INTRODUCTION

In *The Holy Sinner*, Thomas Mann unfolds an ornate depiction of the Middle Ages, replete with courtly love and jousting knights, illiterate peasants and papal magnificence. This fascinating setting, which the author embellishes with all his linguistic and confabulatory powers, is equally a backdrop for weighty matters of the mind: religious questions of sin and grace, psychoanalytic inquiries into incestuous desire, political investigations into the distribution of power. It is perhaps Mann's most characteristic talent to be able to write on these two levels, exploring profound philosophical problems while simultaneously enchanting us with an endearing and seductive tale.

Published in 1951, *The Holy Sinner* achieved critical acclaim and considerable popularity. On reading the manuscript, Alfred A. Knopf, Mann's American publisher, wrote Mann that he "found the book utterly entrancing. As sheer narrative, it seems to me to be perhaps your best book." Mann was not immune to flattery and replied, "As a matter of fact, I myself couldn't help finding the book quite nice when I read the German proofs. It is light, it is serene, it has a certain aloofness without being cold,

and I think it *is* something that I could do it right after *Doctor Faustus*. So you see how self-complacent I am."[1] Mann's irony cannot hide his recognition of an implicit competition between his two late works, a sense that the *Holy Sinner*, for all of its sublime levity, was somehow too late, coming after the fact of the major statement of *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Indeed Mann soon confessed as much to his daughter Erika: "Often I can't help thinking that it would have been better if I had departed from this earth after the *Faustus*. That, after all, was a book of seriousness and a certain power, and would have been a neat finale to a life's labor, whereas now with *The Holy Sinner*, though I happen to love it, there begins an overhanging epilogue that probably would be better lacking."[2]

Scholars have, in a sense, concurred, and although none would insist that *The Holy Sinner* "would be better lacking," they have voted with their pens, devoting noticeably more philological attention to *Doctor Faustus*, the *magnum opus*, the monumental exploration of aesthetic autonomy and the German imperiousness that led to the rise of Hitler. The reader of this volume will have to decide whether the delicacy, fantasy, and, perhaps above all, humor of *The Holy Sinner* render it less worthwhile. This reader, in any case, suggests that it is neither a footnote to nor a diversion from *Faustus*, but rather a reprise, a revision, certainly a reaffirmation of the hope, faith, and love that pervade

Mann's novelistic credo, appearing now in a different register, appropriate to the recognition that there is life after *Doctor Faustus* and after the catastrophe which that novel so trenchantly scrutinizes. Not a theological account of the afterlife, *The Holy Sinner* is an anthropological—which is to say, humanistic—inquiry into life as always after, always "an overhanging epilogue," always subsequent to an original sin and precisely therefore the possible site of grace: no grace without sin, one might say, and this becomes the injunction to life and to love, not beyond good and evil but based on the divine joke that good comes about through evil. And it does so, needless to say, with irony.

The original sin here is the incestuous love of the twins, Wiligis and Sibylla, whose child, cast adrift in the sea, is miraculously rescued and eventually is chosen to become Gregory, the Pope of Rome. Mann drew his story from the medieval German epic *Gregorius* by Hartmann von Aue (itself based on earlier French and Latin versions of the legend), and although Mann follows Hartmann in many details, he differs on one crucial point: Hartmann leaves no doubt that it is the devil who corrupts the siblings and initiates their fall, while Mann does away with the devil altogether, treating the incest instead as the narcissistic love of an undifferentiated nature for itself.[3] This alternative beginning is not merely a matter of the distance between medieval Christian and modern secular worldviews. Indeed we know how

the devil had recently played a central role in *Doctor Faustus*, and the most important distinction between the two novels might well be the disappearance of the diabolical principle in *The Holy Sinner*. For the story is no longer driven by the introduction of a heterogenous element, the serpent in the garden, but rather by a dialectic of self-love, pursuant to the lack of heterogeneity in the incestuous couple. If one can speak of an initial sinfulness, it is the refusal of difference. Wiligis and Sibylla love each other because they are identical and no one is their equal, but their son finally becomes the embodiment of a love for the world, and his bildungsroman is the narrative of a passage from hermetic particularity to a universalist embrace. Its optimism entails the promise that one can become an individual without renouncing society, the world, and the others within it.

The biography of the subject is preceded by the account of the prelapsarian idyll of the ducal court of Flanders, where worldly pleasure and joy are marred by infertility; the limitless pleasure is, despite the bounty of nature, fundamentally unproductive, for there is no room for change or difference. Far from disrupting this primal narcissism, the birth of the twins represents its culmination and its consistent refusal to engage with a larger world. Yet this very refusal is already a negation, a premonition of the end of the primitive utopia of Belrapeire and a recognition of the greater terrain into which the

infant must venture. When, as an adolescent, Gregory learns something—but certainly not everything—about the circumstances of his birth, he sets off once more, this time to find his parents, and he ends up finding and loving his mother as his wife: the second incestuous sin on his path to holiness.

The wisdom of the account is both mythological and psychoanalytic: Narcissus precedes Oedipus in the history of the subject. An autoeroticism without difference passes into a dichotomy of mother and son, divided and therefore richer, but still self-enclosed. Not until Sibylla and Gregory discover their oedipal secret and Gregory sets off again, this time seeking punishment and penance, does he discover his true mother, the *magna mater* of nature, who is both the Queen of Heaven and the Earth Mother who nourishes all humanity. Only then can his selfish love be sublimated into the boundless charity, purged of all parochialism, that prepares him for his role as the representative of God on earth. Or it prepares him for his election—the sense of the German title *Der Erwählte*—implying that only through a Nietzschean self-overcoming does the self become complete: it is the universality of the subject that allows for its authentic particularity.

Of the various component parts of the oedipal myth, Mann retains of course the desire for the mother and, especially, the cognitive inquiry into origins and sexuality, Freud's "instinct for research," which Mann designates expressly as "en-

lightenment." One of the most salient features of *The Holy Sinner* is the extent to which this enlightenment lacks violence, as evidenced by the marginalization of the most dramatic aspect of Oedipus: the parricide. While the history of the subject passes through a love for the mother, it does not depend on the murder of the father, and it is the absence of this sin that allows Mann to imagine a potential for utopian reconciliation within the enlightenment (rather than, for example, the intervention of an external grace, as at the conclusion of Goethe's *Faust*). It is true that, within the narcissistic phase of Beaurepaire, a competition between father and son develops with regard to their erotic attention for the daughter/sister (rather than the wife/mother). Yet the conflict is resolved without a crime, when the father dies a natural death, and only in the wake of his demise do the siblings consummate their passion for one another. Instead of killing his father, Wiligis sacrifices a substitute, the hound who had begun to wail—at the sight of the incest or in mourning for the Duke? The oedipal ambivalence remains, but the specific historical form of its resolution has displaced the violence onto a different object. This suppression of violence is magnified in the second oedipal scene, when Gregory rescues Sibylla from the violent entreaties of her insistent suitor Roger. Defeating his more mature—which is to say, fatherly—rival for the love of his mother, Gregory refrains from killing him, taking him prisoner instead, forcing him to re-

nounce his erotic ambitions through a peace treaty rather than through annihilation.

Measuring the oedipal material in the novel against the Sophoclean version, one is struck therefore by the reduction in the level of violence. This civilizational progress is echoed by the course of development within the novel itself: first an animal is slaughtered instead of the father, then the father/rival is vanquished but spared, until finally the abject sinner, reduced to the limits of creatureliness, is elevated to the glory of the Holy Father. The patriarchal violence of nature is able to overcome itself in a miracle of culture. Freud too imagined a historical transformation of Oedipus, including a reduction in the potential for violence from the Greek hero, the ignorant murderer, to the passive Hamlet, equally desirous of his mother but unable to act. "The changed treatment of the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilization: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind. In the *Oedipus* the child's wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In *Hamlet* it remains repressed; and—just as in the case of a neurosis—we only learn of its existence from the inhibiting consequences."[4] For of all of Mann's indebtedness to Freud—and none of his novels is more psychoanalytic than *The Holy Sinner*—the account that he provides of civilizational progress stands at great odds

to Freud's pessimistic vision of a constantly growing repression. For the history of the subject is, for Mann, not one of subjugation; it is rather a progressive expansion of the freedom that can only pertain to the individual who has overcome ignorance and brute nature and therefore engages in choices, which imply differences and, consequently, alternatives. It is with "free choice" that young Gregory decides to search for his parents, and this choice constitutes a key step on the path to his ultimate election.

The same optimism distinguishes *The Holy Sinner* from *Doctor Faustus*, the novel the shadow of which has so obscured the later work and which made Mann himself so anxious. To be sure, free choice and the possibility of civilizational progress are hardly absent in *Doctor Faustus*, but they dwindle to a barely consoling promise, overwhelmed by a dialectic of enlightenment that leads, nearly inexorably, to catastrophe and isolation. In contrast, *The Holy Sinner* shows how redemption is the natural—or the natural-historical—outcome of enlightenment. If the incestuous child of incest, the exponential sinner, can be chosen Pope, then anyone can become, if not Pope, at least an individual, elect, elevated, and endowed with the capacity of choice and freedom. However, this sort of optimistic faith in the promise of humanity would have been all but impossible in the context of National Socialism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust. If *Doctor Faustus* mourns over what had become of Germany, *The Holy Sinner*

looks forward to what might become of Europe, after the catastrophe; hence "the overhanging epilogue" also entails a political question.

Given Mann's status (and self-stylization) as the overriding representative figure within twentieth-century German literature, one is tempted to read the novel as an allegorical account of the vicissitudes of Germany. There are some interesting lines to pursue. A history begun in incest? Gregory might then figure as Siegfried, and the novel therefore as a rewriting of the Wagnerian imagination of the nation. If the ideologues of the Third Reich hearkened back to the racial purity of medieval Germany, Mann unfolds a European Middle Ages, when Irish monks converted the Germans and travelers crisscrossed the continent. This corrective to Nazi nationalism is amplified by the fluidity of the linguistic borders among German, French, and English, perhaps also even a celebration of the Atlantic alliance and the salutary impact of Western "civilization" on German "culture." Finally one should note that the fictional narrator composes his story in the library of St. Gallen, a Swiss location that points back to the sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain* and the figure of Marie Godeau in *Doctor Faustus*: Switzerland as the model of a Central European culture that avoided the isolation and arrogance of Germany and, for all its Alpine seclusion, cultivated an openness to the world. Yet that connection is implicated in a historical irony presumably even beyond Mann's inten-

tions. For it was with the proceeds from *The Holy Sinner* that Mann was able to finance his final emigration, moving from California (where the atmosphere of the McCarthy era made him increasingly uncomfortable) to Zurich, a German setting where the renowned German writer would not have to affiliate himself with the Germany of either the East or the West.

There is, however, a larger political consideration encoded in the sequence of settings, each a description of a different mode of social organization that corresponds to one of the stages of Gregory's development. Beaurepaire, we know, is a site of undifferentiated pleasure, but therefore also isolated, exclusive, and immobile. On the isle of St. Dunstan, even more isolated, difference nevertheless plays a greater role, although it is the difference of class and culture, leading eventually to Gregory's departure. The insular primitivism seems to disappear in the splendid urbanity of Bruges, but the brutality of class differences is, if anything, heightened—note the ironic remark relegating the fallen soldiers to mere minor figures—and, in any case, the arrogance of isolation has not been overcome, since it is there that Gregory woos his mother. Only in the absolute isolation of the penance on the rock does the social question disappear, once Gregory has renounced the privilege of the scholar that he enjoyed on St. Dunstan and the privilege of the knight from Bruges. It disappears, however, for another—much more im-

portant—reason as well. For it is in the hermetic separation, at an infinite distance from society, that the dialectical inversion transpires and Gregory discovers the universality of humanity: born of nature, all are one, precisely through their always-specific difference. It is this knowledge that enables him to become the "very great Pope."

Consider some of the achievements of Gregory's reign. Separating the ecclesiastical office from the officeholder, he preserves the substance of the identity of the Church, protecting its dignity from the failings and frailties of any of its individual servants. Recognizing the significance of cultural differences, he modifies specific legal precepts in the interest of the spread of the faith: polygamous converts would not be compelled to divorce their wives. Similarly he determines that transgressors should be called to penance, rather than to a punishment that might alienate them further. In other words: an internal differentiation of the Church as an organization; a multicultural differentiation of its mission; a pastoral and psychological differentiation between intention and deed. If Gregory is Mann's ideal Pope, he is also the philosopher-king, the wise ruler of the modern state, extremely more complex than the utopia of Beaurepaire and therefore requiring a political understanding more sophisticated than the jovial paternalism that prevails there.

Just as Gregory has matured from a self-enclosed narcissism through Oedipus to philanthropy, the po-

litical model of the novel has grown from isolated particularity to universalism. This universalism is, after the nightmare of German imperialism, Mann's program for Europe. Is it Eurocentric? Hardly, for the agenda of "the very great Pope," at least, does not include ruling with an iron hand in order to impose a single identity on all his subjects. Mann's European project is, by definition, not "Eurocentric," since it is organized in terms of the dialectic of the particular and the universal. A federal center—his fiction of the papacy—is no infallible source of ultimate meaning but the mechanism through which local identities flourish, interact, and therefore preserve their unique substance. Without such interaction, they would run the risk of falling into narcissistic parochialism and infertility, a cultural isolation that would quickly lead to desolation. Instead, Europe, at its best never Eurocentric, becomes a community of communities, each independent, differentiated and flexible, and guaranteed by the tolerance of the coordination. For Gregory is, in Mann's account, a great Pope precisely because he is a populist, opposed to the "rigorists" who would zealously enforce the doctrine without regard to local differences, as much as he is opposed to the secession of any single community from the common project of humanity. Rejecting both particularist separatism and abstract universalism, Gregory reigns "in the spirit of enlightenment," an enlight-

enment, however, that entails the recognition, rather than the eradication, of difference.

Such an enlightenment is self-reflective, rather than dogmatic. It is the self-overcoming of the state of nature rather than its suppression through an administrative state. Gregory's trajectory from the periphery to the center is not the result of an invisible hand (as is the case, for example, with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, guided by a secret society) but the exigency of nature, which loves itself at first until it learns that it can love better by loving an other. In the final chapter, Gregory reveals his identity to Sibylla as "the trinity of child, husband, and Pope." The earlier stages have been retained in the conclusion. The infantile narcissism of Beaurepaire, for all its limitations, has not been abolished, since it is the primary source of love. The oedipal desire for the mother has had its object-choice expanded but not fundamentally revoked: from the one mother to the mother of all. In the figure of the Holy Father, these prior components are preserved and elevated into a universal love as human solidarity. The religious scandal here is not so much that it is the sinner who becomes the Pope but that the whole process unfolds as if faith, grace, and holiness are potentials grounded within nature, and not dependent on an otherworldly deity. Not only is the devil absent in *The Holy Sinner*; so too is God. It is therefore nature, through its own self-overcoming, that invents the

spirit, and not an original spirit who creates the world.

In the novel, the embodiment of that invention is "the spirit of the narration," and the self-confessed fictionality of the enterprise explains the prominence of irony. Working with medieval material, Mann certainly addresses particular aspects of Christianity, e.g., submerged matriarchal elements and oedipal aspects of the Christological narrative. Yet his genuine concern is the modernity of faith and culture, explored in a Christian idiom, not unlike Salman Rushdie's comparable discussion, in an Islamic idiom, in *The Satanic Verses*. In both cases, treatments of particular dogmatic issues provoked fundamentalist opposition, but the goal of each was to rescue religion precisely from dogmatic fundamentalism by inquiring, in the spirit of the enlightenment, into its universalist potential as a mode of human practice, religion after the death of God. Yet the very notion of religion as human is itself extremely ironic, if not blasphemous, and perhaps even labile enough to slip back, as a veneration of the human, into a never-ironic narcissism. And if there is no love without self-love, a solely selfish love can only wither; hence, the faith of universal love. That is, Lord only knows, no easy task. It requires quite a leap of faith, or rather, of irony: not as a retreat from enlightenment but as a vehicle for enlightenment as reconciliation.

NOTES

1. *Letters of Thomas Mann*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 434.

2. Ibid., p. 465.

3. Peter Szondi, "Thomas Manns Gnadenmär von Narziß," in *Schriften II*, ed. Wolfgang Fietkau (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 235.

4. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 298.