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Paul Mann, *Masocriticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 274 + xvii pp., $19.95 (paperback)

Paul Mann wanted to write a dark book. As an example of criticism *en abîme*, *Masocriticism* is the darkest book he could imagine. In it, the author flaunts the privileges of critical negativity as the perverse repetition of a *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics that he identifies everywhere as our common culture. Disposing of what he proposes, destroying what he produces, Mann wants to take to the limit, once and for all, what he sees as the fatal paradoxes of contemporary critical practice as both object and method. Like Sade, who precedes him in his task, Mann intends his book simultaneously to annihilate its targets of critical and cultural polemic and, having dispensed its provocations, to disappear from the face of the earth forever. Given such admittedly radical intentions, anyone who would read or follow him in his perverse task must be reproducing their own masochistic drives as a species of self-punishment. Why would anyone submit to such a destructive game of criticism? Mann himself repeatedly asks. The enactment of a 'maso-criticism', in which all attempts to account for destructive urges within a normative protocol are preassigned to oblivion, would be as painful for the reader as it is pleasurable for the writer.

I want to answer the question of Mann's book from the perspective of a writer, not simply the masocritical reader. As the author of *Bad History* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos Press, 1998) – a creative/critical work that, like Mann's, is compelled to discover the deathward traces of the negative in the progressive illusions of culture – I feel duty-bound (or self-condemned, as he would have it) to accept his ambitions and to admit the necessity of his pre-scripted failure. If that were all this book were about, however, one could simply consign it to a category of kinky, late-modern aestheticism as an example of the post-marginality Mann analyses in detail, and either accept or deny it depending on one's immediate aesthetic (or entertainment) needs. There is a category of cultural consumption – a bin in the techno store, a leather accessories outlet, an ink-smudged page of discipline and bondage ads in the weekly reader – that hyper-postmodern adventures in radical critique at times seem to fall into. Mann is well aware of the risk he takes in imitating, within critical discourse, cultural figures like Marilyn Manson and Bob Flanagan as much as Nietzsche and Bataille. In terms of an ancient idiom, this is what suspicious readers will label 'trendy' criticism taken to a logical extreme, as it cancels even the progressive illusions necessary to grant it any status of new meaning. But it is precisely as an aesthetic example, a challenge to normative discourse indebted to the methods and values of the avant-garde it imitates as well as

attacks, that Mann's book will outlast his stated intentions – to survive its own self-cancelling and the oblivion of the techno bin.

Mann begins by recounting the argument of his previous book, *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). It is precisely in its reception – its reproduction in the reader as much as in institutions such as museums or concert series – that the avant-garde suffers a paradoxical erasure of its own agency. Avant-garde negativity cancels out its politics of opposition through its surplus of *productivité*; as Mann writes in the present volume, 'The rage to say everything is the equal sign that links silence and death' (p. 8). In the face of such unassimilable surplus, the modern world behaves either as if the avant-garde has been wholly absorbed into it, or as if the avant-garde had never existed: one and the same thing. Any further insistence on the negativity of the avant-garde would be a form of repetition compulsion, a deathwardness that inspires Mann in his theoretical efforts but that is always contained within the paradoxes of the aesthetic, and which anaesthetizes its own opposition as much as it acculturates or instructs. Culture after the avant-garde (and there is no other for Mann) is a big nothing, a useless production that can only celebrate the failure of its politics. A certain strand of anti-aesthetic cultural studies, not at all Mann's perspective, also supports this view. The avant-garde is the paradigm of uselessness:

> Every manifesto, every exhibition, every review, every monograph, every attempt to take up or tear down the banner of the avant-gardes in the critical arena, every attempt to advance the avant-garde's claims or to put them to rest: no matter what their ideological strategy or stakes, all end up serving the 'white economy' of cultural production. (p. x)

The violence of Mann's argument is, at the very least, thrilling to him; he experiences a vertiginous emptying out of agency that drives him forward in his critique. Just so, dying into commodity, the avant-garde exhausts itself, until it is 'circulation alone that matters' (ibid.).

A devolution of the avant-garde into the economic indeed took place at least in the visual arts in the United States during the time when Mann wrote his attack, the late 1980s (as with artists such as Cindy Sherman, Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons). It is arguable that the overheated art market in the United Kingdom is going through a similar period of devolution to the economic. In that market, however, there has been an increasing sense of boredom with the kinds of commodity critique that encouraged the American artists in their 'necessary-impossible' illusion of an identity between antagonism and cooptation. Looking at Mann's position through another lens, his deathward totalization of the economic now seems more to align with the perspective of a posthistorical liberalism that sees the

'end of history' in the overthrow of the progressive illusions of the Hegelian state, after which only the plus and minus signs of profit and loss remain. This is the position identified with the historian Francis Fukuyama, but in the cultural sphere there has also been convincing evidence of an alignment of liberal *posthistoire* with a 'necessary-impossible' market critique. Take, for instance, the notorious foray into the world of consumer advertising by our colleague in the Language School, poet Charles Bernstein. Sometime around New Year's Day, 1999, as the big ad campaigns were being rolled out during American football bowl games on television, there appeared on the screen for several moments of sound bite the once-marginal avant-garde poet in an advertising spot for, of all things, the *Yellow Pages* – that hyperpublic document of commercial viability, in short of profit and loss. Parodying a poststructuralist 'nutty professor' beside himself with arcane musings – in Mann's terms, trying to 'say everything' – Bernstein offered a deconstructive reading of the text of the *Yellow Pages*, comparing it to epic poetry such as *Paradise Lost* while gesticulating in all directions, imitating its compendious performativity, acting out its sublime bulk. Was this a confirmation of the avant-garde's final self-authored suicide at the hands of the economic, an absorption by the artifice of capitalism we were all supposed to be writing *against*? Authorial intentions here, of course, can only devolve into form, and one was left, jaw agape, holding the clicker helplessly as the next spokesperson for the transparent opacity of the economic bodied forth.

Whether one reads Bernstein's testimony as heroic distancing or fatal collusion, it provides a spectacular example of the 'theory death' of the avant-garde artist disappearing into the 'white economy' – or *Yellow Pages* – in Mann's account. In homage to what he has learned from the avant-garde, it is at just such a moment of self-cancelling intervention that Mann stages his own critique, even in a violent rejection of its prior example. The negative status of the 'example' is therefore important here. Where avant-garde theory-death cancels out any agency it may have claimed, Mann will go on to extend its analogy to literary theory, war studies, popular culture and postmodern ethics in a carefully staged series of arguments. (The agency of the avant-garde is, of course, always overstated by Mann to be the overthrow of the 'system', reproducing a 'damned if you do/damned if you don't' paradigm akin to the Leninist perspective on the Cabaret Voltaire.) At the same time, Mann's self-cancelling paradox of argument could well be imagined as a synthesis of two foundational texts of the avant-garde, Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*, in terms of its critical connection between radical evil and the negativity of form. In inculcating theory-death, in other words, the avant-garde is an example of self-undoing that compels destruction, of itself and those who would imitate it. Mann, in this sense, is one of the avant-garde's most profound imitators as he

fulfils the destiny of its paradoxical intentions, its self-destruction as an object. This 'object' is then immediately extended by analogy – from the virtually repeating bobbins of Duchampian theory-death to that which compels a critical account of their effect and, by extension, to *any* object that compels a critical account. Criticism thus becomes a re-enactment of a destructive relation to the object whose paradigm is the avant-garde.

In *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde*, Mann rejected the avant-garde as a betrayal of its critical stakes; in *Masocriticism*, he reverses polarity to show how the critic's self-mystification leads to his fatal attraction to *any* object as an act of self-destruction. Criticism can only be masocritical in submission to this duplicitous object. In thus bracketing the object of criticism from the self-scrutiny of the critic, Mann implies something rarely said about criticism, something a writer (like myself) of those very 'objects' that critics find so antagonistic or self-undoing will readily confirm. As any practising writer who has had a serious intellectual engagement with a practising critic is aware, a relation between their two perspectives constructed on the basis of a shared interest in a work of art as critical 'object' may be one of destructive envy. Critics often criticize simply to overwhelm and neutralize the object of their critique; so it is with prescient insight that Mann identifies the avant-garde as an exemplary object that performs this task for him, leaving him to speculate on further motives for his masochistic critical attraction to it. As Terry Eagleton has recently written, 'Nothing is more voguish in guilt-ridden US academia than to point to the inevitable bad faith of one's position. It is the nearest a Post-Modernist can come to authenticity' ('In the gaudy supermarket', review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, *London Review of Books*, 13 May 1999). Such a display of bad faith is clearly the risk of both Bernstein's and Mann's masocritical acts. The débâcle of postmodern intervention turning into a commodity thus sets up for Mann his more proper question: the guilt of the coopted critic.

Mann's masocriticism is a metacriticism without examples, at least to begin with, but it is easy to find instances of the critical bad faith he wants to unveil. We may take (and I am sure Mann would agree) Terry Eagleton's above-mentioned review of Gayatri Spivak (as well as in many ways the work under consideration, *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason*) as a species of masocriticism every bit as self-undoing as Bernstein's *Yellow Pages* ad. Apart from anything Spivak *says*, her book *is* the antagonistic and persecuting object that generates the ambivalent self-display of Eagleton's review, focused as it is on punishing Spivak for her guilty inauthenticity. The critic's intention is clearly to 'wipe out' his antagonist, to annihilate her, but this destructive desire is played off, at the outset, on to her own work's negativity: 'There must exist somewhere a secret handbook for post-colonial critics, the first rule of which reads: "Begin by rejecting the whole

notion of postcolonialism".' Identifying the object as self-cancelling becomes the basis for an extended harangue on the duplicitous contradictions of Spivak's work, apart from any motivations of content that would account for them (an odd position for a materialist like Eagleton): 'Indeed, an essay remains to be written on the unpublished writings of Gayatri Spivak, which would take as its subject all those footnotes in which she has announced a work which never actually appeared.' Spivak as trickster drives Eagleton's rage; far from the high-mindedness of his Enlightenment call for rational argument and discursive clarity, his review moves quickly to a masocritical display of mastery and envy. It follows that, while destruction of the object is his goal, at the same time he is compelled to identify with it, in the sense that Spivak, like Eagleton in his own estimation, is a world-class public intellectual with emancipatory aims. Eagleton thus praises and damns his object to the same degree: Spivak is a self-indulgent, politically defeatist, obscurantist entrepreneur: 'In this gaudy, all-licensed supermarket of the mind, any idea can apparently be permutated into any other'; at the same time, she is one of the truly important critics on the world-historical stage: 'There can thus be few more important critics of our age than the likes of Spivak, Said and Homi Bhabha, even if two of that trio can be impenetrably opaque.' It follows that 'her comment that much in the area [of postcolonial criticism] is "bogus" is largely an aside', even if these asides, digressions and reversals have been demonstrated to be the fatal error of her postcolonial self-advertising.

Common to both judgements is Eagleton's enlightened self-interest as progressive critic. His glaring reversals, however, show that even the liberatory necessity of his critique has long since undergone the same 'theory-death' as the subversive claims of the avant-garde or the postcolonialist. As a result, a self-masking disavowal of ultimate ends (aka the irony of history?) comes through his review; it must certainly be to avow a spectacle of futility that Eagleton argues so carelessly, as if all outcomes were prefigured in advance. This rational disavowal is hardly lost on the reader, but it is interpreted (and can only perpetuate itself) in a register that is the opposite of what it seems to perform. Finally, it is the spectacle of the irrational attack on the antagonistic object (both person and work) of the postcolonial critic that draws readers in to Eagleton's review. For Mann, these dynamics must be taken into account as the denied irrationality of critical practice. As he writes in a memorable passage:

> We have plenty of psychoanalytic criticism, formalist criticism, ideological criticism, and so on, but where is our fear criticism? Our despair criticism? Our disgust criticism? Our criticism of resentment? Of petty ambition? Of treachery, deceit, jealousy, hysterical rage?

> Nowhere in sight, yet it would hardly require much effort to discover them all just beneath the thin civility of the strictest critical decorum. (p. 21)

What, indeed, is the status of the shitty remark the critic makes in the corridor, on his way either to or from the podium? Eagleton's review may be read precisely in that spirit, as an attempt, through the disavowal of its own rationality, to destroy its object by undermining itself. Insofar as this destructive drive is initially given in terms of the object, here the work of Gayatri Spivak, it is generalized by Mann as the critic's self-undoing address to *any* object: 'Who is that in the text, behind the figure of whoever it is I think I see? And why submit myself anyway to this other, for whatever reasons I claim or believe or pretend to believe that I make this sacrifice?' (p. 22). It is the terrible necessity of writing about, not the *other*, but simply *another* that draws Eagleton into the spectacle of playing the fool in this serious business; he is aghast that, once again, he must give himself over, sacrifice himself, to *another* as the fundamental critical act. For Mann, the vulgarity of the critic's disavowal takes place precisely as 'the entry into culture' that goes along with mastery of object loss as a self-constituting display:

> Whatever stands behind the *other* that one affects to see in the text, submission to its rule is a highly formalized attempt to control its anticipated retribution for the aggressive identifications one imagines oneself inflicting upon it. . . . Criticism performs a homeopathic preemption of the forever-imminent revenge of the text, and of our own revenge against ourselves. (p. 37)

The emancipatory reason of criticism is motivated by its irrational object. One wonders whether Eagleton, or his readers, are aware of this.

And why am I writing about Mann's book? This is a question that must be asked. It certainly is not to give my own masocritical account of its argument, or to rehearse its major points as if I were unaware of the fundamental nature of its larger stakes. Simply, I have enjoyed surviving Mann's prior attack on the avant-garde – it hardly hurt a bit – and thus find his posthistorical anti-progressivism useful in thinking through my own position. Such will be the ethics of Mann's text – that its readers survive his attack – towards which his argument is relentlessly devolving. First, however, it is necessary that the object of the masocritical act be further discerned – so that one can clearly show how it is a situation of the critic rather than his object that matters – with some supporting examples, even as they paradoxically reinforce the metacritical aspects of the work by inserting it into already concluded arguments. It is from this point of departure that Mann undertakes, briefly, an account of the critical situation

of the object in two of his own role models: Bataille and Nietzsche – on his way to an ethics without examples.

The situation with Bataille is, in fact, easily paraphrased: it is not possible to read Bataille in the spirit of his work without disrupting the 'restricted economy' of critical discourse; as an object, the work of 'general economy' will destroy the critic. The critic, therefore, must desire self-destruction sufficiently to continue his futile act of paraphrase. This failed but necessary attempt to represent the unrepresentable is then traced back to Nietzsche's account of tragedy, which, finally, is a performative act that intends the edification of the community in terms of that which would destabilize and destroy it. Tragedy attempts to re-present these antagonistic (Asiatic, barbarian) elements in the figure of the Dionysian, at which point they become, figuratively at least, a moment of self-undoing. This becomes, for Mann, the politics of any act of representation, and indeed he claims that all representation, and by extension all culture, is masocritical, a mere celebration of the limits of representation in its own undoing: 'All representation depends on the order of masochism'; 'It is a necessary condition of culture as such' (pp. 28–9). Bataille and Nietzsche, as precluding any paraphrase, make inevitable a masochistic motive that will be engaged in the reproduction of culture insofar as it finds itself, of necessity, described by them. Culture, for Mann, is the negative unfolding of an impossible containment.

It is a relief, then, to find that culture, even so negatively defined, still has objects. In his derivation (by analogy) of the necessity of a developing 'ethics without examples', Mann gives accounts of two recent developments in critical discourse and popular culture that spur on the self-staging of his relentless devolution. In 'The nine grounds of intellectual warfare', Mann predicts an emergence of 'war studies' in the period immediately following the convulsively self-punishing display of the 1991 Gulf War. At the moment of posthistorical crisis, criticism will elevate war to an object of rational critique in order to better understand its own structuring devices; this Mann terms criticism's 'eventual phenomenalization, through proxy objects of study, of the devices that structure it' (p. 92). There is no critique of war, however – it is an 'impossible' object where, as in Tolstoy's depiction of the Battle of Borodino, every representation of an event shatters its own perspective (it turned out that the appropriation of war, which Mann predicted, did not become a major theatre of critical operation, however). War studies, instead, reveals the essentially substitutive nature of critical discourse, as it employs Nietzsche's 'mobile army of metaphors' precisely in the self-punishing absence of its object. The payoff is that, in analogizing criticism to the rhetorical strategies of 'position taking' or the nomadic tactics of 'stealth technology', we can try to argue for another form of effective engagement:

> One might find oneself, for instance, no longer putting forth positions, outlining, defending, and identifying oneself with them: one might find oneself engaged in an even more severe, more rigorous discipline of affirming ideas without attaching oneself to them, making them appear . . . only so as to make them disappear.
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> (p. 109)

Criticism, as in Eagleton's review, clearly fails in its adherence to the logic of position; Mann advocates something like the site-specific and ephemeral 'relays' of the Internet, where 'assemblages will serve as the auto-erosive becoming-machine of what was never exactly the intellectual "subject"' (p. 112). Lest we become too optimistic in our embrace of the resulting Deleuzian nomadology, however, Mann reminds us that the Internet began as a military operation.

Having thus proposed and disposed of another possible arena of oppositional critique, Mann goes on to explore an entire universe of similar constructions in his chapter on 'Stupid undergrounds'. The destructive rhetoric of his account of failed resistance is enough to make the maso-critical reader howl with pleasure and pain, as he attacks

> apocalyptic cults and youth gangs, *collèges* and phalansteries, espionage networks trading in vaporous facts and networks of home shoppers for illicit goods; monastic, penological, mutant-biomorphic, and anarchoterrorist cells; renegade churches, garage bands, dwarf communities, no-risk survivalist enclaves, unfunded quasi-scientific research units, paranoid think tanks, unregistered political parties, sub-employed workers' councils, endo-exile colonies, glossolaliac fan clubs . . . and the endlessly multiplied hybridization of variant combinations of these.
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> (p. 127)

Mann's entire chapter betrays the repetition compulsion of the masocritic: 'Why this stupid fascination with stupid undergrounds?' he asks (p. 128). In an extended argument by analogy, critical terminology is *stupid*, as are the hybrid quasi-entities that are its objects; such is the residual trace of Mann's prior fascination with the Hegelian avant-garde at the moment of its theory-death by recuperation. Now all that one has for opposition are avant-gardes of *posthistoire* which, like Marilyn Manson, are prefigured as media stars at the same time that they create their market niches by pitching resistance. This resistance is 'everywhere and nowhere' at the same time; a true underground, it disappears at will and surfaces whenever it feels like it. Mann is clearly fascinated by, and wants to imitate, this effect – even as it makes criticism 'as painful and difficult as possible' (p. 129). In fact, Mann has constructed here a brilliant counterposition to the stale

progressivism of much of cultural studies. The inconsequential negativity of his critical approach, objectively correlated in his objects, allows for a whole range of emerging cultural phenomena to be theorized and discussed without the guilt of failed opposition that has been identified as the critical aporia of the traditional avant-garde. As positive facts of late capitalist culture, these phenomena are intrinsically important and revealing, and they must be discussed in a way that does not simply reproduce them on the model of the prior avant-garde claims to agency. Paradoxically but efficiently, Mann's self-cancelling critique points the way.

What we then get is a return of the repressed modernist moment of 'participant observation' in Mann's fascination with the negative phalanxes of tattoo parlours, punk rock acts, virtual reality, Japanese animation, or (a more current fan interest of my own) techno music: a whole new horizon of research topics opens up. Even beyond trendy research topics, however, this critical fascination with negative objects is the site for deep knowledge of the critic's profession. As Mann identifies with the underground, so he claims that any critic identifies destructively with his object:

> Any cultural (political, philosophical, critical, artistic) activity orbits elliptically, masologically, around such null points: one is a Freudian, a Marxian, a Derridean, a Habermasian; a Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen scholar; one becomes a New Historicist not only for considered methodological but because one has *already* recognized something of what one might call oneself were it so conscious a recognition, in reading Greenblatt or McGann; one becomes a performance artist because, sitting in the audience during a performance, one saw without seeing (through a fundamental *méconnaissance*, through stupid recognition) oneself on stage, as the other of one's desire.
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> (p. 155)

I became a language poet because. . . . I'm willing to consider this; we have here, in the moment of 'stupid recognition', a logic of social reproduction that must be accounted for. Mann, however, seems to offer a positive approach to thinking this problem through, even in terms of his own project, that he then retracts. It turns out that no such knowledge would be possible because all identifications will be essentially misrecognitions. It does not matter whether there is a context for particular identifications, whether they are motivated in any way. Here, Mann misses the opportunity to found a new, negative tendency of cultural studies that would base its insights on the politics of misrecognition. Having shown how Dick Hebdidge misrecognizes a figure of resistance in the punkette with outrageous tattoos in the London Underground as merely his own projection, Mann will not go further to discuss why these projections occur

in any but the most discredited, coopted, utopian ways. There is nothing one can do as a form of positive cultural resistance in terms of the agency of *any* identification; this is symptomatically described in a revolting passage on the counter-utopia of the 'day job', where the pre-Yuppie wannabe artist works at degrading tasks while simultaneously 'seeing himself as' a heroic example:

> In a slightly older bohemia, the artist's dream: uninterrupted time for the real work. Or rather, what came to be seen as the real work, that painting or writing which was by force an avocation in a world where one was a slave to the day job. Each day demanded the most intense struggle to steal or conserve time from the world of the job for yourself, your spirit, your art. . . . A thousand petty tasks and distractions staged endless raids on your energy and attention, until it seemed that art itself was at war with everything else. The pitiable heroism of each momentary victor – each finished painting or poem – was belied by the manifestation in a world in which, after all, a poem is merely a poem, and therefore a sign that a much more pervasive defeat had already occurred.
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> (pp. 169–70)

Now that's criticism! – even as my marginal notes read, 'Kill dog' – complete destruction of the object, complete abasement of the critic. Mann's critical violence to the object becomes a permanent cultural condition: having been there, done that, what's left?

The disappearance of the object – however delimiting, because it abolishes all forms of historical or contextual enquiry; and debilitating, as it shows the dependence of the critic on identifications he cannot comprehend – is necessary to throw the author into the crisis of his book, which he must survive or the book would not have been possible to publish. Here, I feel compelled to admire the rhythm of proposal and disposal that guides Mann's work. Of how many critics could it be said that their enquiry is *necessary* in its form of its unfolding, not simply a rehearsal of position? For Mann, the *via negativa* can only empty out, until one stands, under the intense light of a philosophical formalism, at the meta-discursive crossroads of one's enquiry. Having dispensed with the object, the critic must turn the scrutiny on himself precisely to account for his desire to destroy it (would more critics account for that central and motivating fact!). This is so even if one's object is critical discourse: so Mann begins his anti-triumphal finale at an even higher, more encompassing level of generality with an obituary for 'ethics' as the ultimate discourse about itself. As the consequence of three millennia of philosophical enquiry,

> there are a thousand obituaries of ethics, and every one of them is written in the zone of what I have been disposed to call *theory-death*, that event-horizon where a discourse reaches its point of termination without coming to an end, where it ought to die but does not, where its persistence is a form of death and death sustains it interminably.
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> (p. 205)

Whatever 'ethics' is, nothing may be said of it that has not been said already: this is the discursive moment of its theory-death. Therefore, Mann begins his discussion of ethics without rehearsing any of its privileged concerns; ethics is entirely a metadiscourse, completely dissociated from any terms for an ethical life: 'In ethics, one constantly tries to say something that does concern and can never concern the essence of the matter.' The first third of Mann's account of ethics is thus curiously emptied out, a place-holding formalism that becomes, precisely, the condition for an alternative or parallel discussion. This parallel track Mann calls an 'anethics' (of all his idiosyncratic terms, from 'theory-death' to 'masocriticism' to 'stupid undergrounds', the only one with half a chance to survive):

> *Anethics* involves this division, this back-stretched connection, between the vast field of ethical discourse and the impossibility of ethical totalization it indicates. That is why it will do no good to refine and defend a position . . . not in the name of any fashionable inconsistency but at the very limits of a discipline faced with everything it cannot dominate, even in the mere act of writing.
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> (p. 198)

If *anethics* is an ethics of no position, Mann immediately goes on to produce one: a crossroads of ethical decision in which agency is suspended in retroactive determination of any ultimate outcomes. Psychoanalysis, then, becomes a model for thinking, formally rather than causally, about what one will have done. In a reading of the Greek maxim 'ethos anthropo daimon' (often interpreted as 'character is destiny'), both 'ethos' and 'daimon' become mutually constituting for the poor 'anthropos' who tries to imagine any prospective agency. This is first of all a problem of ethical discourse, which tries argumentatively to erase that which is 'only displaced, veiled, repressed, translated . . . the residual force of everything we believe we have left behind' (p. 222). Agency, then, must address all possibilities of an outcome: 'the status of the hypothetical is an ethical problem' (p. 226). It is here, in the relation of agency to possibility, that Mann formally reproduces what he has gone to great lengths to exclude in the entire course of his book's argument: the *example*, which returns to re-present exactly what might be imagined as possible at the moment

of action at a crossroads. The example, in a very long tradition, is a crux, but Mann wants an anethics without examples – even as he reproduces its formal necessity. Such reliance on an example that is none immediately recalls Mann's initial point of departure – the avant-garde. And indeed it is my final act of revenge on the critic to show that his entire project has been to reproduce, by attempting to short-circuit his envy for the object that is the avant-garde, the avant-garde's contribution to ethics.

Anethics is avant-garde ethics without guilt over recuperation (and hence defeat of agency) in its objects. It is the horizonal possibility of the avant-garde; in other words, as if its objects were entirely transparent to the crossroads of ethical decision. In order to show this, we may return to examples – or we may, with Mann, hold them in abeyance. The central moment of man at the crossroads, attempting to act without example, is his submission to a law that will determine the meaning of his acts. He must, in the end, give himself over to the law in the default of the example, as the example would merely be some idealization of heroic agency: a role model, teacher or preceptor that would mediate between subject and law. But 'ethical decisions and the general question of ethics would not arise if the law had not prepared us for them, if there had not been something to mandate ethical decisions' to which he is subject (p. 237). Examples become agency (or not) by the retroactive determination of the law. The law is thus the retroactive effect of that which undoes the mediation of agency: whether that would be in the stabilizing imagination of a means (hero or preceptor) or in the condition of possibility of extremes (all that deviates from the law in terms of historical or cultural relativity or difference). It is here that an anethics offers, in an act of violence, its non-alternative as a way of knowing that one is, precisely, at the crossroads:

> Hence the strange possibility, that the paralytic, paralyzing anethics of complexity would be the most ethical ethics of all. It would be the task of anethics no less than of psychoanalysis to persist in addressing our attachment to the law and the drives that bring us to it, even at the expense of logical clarity and action.
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> (p. 243)

Anethics comprehends the determination of that which ethical decision represses. Oedipus may act, but his knowledge is not confined to the outcome.

Is there a practical criticism in Mann's derivation of an anethics, rather than merely a self-cancelling tilting at windmills? I think so. It is one that returns, however, to the scene of writing, or to the construction of any example, at the crossroads of ethical decision. Let us imagine an ethical decision that someone really had to make: to abrogate one's rights as a

citizen or to compromise one's refusal to participate in a war (it does not matter which war). One is prepared to take an action one way or another. Let us imagine, also, that the moment of decision never comes; what is the status of the action not taken? Some years later, one finds that which has been repressed in the moment of ethical decision remains, that one's agency is decisively imbricated with non-agency, to an action that never took place. And one writes a poem. While the poem is being written, it is not clear what the poem represents; it is hellishly difficult, fraught with every colliding hypothesis one could imagine as to the outcome of an action that never took place. Its ethical prospect, its exemplarity, is equally motivated by a forthcoming dogmatism of retroactive determination: it sets forth as it will have been: the poem, complete. What was *work in progress* becomes *Progress* (New York: Roof Books, 1985) under the retroactive determination of the law, 'which cannot be reduced to the effect of human agency, however unconscious, since it is what calls up agency in the first place' (p. 240). And what is that but the drive, meaning the same thing that causes us to act as if we were continually in the place of an ethical decision, at the very crossroads of our lives: 'There is no decision between active and passive. We are in a zone where the most insistent actions are overdetermined effects of indetermined force' (p. 252). As I have just shown, and Paul Mann will believe, the avant-garde is simply not concerned with its mere recuperation – except insofar as one may substitute 'agency suspended in its retrospective determination' for 'recuperation'. Rather, in the sense of the maxim 'ethos anthropo daimon' Mann elucidates, Bernstein would turn out to have accepted the *Yellow Pages* ad; I would not. The avant-garde is always at the crossroads of the example; it writes *as if* its complexities will become the knowledge of an outcome. 'Anethics is the threshold where the ethical dualism of the crossing gives way to overwhelming complexities, to the gordian knot of conditions, to incomplete and multiple overlapping contexts and frames, to drives whose trajectories can never be fully mapped' (p. 258). As Mann's book itself demonstrates, agency is neither the immediacy of an outcome nor the fatality of one that will never be achieved. Agency is equally the conditions it proposes and disposes of itself.

The solution of the critic's dilemma is to see himself as a writer, a producer of those objects his ambivalent envy wants simultaneously to idealize and attack. The gain in knowledge, then, will not only be his alienation but the complex unfolding of all that remains unexplicated in his decision to pursue a particular critical path. This is knowledge, indeed, that Mann has an inkling of in the pursuit of his self-cancelling examples. And it is knowledge enough to compel a continued respect, as well, for those examples that give him the rule for his self-cancelling enquiry: or else he could not have written his book. The crucial test of Mann's book is what

it will have been, not only what it wants to be taken to be. Criticism should be at least as well written as the objects it sets out to destroy.

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