

Thomas Mann and *Pound Laundry*

Thanks for this, Joe.

I can't read most articles from the *New Yorker* and NYT because of paywalls (though some get sent to w/o that blockage) and would be glad to see Ross's review of *Reflections*. Will try to find an accessible copy online.

Mann's *Reflections* is indeed a revelation for those of us who before we came upon it knew only his post-1933 writing. I discovered it in my research for *Pound Laundry* and was blown away, enough so that I included a fairly large block of his book verbatim in PL (starts on p.153 of your copy - and I've attached it in pdf here for you, Jeff, since if I'm not mistaken you don't have a copy).

I knew of course that since, as with all of the pieces in PL I added no identification of the specific speakers, that many readers would think the ideas expressed were Pound's, but of course that was the point: once you know it's Mann, and that Pound's views about the war were much more nuanced than Mann's (*Reflections* was being written about the same time Wyndham Lewis and EP were putting out their outrageous little anti-war periodical *Blast*, which excoriated both sides in WW I), and how much their views diverged in the 30s and after, the ironies reverberate wonderfully.

Ross's (and, I suppose, Toibin's) main point is well-taken, but in considering Mann juxtaposed to Pound, I'm also reminded of the only line from Mailer I've memorized: "Don't understand me too quickly." But of course we do that, not only with authors (and their personae!) but with politicians and everybody else. We're human beings, always in a hurry, always in survival mode, having to make snap judgments, jumping to conclusions, and shooting from hip (and, as Galway Kinnell wonderfully put it, like the bear we "shit on the run").

I had read before of Mann's characterization of the "political stupidity" of his Non-political man, and found it to be ingenuous at best. The attitudes expressed in *Magic Mountain* and other later works do not by any means repudiate the attitudes or psychological inclinations expressed in *Reflections*. He was in his late 30s when he wrote that elitist race- and empire-loving diatribe (Pound was ten years younger), so his position can't be written off as youthful folly. Neither can it be attributed, as Ross believes, to his simply being swept up in the wave of Kaiser-adoration that washed over the Germanic world or being duped by the charisma of the Great Leader or ideal of the Holy Nation or Salvific State.

Rather, I think we have to recognize that in our moral depths we are more complex than binary, that we do "contain multitudes," and that we base our choices on a complexity of thoughts, emotions and compromises political parties and factions cannot come close to defining or comprehending. Our politics are always experimental, and whether we choose to put our bodies on the line for this or that "great experiment" is always to some extent a toss of the dice, no matter how much brain we have, no matter how much thinking or reasoning we do. Politics, social life in general (life itself, for that matter), always proceeds only in terms of tension, angst

and courage. As both Mann and Pound (and the existentialists writing in the same era) stressed, freedom is an agonizing process, not a foregone conclusion.