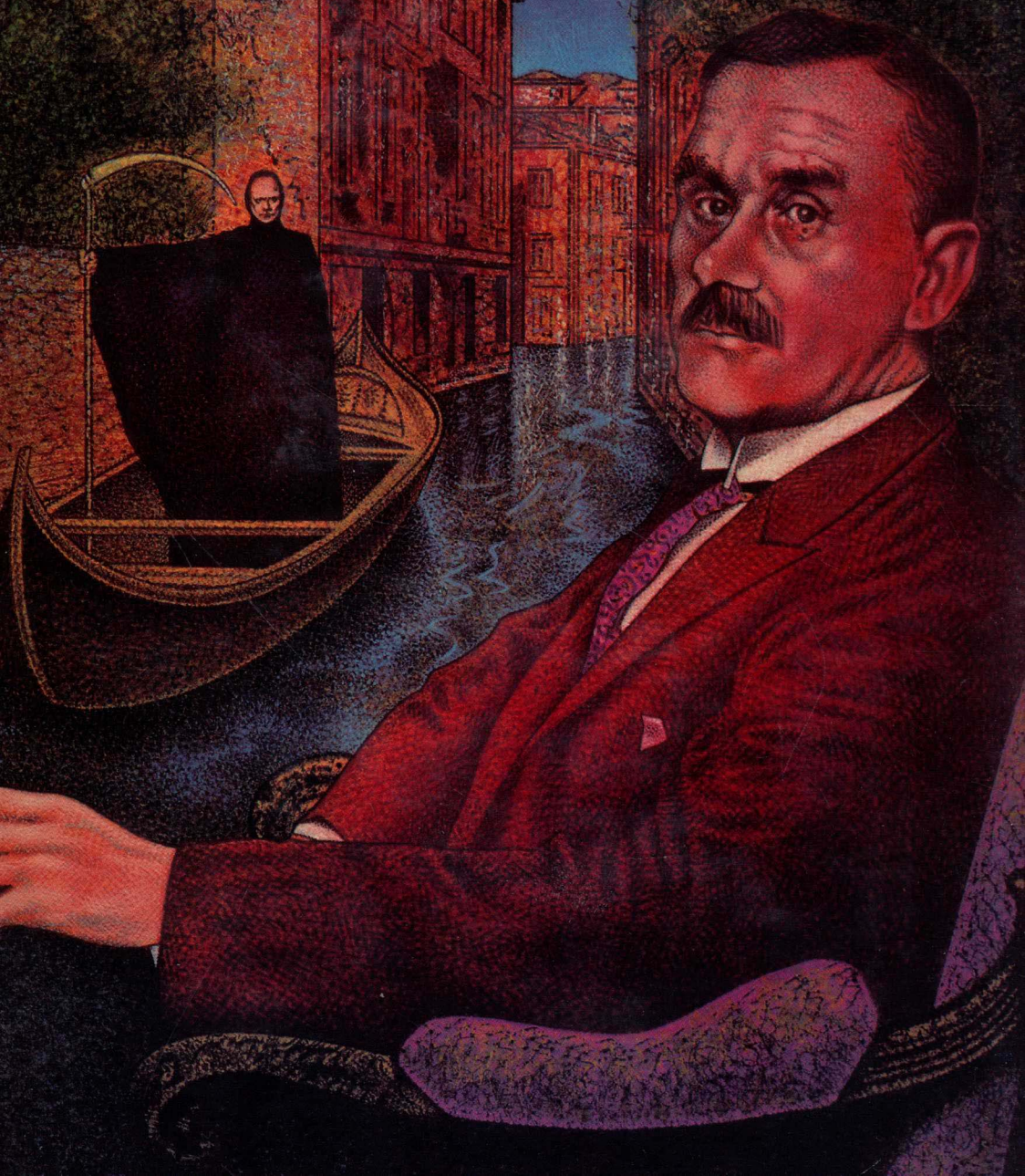


*Modern Critical Views*

# THOMAS MANN

Edited and with an introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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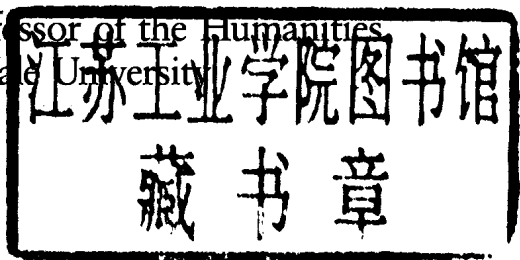
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*Edited and with an introduction by*

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## *Editor's Note*

This volume gathers together a very full representation of the most useful literary criticism devoted to the enormous range of Thomas Mann's fiction. The essays, which span more than half a century, are arranged here in the order of their original publication. I am grateful to Marijke Rijsberman for her erudition and judgment in helping to locate and choose them.

The book begins with the editor's introduction, which centers upon Mann's novel *The Beloved Returns* (*Lotte in Weimar*) and its relation to Mann's essays on Goethe and Freud, so as to sketch something of the problematical aspects of the novelist's ambivalence towards the greatest German writer, his prime precursor. Since all of Mann's fiction is a kind of symbolic autobiography, the chronological sequence starts appropriately with Hermann J. Weigand's reading of Mann's first novel, *Royal Highness*, with its shrewd suggestion that the book is an early reflection of the lifelong agon between Thomas and Heinrich Mann, his older brother and fellow novelist.

Vernon Venable's account of structural elements in *Death in Venice* brings a modified Marxist perspective to the analysis of Mann's most famous short novel. His most celebrated longer fiction, *The Magic Mountain*, is the subject of Erich Heller's ironic dialogue, which mirrors the abyss of endless ironies in the book itself. A very different mode, the high decadence of the Aesthetic movement, is invoked in George C. Schoolfield's adroit exegesis of *The Black Swan*, with its dark sense of the quintessentially German quality of the novel. The same sense is necessarily present in Gunilla Bergsten's study of *Doctor Faustus* as an authentically historical depiction of the Nazi era. An emphasis upon timeless myth is the very different center of Isadore Traschen's investigation of *Death in Venice*, which provides also a useful contrast to Venable's more socially oriented analysis of the same work. Still another contrast with the historical exegesis of *Doctor Faustus* comes in Eva Schaper's study of irony in that formidable novel. These contrasts, and others, are subsumed in the remarkable essay by Peter Heller, which finds in

Mann's marginal and deliberately limited ambivalences a kind of dialectic that almost governs the alternation between ironic skepticism (verging upon nihilism) and mythic quasi-belief throughout *The Magic Mountain*, *Joseph and His Brothers*, and other works.

A more specific, indeed quite personal level of commentary pervades Erich Kahler's remarks upon *The Holy Sinner* and *Felix Krull* as rambunctious performances in which Mann relaxed after his strenuous labors upon *Doctor Faustus*. Much more sober, as befits its craftsmanlike subject, is the solid analysis of the early *Buddenbrooks* by Larry David Nachman and Albert S. Braverman. Their emphasis upon Mann's control of the alternation between societal conformity and the aesthetic inner life is a familiar one in studies of Mann, but its relevance to *Buddenbrooks* is substantial and clear.

Another fine contrast enters with Oskar Seidlin's agile exegesis of Mann's weird number symbolism in his representation of the Dionysian vitalist, Mynheer Peeperkorn, in *The Magic Mountain*. This instance of virtuosity is a prelude to Hilary Heltay's subject in her essay on the subtler virtuosities of Mann's later narrative technique, with particular reference to the Joseph novels. A particular virtuoso technique, that of the parodistic narrator in *Doctor Faustus*, is the concern of William M. Honsa, Jr., in his contribution, a concern reflected also in Benjamin Bennett's view of the parodistic structure of myth in *Tonio Kröger*.

Myth, an obsessive technique in Mann, is again the center in Elaine Murdaugh's reading of *Joseph and His Brothers*, where the development of consciousness and an emergent theology are seen as Mann's ways of returning to the aesthetic strength of the archaic. The famous if rather overvalued novella, *Mario and the Magician*, is analyzed by Allan J. McIntyre as another example of ironized myth in Mann, overdetermined but partly redeemed by aesthetic artifice. Michael Mann, the novelist's youngest son, in a moving lecture on his father's work, turns aside critics of Mann's ironic stance by coming to rest upon the readiness to accept fate, or one's own character, as Mann's truest legacy. Character, and its inevitable relationship to destiny, is again the subject in Daniel Albright's overview of the earlier work and in Lawrence L. Langer's meditation upon the *topos* of death in *The Magic Mountain*.

The two most recent essays in this volume are distinguished examples of Mann criticism at its most sophisticated and mature. Norman Rabkin skillfully employs the context of Shakespeare's late romances to illuminate Mann's late romance, *The Holy Sinner*. In a fitting conclusion to this book, Martin Price renders an exegesis of *Felix Krull* worthy both of that delightful fiction and of the comic muse whom Price brilliantly invokes.

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## Introduction

### I

The greatest of modern German literary scholars, Ernst Robert Curtius, observed that European literature was a continuous tradition from Homer through Goethe, and became something else afterwards. Thomas Mann is part of that something else, which begins with Wordsworth and has not yet ended. Mann, too ironic to study the nostalgias, nevertheless was highly conscious of his lifelong agon with his true precursor, Goethe. It was a loving agon, though necessarily not lacking in dialectical and indeed ambivalent elements. From his essay on "Goethe and Tolstoy" (1922) through his remarkable triad of Goethe essays in the 1930s (on the man of letters, the "representative of the Bourgeois Age," and *Faust*) on to the "Fantasy on Goethe" of the 1950s, Mann never wearied of reimagining his great original. The finest of these reimaginings, the novel, *Lotte in Weimar*, was published in Stockholm in 1939. We know it in English as *The Beloved Returns*, and it is surely the most neglected of Mann's major fictions. Mann is renowned as the author of *The Magic Mountain*, the tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Death in Venice*, and *Felix Krull*, while even the early *Buddenbrooks* remains widely read. But *Lotte in Weimar*, after some initial success, seems to have become a story for specialists, at least in English-speaking countries. Perhaps this is because Goethe, who exported splendidly to Britain and America in the time of Carlyle and Emerson, now seems an untranslatable author. Or it may be that Goethe's spirit has not survived what happened in and through Germany from 1933 until 1945.

In his essay on *Faust*, Mann remarks that the poem depicts love as a devil's holiday. The meditation upon Goethe's career as a man of letters centers itself in a remarkable paragraph that is as much on Mann as on Goethe:

But this business of reproducing the outer world through the inner, which it re-creates after its own form and in its own way, never does, however much charm and fascination may emanate from it, quite satisfy or please the outer world. The reason is that the author's real attitude always has something of opposition in it, which is quite inseparable from his character. It is the attitude of the man of intellect towards the ponderous, stubborn, evil-minded human race, which always places the poet and writer in this particular position, moulding his character and temperament and so conditioning his destiny. "Viewed from the heights of reason," Goethe wrote, "all life looks like some malignant disease and the world like a madhouse." This is a characteristic utterance of the kind of man who writes: the expression of his smarting impatience with mankind. More of the same thing than one would suppose is to be found in Goethe's works: phrases about the "human pack" in general and his "dear Germans" in particular, typical of the specific irritability and aloofness I mean. For what are the factors that condition the life of the writer? They are twofold: perception and a feeling for form; both of these simultaneously. The strange thing is that for the poet they are one organic unity, in which the one implies, challenges, and draws out the other. This unity is, for him, mind, beauty, freedom—everything. Where it is not, there is vulgar human stupidity, expressing itself in lack of perception and imperviousness to beauty of form—nor can he tell you which of the two he finds the more irritating.

We would hardly know that this aesthetic stance is that of Goethe rather than Flaubert, of Mann rather than T. S. Eliot. It seems Mann's shrewd warning to us is that the true man or woman of letters always exists in opposition to the formlessness of daily life, even when the writer is as socially amiable and spiritually healthy as Goethe and his disciple, Thomas Mann. That spiritual health is the subject of the grand essay by Mann on "Goethe as Representative of the Bourgeois Age," which nevertheless makes clear how heroically Goethe (and Mann) had to struggle in order to achieve and maintain such health:

As for Goethe, I may make an observation here having to do with certain human and personal effects and symptoms of the anti-ideal constitution; an observation which, indeed, leads me so far into intimate and individual psychology that only indications are

possible. There can be no doubt that ideal faith, although it must be prepared for martyrdom, makes one happier in spirit than belief in a lofty and completely ironic sense of poetic achievement without values and opinions, entirely objective, mirroring everything with the same love and the same indifference. There are in Goethe, on closer examination, as soon as the innocence of the youthful period is past, signs of profound maladjustment and ill humour, a hampering depression, which must certainly have a deep-lying uncanny connection with his mistrust of ideas, his child-of-nature dilettantism. There is a peculiar coldness, ill will, *médiance*, a devil-may-care mood, an inhuman, elfish irresponsibility—which one cannot indulge enough, but must love along with him if one loves him. If one peers into this region of his character one understands that happiness and harmony are much more the affair of the children of spirit than of the children of nature. Clarity, harmony within oneself, strength of purpose, a positive believing and decided aim—in short, peace in the soul—all this is much more easily achieved by these than by the children of nature. Nature does not confer peace of mind, simplicity, single-mindedness; she is a questionable element, she is a contradiction, denial, thorough-going doubt. She endows with no benevolence, not being benevolent herself. She permits no decided judgments, for she is neutral. She endows her children with indifference; with a complex of problems, which have more to do with torment and ill will than with joy and mirth.

Goethe, Mann, and nature are everywhere the same; their happiness and harmony are aesthetic constructs, and never part of the given. Contradictory, skeptical, and full of the spirit that denies, Goethe and Mann triumph by transferring “liberal economic principles to the intellectual life”; they practice what Goethe called a “free trade of conceptions and feelings.” The late “Fantasy on Goethe” has a delicious paragraph on the matter of Goethe’s free trade in feelings:

Goethe’s love life is a strange chapter. The list of his love affairs has become a requirement of education; in respectable German society one has to be able to rattle off the ladies like the loves of Zeus. Those Friederikes, Lottes, Minnas, and Mariannes have become statues installed in niches in the cathedral of humanity; and perhaps this makes amends to them for their disappointments. For the fickle genius who for short whiles lay at their feet

was never prepared to take the consequences, to bear the restriction upon his life and liberty that these charming adventures might have involved. Perhaps the fame of the ladies is compensation to them for his recurrent flights, for the aimlessness of his wooing, the faithlessness of his sincerity, and the fact that his loving was a means to an end, a means to further his work. Where work and life are one, as was the case with him, those who know only how to take life seriously are left with all the sorrows in their laps. But he always reproved them for taking life seriously. "Werther must—must be?" he wrote to Lotte Buff and her fiancé. "You two do not feel *him*, you feel only *me* and *yourselves*. . . . If only you could feel the thousandth part of what Werther means to a thousand hearts, you would not reckon the cost to you." All his women bore the cost, whether they liked it or not.

It is to this aspect of Goethe as "fickle genius" that Mann returned in *The Beloved Returns*, which can serve here as representative both of the strength and limitation of Mann's art of irony.

## II

After forty-four years, the model for the heroine of Goethe's notorious *The Sorrows of Young Werther* goes to Weimar on pilgrimage, not to be reunited with her lover, now sixty-seven to her sixty-one, but rather in the hopeless quest to be made one both with their mutual past, and with his immortal idea of what she once had been, or could have been. For four hundred pages, Mann plays out the all but endless ironies of poor Lotte's fame, as the widowed and respectable lady, who has her limitations but is nobody's fool, both enjoys and endures her status and function as a living mythology. Mann's supreme irony, grotesque in its excruciating banalities, is the account of the dinner that the stiff, old Goethe gives in honor of the object of his passion, some forty-four years after the event. Poor Lotte, after being treated as a kind of amalgam of cultural relic and youthful indiscretion shrived by temporal decay, is dismissed by the great man with a palpably insincere: "Life has held us sundered far too long a time for me not to ask of it that we may meet often during your sojourn."

But Mann was too cunning to conclude his book there. A marvelous final meeting is arranged by Goethe himself, who hears Lotte's gentle question, "So meeting again is a short chapter, a fragment?" and replies in the same high aesthetic mode:

“Dear soul, let me answer you from my heart, in expiation and farewell. You speak of sacrifice. But it is a mystery, indivisible, like all else in the world and one’s person, one’s life, and one’s work. Conversion, transformation, is all. They sacrificed to the god, and in the end the sacrifice was God. You used a figure dear and familiar to me; long since, it took possession of my soul. I mean the parable of the moth and the fatal, luring flame. Say, if you will, that I am the flame, and into me the poor moth flings itself. Yet in the chance and change of things I am the candle too, giving my body that the light may burn. And finally, I am the drunken butterfly that falls to the flame—figure of the eternal sacrifice, body transmuted into soul, and life to spirit. Dear soul, dear child, dear childlike old soul, I, first and last, am the sacrifice, and he that offers it. Once I burned you, ever I burn you, into spirit and light. Know that metamorphosis is the dearest and most inward of thy friend, his great hope, his deepest craving: the play of transformation, changing face, greybeard to youth, to youth the boy, yet ever the human countenance with traits of its proper stage, youth like a miracle shining out in age, age out of youth. Thus mayst thou rest content, beloved, as I am, with having thought it out and come to me, decking thine ancient form with signs of youth. Unity in change and flux, conversion constant out of and into oneself, transmutation of all things, life showing now its natural, now its cultural face, past turning to present, present pointing back to past, both prelude future and with her dim foreshadowings already full. Past feeling, future feeling—feeling is all. Let us open wide eyes upon the unity of the world—eyes wide, serene, and wise. Wouldst thou ask of me repentance? Only wait. I see her ride towards me, in a mantle grey. Then once more the hour of Werther and Tasso will strike, as at midnight already midday strikes, and God give me to say what I suffer—only this first and last will then remain to me. Then forsaking will be only leave-taking, leave-taking for ever, death-struggle of feeling and the hour full of frightful pangs, pangs such as probably for some time precede the hour of death, pangs which are dying if not yet death. Death, final flight into the flame—the All-in-one—why should it too be aught but transformation? In my quiet heart, dear visions, may you rest—and what a pleasant moment that will be, when we anon awake together!”

In some complex sense, part of the irony here is Mann's revenge upon his precursor, since it is Mann who burns Goethe into spirit and light, into the metamorphosis of hope and craving that is *The Beloved Returns*. Mann and Goethe die each other's life, live each other's death, in the pre-Socratic formulation that so obsessed W. B. Yeats. But for Mann, unlike the occult Yeats, the movement through death into transformation is a complex metaphor for the influence relationship between Goethe and his twentieth-century descendant. What Mann, in his "Fantasy on Goethe," delineated in his precursor is charmingly accurate when applied to Mann himself:

We have here a kind of splendid narcissism, a contentment with self far too serious and far too concerned to the very end with self-perfection, heightening, and distillation of personal endowment, for a petty-minded word like "vanity" to be applicable. Here is that profound delight in that self and its growth to which we owe *Poetry and Truth*, the best, at any rate the most charming autobiography the world has seen—essentially a novel in the first person which informs us, in the most wonderfully winning tone, how a genius is formed, how luck and merit are indissolubly linked by an unknown decree of grace and how a personality grows and flourishes under the sun of a higher dispensation. Personality! Goethe called it "the supreme bliss of mortal man"—but what it really is, in what its inner nature consists, wherein its mystery lies—for there is a mystery about it—not even he ever explained. For that matter, for all his love for the telling word, for the word that strikes to the heart of life, he never thought that everything must be explained. Certainly this phenomenon known as "personality" takes us beyond the sphere of purely intellectual, rational, analyzable matters into the realm of nature, where dwell those elemental and daemonic things which "astound the world" without being amenable to further elucidation.

The splendid narcissism of Mann, at his strongest, is precisely daemonic, is that profound delight in the self without which works as various as *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus* would collapse into the weariness of the irony of irony.

### III

In his remarkable essay, "Freud and the Future" (1936), Mann wrote the pattern for his own imitation of Goethe:

The ego of antiquity and its consciousness of itself were different from our own, less exclusive, less sharply defined. It was, as it were, open behind; it received much from the past and by repeating it gave it presentness again. The Spanish scholar Ortega y Gasset puts it that the man of antiquity, before he did anything, took a step backwards, like the bull-fighter who leaps back to deliver the mortal thrust. He searched the past for a pattern into which he might slip as into a diving-bell, and being thus at once disguised and protected might rush upon his present problem. Thus his life was in a sense a reanimation, an archaizing attitude. But it is just this life as reanimation that is the life as myth. Alexander walked in the footsteps of Miltiades; the ancient biographers of Caesar were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that he took Alexander as his prototype. But such "imitation" meant far more than we mean by the word today. It was mythical identification, peculiarly familiar to antiquity; but it is operative far into modern times, and at all times is psychically possible. How often have we not been told that the figure of Napoleon was cast in the antique mould! He regretted that the mentality of the time forbade him to give himself out for the son of Jupiter Ammon, in imitation of Alexander. But we need not doubt that—at least at the period of his Eastern exploits—he mythically confounded himself with Alexander; while after he turned his face westwards he is said to have declared: "I am Charlemagne." Note that: not "I am like Charlemagne" or "My situation is like Charlemagne's," but quite simply "I am he." That is the formulation of the myth. Life, then—at any rate, significant life—was in ancient times the reconstitution of the myth in flesh and blood; it referred to and appealed to the myth; only through it, through reference to the past, could it approve itself as genuine and significant. The myth is the legitimization of life; only through and in it does life find self-awareness, sanction, consecration. Cleopatra fulfilled her Aphrodite character even unto death—and can one live and die more significantly or worthily than in the celebration of the myth? We have only to think of Jesus and His life, which was lived in order that that which was written might be fulfilled. It is not easy to distinguish between His own consciousness and the conventionalizations of the Evangelists. But His word on the Cross, about the ninth hour, that "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" was evidently not in the least an outburst of despair and

disillusionment; but on the contrary a lofty messianic sense of self. For the phrase is not original, not a spontaneous outcry. It stands at the beginning of the Twenty-second Psalm, which from one end to the other is an announcement of the Messiah. Jesus was quoting, and the quotation meant: "Yes, it is I!" Precisely thus did Cleopatra quote when she took the asp to her breast to die; and again the quotation meant: "Yes, it is I!"

In effect, Mann quotes Goethe, and thus proclaims "Yes, it is I." The ego of antiquity is simply the artist's ego, appropriating the precursor in order to overcome the belatedness of the influence process. Mann reveals the true subject of his essay on Freud just two paragraphs further on:

Infantilism—in other words, regression to childhood—what a role this genuinely psychoanalytic element plays in all our lives! What a large share it has in shaping the life of a human being; operating, indeed, in just the way I have described: as mythical identification, as survival, as a treading in footprints already made! The bond with the father, and the transference to father-substitute pictures of a higher and more developed type—how these infantile traits work upon the life of the individual to mark and shape it! I use the word "shape," for to me in all seriousness the happiest, most pleasurable element of what we call education (*Bildung*), the shaping of the human being, is just this powerful influence of admiration and love, this childish identification with a father-image elected out of profound affinity. The artist in particular, a passionately childlike and play-possessed being, can tell us of the mysterious yet after all obvious effect of such infantile imitation upon his own life, his productive conduct of a career which after all is often nothing but a reanimation of the hero under very different temporal and personal conditions and with very different, shall we say childish means. The *imitatio* Goethe, with its Werther and Wilhelm Meister stages, its old-age period of *Faust* and *Diwan*, can still shape and mythically mould the life of an artist—rising out of his unconscious, yet playing over—as is the artist way—into a smiling, childlike, and profound awareness.

The profound awareness is Mann's own, and concerns his own enactment of the *imitatio* Goethe. Subtly echoed and reversed here is Goethe's observation in his *Theory of Color* to the effect that "even perfect models



have a disturbing effect in that they lead us to skip necessary stages in our *Bildung*, with the result, for the most part, that we are carried wide of the mark into limitless error." This is also the Goethe who celebrated his own originality as well as his power of appropriating from others. Thus he could say that: "Only by making the riches of the others our own do we bring anything great into being," but also insist: "What can we in fact call our own except the energy, the force, the will!" Mann, acutely sensing his own belatedness, liked to quote the old Goethe's question: "Does a man live when others also live?"

The Goethe of *The Beloved Returns* is not Goethe, but Mann himself, the world parodist prophesied and celebrated by Nietzsche as the artist of the future. E. R. Curtius doubtless was accurate in seeing Goethe as an ending and not as a fresh beginning of the cultural tradition. Mann too now seems archaic, not a modernist or post-Romantic, but a belated Goethe, a humanist triumphing through the mystery of his own personality and the ironic playfulness of his art. Like his vision of Goethe, Mann too now seems a child of nature rather than of the spirit, but laboring eloquently to burn through nature into the transformation that converts deathliness into a superb dialectical art.