Introduction
The German Envoy to America

The ambassadors of the Third Reich, Hitler’s dangerously industrious agents, may well claim to speak for Germany, but nobody listens to them... The true German in America, the representative of all things German in the United States, is Thomas Mann, no matter how much this may displease certain people.

—Bodo Uhse, “The German Envoy to America,” July 23/24, 1939

Only the timeless verdict of the German nation itself can decide what counts as German culture and what doesn’t. For our time, that judgment has been made. The opinions of certain foreign circles, who believe that they can act as judges in this matter, will not change it.

—Völkischer Beobachter (official newspaper of the Nazi Party), October 25, 1935

In the morning hours of February 21, 1938, the ocean liner Queen Mary pulled into New York harbor, completing its transatlantic journey from Cherbourg, France. On board was one of the most famous writers of the day, the German novelist Thomas Mann, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929 and become the first non-Anglophone author to grace the cover of Time magazine in 1934. Now he was regularly celebrated in the US press as the “greatest living man of letters.”

This was Mann’s fourth trip to the United States in as many years, and New York’s journalists might have been forgiven had they chosen to relegate his arrival to a small note in the society columns (figure 0.1). The opposite was the case, however. The author was greeted by a throng of reporters that included representatives of all the major city papers, along with a film crew from the Paramount News Corporation, which recorded his impromptu press conference on the main deck of the Queen Mary for
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later use in a newsreel. As the title of this newsreel—“U.S. Reacts to European Crisis”—indicates, literary considerations were of decidedly secondary importance for the commotion. The reporters were there because of recent political developments. Roughly a week earlier, Adolf Hitler had forced the Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, to include members of the Austrian Nazi Party in his government, thereby effectively staging a coup in the neighboring country. Many observers predicted that this would mark the end of an independent Austria, and indeed by mid-March German tanks made an unopposed entrance into Vienna. The American public followed the developments in Europe with bated breath, and the reporters were thus eager to hear what Mann, who had been living in exile in Switzerland ever since Hitler had come to power, might have to say about the situation.

The famous author gladly obliged. In a pointed address, he correctly predicted the annexation of Austria and compared it to Benito Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia two and a half years earlier. He also condemned the appeasement policy pursued by the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain (E, 4:246). The remarks that Mann delivered aboard the Queen Mary were exclusively political in nature, but during a second press conference later that
day, he did add a few words about the contentious relationship between the official culture of fascism and his personal creative work. Asked whether he did not find exile to be a rather lonely occasion, Mann defiantly replied, “It is hard to bear. But what makes it easier is the realization of the poisoned atmosphere in Germany. That makes it easier because it’s actually no loss. Where I am, there is Germany. I carry my German culture in me. I have contact with the world and I do not consider myself fallen.”

This was not the first time that Mann had publicly identified himself with German culture and used this claim to position himself in opposition to the Nazi regime. Roughly a year earlier, in an open letter to the dean of the philosophical faculty of the University of Bonn, which had just stripped him of an honorary doctorate that had been conferred in 1919, Mann had written, “Justly or not, my name [has] once and for all become connected for the world with the conception of a Germany which it loved and honoured. The disquieting challenge [rings] in my ears: that I and no other must in clear terms contradict the ugly falsification which this conception of Germany [is] now suffering” (EL, 7; GW, 12:788). The leading liberal weekly the Nation published an English translation of Mann’s letter under the attention-grabbing headline “I Accuse the Hitler Regime,” and Reader’s Digest carried a condensed version of it into millions of American homes. A few months later, Mann’s US publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, reissued the entire document as An Exchange of Letters, just in time for the book signings during Mann’s first American lecture tour.

From this point on, and especially after he took up permanent residency in the United States in September of 1938, Mann, who had once described himself in the title of one of his books as a “nonpolitical man,” acquired a new role in the eyes of his US audience. For the hundreds of thousands of American readers who purchased his books, flocked to his lectures, or followed his endeavors by means of the frequently breathless news coverage, Mann became an embodiment of German culture as well as a personal antagonist to Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and the Nazi regime. Through his words and actions, he seemed to personify a great cultural tradition now in danger of being irreversibly corrupted or even eradicated by fascism. Mann himself took great satisfaction in this development and fully understood its implications. As he commented in a 1941 letter to his American patron Agnes E. Meyer, “I am waging a war” (L, 354; Br. AM, 253; Je fais la guerre).

My aim in this book is to explore the circumstances that made this remarkable development possible, as well as to chart its significance for literary history more generally. Writers have certainly served as a thorn in the side of the powerful almost since the beginnings of recorded history. But Mann’s
case was nevertheless novel. He became famous in America not because of his personal criticism of Hitler nor even because he found powerful words to attack governmental injustice, as his nineteenth-century predecessors Heinrich Heine and Émile Zola had done. His fame instead rested on the quietly dignified aura of culture and tradition with which he surrounded himself and that seemed to emanate from every page that he wrote.

The story of Mann's life seems tailor-made to support such an impression. The son of a merchant and senator from the small north German town of Lübeck, Mann had grown up wealthy and had learned from an early age what it meant to assume a representative function in the eyes of the public. In 1894, when he was nineteen years old, Mann moved to Munich to begin a career as a writer, following in the footsteps of his older brother, Heinrich, a highly regarded novelist. Success and financial independence came with the publication of his first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, in 1901, and with the novella *Tonio Kröger* in 1903. Although Mann was gay, he shortly thereafter married Katia Pringsheim, the daughter of a prominent mathematics professor. The couple had six children, the two oldest of which, Erika and Klaus, had embarked upon promising literary careers of their own by the time that the Manns arrived in the United States. The Pringsheims were one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Munich, and from 1905 to 1933, the author and his ever-expanding household lived a life of affluence and social distinction. During this time Mann wrote what are now his most famous works, the novella *Death in Venice* (1912), and the novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924). He also penned numerous works of cultural criticism, with which he cemented the public impression that he was a writer in the great German lineage of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Theodor Fontane, rather than an avant-garde revolutionary. By the time that he stepped foot off the *Queen Mary*, Mann was about halfway finished with a four-volume novel cycle recounting the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers. It was a “big” project in all senses of that term, a self-conscious attempt to cement a posthumous legacy.

Mann was, in other words, a writer unlike any of his contemporaries who continue to enjoy a similar level of fame in literary history: famous, rather than toiling in obscurity like Franz Kafka; wealthy, rather than penniless like James Joyce; well-traveled and outgoing, rather than reclusive like Marcel Proust; supremely self-confident, rather than clinically depressed like Virginia Woolf. It was precisely this studiously cultivated air of authority and dignity that made Mann a particularly potent actor in an age of totalitarian domination. The Nazi government based its representative claims on the notion of the *Volkswagen*, a collective will that supposedly permeated every
aspect of the German nation’s identity. Under this totalitarian logic, Mann became a political threat precisely because of his pretensions toward cultural autonomy, not despite of them. In his letter to the dean of the philosophical faculty at Bonn, Mann had noted that “from the beginning of my intellectual life I [have] felt myself in happiest accord with the temper of my nation and at home in its intellectual traditions. I am better suited to represent those traditions than to become a martyr for them” (EL, 6; GW, 12:786). The complaint was justified, but also a bit beside the point. It was precisely because Mann was so well-equipped to represent the intellectual traditions of his nation that he was in danger of becoming a martyr at the hands of the Nazis.

There was a second novel quality to Thomas Mann’s case as well. As both his interview with the New York Times and his letter to the dean note, Mann’s representative authority was rooted not in the assent of the German Volk, but rather in that of the “world,” or in what we might now call the global literary community. And indeed, translations of An Exchange of Letters quickly appeared not only in the United States but also in England, France, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Argentina, and Japan. This was hardly surprising, for Mann had made a triumphant entrance into world literature at an early stage of his career, seeing his works widely translated throughout Europe and beyond. This development was greatly aided by the birth of stable copyright regimes and the growth of international publishing during the closing years of the nineteenth century. As a result of these larger developments, “German culture” became an entity that no longer assumed a coherent form in the eyes of Germans alone. It now was an export commodity and, like all such commodities, became a vehicle for fetishistic projections by international consumers. Regardless of how much they consolidated their territorial and cultural control over German-speaking Europe (excepting tiny Switzerland), the Nazis therefore could not prevent Mann’s self-stylization as a representative German in the eyes of the world.

It’s true that once the Second World War broke out, this “world” largely became confined to the North American continent. But this restriction was of little consequence, for once the war was over, US military and industrial might completely reshaped the literary world—especially in Europe, where entire publishing industries lay in ruins. As the United States rose to the status of a global hegemon, American tastes profoundly altered what the world read. This fact was not lost on other German writers, one of whom jealously described Thomas Mann as a “loyal American subject.”

These two factors that characterize Mann’s case—the battle of cultural autonomy against totalitarian dependence and the struggle between
international and national sources of literary esteem—continue to have a clear relevance for literary production into the present day. Here we need to think only of the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk (perhaps not coincidentally a great admirer of Thomas Mann), who was recently accused by the progovernment media in his own country of being the “project” of an “international literature lobby” eager to destroy Turkish culture. What Pamuk’s case shares with Mann’s is not only the constellation pitting an author against his own government, but also the fact that Pamuk’s enemies claim that his representative authority derives from the opinions of the global literary community rather than from readers in his native country. Or we could think of the Israeli novelist Dorit Rabinyan, whose novel *All the Rivers*, a Jewish-Palestinian love story, received a wide international release even as it was banned from Israel’s school curricula on the grounds that it threatened the “national-ethnic identity of the people” by downplaying the “significance of miscegenation.” Thomas Mann’s story in the 1930s and 1940s is thus of clearly more than antiquarian interest. It instead marks the starting point of a historical situation that persists well into the twenty-first century.

**The World Republic of Letters**

An honorary doctoral diploma that Thomas Mann received from Harvard University in 1935 neatly illustrates the complex relationship connecting his battle for cultural autonomy to his struggle for international recognition. In *An Exchange of Letters*, Mann proudly invokes the Latin text of this diploma, which praises him as a “famous author who . . . together with a very few contemporaries sustains the high dignity of German culture” (*EL*, 4; *GW*, 12:786). For Mann, the diploma signified the existence of an autonomous cultural sphere that cut across national borders and could not be circumscribed by merely local actors, even ones as powerful as the *Reichsschrifttumskammer*, the Nazi agency in charge of literature and the book trade. A second doctoral diploma that he received four years later from Hobart College even gave a name to this autonomous sphere: the “international republic of letters.” During the summer of 1938, Mann also reread the *Conversations with Eckermann*, a transcript of a series of conversations between the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his assistant Johann Peter Eckermann in the 1820s and 1830s (*Tb.*, June 2, 1938). Mann made careful note of the famous passage in which Goethe predicts that the nation-state would become an increasingly unimportant arbiter of what constitutes literary greatness and that “the epoch of world literature is at hand.” References to it are scattered throughout several of his essays from the war years.
For Mann, the “international republic of letters” was by no means an apolitical realm. This is a crucial difference between his understanding of global literary circulation, developed during an age of unprecedented military conflict, and the twenty-first century notion of a “world republic of letters” proposed by the influential literary critic Pascale Casanova. Whereas Casanova regards the republic of letters as an aesthetic realm in which writers are freed of all “arbitrary political and national power,” Mann believed that it was truly a republic in the original sense of that term: a space whose members acted as representatives or emissaries of their individual nations. As early as 1922, Mann had asserted (in his essay “On National and International Art”) that “there is no such thing as a pure, an absolute cosmopolitanism” in the realm of literature. Instead, “greatness and national character in a paradigmatic sense are related to one another in a causal and organic fashion, and while a great German, a great Frenchman, a great Russian do indeed ‘belong to humanity,’ they would not be great, and would thus also not ‘belong to humanity’ if they weren’t first to a large degree German, French, or Russian” (GKFA, 15.1:506). He therefore saw his own place in world literature as a direct consequence of his ability to embody, rather than transcend, Germanic culture in the eyes of the world.

This belief, in turn, was shared by a large number of other European intellectuals who had witnessed the devastation of 1914–18, when ideas, no less than soldiers, went to war with one another. In reaction to these experiences there arose a clear conviction among the European intelligentsia during the 1920s that artists and scholars had a duty to seek international dialogue not just out of a shared commitment to beauty or to the life of the mind, but rather in order to keep open conversations that were all too easily abandoned by power-hungry politicians. Thomas Mann took this conviction with him to America.

The Nation, when it retitled Mann’s open letter “I Accuse the Hitler Regime,” clearly intended to draw a connection to earlier expressions of protest by writers against their own governments, specifically to Émile Zola’s famous manifesto “J’accuse.” As the concept of an “international republic of letters” illustrates, however, there was a decisive difference between Mann’s self-positioning and that of nineteenth-century authors such as Zola or Heinrich Heine. Both Heine and Zola had remained firmly wedded to the literary systems of their countries of origin even in exile; they had no international cultural sphere such as the one Mann discerned in his Harvard diploma to fall back upon. Heine, for instance, had published many essays on German culture in French intellectual papers, but when it came time to combine these writings into a book that he decided to call The Romantic
School (1836), he returned to the German publisher Hoffmann & Campe, despite the fact that he there had to submit to heavy interference from government censors. Zola, during his brief sojourn in London, never bothered to engage with the country that hosted him on any deeper level. He continued to publish in French and for a French market. His fame throughout the world came at second remove, through translations of his courageous interventions in his country’s public sphere, not because he directly addressed himself to an international audience.

By the time that he arrived in America, Thomas Mann, on the other hand, had come to understand that the Nazi regime had irrevocably severed him from his audience in Germany. In a 1943 address, “The Exiled Writer’s Relationship to His Homeland,” he lamented,

The exile of Victor Hugo, for example, was child’s play compared with ours. To be sure, he sat as an outcast far from Paris on his island in the ocean, but the spiritual link between him and France was never broken. What he wrote was printed in the French press; his books could be bought and read at home. Today exile is a total exile, just as war, politics, world, and life have become total. We are not only physically far from our country but we have been radically expelled from its life both in the purpose and, at least for the present, in the effects of our exile. (EW, 342; GW, 13:195)

Of course, hundreds of other literary émigrés shared in the condition that Mann here describes. The lessons that the famous author drew from his analysis were starkly different from those of his contemporaries, however. A common hope within the émigré community was that German cultural institutions might simply be reconstructed in America, beyond the reach of the Nazis. To name but one example, Prince Hubertus zu Löwenstein, a scribbler of limited talent but immense ambitions and substantial means, spent the latter half of the 1930s building up his German Academy in Exile. Volkmar von Zühlsdorff, its managing director, later avowed that this academy was “intended to be an entirely German institution. It would have German roots, membership and aims; it was to be set up in exile only because its members had been driven from their homeland by the Nazi tyranny. It was to be a cultural equivalent to what, in politics, would be termed a government in exile.”

Thomas Mann was a founding member of the German Academy in Exile and even served as the president of its literary division. He had been extremely active in literary academies, guilds, and protective associations
during the 1920s, and well understood their importance in fostering international solidarity. He also quickly came to realize, however, that projects such as the one pursued by Löwenstein, or by Alfred Kantorowicz, the general secretary of the League of German Writers in Exile, rested on a fundamentally flawed premise. Kantorowicz’s motto, to which Löwenstein would have also subscribed, was “Germany is in our camp.” He assumed, in other words, that the cancer of fascism was only superficial and that German culture as such would survive association with the Nazis unscathed.

Mann’s own perception was very different. In his most important political address, the lecture “Germany and the Germans” of 1945, he said, “there are not two Germanys, a good one and a bad one, but only one, whose best turned into evil through devilish cunning. Wicked Germany is merely good Germany gone astray, good Germany in misfortune, in guilt, and ruin. For that reason it is quite impossible for one born there simply to renounce the wicked guilty Germany and to declare: ‘I am the good, the noble, the just Germany in the white robe; I leave it to you to exterminate the wicked one’” (LC, 64; GW, 11:1146). Mann proposed, in other words, that the Nazi domination arose from structural conditions that were endemic to the German cultural tradition itself, inhering even in its very best elements. To simply carry this tradition across the Atlantic and start afresh with a new set of academies, publishing houses, and literary papers would mean to court disaster. Indeed, by the spring of 1940 (at a time when Nazi military might seemed insurmountable anywhere in Europe), Prince Löwenstein took to publicly complaining about the supposed “policy of annihilation directed against Germany,” a pronouncement that resulted in an irreconcilable breach with the Mann family and ultimately to Löwenstein’s resignation from his offices.

In a 1936 letter to the editor of the New York Times, Mann spelled out a rather different worldview when he asserted, “The task of affirming [that there remains alive a tradition of German culture outside of the sphere of dictatorship] does not belong to us emigrants. It is the task of the world to proclaim this—of that world which cannot forget the sympathy and gratitude with which it time and again welcomed the questing and creative German spirit” (SP, 18; GW, 13:638). Mann believed, in other words, that in times of totalitarian terror, the continued care for German culture was no longer the responsibility of Germans alone, not even that of the politically unburdened Germans who had fled into exile. The global community would have to shoulder this task instead. In this context, the quotation from Bodo Uhse that serves as one of the epigraphs to this chapter is telling. Uhse speaks
of Thomas Mann as a “delegate,” that is, as someone who has been “sent” (ein Entsandter). Mann would no doubt have preferred another term that Uhse discusses but ultimately discards: someone who “has been called” (ein Berufener).

**Cosmopolitan Germanness**

In his 1940 essay “The War and the Future,” Mann summarized his theory of exile as follows: “Emigration is no longer, as it once was, a search for temporary shelter, a hopeful and impatient waiting for the time when we can return. We are not waiting to return, we long ago gave up the idea. We are waiting for the future—and the future belongs to the new idea of world community, to the restriction of national sovereignties and autonomies. To this new state our emigration and the diaspora of our various cultures are merely the prelude” (OD, 244). Five years later, in a radio address to the newly liberated Germany, he revived this sentiment, adding to it the plea, “do not begrudge me my cosmopolitan Germanness [Weltdeutschtum]!” (GW, 13:747).15

To many of Mann’s German contemporaries, these aspirations toward “cosmopolitan Germanness” reeked of a Jewish conspiracy.16 Indeed, the author’s break with the Nazi regime had been set into motion when Mann, in January 1936, issued a sharp rebuke to the Swiss journalist Eduard Korrodi, who had sought to drive a wedge between Jewish and German literature. Mann reminded Korrodi of the profoundly beneficial influence that Jewish writers had exerted on German letters, stressing that the “‘international’ component of the Jew, at any rate, is his middle-European component, which is at the same time German, and without it German character wouldn’t be German character” (GW, 11:792). The German ambassador to Switzerland reported Mann’s pronouncements to his superiors; by the end of the year, Mann had been stripped of his citizenship, and his books were banned throughout the Reich.17

It would be perverse, of course, to compare the deprivations that Mann experienced over the next ten years to the collective suffering of the European Jews. Mann was forced into exile, his monetary assets were confiscated, and he saw both friends and family members perish or be taken off to concentration camps. But he never experienced genuine material hardship, he was not tortured, and his life was never in danger. Yet Mann’s denaturalization and the persecution of the Jews were nevertheless governed by a similar political logic. In both cases, the Nazi state attempted to affirm the authority of its representative claims by establishing an excluded other. By depriving
the Jews of even symbolic recognition of their membership in the national community, the Nazis could assert that their movement expressed the collective will of the entire German people. By casting Thomas Mann into exile and banning his books, they could advance the claim that German culture and tradition were entirely on their side.

This process of systematic exclusion from a cultural community brings us to the effect that translation had on Thomas Mann’s self-understanding during the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that his stories could not legally be sold in Germany between December 1936 and May 1945 meant that the audience for his German books was essentially confined to neutral Switzerland, as well as a few pockets of refugees scattered all over the world, from Stockholm to São Paulo. In terms of both monetary gain and cultural prestige, the American editions published by Alfred A. Knopf thus acquired an outsized importance. In July 1938 Mann ruefully told his German publisher, Gottfried Bermann Fischer, that he was “frequently depressed by the fact that the German editions of my books are of so little importance in comparison to the English and American ones. Especially in regards to the economic point of view one gets the impression that the originals have more or less been lost, and only the translations remain in the world” (Br. GBF, 175).

Thomas Mann’s attitude toward his reception in translation was never exclusively—or even primarily—mournful, however. In An Exchange of Letters, for example, he had still claimed that “my books . . . are written for Germans, for them above all; the outside world and its sympathy have always been for me only a happy accident. They are—these books of mine—the product of a mutually nourishing bond between nation and author” (EL, 6; GW, 12:787–88). But as the center of his life moved to the United States, Thomas Mann’s attitude changed. By 1939 he was willing to grant his US publisher that “the American public in recent years has stepped into the place that the German public once occupied for me, now that politics—and what politics at that!—have separated me from it.”18

Mann’s correspondence also shows how he used his excellent reputation in the United States as leverage during negotiations with Bermann Fischer. When Bermann Fischer resisted Mann’s idea of opening a German-language publishing house in the United States, for example, Mann insinuated that “an established American publisher with a wide distribution network and significant means might be a better [partner], and of course I’m thinking first and foremost of my friend Alfred Knopf” (Br. GBF, 144). On another occasion, the famous author openly reprimanded his German publisher when the latter wanted to assert copyright over a series of lectures that had been written specifically for the American market, reminding Bermann Fischer that “the
original publication is, after all, the handiwork of Alfred A. Knopf in New York” (Br. GBF, 171).

Put slightly differently, while Mann never entirely reconciled himself to the thought that his cherished creations would be consumed primarily in translation, he was eminently pragmatic about the ways in which this fact affected his status as a writer. He had become perhaps the world’s first author of what the literary critic Rebecca Walkowitz has called “born translated fiction.” And he intuitively understood that the advent of this condition would have transformative effects also on book publishing in the original language. Henceforth, even works written by a German for other Germans would in some small way be marked by the fact that they were part of a larger global literary system. A curious anecdote from 1947 illustrates this well. With the Nazi government finally toppled, the way was clear for Bermann Fischer to publish Mann’s latest works in his home country again. But because Mann had by then become a US citizen, his books were legally vulnerable to piracy in America unless a copy that had been printed in the United States was submitted for copyright protection in Washington, DC, prior to publication. When Bermann Fischer wanted to sell the recently completed *Doktor Faustus* in Germany, he thus first had to produce a limited-edition German-language print run in America. Mann accepted this necessity without so much as a jocular remark about its underlying absurdity (Br., 2:561). He understood that the removal of the conditions that had necessitated his exile did not simultaneously dissolve his status as a “cosmopolitan German” writer.

**The Function of an Author**

Over the course of the seven years that he spent in involuntary exile while the Nazis were in power, Thomas Mann developed increasingly complicated and increasingly varied strategies to exploit his status as the “German envoy to America” and conduct a cultural war against Hitler and his propaganda ministry. Press conferences and lecture tours were only the beginning, later to be joined by radio broadcasts, congressional testimony, political action committees—and, of course, allegorical novels intended to, as Mann himself put it, “repurpose” the emotional allure of fascism and put it in the service of democracy (GW, 11:658). One ambition of this book is to tell the story of this struggle.

Ultimately, however, Mann’s unique status in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s owed less to his personal actions than it did to the expectations that American audiences projected upon him. The true antagonist of Hitler in the United States was not Thomas Mann, the aging writer who had
made a home for himself in exile, but rather “Thomas Mann”: a name that adorned book covers and marquees at lecture halls throughout the nation and was eagerly discussed in both middlebrow magazines and intellectual journals. This idea of Thomas Mann corresponded not so much to a flesh-and-blood individual as it did to a networked entity, created through the labors of literary agents, translators, editors, publishers, journalists, literary critics, and, of course, ordinary readers. Thomas Mann became a cipher in which America could see itself.

To examine how such a networked construct was created, and how this construction irrevocably changed the place of authors in society, is my second main purpose here. This book is thus not a biography, and indeed, Mann himself will practically vanish from the narrative at certain points. Instead, those pages will offer detailed reconstructions of forces in US cultural history (for example, the rise of middlebrow publishing in the 1920s, or of the Popular Front in the mid-1930s) that changed the ways in which ordinary Americans thought about the relationship between literature and the world. Then as now, readers did not pick up books merely to be entertained, but also to find a mooring amid trying times and to see their hopes, fears, and anxieties validated in the palpable form of bestselling fiction.21 Mann never set foot in a living room in rural Iowa, a Lower East Side tenement apartment, or a German prisoner-of-war camp in the swamps of Mississippi. And yet his books circulated in all these places, where they arrived framed in a certain fashion and became the subject of both rational discussions and inchoate longings that Mann himself could scarcely have anticipated. The results of these discussions redounded upon the author: they contributed to the creation of an American “Thomas Mann” that was only partially connected to the actual person by that name.

Thomas Mann made an especially suitable target for such projections because of his bold equation of himself with the broader construct of German cultural history. When the term “culture” first acquired widespread currency in German and French intellectual discourse during the mid-eighteenth century, it referred to the collective characteristics—frequently thought to be the product not of arbitrary traditions but rather of natural environments—of people living together in the same place and speaking the same language. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as nation-states sprung up all over Europe from the ashes of absolutist realms, the concepts of “nation” and “culture” became inextricably intertwined. Nowhere was this truer than in Germany, where political unity long proved elusive and where patriots thus had to seek refuge in the compensatory idea that they possessed an especially noble unifying culture.22
Over the course of the nineteenth century, as once-agricultural societies became urban and modern, and as literacy rates rose, this notion of “culture” as something inborn and environmentally determined gradually gave way to the realization that culture is instead a dynamic battlefield contested by specialists working in what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called the “field of cultural production.” By the end of the century, this field of cultural production had acquired its own rules (such as the painterly conventions codified by academic art), its own accreditation standards (such as membership in prestigious salons or in national academies), and even its own behavioral expectations (as expressed, for example, by the bohémien).

Born in 1875, Thomas Mann belonged to the first generation of European artists who were able to take the notion of autonomous cultural production entirely for granted and to reflect on its implications for their careers. Most of Mann’s artistic contemporaries arrived at the conclusion that wealth and social prestige were to a large extent mutually exclusive accomplishments (fame, on the other hand, could accrue to either the wealthy or the prestigious). Wealth could most easily be obtained via a compromise with the demands of the market; prestige, by contrast, came most readily to those who developed a unique and uncompromising style. There thus arose a type of artist who, in the words of literary scholar Aaron Jaffe, strove to develop a stylistic signature or “imprimatur” that might “sanction elite, high cultural consumption in times when mass cultural values predominate[d].” This hunt for a unique style by definition negated any claims to representativeness; to be a “modernist,” as we now call such artists in English, meant to stand apart from the crowd—to reject the ambition, implicit in the original eighteenth-century understanding of culture, to speak for a social collective. Thomas Mann pursued a different strategy, however. From an early age, he was determined not only to acquire wealth, fame, and prestige all at the same time but also to be perceived as the foremost artist of his nation. To some extent this ambition to be simultaneously autonomous and representative was internally contradictory, as Mann discovered during the time of the First World War, when his desire to be perceived as a quintessentially “German” artist drove him to ever more convoluted intellectual rear-guard actions. But when the time came to break with the Nazi regime, his struggle turned out to have been dialectical rather than merely oppositional. By simultaneously advancing his ambition of artistic autonomy and the claim to thereby speak for a crowd, Mann was able to give an intellectually coherent grounding to his defiance of the German government.

By crossing the Atlantic to America, however, Mann also entered into a part of the world in which the term “culture” carried a very different
conceptual baggage than it did on the European continent. The United States was a country founded by immigrants; the notion that culture somehow is an expression of characteristics inherent in blood and soil had far weaker purchase there. Nor, given the country’s far-flung civic centers and the relative youth of its artistic institutions, was there a strong sense of an independent class of cultural producers of the kind that had led to the European bohème. Culture in the United States was instead understood in terms that owed more to an eighteenth-century British understanding of that term: as an acquired set of ideas and behaviors that conferred upper-class status distinction. The question applicable to Mann’s case was thus not simply, Would Americans believe his representative legitimacy as an icon of German culture? but also, Why should they care?

When he first set foot on US soil, in 1934, Mann was already famous there, thanks to a relentless marketing campaign that promoted him as the “greatest living man of letters” and sought to convince American readers that his books contained profound ideas that would be useful to them on their own paths of social advancement. Had this been the last of it, Mann’s career would no doubt have entered a phase of precipitous decline over the course of the 1930s, as had happened to previous German literary giants who had been similarly promoted, for instance his archrival Gerhart Hauptmann. But by the time that he stepped off the Queen Mary in 1938, millions of Americans were desperately seeking answers to such questions as, What were the origins of Nazism? Were the Germans inherently evil? Could peace ever be made with Hitler? Thomas Mann provided them with answers in speeches, essays, and interviews. During the period from 1938 to 1945, Mann’s importance as an interpreter of the current situation in Europe easily outpaced his role as the author of demanding and culturally prestigious fiction. Over the course of these years, Alfred A. Knopf issued five new volumes of speeches and essays to balance five works of fiction. The novels were heftier works, but the essays and speeches sold better. The lecture transcript The Coming Victory of Democracy, for instance, sold more copies even than Joseph in Egypt, the most widely acclaimed literary work that Mann published during his American exile.

Modernism and the Media

Thomas Mann’s success in the United States was thus fundamentally the result of two serendipitous acts of cultural translation: a thoroughly Germanic notion of culture unexpectedly gained relevance with an American audience, and a model of the world republic of letters developed in Europe
following the First World War became useful to a world rapidly hurtling toward a second global catastrophe. Ultimately, however, such large conceptual abstractions are of limited use in explaining what actually happened, and they undercut a full consideration of the many different agents who played a part in the creation of Thomas Mann’s rather singular status in the United States.

In recent years, literary histories of the early twentieth century have increasingly become cognizant of those decades as collectively forming what the critic David Trotter calls “the first media age.” On its most basic terms, this simply means recognizing that during this period, cinema, telephone, radio, and later also television joined print culture as important channels for the distribution of information, while print itself was transformed by such technical advances as newspaper photography. Thomas Mann took a keen interest in the medial advances of his age, from his astute meditations on recording technology and X-ray photography in *The Magic Mountain* to his several unsuccessful attempts to pitch films to Hollywood.

Much more importantly, the notion of a “first media age” reminds us that literary works and literary authorship were themselves increasingly mediated during the early twentieth century. Readers interested in obtaining the latest book by Thomas Mann, for example, no longer simply went to the local bookstore or lending library. Instead, they first might have studied the extensive advertising supplements produced by Alfred A. Knopf, which featured blurbs, summaries, and sometimes excerpted passages. Their interest piqued, they could have turned to the reviews, purchase recommendations, and literary advice columns that flooded the journals and newspapers of the period. Their minds made up, they then might have gone to the local bookstore—or they might have chosen to place an order via the Book-of-the-Month Club instead. If they decided on the latter route, their reading matter would have been dispatched to them via the US Postal Service with a speed and efficiency made possible only by recent advances in labor organization and rationalization. Similarly, readers interested in learning more about Thomas Mann’s political opinions could simply wait until he made a stop in a nearby town as part of a tour organized by a professional lecturing bureau. To get there, they would hop into their cars, while Mann would arrive by high-speed luxury train.

Mediation of this sort always goes hand in hand with a certain loss of autonomy: no author can control the newspaper headlines, and the question of who gets to interact with a prestigious literary figure will always partly be decided not only by ledger books but also by train schedules, highway maps, and other factors. What makes the case of Thomas Mann so
intriguing, then, is that even as he developed into a self-conscious manipulator of his own public image, he also doubled down on the ostensible purity of his art. In his 1947 work *Minima Moralia*, the exiled philosopher Theodor W. Adorno sniffed, “Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid being cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly closed doors of his self-esteem. He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him. . . . Between the reproduction of his own existence under the monopoly of mass culture, and impartial, responsible work, yawns an irreconcilable breach.” Adorno’s statement, though it has often been echoed in the decades that followed, is remarkably myopic. During the very years in which he wrote *Minima Moralia*, Adorno also served as a musical consultant to Thomas Mann on his novel *Doctor Faustus*, unquestionably an “impartial, responsible” work. Yet Mann was quite comfortable with the “reproduction of his own existence under the monopoly of mass culture,” and even took an active hand in it.

The account that follows, then, will chart how a social role for the author was invented and successfully popularized in an age of total war—an age in which modern literature’s traditional insistence on social autonomy itself represented a political act. The first chapter explores Mann’s changing self-understanding as a writer during the decades prior to the Nazi seizure of power. After that, the story moves to America. Each subsequent chapter focuses on a different social formation in the United States, along with some of the representative institutions and actors that it produced: the middlebrow commercial networks of the 1920s, the Popular Front of the mid-1930s, the military-industrial complex of the Second World War, and the secretive cabals of the early Cold War period, to name just the most important examples. In each case, the guiding question will be how these social formations participated in creating and mediating a specific image of Thomas Mann. My emphasis throughout these chapters is on “Thomas Mann” the author figure, not Thomas Mann the flesh-and-blood person, a fact that I have sought to highlight by naming each of my chapters after one of the epithets and marketing slogans that were used to promote him.

The novels and stories that Mann wrote throughout the 1930s and 1940s provide one of the best windows into his own changing understanding of the social role of the writer. The main chapters of the book are thus separated by “literary interludes” that each focus on one of the main works Mann produced during his American period. For reasons of space, I have left out the comparatively minor novella *The Transposed Heads* (1941) as well as the novel *The Holy Sinner* (1951), published toward the very end of his stay in the
country. Readers who are unfamiliar with these largely forgotten late works will hopefully find in these interludes an inspiration to rediscover them. Those, however, who simply wish to learn about Mann’s changing fortunes in the United States can skip them without danger of losing the thread of the narrative.