking as a German citizen. Taking into consideration the importance that Thomas Mann gave to art as an existential *habitus*, my research intends to point out the influence of his aesthetic categories and sensitivities in non-aesthetic fields; more precisely, the role that Mann’s idea of art and his

¹ T. Mann, *Gedanken im Kriege* (1914), in *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* (afterwards GKFA), vol. 15, t. 1: *Essays II 1914-1926*, ed. by H. Kurzke (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 27-46, in partic. 27.

aesthetic views played by shaping, orientating and, sometimes, misleading his political mind.

Art is a symbolic place where the reality is not only reflected, but also re-create: through the artist's eyes different reality constituents become clear and transparent ("art is life in the light of thought"¹, Mann observes) and, at the same time, completed because they are reassembled into a new order that is plural in itself, not monothematic, not based on exclusion, but on integration, not on the selection of the few but on the synthesis of the many. And of course, the way for accomplishing this synthesis is determined by the way Thomas Mann conceives art: art as irony and irony as mediation between the opposites. By means of an ironic refraction of feelings on life objects and situations, art leads to expression the mutual attraction connecting, in a bond mixing nostalgia and repugnance, fascination and estrangement, the conflicting constituents of reality like life and spirit, nature and form, the lyrical and critical tune, the moral and the aesthetic aptitude, reason and passion, law and chaos, Apollo and Dionysus. Mann's ironic art is a form of "erotism" between contrasting, yet related elements.

Within Mann's world comprehension, the aim of the aesthetic representation is to shape a synthetic order of life marked by the convergence of the opposites. And this is possible through an artist logic that, with reference to August Strindberg's phrase resumed by Mann, it is possible to name "stereoscopic viewpoint": that is, a way of looking at things that tries to combine different perspectives and points of view, contrasting criteria and values in order to give a multidimensional, "round", as exhaustive as possible image of things, situations, events and questions about life.

A long section of my research has been destined to analyse and deconstruct Mann's view and use of art with reference to his properly artistic production and to the numerous conceptual analyses of the meaning of art for life that he makes in his essays and novels. The peculiar approach of my research consists in showing how deep this visual aptitude based on intellectual dualisms, stereoscopic views and optical pluralism affect Mann's political stance and opinion, so that it is possible to state that the multidimensional and morally inconsistent logic of the artist is at the root of the continuity that can be assumed

¹ T. Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, in *GKFA* vol. 13, t. 1, ed. by H. Kurzke (2009), 447.

between Mann's spiritual worldview and his (un)political ideology. After all, my intention—that builds the conceptual core of my work—to show the logical continuity between Mann's aesthetic conceptualization and the political conceptualization follows the attempt to take seriously what Mann wanted to say by concluding his polemical (a)political essay on politics with a chapter on "Irony and radicalism". It is linked to the choice to start the longest and fundamental chapter of "Politics" with surprising and apparently remarks like these: "Politics is the contrary of being aesthete" and "Being a political man is the only way not to be an aesthete"¹.

If multiperspectivism characterizes Thomas Mann as artist and intellectual, the categories through which he enters in touch with the historical world and through which he gives to it his personal interpretation, are marked by that way of seeing. And showing this is the purpose of a major part of my research.

In particular, my thesis has been proved with the references to Mann's stance towards politics and history. Compared to his interpretation, categories like war, State, nation, democracy, politics itself, reveal a dual meaning issuing from the intersection of different values and contrasting interpretation levels. "The problem of a human being—Mann writes in the *Betrachtungen*—shows a double aspect: metaphysical and social, moral and political, it is a problem of the individual and of the community"². Mann's sentence draws attention on the doubleness that crosses many political concepts as a consequence of the contemporary presence of different coordinates of meaning. Therefore, if rationalistic and formalistic criteria stand out, one would speak of the human world in terms of individuality and masses, society and utilitarianism, mechanism and progress: this is, according to Mann and, similarly, to many other German intellectuals of the war time, the world of *Zivilisation*. If, instead, criteria related to the moral and to the inner life prevailed, one would speak of person and people, community and solidarity, liberty and development: this is the world of culture, better, of the *deutsche Kultur*.

Similar considerations can be applied also to more properly political concepts. For instance, the war is condemned to the extent in which it is judged as a clash of interests between imperialistic powers, but the same war is con-

¹ Mann, *Betrachtungen*, 243.

² Mann, *Betrachtungen*, 280.

sidered as blessed and spiritually empowered in so far it allowed the German nature to disclose itself. Democracy is blamed for furthering mediocrity and spiritual levelling, but it is also regarded as a good system for assuring social justice and meritocracy. The people are mythicized into the legendary bearer of spiritual power and keeper of traditional values, but harshly criticized for being a foolish mass of vulgar and inconstant individuals. Finally, the State is censured in so far it is a bureaucratic machinery obedient to the will of the majority, but at the same time it is taken in great account as earthly, armed wing of the nation considered as spiritual soul of the people.

Duality marks also the central concept of Mann's war essay, that of *unpolitisch* and my whole research aimed to clarify it. What suits it is the definition used by Walter Bryce Gallie about some Aristotle's notions like democracy: "an essentially contested concept"¹, that is a concept whose deep meaning remains always partially unclear and not explainable, ambiguous because it can not be entirely explained with words.



5 If interdisciplinarity is the practice of crossing boundaries between disciplines, then the term *unpolitisch* can indeed be a particularly interesting generator of crossing movements. In fact, the suffix *-un* does not deny the main substantive, by which the term is compounded (*politisch*): in comparison with this one, it produces rather a gap generating an insoluble tension. This is the reason why the concept *unpolitisch* is ambiguous and non-transparent, it is set on the threshold between two different fields: politics and what is not politics, actually what is "something else" than politics. The allure and the component of intellectual challenge of this concept should be seen exactly in this hybrid nature.

¹ W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-1956): 167-198, quoted in M. Truffelli, *L'ombra della politica. Saggio sulla storia del pensiero antipolitico* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2008), 23.

A “shadow concept”: this is how the *unpolitisch* can be called in comparison with the main term, on which it also terminologically depends. The paradox inherent in this term consists in the fact that the positive definition of it includes also a negative aspect: the *unpolitisch* expresses a difference *ex negativo*, identity through opposition. Its consequence is the fact that each attempt to clarify the meaning of the *unpolitisch* necessarily implies the symmetrical attempt to give a lexical, intellectual, historical and cultural definition of what politics is, taking into consideration its historical forms and means, paradigms and meanings. In my research, this attempt was carried out with reference to the historical experience (corresponding to the sections on war, its meanings and grounds, on the German State and the German political tradition) and to the conceptual point of view (where the idea of the State has been analyzed through the paradigmatic categories typified by Max Weber).

Furthermore, the semantic field of the *unpolitisch* is never safe, not only because of its ambiguous and conflictual relation with politics, but also because that field is threatened by “rival concepts”, that is, related concepts it often gets mixed with or confused, especially in the public, journalistic, and non-scientific debate: *apolitisch* and *antipolitisch* are, for instance, the two most common ones. Consequently, the section of my research focused on the category of the *unpolitisch* tried to answer questions like the following ones: what is the relation of the *unpolitisch* with these concepts?; Under what—historical? conceptual?—conditions and to which extent does it match with them?; What meanings does it share with them and what is peculiar of the *unpolitisch* itself?

Starting with these questions and taking into account these and other similar issues, I tried to illustrate how the conceptualization of politics is possible from the point of view of the German *unpolitisch*.

Exactly at this point, the two above-mentioned research coordinates again emerged together, raising the question that oriented the whole research: what kind of *unpolitisch* are we going to speak about? Are there different types of non-political behaviour, or not? If so, under what conditions are they possible or thinkable? What would make them similar or different?

Thomas Mann represents a good starting point for trying to clarify this subject. Why just him? Not because he had invented the term that, according to the European lexicons, had existed since at least the 17th century. What Thomas Mann masterfully made, was a big operation of intellectual marketing: he took

an already existing word and cast it in the middle of the contemporary public discourse after having supplied it with new and contradictory meanings. The result was so striking and successful that, since then, the *unpolitisch* has become a terminological and conceptual component of the modern political thought. Consequently, we are able today to speak about the un-political thinker Thomas Mann and also about the “unpoliticity” as a more general, yet peculiar approach to politics. More precisely, and metaphorically speaking, we can say that the choice to start from Thomas Mann is justified by the fact that his work builds a very good historical and conceptual post where to begin to formulate the right questions and to become aware of the variety of issues, problems and contradictions related to it. Thomas Mann’s chaotic, yet stimulating, considerations about being an *unpolitisch*/apolitical man represents an outstanding opportunity both to take in consideration a peculiar season of Europe and the world history and to focus on some conceptual elements of the political thought which can be helpful to highlight in order to give a structural order to the experience of the political world and history.¹

Beyond this, it is important to observe the hermeneutical circle generating by Mann’s (un)political considerations. In fact, if we assume—as my research does—that there is a conceptual continuity between the aesthetic and the political sphere, Mann’s unpolitical stance results to be a consequence of his being an artist. Still more: Mann’s German being, displaying in the fact that he presents himself as an outstanding representative of the *deutsche Kultur*, comes to be the same as his unpolitical being. More than once the *Betrachtungen* focuses on this connection. For instance, in the preface of the book, one can read: “The political spirit, that is not German in so far it is spirit, is necessarily anti-German, in so far it is political”². A few pages later, Mann remarks: “The difference between spirit and politics implies the one between culture and civilization”¹. The following sentence is definitive: “In Germany, the political spirit is extraneous

¹ Consistent with this double perspective, the title of the last chapter of my research is: “The Unpolitisch: historical figure and over-historical category” (“L’impolitico: figura storica e categoria sovra-storica”), where I was doubtful for a long time whether I ought to separate the two expressions by means of the conjunction “and” or through the disjunctive conjunction “or”. The reference is to E. Alessiati, *L’impolitico. Thomas Mann tra arte e guerra* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2011), 239-318.

² Mann, *Betrachtungen*, 33.

¹ Mann, *Betrachtungen*, 35.

and impossible”, because “the German people are not political people *par excellence*”².

These comments disclose an hermeneutical problem and suggest a methodological way to proceed: since the unpolitical way of being and being a German are, according to Mann, all one, the attempt to explain his (un)political opinions passes through the thematization and clarification of some pertinent and basic features of the German culture, namely, the culture which built and moulded Mann as a German man, artist and intellectual. But this is possible only if the “inside-perspective” joins the “outside-one” in a way that the clarification of the unpolitical meanings, i.d., of the meaning of the unpolitical, implies showing how this figure was interpreted with reference to the questions, issues and dynamics typical of Mann’s historical life time and how it was experienced in that contemporary cultural context. Given, however, that the discussed concept is not only a passive outcome of a cultural process or a historical epoch, but, on the contrary, it massively contributes to model, complicate, explain and, sometimes, to justify the reality itself.

Considered under the perspective of that combined movement of systole and diastole explained above, Mann’s unpolitical thought appears as a “justification effort”. Thomas Mann, along with a whole generation of German intellectuals, endeavoured to find a ground or a principle able to give reasons for their nationalistic engagement and for the fight of their country “against a world of enemies”, as at that time the war was commonly called. According to Mann, the reason was an identity reason: the last ground for the war was to find in the Germanness, in the fact of being Germans, what necessarily forced them—according to Mann’s perspective—to be unpolitical beings, or, in other terms, not to be able to be political spirits.

Given this frame, the German intellectuals, mostly conservative, tried to legitimate a paradox, which is a paradox both of the unpolitical man Thomas Mann and of the German culture: it consists in having given an extraordinarily warm and enthusiastic support to the world war in the name of a spiritual principle, condensed in the expression *deutsche Kultur*, whose peculiar component was the refusal of politics and of its formalistic mechanisms. The paradox lies, however, in the fact that by opposing the western politics and civilization, the

² Mann, *Betrachtungen*, 34.

German unpolitical intellectuals accepted and supported the militaristic official politics of their government, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, claimed a form of political world organization consistent with that spiritual nature that the German spirit was: *ergo*, non-political politics, un-political politics, or, at least, “other politics”. All this is included in the research about the German *unpolitisch*.

6 FINALLY, the exercise of conceptualization related to politics and its various forms also allows to define formally and methodologically my work, helping to place it among the research disciplines. In fact, my work is about a writer who, in many ways and in different stages of his production, discusses at a high intellectual level many different themes like art, music, spirit, politics and culture. It undoubtedly presents itself as a research work standing between the history of the political thought, the history of the political culture (*Kulturgeschichte*) and the political philosophy. Obviously, the fact that my work is related to these hermeneutical fields marks it off thematically and methodologically, distinguishing it from other subject fields it could be easily confused with (for instance, the history of literature or literary criticism). Exactly interdisciplinarity, namely the original intention and necessity to carry out research on complex themes and issues by intersecting different research approaches, has helped me to define the thematic and subject nature of the research itself. By doing so, other questions have appeared. They are open both to pluridisciplinarity (the possibility for a topic to become the subject of different disciplines) and to methodological multiperspectivism (the possibility for a subject to be questioned by means of different methodological patterns), and can be hopefully the subject of new research efforts. As the present research regards, it likely shows that a method for interdisciplinarity may exist under the conditions that 1) interdisciplinarity ought to respond to a set of specific questions that, orientating the research work, mark the affiliation of the work to a specific discipline; 2) interdisciplinarity implies the attempt to elaborate methodological “devices” aimed to combine questions and heuristic perspectives coming from different disciplines into a homogeneous research line; and finally, 3) in the specific case of trying to clarify the conceptual contribution given by an author, actually a novelist, to the construction and comprehension

of a political-intellectual scenery interdisciplinarity implies both biographical exposition of facts, historical exploration of events and conceptual clarification of ideas. Interdisciplinarity is a fruitful research account in so far it is a creative method of thinking.



Gustave Fraipont (1849–1923): Incendie de la cathédrale de Reims, 1914.