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The Self-cancellation of Injustice in Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan*

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I

THE *Untertan*¹ can be characterized above all by his 'Verehrung der Macht' (161, 358).² He asks not what is reasonable or just but rather what will enhance his power. The maxim 'Macht geht vor Recht!' guides his life (244). Diederich Heßling, the hero of Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan*, blindly submits to the various figures of authority and institutions of power he encounters: his father, the school masters, the Neoteutons, the military, nobility, and of course the Emperor.³ Meanwhile he strives to move upward in the hierarchy so that he may do more than just worship power; he desires to exercise it as well.

The *Untertan*'s relationship to power is two-fold: while asserting his strength over the forces below, he bends to the powers above. In his analysis of the *Untertan* mentality in chapter four Wolfgang Buck speaks of 'eine romantische Prostration vor einem Herrn, der seinem Untertan von seiner Macht das Nötige leihen soll, um die noch Kleineren niederzuhalten' (181). The *Untertan* is both master and slave,⁴ a sado-masochistic character.⁵ Though he punishes those below him, his power depends on his receiving punishment from above, i.e., it derives from his position within the hierarchy.⁶ Love of punishment is a sign of one's adoration of the system in which one is granted a position of power. Thus, the young Diederich Heßling embraces

¹ In this paper I refrain from translating the word 'Untertan.' Renditions such as 'subject,' 'vassal,' or 'slave' fail to capture the term's nuances. Nonetheless, the idea of the *Untertan* is not unique to Germany; with some variations Thrasymachus and Gorgias might be seen as its first proponents, Sergeant Waters of Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story* its most recent.

² Page references are to the convenient yet reliable DTV edition.

³ Adding some humour to the list of powers to which Diederich was subjected, the narrator also notes the ghost of the castle, the police, and the chimney-sweep. (7)

⁴ The dualism of Diederich's character as both master and slave is emphasized in a humorous reversal where Guste, as a woman normally Diederich's *Untertan*, beats him up and suggests: 'Ich bin die Herrin, du bist der *Untertan*' (340).

⁵ Several interpreters have already discussed Mann's perceptive anticipation of what later thinkers have defined as the authoritarian character. The point need not be elaborated here. See Emmerich 44-50; Siefken 189-91; and Vogt.

⁶ Ironically, the *Untertan* is also dependent on those below him, for his own feeling of power is rooted in the fact that he is master over someone. Power, unlike justice, is not autonomous.

punishment: 'Denn recht geheuer und seiner Sache gewiß fühlte er sich nur, wenn er selbst die Prügel bekam' (8). He is content to exert his power over animals, even inanimate objects: 'Er hatte, den Machthabern nachzuahmen, keinen Menschen nötig; ihm genügten Tiere, sogar Dinge' (8). The number of those below in relationship to those above Diederich changes of course as he becomes progressively more powerful, yet the static principle on which the hierarchy is based remains, and with it Diederich's belief that the more powerful are also more just.

Diederich achieves power less through ingenuity than assimilation.⁷ According to Wolfgang Buck the *Untertan* is a creature of environment and opportunity (180). The young Diederich has no ideas of his own. Rather than analyzing issues, he agrees with the ruling opinion: 'Herr Göppel bekannte sich als freisinniger Gegner Bismarcks. Diederich bestätigte alles, was Göppel wollte; er hatte über den Kanzler, die Freiheit, den jungen Kaiser keinerlei Meinung' (12). As Diederich eventually assimilates himself to the power structure, he embraces whatever opinions support it. He later says to Göppel: 'Was die Herren da oben . . . zu glauben für richtig halten, das glaube ich auch – unbesehen' (57). We see Diederich pass through several institutions – school, fraternity life, the military – with which he identifies. He finds his self in an impersonal whole, even if only as a suffering part: 'ihn beglückte, daß die Macht, die kalte Macht, an der er selbst, wenn auch nur leidend, teilhatte, sein Stolz war' (8).

Diederich's sadistic and masochistic tendencies can be understood in the context of his desire to belong. The *Untertan* would fuse his self with the power structure. Through this process of submergence he acquires the strength he cherishes: first, he gains vicarious power by identifying with the whole; second, he gains ever more power over others. His advancement, however, presupposes his submission. When he is older, Diederich continues to recognize the validity of this concept as a justification for his own suffering: 'Wer treten wollte, mußte sich treten lassen, das war das eherne Gesetz der Macht' (306). Diederich's desire to relinquish his own self in order to participate in a collective and powerful whole explains not only his willing subordination and love of punishment, but also his frequent intoxication with like-minded men, his masochistic ideal of self-sacrifice,⁸ even his references to the ways of destiny. Diederich reaffirms his veneration of power by showing

⁷ See esp. the passages on the following pages from chapter one, originally to have been grouped together with chapter two under the heading 'Die Macht': 8, 10, 22-23, 28, 36, 37, 38, 47. See Kirsch/Schmidt 121.

⁸ In a passage brimming with narrative irony Diederich announces his willingness to sacrifice his own life for the power of the highest authority: 'Das Volk muß die Macht fühlen. Das Gefühl der kaiserlichen Macht ist mit einem Menschenleben nicht zu teuer bezahlt!'/'Wenn es nur nicht Ihres ist', sagte Heuteufel. Und Diederich, die Hand auf der Brust:/'Wenn es auch meins wäre!'" (109).

contempt for the powerless: Jews, women,⁹ later Old Buck.¹⁰ Diederich's bullying a Jew is evidence of not only his sadism and his desire to belong to the ruling structure but also his role-playing, his performing:

Aus Klötzen, die zum Zeichnen dienten, erbaute er auf dem Katheder ein Kreuz und drückte den Juden davor in die Knie. Er hielt ihn fest, trotz allem Widerstand; er war stark! Was Diederich stark machte, war der Beifall ringsum, die Menge, aus der heraus Arme ihm halfen, die überwältigende Mehrheit drinnen und draußen . . . Wie wohl man sich fühlte bei geteilter Verantwortlichkeit und einem Schuldbewußtsein, das kollektiv war! (10)

Diederich's intoxication with collectivism reaches its first peak during his service in the military: 'Diederich fühlte wohl, daß alles hier, die Behandlung, die geläufigen Ausdrücke, die ganze militärische Tätigkeit vor allem darauf hinzielte, die persönliche Würde auf ein Mindestmaß herabzusetzen. Und das imponierte ihm' (36). After Diederich beholds the Emperor's strength, the first chapter concludes with a paean to power and a résumé of the spheres in which Diederich feels its presence:

Auf dem Pferd dort . . . ritt die Macht! Die Macht, die über uns hingeht und deren Hufe wir küssen! Die über Hunger, Trotz und Hohn hingeht! Gegen die wir nichts können, weil wir alle sie lieben! Die wir im Blut haben, weil wir die Unterwerfung darin haben! Ein Atom sind wir von ihr, ein verschwindendes Molekül von etwas, das sie ausgespuckt hat! Jeder einzelne ein Nichts, steigen wir in gegliederten Massen als Neuteutonen, als Militär, Beamtentum, Kirche und Wissenschaft, als Wirtschaftsorganisation und Machtverbände kegelförmig hinan, bis dort oben, wo sie selbst steht, steinern und blitzend! Leben in ihr, haben teil an ihr, unerbittlich gegen die, die ihr ferner sind, und triumphierend, noch wenn sie uns zerschmettert: denn so rechtfertigt sie unsere Liebe! (47)

The theme of loss of self in the *Untertan* is reviewed at the end of each chapter, where Diederich identifies with the Emperor.¹¹ His submission to the Emperor and resulting dissolution of self are presented each time with increasing force. An adherent of power positivism need not be a powerful figure himself. Even the young Diederich, before he gains power of his own, idolizes

⁹ Enlightening on the role of women in the novel is Emmerich 66–68.

¹⁰ Humorous is Diederich's ferocious power over a stranger after Diederich decides that he hasn't imposing shoulders: 'Er fühlte nur, daß er hier, zum erstenmal im Leben, die gute Sache zu vertreten habe gegen feindliche Bemängelungen. Trotz seiner Aufregung sah er sich noch die Schultern des Menschen an: sie waren nicht breit. Auch äußerte die Umgebung sich mißbilligend. Da ging Diederich vor. Mit seinem Bauch drängte er den Feind gegen die Mauer und schlug auf den Künstlerhut ein' (46).

¹¹ For this much discussed topic see esp. Emmerich 88–95; Nägele 32–34; and Weisstein (1962) 118–22 and (1973) 142–46.

the ruling structure, tries to identify with it, and acts solely according to its laws.

II

Wolfgang Buck, the professional actor in *Der Untertan*, is characterized by his 'Überzeugungslosigkeit' (159), but other characters, non-actors who nonetheless play roles, lack convictions as well. Mayor Scheffelweis' flexibility involves an interesting mix of comedy and immorality. Buck alludes to the mayor's favorite phrase – 'einerseits . . . andererseits' (93, 97, 174, 217, 249) – when he states: "Heßling ist ein vorsichtiger Politiker, er hört nicht gern mit an, daß der Bürgermeister zwar einerseits ein guter Ehemann ist, aber andererseits auch seiner Schwiegermutter nichts abschlagen kann" (212). Diederich is a complex figure to the extent that he is honestly convinced of his position as well as an opportunist, like the mayor, who simply plays various roles. Wolfgang Buck says to Diederich: "Ihre Rolle vor Gericht hat mich mehr interessiert als meine eigene. Später, zu Hause vor meinem Spiegel, habe ich sie Ihnen nachgespielt" (240). Diederich responds: "Meine Rolle? Sie wollen wohl sagen, meine Überzeugung" (240). Diederich is, on the one hand, sincere; he is willing to die to preserve the Emperor's power. On the other hand, he is an opportunist who assumes roles vis-à-vis Buck, Lauer, Jadassohn, Künchen, Zillich, Wulckow, and just about everyone else in order to gain more power. The seeming contradiction between Diederich's convictions and his role-playing is resolved as soon as we recognize that the position of which Diederich is convinced, absolute adoration of power, necessitates the playing and shifting of roles. Consistency is unattainable for a figure who embraces power as a criterion of justice. Diederich's shifting of positions, his playing out roles, is indeed a form of acting. The principle of power-positivism, with its resulting opportunism or role-playing, forbids Diederich from having a solid center to his personality. Moreover, this role-playing is not mere illusion; it is false. Wolfgang Buck is thus justified in asking the judges to choose between comedy and truth (183).¹²

Seemingly opposed to Diederich's idolization of power and comic, self-contradictory behaviour are the few moments when Diederich questions his role-playing and adherence to power positivism. The novel seems to imply that at these moments Diederich gains insight into truth. Thoughts of Agnes' love lead him to the first of these moments:

Er fühlte sich verwandelt, leicht, wie vom Boden gehoben . . . Er hatte die Gewißheit, daß er bis jetzt, bis zu dieser Minute alle Dinge falsch

¹² The novel thematizes the opposition of comedy and truth; from the reader's perspective, however, an awareness of comedy or the comic incongruities of injustice serves the understanding of truth – more on this later.

angesehen, falsch bewertet hatte . . . Juden oder Arbeitslose, was gingen einen die an, warum sollte man sie hassen? Diederich fühlte sich bereit, sie zu lieben! (54)

In the novel's final chapter Diederich questions power again in conjunction with thoughts of Agnes:

Diederich erfuhr, daß sie [die Macht] manchmal einen gemeinen und niedrigen Anblick bieten könne: die Macht und alles, was in ihren Spuren ging, Erfolg, Ehre, Gesinnung. Er sah Emmi an und mußte zweifeln an dem Wert dessen, was er erreicht hatte oder noch erstrebte: Gustes und ihres Geldes, des Denkmals, der hohen Gunst, Grausenfelds, der Auszeichnungen und Ämter. Er sah Emmi an und dachte auch an Agnes. Agnes, die Weichheit und Liebe in ihm gepflegt hatte, sie war in seinem Leben das Wahre gewesen, er hätte es festhalten sollen! (307)

Each time Diederich questions his idolization of power, the concept *Weichheit* surfaces. When he lets himself be charmed by Old Buck's socialist ideals, Diederich finds himself 'weich' (91). On Christmas Eve, when he reflects on his mother's love, he enjoys 'weiche Biederkeit' (141). When Diederich sees that the lieutenant in the play *Die heimliche Gräfin* should have married the heroine independent of any financial concerns, the narrator writes:

Diederich hatte noch einen Zweifel, äußerte ihn aber nicht. Der Leutnant hätte die heimliche Gräfin auch ohne Geld heiraten sollen, es würde Diederich tief befriedigt haben in seinem weichen und idyllischen Herzen. Aber ach! diese harte Zeit dachte anders.¹³ (226-27).

The contrast between *Weichheit* and *Härte* occurs earlier as well when Diederich finally breaks his relationship with Agnes:

Daß auch die anderen in ihrem Innern vielleicht doch weiche Stellen haben könnten, erschien ihm im höchsten Grade unwahrscheinlich. Nur er war, von seiner Mutter her, damit behaftet; und ein Mädels wie Agnes, die gerade so verrückt war wie seine Mutter, würde ihn ganz untauglich gemacht haben für diese harte Zeit. (75).

Though these moments appear to contrast with Diederich's power positivism, their inadequacy is revealed on three counts. First, Diederich's softness cannot withstand the allure of power and theatre. His positions are naive and emotional, not reflective; they are, therefore, easily undercut by the rhetoric of power. Indeed, in some instances this rhetoric already infects Diederich's

¹³ Diederich's resignation via his reference to the callous age is undercut by Göppel's earlier suggestion that the age is 'doch nur hart, wenn wir uns gegenseitig das Leben schwermachen' (57).

positions.¹⁴ Unless philosophically grounded, even moments of right opinion will eventually succumb to power and injustice, falsehood and negativity. A further meaning of 'weich' manifests itself: yielding, impressionable, easily manipulated. The unreflective Diederich is no more beyond the influence of rhetoric than he was as a child, 'ein weiches Kind' (5). Second, the passages are ironized stylistically for their pathos and sentimentality. Consider, for example, Diederich's letter to Agnes along with the narrator's ironic portrayal of his sobbing (55-56) or the later passage where Diederich suddenly breaks into tears and unthinkingly promises eternal love: 'er [brach] in Tränen aus und sagte, daß er sie immer, immer liebhaben werde' (65). Another passage – sometimes cited as genuine (Emmerich 56; Scheibe 216) – is full of clichés and must be seen in an ironic light:

Zum erstmal fiel es ihm auf, daß die Hügel dahinten traurig oder wie eine große Sehnsucht aussahen, und was als Sonne oder Regen vom Himmel fiel, waren Diederichs heiße Liebe und seine Tränen. Denn er weinte viel. (21)

Third, the alert reader will question not only the ephemerality and sentimentality but the precise content of these passages. Diederich's emotional outbursts are perhaps best viewed not as an approximation to truth but as a negation of the earnestness that necessarily accompanies truth.¹⁵ Diederich's sentimentality is merely an extension of his self-compassion and self-pity. Rather than acting according to his apparent insight, Diederich identifies with the weaknesses of his own self. He is unwilling to be hard with himself. It is a clever psychological mechanism whereby Diederich can feel his self-importance and at the same time suppress serious self-criticism. Rather than being an opening towards goodness, Diederich's sentimentality represents an adoration of the self and a veiled disregard for truth.¹⁶

¹⁴ Diederich loves Agnes when she appears to look down on him from above (52-53) and when he can lie at her feet (54) or, conversely, when he has power over her and he can look at her with a glance of possession (56).

¹⁵ Emmerich 55-57, Nägele 38-39, Scheibe 215-20, and Schröter 27-28 see moments of truth in these passages. Only Nägele recognizes irony, but he restricts it to the ephemerality of Diederich's insight and does not consider the problematic aspects of the stance itself.

¹⁶ The structure is not unique to Diederich Heßling. In Joseph Roth's *Radetzky-marsch* we again see the avoidance of truth via self-pity. Consider the following description of Trotta from chapter 17: 'Trotta trank. Das kahle Zimmer wurde heimlicher . . . Allmählich verwandelte sich auch Trotta's Enttäuschung in wohliges Weh. Er schloß eine Art Bündnis mit seinem Kummer. Alles in der Welt war heute im höchsten Maße traurig, und der Leutnant war der Mittelpunkt dieser erbärmlichen Welt. Für ihn lärmten heute so jämmerlich die Frösche, und auch die schmerzgefüllten Grillen wehklagten für ihn. Seinetwegen füllte sich die Frühlingsnacht mit einem so gelinden, süßen Weh, seinetwegen standen die Sterne so unerreichbar hoch am Himmel, und ihm allein blinkte ihr Licht so vergeblich sehnsüchtig zu. Der unendliche Schmerz der Welt paßte vollkommen zu dem Elend Trotta's. Er litt in vollendeter Eintracht mit dem leidenden All. Hinter der tiefblauen Schale des Himmels sah Gott selbst auf ihn mitleidig hernieder . . . Er [Trotta]

The novel considers power positivism not only in relation to Diederich's naive emotionalism and arrogant self-pity but also in the context of the values espoused respectively by Old Buck and by his son Wolfgang. In a world filled with anti-Semitic characters and gestures,¹⁷ Old Buck is married to a Jew. He is concerned with human values, not power. To Diederich he says, albeit in vain: 'Haben Sie immer Achtung vor den Rechten Ihrer Mitmenschen! Das gebietet Ihnen Ihre eigene Menschenwürde' (33). Buck is the founder of the 'Volksküche' and the 'Fürsorge für die entlassenen Sträflinge' (81) as well as a supporter of the 'Säuglingsheim' (229). Though he opposes theatre as the guiding spirit of the age, he is not without aesthetic sentiment: he married an actress and is himself a poet. Unlike the Social Democrat Napoleon Fischer, Buck is free of blind self-interest and pride. It is no surprise that Buck, who tries to hold to his principles throughout, suffers financial ruin and loss of power. Diederich quickly learns the lesson: 'Nichts Menschliches hielt stand vor der Macht' (170). Buck, with his concern for justice has followed 'nichtige Ziele, die fortführten von der Macht!' (363). Buck himself states: 'Mein Leben gehört seit mehr als fünfzig Jahren . . . einem Gedanken, den zu meiner Zeit mehrere hatten, der Gerechtigkeit und dem Wohl aller' (326).¹⁸ Diederich responds to Buck's words by glaring the old man down and with him justice and the common welfare: 'Er blitzte den Alten, der vergebens flammte, einfach nieder, und diesmal endgültig, mitsamt der Gerechtigkeit und dem Wohl aller. Zuerst das eigene Wohl – und gerecht war die Sache, die Erfolg hatte' (327). Buck is in part a tragic figure: he chooses the good while knowing he will suffer, and the novel ends with his death.

Buck's death is symbolic of the loss of his generation's values. Much like the paintings he describes at the Harmony Club, Buck belongs to the past. That his values are not fully solid is shown in several respects. Buck is willing to make secret deals and compromises with Diederich (88, 99). The rumour of his affair, though never substantiated, does receive a smattering of circumstantial support: Guste's early birth, Buck's knowledge of the Cabinet of Love, and the unexplained inheritance. In consistently misreading Diederich, Old Buck exhibits a naive faith in goodness and an inability to cope with the negative (165, 229, 230). He never gets into a position where he can argue theoretical or political points with Diederich.¹⁹ In this respect he is no

war nicht nur ein grundschlechter Charakter, sondern auch ein müder, törichter Kopf. Und kurz und gut: sein ganzes Leben war verfehlt! Seine Brust preßte sich zusammen, die Tränen quollen schon in seiner Kehle, bald würden sie in die Augen steigen. Und er trank noch ein Glas, um ihnen den Weg zu erleichtern. Schließlich brachen sie aus seinen Augen. Er legte die Arme auf den Tisch, bettete den Kopf in die Arme und begann jämmerlich zu schluchzen' (291–92). I owe this comparison to Vittorio Hösle.

¹⁷ See 10, 35, 41, 44, 63, 84, 96, 98, 111, 119, 129, 260, 266, 295, and 337.

¹⁸ See also 312 and 329.

¹⁹ In some respects he is reminiscent of Plato's naively good but aged Cephalus, who leaves philosophical debate to the younger generation.

stronger than Agnes as a counterforce to Diederich's power positivism. Buck is incapable of transmitting his values to the new generation, to either Diederich or Wolfgang. Like Agnes and like Diederich at certain moments, Buck is merely sentimental and emotional (99, 165, 230). Conceptually, the transition from Old Buck's values to those of Wolfgang and Diederich represents the passage from a naive and basically good position to a reflective, yet relativistic, one.

Diederich's opponent in many respects, Old Buck's son Wolfgang,²⁰ is similar to Diederich in his role-playing. Both believe that values are relative; each is portrayed as intellectually lazy and ready to adopt the ruling opinions of their circles rather than search for truth; neither holds to the betterment of man as an ideal.²¹ Just as the naive goodness of Agnes, Herr Göppel, and Old Buck cannot keep Diederich from his unjust behaviour, so too Wolfgang Buck, even though he has more insight, is ineffectual in stopping Diederich. Buck's role is passive. He understands, but cannot argue against, Diederich's position; he even admires it. Buck has no value structures with which to counter Diederich, as his own questionable behaviour towards Guste shows. Buck, with his Nietzschean view that what matters are mere appearances, cannot stem Diederich's power positivism. Indeed his position would seem to pass over into Diederich's: if all positions are illusions and lies, one cannot argue against any one lie; one must grant power to the strongest lie, the most successful illusion. Only Diederich can stop himself, by contradicting and cancelling his own position. Diederich's position is to be overcome not with the hero's self-pity nor with the naïveté of Agnes or Old Buck nor even with the relativism of Wolfgang but rather with insight into the necessary untenability of injustice, an achievement Mann reserves for his readers as they follow his hero's comic and contradictory behaviour.

III

The philosophical truth of the self-cancellation of injustice or power positivism is clearly demonstrated in two of Plato's dialogues.²² Thrasymachus in *Republic I* and Calicles in *Gorgias* advance the Sophist's view of justice as the will of the more powerful directed towards his own interests. Here justice

²⁰ Wolfgang Buck and Diederich are presented as 'Gegenpole'; they represent 'die vorgeschrittenen Tendenzen der moralfreien Epoche' (242). On Wolfgang Buck cf. esp. Schröter (1971) 18–25.

²¹ Consider Wolfgang Buck's statement: 'Worauf es für jeden persönlich ankommt, ist nicht, daß wir in der Welt wirklich viel verändern, sondern daß wir uns ein Lebensgefühl schaffen, als täten wir es' (156).

²² Besides consulting Plato's dialogues, the interested reader will want to refer to Hösle's brilliant analysis, from which my discussion benefits greatly. See Hösle, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 330–59.

is understood as a standard of action for the individual or state; thus, injustice or 'the sovereignty and advantage of the stronger' is offered as a standard of action.²³ Injustice or power positivism is a negative philosophical position, and like all negative positions, is untenable, because, first, it presupposes the positive position that it attempts to deny and, second, when thought through on its own terms, it cancels itself.²⁴

Epistemological scepticism is a simple example of one such self-cancelling position. The negative proposition, 'We cannot know the world,' still makes a claim to knowledge. To suggest that we cannot know the world but can know our capacity for knowledge – as negative – presupposes that matters stand differently with the world than with reason and that knowledge of reason does not imply knowledge of the world. Since, however, any reflection on the relationship between object- and metalevels must include both spheres, the implicit dualism is dissolved; the presupposition assumes knowledge of both reason and the world. Even the metasceptical proposition, 'We cannot know whether or not we know the world,' fails, for it leads to an infinite regress. In addition, the statement, 'We cannot know anything,' could never on its own terms be seen as valid, i.e., presented as knowledgeable. Thus, it cannot compete with an opposing position and cancels itself.

Injustice functions in a structurally analogous way. First, injustice always presupposes justice. For any number of individuals to get the strength to be unjust they must act justly by one another. Socrates asks Thrasymachus: 'Do you think that a city, an army, or bandits, or thieves, or any group that attempted any action in common, could accomplish anything if they wronged one another?' (351c). The answer of course is no, for 'Factions . . . are the outcome of injustice, and hatreds and internecine conflicts, but justice brings oneness of mind and love' (351c). The thought is not new to literary critics familiar with the real or expected loyalty within the robber-bands of Schiller's *Die Räuber* (Act I, Scene 2) or Brecht's *Die Dreigrosschenoper*²⁵ or with the legalistic mentality of Goethe's Mephistopheles (*Faust* 1410–17). Injustice requires justice. As Plato insists again and again, an evil person can befriend neither a good nor another evil person.²⁶ Taken on its own terms, injustice becomes an enemy not only to justice but to itself. Even the individual who acts unjustly toward all other individuals and knows not a single partner in crime must act justly toward himself. The many parts of the self couldn't function if they were wholly unjust toward one another. Injustice will 'in the first place make him incapable of accomplishing anything because of inner

²³ *Gorgias* 483d. See also 488b–e and *Republic* 338c–39a. Cf. *Laws* 889e–90a.

²⁴ See Hölsle, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 272–304.

²⁵ In Brecht's play the breakdown of ostensible loyalty illustrates the self-destruction of absolute injustice.

²⁶ *Lysis* 214c; *Republic* 349c–51e; *Gorgias* 507e; *Statesman* 309e.

faction and lack of self-agreement, and then an enemy to himself and to the just' (352a). Unless injustice includes justice as a moment, it dissolves itself:

If we ever say that any men who are unjust have vigorously combined to put something over, our statement is not altogether true, for they would not have kept their hands from one another if they had been thoroughly unjust, but it is obvious that there was in them some justice which prevented them from wronging at the same time one another too as well as those whom they attacked. (352b–c)

Injustice, dependent in this way on justice, is ontologically inferior, a deficient mode of justice.

Not only does injustice presuppose justice, but the unjust individual cannot attempt to convince others of the validity of his position in dialogue form without falling into a contradiction between his theory of injustice and the theory of discourse (348a–c). For Plato the just man would deny the values of not the just but only the unjust individual (349c). The unjust man, however, claims to overreach and get the better of the just and the unjust, his unlike and his like (350b). The unjust man's eristic position thus conflicts – as Socrates elaborates – with the pursuit of knowledge and the investigation of truth, which call for fairness, consistency, and communicability (349c–50c; 495a). The theory of discourse suggests that one test arguments on their own terms and adjust conflicting claims impartially; this is possible only within a framework of justice. Thrasymachus and Callicles find themselves in the self-contradictory position of arguing for injustice while accepting the just conditions of discourse. Dialogue is possible only in a system of justice; it is therefore impossible to make a case for injustice without assuming the position one would deny. Insofar as Thrasymachus remains a partner in dialogue, the victory of justice is decided *a priori*. It is a victory we see in *Gorgias* as well, where Callicles denies any intent to 'deceive' Socrates or betray the good will of his 'friend,' in offering his arguments for the ruthless sovereignty of his own interests, the absolute and arbitrary validity of the more powerful (487e). To be consistent the unjust individual would have to be silent about his or her theory of injustice.

After denying the possibility of objective discourse to the unjust individual, one might think that he could try to persuade others rhetorically and irrationally of the virtues of injustice – avoiding any direct confrontation with the arguments or structures of justice, but here too he would only lose the power that forms the core of his injustice. Insofar as the unjust individual encourages belief in the validity of injustice, he justifies the violation of his rights by others. The unjust man, therefore, 'who attempts injustice rightly must be supposed to escape detection' (361a) and must support – at least theoretically – the idea of justice, under whose shield he can remain unjust only as long as he seems to be just. In short, to defend injustice is to place the

unjust individual and the principle for which he stands in danger. The unjust individual not only presupposes that which he would deny, he cannot present a case for injustice without cancelling his own position.

IV

Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan* presents this conceptual truth of the self-cancellation of injustice in artistic form: through inconsistencies in Diederich's behaviour and his demands for justice in the face of his own doctrine of injustice as well as through the aesthetic use of paradoxes, terms out of place, and extreme juxtapositions. The latter seeming contradictions mirror the self-contradictory nature of Diederich's doctrine of power positivism aesthetically; they also provide the novel with its humour. *Der Untertan* links the falsehood and inner contradictions of injustice with the comedy that arises from incongruities.

On the level of plot we note numerous inconsistencies in Diederich's behaviour and standards. Diederich's statement to Herr Göppel at the end of chapter two that he cannot marry a woman who is impure is undercut of course by the fact that it is he who has made her impure (75). Diederich has violated his own standards of action. Later in the novel Diederich reverses his position and plays Göppel's role vis-à-vis von Brietzen. Diederich, the unjust individual, makes an appeal to a standard of justice that he had earlier denied. The comic effect is heightened through the repetition of details (packing, the reference to seducing the one and shooting the other, etc). Diederich is soon mollified, however, by the fact that he has lost to a more powerful figure in the hierarchy of society, a nobleman and an officer (306). Diederich contradicts his standards in another blatant set of episodes. He dismisses two workers for indecent conduct in the rag-room of his factory and then fools around with Guste at the very same spot (85, 193). Numerous less striking shifts in standards could be added to the list, for example, the fact that after forbidding his sisters to see Kätchen Zillich, Diederich procures her sexual favours (200, 343). Diederich's lack of commitment to his expressed ideals also surfaces when he tries to renege on his offer to appear as a witness against Lauer (129) and when he reverses his position on the Army Bill because of a change in mood (187, 305).

Diederich's contradictory behavior is nowhere clearer than in his repeated lies.²⁷ Lying, very much an element of injustice, presupposes a subjectivity unwilling to recognize objective standards. When lying, Diederich is inwardly

²⁷ For Kant, lying is the second of his four examples to illustrate the self-contradictory nature of certain moral maxims. See *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (A54-55). On Kantian elements in Mann's moral system despite his limited knowledge of Kant see König 216-64.

different from what he would appear; this incongruity often surfaces in a comic manner.²⁸ Diederich's deception begins early. He was 'gut Freund mit allen, lachte, wenn sie ihre Streiche ausplauderten . . . und dann in der Pause . . . berichtete er' (10). Diederich's dishonesty is especially apparent during his various efforts to escape military service. Diederich asks Heuteufel to concoct a letter of excuse (35); he fakes limping (36) and eventually escapes military duty with the aid of his fraternity connections (40). He then returns to his fraternity brothers and announces his sincere regret at having to leave the service (40). To list all of Diederich's lies would be to offer an almost complete summary of the novel.²⁹ Three final examples will suffice. To make himself appear more powerful to Jadassohn, Diederich states that Wiebel was his fag (98), while the reverse was really the case (26). Diederich sternly asserts that he is finished with Heuteufel for the rest of his life in spite of his awareness that he must return later in the week to have his throat painted (128). Finally, Diederich lies about the origins of the rumour concerning Old Buck and Frau Daimchen (206) and then defends Buck (213) and Guste (241) in the face of the rumour he himself helped to start (215). As if this were not enough, Diederich pretends to try to pay Napoleon Fischer not to spread the rumour which he lets slip in his very attempt to bribe him (205). He would have others do his dirty work and let him appear just. After hearing one lie after another, including even the comic reference to a lie Diederich thought of, but hadn't yet had the time to tell (93), the reader can only laugh as he thinks back to the hero's condemning Herr Göppel for not telling the truth (75).

Diederich's acts of deception are often intentional, as for example when he deliberately keeps Agnes waiting in his apartment (59-60). When his actions become self-deceptive, they are especially humorous. During his speech at the unveiling ceremony of the monument to William the Great, Diederich describes and condemns the empire of Napoleon III, using the very terms we have learned to associate with Wilhelminian Germany and in particular with Diederich:

'Der in leere Religiosität versteckte krasse Materialismus hatte den unbedenklichsten Geschäftssinn großgezogen, Mißachtung des Geistes schloß ihr natürliches Bündnis mit niederer Genußgier . . . Im Äußern nur auf das Prestige gestellt, im Innern nur auf die Polizei, ohne andern Glauben als die Gewalt, trachtete man nach nichts als nach Theaterwirkung, trieb ruhmredigen Pomp mit der vergangenen Heldenepoche . . . Von all dem wissen wir nichts' rief Diederich. (357)

Comical as well are the repeated inconsistencies that seem not to disturb

²⁸ It can also be disturbing, as in the constant split between thought and statement when Diederich courts Agnes in chapter two.

²⁹ For a selection of prominent lies not mentioned here see 12, 40, 315, and 323.

Diederich. Diederich knows that Wiebel's cousin von Klappke is a charlatan, yet he still clicks his heels in recognition of his importance (26). Diederich's fourfold repetition of the phrase, 'Ich bin ein durchaus liberaler Mann' (87, 91, 94, 97), contrasts with his simultaneous assessment that 'der Liberalismus' is the beginning of 'Sozialdemokratie' and 'die rote Gefahr': 'es untergräbt die Ordnung' (95). Diederich praises family life to his future brother-in-law Kienast (151) just after a disastrous Christmas at home (140) and before the family battles rage anew (160). He dictates an address for his induction into the veterans' club and then 'Tränen in der Stimme, bekannte sich unwürdig, so viel Lob entgegenzunehmen' (187). Finally, through Napoleon Fischer Diederich arranges to have Governor von Wulckow's manoeuvres in Netzig exposed, whereupon Diederich seizes the occasion 'um zwischen sich und denen, die an dem Herrn Regierungspräsidenten hatten zweifeln können, glatt das Tischtuch zu zerschneiden' (351).

Despite the contradictions embodied in such unjust behaviour, Diederich, like all unjust individuals who want to succeed, continually appeals to the standards of morality and the scales of justice. Diederich considers certain actions of Lauer 'unmoralisch' (95).³⁰ In dismissing Agnes he thinks of his own 'moralisches Empfinden' (75). Wolfgang Buck's 'Unmoral' outrages him (159). At one point Diederich becomes violent, thinking that family members are pocketing money that rightfully belongs to him (160). During the Lauer trial Diederich attempts to assert his morality in the face of the falsehood and decadence around him: 'Ich meinerseits . . . bekenne mich zu meinen Handlungen, denn sie sind der Ausfluß eines tadellosen Lebenswandels, der auch im eigenen Hause auf Ehre hält und weder Lüge noch Sittenlosigkeit kennt!' (176).³¹ After making one illegal deal with Napoleon Fischer after another, Diederich fears he is being double-crossed but fails to recognize the contradiction in his appeal to justice: 'Verrat überall, Intrigen, feindseliger Verdacht – und nirgends schlichte deutsche Treue' (299). Particularly revealing of Diederich's double standards and humorous in its complexity is Diederich's reaction to Kienast's solution to their argument over the new machine. After lying to Kienast about the success and extent of his business, fiddling with the machine, paying off his machinist, and trying to swindle Kienast's company, Diederich responds to Kienast's suggestion with self-righteous amazement: 'Aber hören Sie mal, das ist Wucher!' Diederich's Gerechtigkeitsinn empörte sich laut' (149). Diederich's perverted sense of justice becomes especially clear when his use of the concept implies power for himself not fairness to others. In an earlier passage the narrator writes of Diederich: 'Während er dies sagte, empfand er es als durchaus unberechtigt,

³⁰ What adds to the humour here is the fact that Lauer's immorality consists in his sharing profits with his workers (95).

³¹ Mann's concern with justice and injustice assumes a concrete form in his portrayal of the Lauer trial and the later trial with Old Buck. See Müller-Seidel.

daß er irgendeinmal sollte gezwungen werden können, die beiden [Diederich's sisters] am Geschäft zu beteiligen' (123). This contradictory concept of justice already surfaces in the first pages of the novel when the narrator suggests that Diederich's 'Gerechtigkeitsinn' manifests itself only to his own advantage (9). Indeed, when Diederich considers the rights of the other, in this case the young Wolfgang Buck, he does so only for fear of Buck's potential power.

These genuine contradictions are mirrored by the novel's numerous aesthetic contrasts and odd juxtapositions, which add to the reader's sense of contradiction. While drinking beer with the Neoteutons, Diederich imagines himself as the head of a great postcard or toilet paper factory: 'Was man mit seiner Lebensarbeit schuf, war in tausend Händen' (24). A later allusion to his genuine power is equally undercut by its banality. Under the trademark 'Weltmacht' Diederich begins manufacturing toilet paper imprinted with 'moralische und staaterhaltende Maximen' (331).³² Diederich's statement that he has no doubts as to the future, for he has seen the Emperor's eyes flash, gives us yet another combination of the seemingly meaningful and the ludicrous (156). Especially comical are the many quotes from the Kaiser shoved inappropriately into the mouth of the little industrialist, for example the following lines from his inaugural address to his workers:

'Jetzt habe ich das Steuer selbst in die Hand genommen. Mein Kurs ist der richtige, ich führe euch herrlichen Tagen entgegen. Diejenigen, welche mir dabei behilflich sein wollen, sind mir von Herzen willkommen; diejenigen jedoch, welche sich mir bei dieser Arbeit entgegenstellen, zerschmettere ich.' / Er versuchte, seine Augen blitzen zu lassen, sein Schurrbart sträubte sich noch höher. / 'Einer ist hier der Herr, und das bin ich. Gott und meinem Gewissen allein schulde ich Rechenschaft. Ich werde euch stets mein väterliches Wohlwollen entgegenbringen. Umsturzgelüste aber scheitern an meinem unbeugsamen Willen.' (80)

Other odd juxtapositions derive from Diederich's diction; Napoleon Fischer's supercilious and passive resistance upsets Diederich: 'Je heftiger Diederich sich gebärdete, desto ruhiger ward der andere. Diese Ruhe war Aufruhr' (190). With purely aesthetic means Mann creates here the effect of inconsistency.

Similar in effect to such odd juxtapositions are the outrageous analogies Diederich makes between himself and the state. Clearly incongruous, they add symbolic weight to our sense that Diederich's genuine self is disappearing in his subservience to power, specifically, to the power of the nation, as well

³² These passages would seem to be deliberate allusions to Heine's famous image at the conclusion of *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*, especially when one considers them together with Wolfgang Buck's description of the future: 'Es wird keine gute Luft sein' (243).

as – paradoxically – to our understanding of Diederich's own sense of self as inflated.³³ Towards the end of the novel Diederich falsely imagines his power to be analogous to that of a great statesman or nation. As Diederich notices that Emma is getting along with, and might even marry, Wolfgang Buck, whom Diederich has just conquered in the political sphere, he decides: "Warum nicht! Bismarck hat es auch so gemacht mit Österreich. Zuerst niedergeworfen, dann ein Bündnis!" (346). Equally incongruous is the passage where Diederich hesitates as he enters Old Buck's abode: 'Unser alter Kaiser hat sich wahrscheinlich auch zusammenehmen müssen, als er nach Wilhelmshöhe zu dem gänzlich erledigten Napoleon ging' (362–63).³⁴

Throughout our reading we find examples of terms, concepts, or reactions that are out of place. Diederich refers to Delitzsch's death at the beer table as 'Tod auf dem Felde der Ehre' (27). Diederich employs the terms 'heroic' and 'sublime' to describe the outright murder of a worker:

'Für mich . . . hat der Vorgang etwas direkt Großartiges, sozusagen Majestätisches. Daß da einer, der frech wird, einfach abgeschossen werden kann, ohne Urteil, auf offener Straße! Bedenken Sie: mitten in unserem bürgerlichen Stumpfsinn kommt so was – Heroisches vor! Da sieht man doch, was Macht heißt.' (109)

Diederich's nationalism is brought to the point of absurdity when he shouts that if a lunatic asylum is established in Netzig, it must at least be a loyal one (94).³⁵ When Jadassohn, one of the novel's most eager power positivists, explains that he must reduce his ears for political reasons, Diederich responds with admiration and respect (323). Diederich's appeal to the Emperor when arguing for a canal in Netzig is so outrageous Heuteufel suggests that it amounts to *lèse majesté* (249). Even more out of place is Diederich's solemn statement on the first night of his honeymoon: "Bevor wir zur Sache selbst schreiten", sagte er abgehakt, "gedenken wir Seiner Majestät unseres allergnädigsten Kaisers. Denn die Sache hat den höheren Zweck, daß wir Seiner Majestät Ehre machen und tüchtige Soldaten liefern." (276)

Diederich's occasional outbreaks of sentimentality also strike us as absurd, not only because of their overdone emotionalism but because of the various objects of his lament, as for example when he cries at his release from the

³³ Diederich's firm assertion of power is undercut in another comical passage: 'Diederich fühlte den Helm auf seinem Kopf, er schlug gegen den Säbel an seiner Seite und sagte: "Ich bin sehr stark!" Der Telegrafist hielt es für eine Reklamation und zählte ihm das kleine Geld nochmals vor' (120).

³⁴ The alert reader will have noticed that Diederich's absurd statements and incongruous behaviour follow logically from his illogical position. On one level, Diederich's actions are incongruous, comic, and absurd; on another, they follow a very clear logic, for they are the consequence of his self-cancelling and unjust position.

³⁵ The hidden suggestion is that between fanatical nationalism and insanity there is no incongruity.

military (40). Still more striking are Diederich's overinterpretations and misinterpretations. When Diederich runs into a few difficulties trying to win Agnes' affection, he suddenly feels 'als verstehe er jetzt das Schicksal' (18). When Delitzsch's beer glass is taken away from him, Diederich sees in his face 'den ganzen, stürmisch bewegten Ernst des Daseins' (23). Finally, when Diederich hears the sentry's shot in chapter three, he is sure that the revolution has started (105).³⁶

The novel also presents us with abrupt transitions that give us a sense of incongruity. Almost immediately after condemning von Brietzen's lack of moral dignity, Diederich abandons his ephemeral principles and, when von Brietzen's car passes, bows before him (306). Another takes place when Diederich shifts from glaring condescendingly at Heuteufel to begging him plaintively to examine his throat (127). There are countless other examples of comedy in the novel:³⁷ when Diederich projects the Neoteutons on to the plot of Wagner's *Lohengrin* (265–70), when he runs around Rome with the Emperor and arrests a would-be assassin carrying tooth powder (234), or when he finds himself at the unveiling ceremony 'unter dem Rednerpult, im Wasser hockend' (360). These absurd antics add aesthetic force to the global self-cancellation of Diederich's position. They also place the reader in a detached frame, from which to view with a sense of the comic the events of the novel and, in particular, the consistent inconsistencies of its hero.³⁸ The narrator takes Diederich Heßling's veneration of power to the limits. *Der Untertan*, which awakens both laughter and reflection through its *reductio ad absurdum*, is a comic novel with a philosophical argument.

By showing Diederich's position in all its absurdity the novel offers an immanent refutation of injustice. Diederich's incongruous and comic position is essentially self-destructive and self-cancelling. Much as Plato argued that the unjust bring about their own destruction (*Republic* 375c), Heinrich Mann suggests that Diederich's position carries its own seeds of destruction. His love of power and of subjection to power inspires in him 'selbstmörderische Begeisterung' (36). Diederich admires 'die Macht . . . noch wenn sie uns zerschmettert' (47).³⁹

³⁶ Cf. similarly 243.

³⁷ Süßenbach provides a list of satiric moments in the novel, many of them comic. While sketching comparisons between contemporary cartoon characters and *Der Untertan*, Brude-Furnau also notes several passages with comic import.

³⁸ The two self-reflexive allusions to the inadequacies of the novel as a genre contribute similarly to aesthetic distance (6, 271).

³⁹ Plato suggests at the end of the *Republic* that the just individual has in the long run more success than the unjust – even though justice is independent of success (612b–14a). As a corollary to this in *Der Untertan* one might consider the above-mentioned references to Diederich's suicidal character and Old Buck's reference to 'die ewige Gerechtigkeit' (329) together with the glimmer of hope Old Buck sketches in chapter six (348). Nonetheless, the novel specifically refrains from offering the traditional comic ending in which the character who represents extreme subjectivity and pursues invalid

After sketching Diederich Heßling's concept of justice as the advantage of the more powerful, I drew attention to inconsistencies in his behaviour and suggested that these arose, necessarily, from his philosophical position. Diederich's concept of injustice or power positivism is philosophically untenable. Mann portrays the self-cancellation of this position not only in the content of the novel but in its formal aspects as well. Odd juxtapositions, expressions out of place, paradoxes, abrupt transitions, and non sequiturs, aesthetic elements that give the novel much of its humour, function as the aesthetic corollary of Diederich's self-contradictory concept of injustice.

By the same degree to which content and form diverge for Thrasymachus and Gorgias as they try to argue discursively and objectively for injustice, Heinrich Mann has unified content and form, showing the self-cancellation of injustice through aesthetic means. In so doing he has given a formal portrayal of a conceptual truth, what one philosopher has called the purpose of art:⁴⁰

Indem nun über die Kunst die Aufgabe hat, die Idee für die unmittelbare Anschauung in sinnlicher Gestalt und nicht in Form des Denkens und der reinen Geistigkeit überhaupt darzustellen und dieses Darstellen seinen Wert und Würdigkeit in dem Entsprechen und der Einheit beider Seiten der Idee und ihrer Gestalt hat, so wird die Höhe und Vortrefflichkeit der Kunst in der ihrem Begriff gemäßen Realität von dem Grade der Innigkeit und Einigkeit abhängen, zu welcher Idee und Gestalt ineinandergearbeitet erscheinen.

Logical structures and their means of illustration are what make a work of art universal. *Der Untertan* not only satirizes the peculiar vices of German bourgeois society, it ponders a universal problem.⁴¹

goals either adjusts or fails. We might today call Diederich's partial success and Mann's break with tradition Brechtian. Not only does Mann portray comic incongruities, he offers no simple solution; instead, he invites the reader who lives in a society where reckless subjectivity still prevails to work through these contradictions and consider their consequences.

⁴⁰ Hegel, XIII, 103. For Hegel satire, being the mere negation of negativity, does not yet spell out the absolute and cannot be viewed as the *pinnacle* of art; nonetheless, Mann's coherent aesthetic portrayal of a philosophical truth does correspond to Hegel's view of the basic *function* of art. The idea that art may serve philosophical truth in a proleptic or educative-illustrative manner seems to have fallen into disrepute recently; Hölsle's reading of the late Sophocles presents convincing arguments for the coherence of this idea as well as a clear demonstration of its interpretive power.

⁴¹ Readers accustomed to studying philosophy and literature primarily or exclusively under the rubric of influence will be tempted to ask whether evidence exists for Mann's knowledge of the principle of the self-cancellation of injustice. In his political essays, most especially the important essay from the time of *Der Untertan* ('Kaiserreich und Republik'), Mann speaks at length of 'Gerechtigkeit,' associating it with truth and wisdom and contrasting it to the realm of blind power, theater, comedy, and lies. Along

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with his insistence on justice, Mann valued philosophical rigour. When writing on the subject of educational reform in Germany after World War II, Mann urges that one of the primary subjects be logic: 'Gewiß werden die deutschen Schulen, nach Lehrstoff und Richtung, von Grund auf reformiert werden müssen. Ich empfehle als ein Hauptfach die Logik: empfehle sie nicht zum erstenmal, aber die Republik hörte mich nicht' ('Über Schuld und Erziehung,' XIII, 374). Mann's emphasis on both justice and logic leads one to think that he may have been aware of the internal inconsistencies and self-cancelling nature of injustice, although no evidence exists for his having actually studied and mastered the arguments in the *Republic* and *Gorgias*. The fact that Mann may not have thought of this philosophical reading of his novel is, however, inconsequential. It is of merely biographical interest.