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Transmogrifying Thomas Mann's Works in Times of Crisis: Colm Tóibín's *The Magician*

Abstract. *The Magician* (2021) is Colm Tóibín's latest novel and his third biofictional text after *The Master* (2004) and *The Testament of Mary* (2013). To address the complexity of the biographical novel as a liminal genre, this article makes use of transmogrification, a portmanteau of transfiguration and modification that refers to the act or process of something or someone being transformed into a different form. *The Magician* (like *The Master* and *The Testament of Mary* before) recalls the life of a historical figure, Thomas Mann in this case. In the process of fictionalizing the flesh-and-blood literary icon, the novel transmogrifies the real human being. For detractors of biofiction, this is ethically questionable. However, for those in favour of the genre, novels like *The Magician* fictionalize historical figures as exceptional and symbolic and, hence, provide a way to understand both their times and the present. Many biofictional texts explore the lives of literary icons. In this sense, this essay delves into the process whereby Mann transmogrified (his) life into fiction. Moreover, it also argues for the significance of this process and Mann's own singularity that explain both the first half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.
Keywords: Biofiction, transmogrification, Tóibín, Mann, duality, early-twenty-first-century crisis

1. Introduction

Transmogrification is a portmanteau of transfiguration and modification, and refers to the act or process of something or someone being transformed into a different form. It has to do with religious, miraculous and magic events. In other words, it is a liminal experience shifting from an ordinary status to a new one. It is connected with transitionality, a sense of change and crisis characteristic of the fascisms of the early decades of the twentieth century coming back with current populism. This concept of transmogrification has been very common in mythic and fantastic literature, as well as in fairy tales and religious texts, because they conjure up the magical, the uncanny and the spiritual. Indeed, the transformative event is often regarded as a solution to a primordial problem. In this article, special focus is put on metaphorical transmogrification,

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as is the case of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphoses* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Samsa's transformation into a monstrous vermin and the Faustian alteration of Dorian's portrait are metaphors for a world in crisis and change. In fact, transformations transcend the characters and address social, political and cultural anxieties and revolutions. At the turn of the new millennium, the hybridity, liminality, and transformative chances of identity are features of an increasingly popular genre, namely biofiction or the biographical novel. For Lackey, it "fictionalizes the life of a real person in order to give readers the author's vision of life and the world" (*Biofiction* 141). David Lodge has also explored the way biofiction works both as a writer and as a critic. The genre, he argues, "takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography" (8). Biographical novels thus transmogrify "actual" life into a different narrative and ontological level, the biofictional. In other words, the biofictional inhabits a hybrid territory, especially because it captures a real event or person and grants them a new aesthetic dimension. In switching between reality and fiction, the truthfulness of the real person is not downgraded when it is fictionalized, but granted a new sense of what is real(ness). Hence, Joanna Scott's words on *Arrogance*, her biographical novel on Egon Schiele, are meaningful—"I was not trying to pretend that my Schiele was the real Schiele. I just wanted him to be real" (32). The biographical novel has been particularly fashionable since the nineteen nineties and has very often focused on writers (Layne 1). In fact, both biofiction and the biopic have delved into writers' lives, which, as Buchanan argues, "is surprising, given that 'literary composition' is 'profoundly uncinematic as a subject of cinematographic attention'" (4). However, for Buchanan, it is precisely writers' exceptionality that attracts a contemporary readership (5). This singularity of the writer in the era of mass reproduction is related to Benjamin's aura, which will be taken up later.

Colm Tóibín's *The Magician* is a biographical novel covering seven decades of Thomas Mann's life. It is not Tóibín's first biofiction, though. *The Master* and *The Testament of Mary* had already fictionalized the lives of Henry James and the Virgin Mary, respectively. In the case of *The Master*, as David Lodge points out, it came out almost simultaneously with other biographical novels on James (Lodge's *Author, Author* and Emma Tenant's *Felony*) in *The Year of Henry James*. All three novels partake of a revival of the past (particularly Victorianism) in the last decades (Kaplan; O'Gorman; Hargreaves; Heilmann and Llewellyn; Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss; Louisa Hadley). This is especially the case for nineteenth-century writers, who are revisited now and again. According to Layne, this is because of the "prevalent sense of the Victorians as the progenitors of the contemporary" (2). If Victorianism is relevant and applicable for historical and biographical novels alike, this is, as Layne points out, "even more applicable to Modernist subjects[2]," not least because of "the innovations of the self-declared 'New Biographers'" (2).

2 Biofiction has often focused on Victorianism and only occasionally on Modernism. Thus, although this article argues there is an increasing interest in the early twentieth century, especially on account of the parallelisms with the early twenty-first century, most references on biofiction are still on neo-Victorianism.

Lytton Strachey is crucial in this shift from classic biography to modernist proto-biofiction, especially in his "subordination of factual detail to inner thoughts, as well as its tendency to present the author's, rather than the subject's vision of life" (5). In other words, the historical figure is transmogrified into a character that helps the author and readership to come to terms with current anxieties irrespective of factual accuracy. This is a point many critics do not consider or simply overlook. In his review of *The Magician*, Anthony Cummins points out:

> When we read what Thomas was up to "as 1914 wore on", or that "for Thomas, the change from complacency to shock was a swift one" when he saw Hitler's support surge in 1930, it adds to a reading experience that feels uncomfortably, even pointlessly, stranded in a stylistic no man's land between biography and fiction. (Cummins)

Cummins's feel of incongruity is not exceptional. Marie-Louise Kohlke speaks of "identity theft"; Binne de Haan questions the historical inaccuracy of biofictions; and Jonathan Dee censors the ethicality of "resuscitating" real people in fiction in *The Reanimators*. As Lackey puts forward, what is at stake in this controversy is "the autonomy of art" (*Biofiction* 88). The critics of the genre take for granted that art, in this case fiction, is a subordinate narrative to truth-relying discourses like historiography—"The issue here is one of disciplinary primacy. Is art subordinate to history, sociology, and/or morality? In other words, are the truths of history, sociology, and/or morality axioms that the artist must accept as conceptual starting points?" (88). Since the Enlightenment, historiography has assumed a scientific discourse to detect and understand historical events and hence predict what is likely to happen in the future (10). For Lackey, historical fiction is a consequence of this scientific conception of history, whereas biofiction breaks with this determinism (12). *The Magician* belongs to this second group, merging different ontologies on the same level and modelling them according to fictional discourses and interests. Moreover, the novel partakes of the increasing interest in the early twentieth century as a moment of crisis and change which reverberates in the early twenty-first century.

In *The Magician*, the process of transmogrification is complex. The novel transforms flesh-and-blood Thomas Mann into a character to enquire into the first half of the twentieth century in Germany first and the world later. In revising Mann's life and times, *The Magician* addresses current anxieties vicariously. Of special relevance is the tension between the historical figure, as known from biographical texts, and the character Tóibín speculates with in fictional terms. To do so, *The Magician* represents the epiphanic moments when and whereby Mann converts people, events, and perceptions into artworks. This double transmogrification process is sometimes intersectional because the limits between the writer, his biofictional persona and the creative process are problematic. This is especially the case with Mann's diaries. When they came out in 1975, they revealed his bisexuality and political views. However, *The Magician* creates a suspense when the narrator argues that, out of the many documents "he would like to have transported out of Germany, the most important set of papers, Thomas knew, were his diaries" (180). It is not only that the novel exposes Mann's privacy and intimate feelings; it works out his inner conflicts in a pushing narrative.

According to Lackey, biofiction has been particularly fertile in Irish literature and often concerned with minorities and marginalized groups (*Ireland* 11). For instance, Irish biofictional novels like Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* delve into "shifting power to the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed; inspiring the wretched of the earth to fight for individual agency and political autonomy; and imagining new and alternative possibilities for social thinking and political being" (Lackey, Biofiction 58). In this way, Lackey points out, the voiceless are granted a degree of agency they have been traditionally denied. Thomas Mann is not a priori among these groups, being an upper-class German married (i.e., "publicly straight") man. However, when his diaries revealed his interest in men, the process of the transmogrification of a historical figure into a gay character took place. Mann was much more than the "respectable" Nobel Prize winner; he had become a man full of secrets literature could dig into and transform to meet current aesthetic, ethical or political needs or interests. As happens with James in *The Master, The Magicia*n focuses on the protagonist's homosexual drives and how he sublimates them in his writing to repress them publicly. This is the agency both writers are granted in Tóibín's novels. Thus, they are constructed as liminal figures, socially and culturally respectable, but non-normative as concerns their sexual preferences. In keeping a distance from the actual Mann, the narrator can rework his intimate experiences and feelings and their transference into his writing. Thus, as a biographical novel, *The Magician* explores Mann's diaries and his literature to render a fictional Mann that converses with the historical figure and with twenty-first-century readers alike. In this way, biofiction allows Tóibín to go into new insights on Mann and his time, and to reach where historiography cannot for the sake of factual accuracy. The novelist does not pursue the scientific truth; instead, he selects epiphanic moments whereby life transmogrifies in literary pieces. With all this in mind, *The Magician* not only helps us to understand the character from a different perspective. It establishes a dialogue about the anxieties in Mann's and Tóibín's Mann's times, especially the rise of populisms one century apart. The mirroring between reality and its fictionalization produces a constant sensation of duality.

2. Life Transmogrifying into Art

2.1. Duality in Thomas Mann

Already in *The Master*, the fictional Henry James experiences life-transforming epiphanies, events where life transmutes into art. However, in this case, James's writing is related to the disastrous first night of his play *Guy Domville*, his inarticulate sexuality, and his bearing witness to Wilde's success and collapse. By contrast, *The Magician* ranges over seven decades and, therefore, an extensive view of the protagonist's life and the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, Tóibín's Mann is also transfixed by some meaningful episodes that he aesthetizes in writing. The tension between facts and their literary transformation is permanent and ambivalent.

The imagery of modification (i.e., the same but with a difference) in the novel is usually represented by duality. The conception of Mann's novella *The Blood of the Walsungs* is a case

in point to analyze this fascination with doubleness in *The Magician*. While Thomas attends a staging of Wagner's *Die Walküre* with his in-laws, the Pringsheims, the literary modification of so-called reality starts. The love story between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde serves as inspiration for Mann's own infatuation with Katia and her brother Klaus. The narrator recalls their likeness, beauty and complicity, which Katia recaps when addressing Klaus—"You [enchant me], my twin, my double, my delight" (Toibin, *The Magician* 73). Drawing on Wagner's Siegmund and Sieglinde, Katia and Klaus build up a restrictive "little world" (74). Like Viola and Sebastian in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* and Julia and Sebastian in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, they, as twins, blur gender boundaries. In fact, closeted Thomas feels attracted to Katia as the doppelgänger of her brother because "she could easily be a boy" (75). This duality that the narrator detects in Wagner's opera, in Katia and in Klaus permeates their house as well. Thomas notices there is a tapestry featuring the scene of Narcissus gazing at his reflection, which leads him to imagine the severance of brother and sister: "It would be like Narcissus being separated from his own reflection" (77). In marrying Katia, the fictional Mann feels he is an intruder, not only because he splits her from her twin, but because he writes down the amputation. Conscious of his implication in the splitting, Mann fictionalizes himself not as a writer but "rather [as] some sort of government official" (77). In other words, writing is so powerful a form of modelling reality that the protagonist even avoids separating brother and sister in his fiction.

The doubleness of Katia and Klaus recalls the transmogrification of so-called reality into literature. When Mann observes his future wife and her brother, he sees "his fictions taking on life" (195). The parallelisms and dialogue are not only between reality and his writing, but within writing itself. That is to say, the literature of the fictional Mann dialogues with itself, challenging ontological levels of meaning and reality. In catching Klaus Heuser's eyes, he notices "he himself had changed in his turn, transformed into Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* and Klaus into the boy he had observed so intensely on the beach" (195). Climactic events, like Mann's meeting a Polish family in Venice, are the basis for *Death in Venice*, which the writer uses to relocate himself with respect to Heuser. Indeed, the protagonist's infatuation with Heuser is "the section of the diaries that most worried him" (184). In this way, *The Magician* highlights Mann's tormented sexuality and plays with different layers of reality. The feeling of urgency about keeping the diaries secret, which Mann recalls in his letters, grants truthfulness to the novel. Yet, it is mixed up with a sense of fantasy when recalling his love affair with Heuser, which marks a tension between the actual Mann and Tóibín's. It is precisely this tension between reality and fiction of the biographical novel that has always been problematic. Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* caused a stir because it hinted at the black revolutionary's "yearnings for a white woman … [an alleged] homosexual experience, and the emphasis on the murder of women and children during [his] insurrection" (Lackey, *Biofiction* 87). In changing details of a flesh-and-blood protagonist, the novel is not unethical with the real historical figure. Fiction has its own logic and factuality. Tóibín and Styron's novels are inspired by Mann and Turner, but the protagonists are autonomous fictional characters. When Nat Turner, the character, becomes "a multivalent symbol", namely of blackness

and queerness, Styron is not stealing Turner's identity, but creating a fictional character (93). Likewise, Tóibín's Mann is granted universality to address current relevant issues, namely sexual orientation, and intolerance. In this sense, doubling the original may constitute an ethical act because a specific case is given universal value although fiction itself does not conform to ethics.

Duality is not only between reality and fiction. It also applies to the fictional Mann because he disassociates from himself as he splits in two—"One would be himself without his talent, without his ambition, but with the same sensibility" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 334). *The Magician* plays with Mann's complex duality, which applies to German culture and human nature. His first self, "faithful" to the original, believes in German values and democracy despite the rise of Nazism. In other words, this Mann is and believes in the Apollonian (in Nietzschean terms) and cannot accept the demise of beauty, order and culture he is bearing witness to. By contrast, there is another Mann, "who did not know caution, whose imagination was as fiery and uncompromising as his sexual appetite" (334). This other side of the character is Faustian because his "talent was a result of a pact with demons" (334). This fictional self-splitting helps him to come to terms with the rise of Nazism at an individual and national level. A cultivated man, the protagonist first regards Hitler and National Socialism as marginal, not a serious threat to deep-rooted German culture. The facts eventually prove him to be terribly wrong, though. Both Mann and Germany become the stage of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In other words, *The Magician* shows how his country transmogrifies, as if magically, from (in his view) the cradle of civilization into hell after the Faustian pact between Germany and Nazism.

Despite Adorno's argument on the (un)ethicality of producing poetry after the Holocaust (Rowland 59), Tóibín's Mann goes on writing, very often to transmogrify so-called reality into an aestheticized version of it. Being split in two, the character struggles between ethics and aesthetics. That is his hard compromise with the victims of Nazism and with German cultural tradition. This duality is eventually solved when he wonders—"What would happen if these two men [his two halves] met? What energy would then emerge?" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 334). It is problematic as well as promising, an aesthetic response to an ethical challenge. He notices these two men are "shadow versions of who he was", which he cannot leave behind (334). In this sense, the protagonist represents much more than himself. In line with Lackey's conception of biofiction, Tóibín's Mann relates with the historical figure not in historiographical terms, but from the viewpoint of fiction and exceptionality. The character is a symbol that transcends a simplistic updating of the actual Mann. Instead, he represents the two sides of 1930s Germany, the civilized and the barbaric, the victim of Nazism and the one that succumbed to it. In fact, he sadly recalls, the culture he was bred in "contained the seeds of its own destruction" (335). This is especially true of romantic music, through whose "mindlessness" and "brutality" the narrator fictionalizes the tensions in Mann's Germany (335). In short, Mann is the paradigm of Germanness as a highbrow civilization, but also the victim and connoisseur of its barbaric consequences. Here is a perfect example of the transmogrification of *The Magician*, namely the unveiling of

civilization, modernity and decadence as potentially threatening and annihilating. Music is a case in point and, for that reason, one of the main referents in Tóibín's novel is *Dr Faustus*.

2.2. From *Dr Faustus to Buddenbrooks*

The protagonist of *Dr Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn, inspired by Arnold Schönberg, is a prodigious composer who makes a Devil's bargain for success. As often happens in Tóibín's biographical novels, the author experiences an epiphany which he transforms into fiction. In other words, fiction may get inspiration from reality, but it has its own logic—"For a split second as the playing ended, he was sure that he had it, he saw the scene, his composer" (336). The muscle of Schönberg's music elates Mann, who regrets the limitations of literature to address the unfathomable (382). In his view, this is due to the attention to detail in (bio)fiction, tributary of its relationship with the scientific logic of historiography (382). Mann's epiphanies get transmogrified from life into art but, in the case of literature, they must stick to conventions of factuality and plausibility. The process of transmogrification from reality into fictional realness is particularly obvious in *Buddenbrooks* and in *Death in Venice*.

Buddenbrooks follows four generations of a wealthy German family with a special emphasis on their decline and progressive degeneration until only the mother of the family survives (54). The idea of decadence is once again the leitmotif of Mann's writing. As the narrator of *The Magician* points out, the Manns from Lübeck were to disappear while the Buddenbrooks would remain in time. Mann's novel was not exactly biofictional because he used fictional names rather than the original ones. However, Tóibín's updating of the Buddenbrooks is biofictional because the narrator recalls Mann's process of fictionalizing his family (53). Indeed, members of the Mann family in *The Magician* discuss metafictionally to what extent they identify with their fictional others. As an example, Thomas's mother boasts about her nemesis in her son's novel—"I am so musical in the book. Now, I am musical, of course, but in the book, I am much more" (56). The interaction between fiction and reality is as confusing as challenging. In fact, she intends to improve her music skills to resemble Gerda, her fictional double (56). In other words, *The Magician* plays with original and double and different ontological layers of representation to grant them a similar status and reveal the tensions of recasting real-life figures. Thus, so-called reality not only inspires fiction, but is also inspired by it.

It is again music—now one of Beethoven's quartets—that transcends the limits between reality and fiction, and elicits Thomas's aesthetic aspirations. This liminal area is tangible for him as a writer, but also elusive as if "entering into a place where spirit and substance could merge and drift apart and merge again" (333). Thomas's relation with his novels is biofictional, which is especially obvious in his interaction with the characters. He models them after real people, especially his family, friends or personalities, though he changes their names. Be that as it may, in acknowledging the flesh-and-blood persons, the fictional Mann makes ontological boundaries redundant or irrelevant in metafictional terms. Moreover, it is not only an epistemological connection that links the writer and the reality he represents, but also an affective one. Tóibín's Mann admits his growing love for his characters, Felix Krull, Adrian Leverkühn, Tony Buddenbrook and Hanno (426). Thus, *The Magician* opens a new discussion thread about the nature of life

writing. Detractors of biofiction argue that the genre is both unethical and unjustified because it delves into real people's privacy and intimacy. However, in recalling and showing affection for life-inspired characters, Tóibín's Mann is telling more about himself than he does about others. He is very explicit about this point when explaining his rapport with the protagonist of *Confessions of Felix Krull*. His making of the character is primarily a way "to harness his own experiences and self-inventions" (426) rather than exploring the accuracy and truthfulness of the facts and traits recalled. These aspects (especially the construction of reality, its reliance on epiphanic moments and the ethicality of it all) are already explored in Tóibín's previous biofiction.

In *The Master* a recurrent idea is that literature can improve life, making up for actual hardships. Being able to empathize with (firstly ill and later dead) Minny constitutes, for Tóibín's Henry James, an act of ethical responsibility with the other. In the second place, the protagonist validates the transmogrification of flesh-and-blood people into characters as a common practice among celebrated writers—"He wondered if … Hawthorne or George Eliot had written to make the dead come back to life, had worked … like a magician or an alchemist, defying fate and time … to re-create a sacred life" (Toibin, *The Master* 112). That is, James appeals to tradition for ethical support to justify his intrusion into others' intimacy; a principle that Mann also appropriates for his own benefit.

Tóibín's James and Mann recreate the lives of those around them as well as the spaces they inhabit. Of all the places that both characters/writers remake, Venice is particularly evocative, for it represents decadence like no other. In Mann's texts, decadence ranges from Hanseatic Lübeck and Nazi Germany to Venice. Through places, *The Magician* not only stages the ethical dilemmas of using real people's names and lives, but the sense of crisis of the early twentieth century, which is reverberating one century later. As usual in biographical novels, Tóibín's is especially concerned with current anxieties, which, in *The Magician*, are the rise of ultra-right ideologies, the division of the world in blocks, and the persecution and repression of minorities. It is as if the sense of an ending (of an extinguishing world) that Stephen Zweig portrayed one hundred years ago gained new meaning in the early twenty-first century.

2.3. Venice as a Recurrent Transmogrifying Motif

Tóibín's Mann's arrival in Venice is epiphanic and biofictional—"In the instant that he caught sight of the city in silhouette, he knew that this time he would write about it" (*The Magician* 95). For the main character of his novella, he first thinks of Mahler, but in the end, he considers a writer is a better choice. However, the reference to Mahler is meaningful since the central theme of Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* is the adaggietto of the composer's fifth symphony. Both Mann's novella and Visconti's film recall the infatuation of a mature writer with a Polish adolescent, an episode which, according to Mann's diaries, occurred and *The Magician* re-enacts. The sense of an ending is implicit in the boy's unreachability (more a Platonic idea than an actual human being) but also in the scenario. Venice is decadent, almost unreal, and unbreathable for the protagonist. As in Mann's novella, in Tóibín's Mann's experience, the sirocco announces disease and a tragic end. However, in this case, the process of transmogrification of life into

beauty, desire and death is reproduced thoroughly. It is not important, the narrator points out, if the protagonist is himself, his brother or Mahler (99). It is the realness of fiction that helps us to understand reality. Drawing on Goethe's infatuation with a young woman, Mann first thinks about a girl as the protagonist's object of attraction (99). However, he finally chooses a boy to grant the story a feel of impossibility and inarticulacy (100). His actual trip to Venice, thus, transmogrifies into a novella. The moment he learns there is cholera in Southern Italy, he incorporates it into the novella because Aschenbach's desire evokes disease and vice versa. Moreover, the successive epiphanic moments of the trip feed the story, especially those when Aschenbach is transfixed while looking at and being looked back at by the Polish boy. The bidirectionality between so-called reality and (bio)fiction is rendered metaphorically in an elusive scenario.

There are two ideas, namely extinction and lucidity, which characterize Mann's *Death in Venice*, especially its closure. The effect of the sirocco and the spread of cholera affect Aschenbach's health. Yet, he is infatuated with Tadzio and an overpowering death drive to remain in Venice. The last scene of the novel is crepuscular, revealing the end of the summer—"An air of autumn, of things past their prime, seemed to lie over the pleasure spot which had once been so alive with colour and was now almost abandoned. The sand was no longer kept clean. A camera, seemingly without an owner, stood on its tripod by the edge of the sea; and a black cloth thrown over it was flapping noisily in the wind" (Mann). There are signs announcing Aschenbach's death after a last hectic summer. This sense of an ending is contradictory, though, for the camera on the beach is a sign of modernity. The scene signals the transition of Aschenbach's old-school art to a new world devoid of Walter Benjamin's aura. For Benjamin, even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element—"Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership." In this process of de-authentication of art, where uniqueness is replaced by mass reproduction, photography is crucial. Therefore, it is not by chance that while Aschenbach is experiencing the aura of a unique experience, there is a camera nearby. Although it is without an owner, the camera stands for Benjamin's "exhibition value" rather than classic art "cult value". In other words, the novella shows very graphically the transition between the ritualistic art of Aschenbach, unique and aureatic, to the new mass production art of photography—namely, the world that vanishes and the one that thrives.

The narrator highlights Tadzio's loneliness at the beach as if a work of art Aschenbach admires before dying. All the teenager's movements are ritualistic in the watcher's eye "as though at some recollection, some impulse, with one hand on his hip he turned the upper part of his body in a beautiful twist which began from the base—and he looked over his shoulder towards the shore" (Mann). The scene recalls a primordial stage, which Visconti's film evokes in a masterly way. In the sunset of the day and the twilight of Aschenbach's life and career, the boy gets into the water in symbolic terms, a rebirth of the writer's inspiration.

Tadzio's sea scene is the preamble to Aschenbach's actual death, which is a symbolic event, "the price of maintaining civilization" (Dollimore 280). However, this is just a mirage because Aschenbach cannot come up with the Dionysian. "The impossibility of an equilibrium" between civilization and desire and the barbaric applies to Mann's *Death in Venice* and Tóibín's Mann's *Death in Venice* (282). Aschenbach's Platonism collapses and he eventually surrenders to "the Freudian narrative of desublimated perversion [which] unites with the pathological narrative of the degenerate, the decadent and the primitive" (291). In *The Magician*, Mann does not collapse, at least as a public figure. The novel recalls the "actual" moment when Mann surrenders to Tadzio's beauty, as appears in his diaries, and transmogrifies into a climactic moment in *Death in Venice*: "And he had no defences against the vision of overpowering beauty that appeared before him in a blue-and-white bathing suit every morning under the brilliant Adriatic light. The boy's very outline against the horizon captivated him" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 101). Tóibín's Mann gets transfixed, though he is not the protagonist of a moral fable, as Aschenbach was, according to the actual Mann (Dollimore 283). In any case, *The Magician* works out Mann's persona, underscoring the conflict between his biographical data and his fiction.

Despite the many similarities with Aschenbach, Tóibín's Mann manages to sublimate through art his repressed homosexuality and the collapse of the world he grew up in with the rise of Nazism and WWII. In other words, Tóibín's protagonist sublimates his homosexuality in novels that explore the overall decay of German culture, economy and society. The sense of crisis the character recalls in *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus* explains his dilemma, namely the devastating consequences of German cultural supremacism and his feeling compelled to that same culture to express his identity. This early-twentieth-century crisis relates to twenty-first-century upheavals, especially as concerns an overall sense of existential angst and political uncertainty.

2.4. The Twentieth Century Revisited

The Magician recalls the birth and rise of totalitarian regimes when Nazis and Fascists insidiously moved "to the very centre of the public imagination" (168). The protagonist becomes an expatriate, a nomad around the world during the first half of the twentieth century. When he first arrives in the USA, he is acclaimed as a German cultural icon opposed to Hitler (219). However, when the war is over, it is obvious that Mann is to be "used" against Communism as the new enemy of the USA. Conscious of the new status quo, Mann notices his discourse is far "too complex to matter in this time of simple polarities" (356). In focusing on Mann's criticism of (current) discourses that oversimplify reality, the novel is aligned with many critics—Barthes's "mythologies," Eco's "Ur-fascism" and Mouffe's "agonistic pluralism" have addressed how populism uses emotionality and myths of origins for "the people" to oppose the elites. However, this process of normalization and legitimation of "the people" entails excluding "the other" as disruptive of a simplified conception of reality and society. Thus, Tóibín's Mann's claim for complexity resonates in the early twenty-first century with the rise of totalitarian populisms, the frailty of democracy and worldwide political polarization. The protagonist witnesses how

Germany suffers all three problems with the rise and fall of Hitler and the division of the world in blocks (357). The Derridean we/them rhetoric he suffers in Germany follows him to the USA. Not only that, he also witnesses his own magical transmogrification from being America's friend, because it served the country's interests against Hitler, to being allegedly a communist. In this new political context, Mann is a controversial figure in the novel again. He is an avid writer, but lukewarm when it comes to politics and ethics, which was as dangerous in the nineteen twenties as it is one century later. He is tepid not only with the rise of Nazism because, when his son Klaus dies, Thomas does not attend the funeral (396). His lack of empathy is at the heart of his artistic ego, strategic politics and inarticulate ethics. He relinquishes his family commitments whereas he accepts an invitation for a conference in Eastern Germany. In other words, Thomas Mann's loyalty remains with Germany as an idea of cultural belonging. Although *The Magician* delves into Mann's personal life, it also focuses on a polarized political climate that recalls nowadays. The American government sends an Alan Bird to persuade Mann not to visit the Eastern Zone (402). This we/them rhetoric of the American government is meaningless for him, who believes in German unity in allegorical terms. Yet, Mann's decision to challenge American orders also serves the novel to reveal the fragility of (American) democracy. When Thomas summons his freedom of movement as an American citizen, Bird reminds him Eastern Germany is not his country anymore (402). Despite political pressures, Mann still dreams of a mythic Germany and thus speaks about Weimar, Goethe and freedom in a new world (412). The novel stages Mann's inner conflict between emotional and rational pulls that tell more about general anxieties (especially the crisis of idealism) than about the protagonist.

Back in the USA, Bird's threats come true and the Manns are supposed to be communists or Nazis. The Manns' unstable and schizophrenic status recalls the case of persecuted groups like homosexuals during the Cold War and enemies in fascist regimes.[3] Almost at the end of his life, Tóibín's Mann regrets "the infantilism that had become widespread in American life" (417). The simplistic discourses reducing everything to either/or positions in the novel address once again the infantile socio-political context of the early twenty-first century. The populism of world leaders has become increasingly common as the century has advanced. Being an old man, Thomas feels he can tell the truth for the first time in his life but he understands that the truth no longer matters, that human nature is volatile and that everything is transient—all of these conclusions are aligned with current anxieties, especially post-truth, and with the concerns of biofiction (418). Recalling his jubilant arrival in the USA when he is about to leave the country, the protagonist realizes his success was ephemeral, namely a decade long (419). Once more the parallelisms

3 During the Cold War, the paranoia against gays was harsh. They were considered either too blatant to be tolerated or too closeted to be detected, too decadent for communists and too potentially revolutionary for liberal democracies. Likewise, Eco's article "Ur-fascism" puts forward a similar schizophrenic discourse that applies to others/enemies in general—the enemies of fascist regimes are considered too powerful because of their influence on the masses, and too weak to lead the people.

with present unease are blatant. Drawing on Benjamin's aura, when everything (even literary icons) becomes mass produced and disposable, nothing remains and neo-existentialism arises. Mann's sensation of loss (420) extends beyond himself in an overall impression of crisis. Yet, he still relies on beauty, the Apollonian, and his biofictional relation between life and literature, as "his life had illustrated his work" (428). Yet, *The Magician* is a proof of the complex relation of fiction and reality, as his work also inspires life.

3. Conclusion

Revising the lives of literary icons seems culturally relevant when an overall mood of crisis pulls towards the past in search of unalterable referents. As of 2008, Lackey points out—"Wideman published a spectacular biographical novel titled *Fanon*, and on the opening page he clarifies how the life of someone like Fanon can be fictionalized and universalized to the benefit of people more generally" (*Biofiction* 118). The same applies to Tóibín's three biofictions so far. In fictionalizing Henry James, Thomas Mann and the Virgin Mary, Tóibín's texts update them with an ethical purpose. The three are sturdy cultural icons, religious or literary, but fiction re-humanizes them. The process is especially complex: when they are humanized, they are singularized and therefore characters readers can empathize and identify with. Yet, their singularity also universalizes them as unreachable cultural idols. In this way, these novels transition between Benjamin's exhibition and cult value. The ethics of depicting all three figures in fiction is thus as problematic as compelling. Mary is an ordinary woman in First-century Palestine, while James and Mann are two renowned (albeit closeted) authors at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, the novels visibilize and uphold the role of sexual minorities and women.

Unlike *The Testament of Mary* and *The Master*, *The Magician* follows the protagonist for decades, which helps to explore a complex process of transmogrification. Mann evolves from a petit bourgeois and situated intellectual from Northern Germany to a nomad and international cultural icon. As for (his concept of) Germany, it develops from a self-infatuated country with its history, traditions and culture, to a contested one after the rise of Nazism, WWII and the Holocaust. Both the man and the country transmogrify almost imperceptibly. Likewise, Mann's experiences and the facts around him transmogrify into texts which constitute the guiding thread of *The Magician*. Yet, overarching the transformation of life into art, the novel addresses the dreadful parallelisms between the past and the present, especially how what seems unconceivable comes true. Tóibín's Mann first overlooks the threats of fascism, which is especially significant nowadays, when post-truth populism whitewashes its neo-fascist undertones and its unpredictable consequences. If the early twentieth century challenged Mann's ideas and expectations, *The Magician* hints at new threats.

Besides individualizing and universalizing Mann, the novel explores German (and by extension Western) civilization as opposed to the other. In fact, the boundaries between one and the other are porous, as both Germany and the USA transmogrify: in the case of Germany, from being the cultured home of Wagner and Nietzsche to the cradle of Nazism; as for the USA, it

transitions from the land of liberty, which welcomes Mann as a political refugee, to a regime that persecutes his political independence. As a rule, biofiction singularizes and universalizes a historical figure as a symbol of a period, but also as one that transcends it. In transcending the actual life and the angst of the period the actual Mann experienced, *The Magician* tells even more about current concerns and anxieties. The crises of the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries are a reminder of the universality and singularity of a cultural icon like Mann and how fictionalizing him is useful to understand the problematic present. In view of all the above, it can be argued that the novel is an example of resistance through literature.

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