



Omnia Mea Mecum Porto: Exile, Culture, and the Precarity of Life

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JOHN T. HAMILTON

OMNIA MEA MECUM PORTO

EXILE, CULTURE AND THE PRECARIETY OF LIFE

Fear is an education in what we are not, what we do not have, what we are supposed to care for and to care about, whose lack, or the fear of it, is so integral to the pursuit of security.

Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security*¹

The fearful experience of exile—of being banished, spiritually or physically, voluntarily or by force, from one’s home, society and culture—invariably occasions reflection on the precarious conditions of existence. Exile renders life *precarious* in the strictest sense, for the term, derived from the Latin word for “prayer” or “entreaty” (*prex*) denotes a state that is frighteningly uncertain, fully dependent on the charitable will of others, and therefore beyond the subject’s control. A person’s situation is precarious when one must pray to another for sustenance, lest he or she go hungry, when one must beg for safekeeping, lest he or she suffer or perish. Precariousness points to a grave lack or loss that can be satisfied only through another’s intervention; it leaves someone existentially vulnerable, reliant on benefits or gifts that may or may not arrive. Torn from the usual contexts of support and care, the exile is set adrift, eager to land in safe harbor, where concerns over one’s livelihood, possessions, and health may be addressed. As long as these concerns remain unanswered, as long as the exile’s prayers continue to fall on deaf ears, the risk of insecurity prevails.

This risk is a cause of fear precisely because it strikes at the very core of subjectivity; for the precariousness of exile reveals that the subject maintains but a

¹ Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), 34.

tenuous relationship to the property that constitutes its identity, be it one's possessions, one's body, or one's very own life. The exile discovers a split or even an abyss that divides one's subjectivity from one's existential being, the preservation of which is now shown to exceed the subject's rational will. An exile's being is precarious because its survival is out of his or her hands.

In the most dismal of circumstances, this neediness discloses the very structure of the subject, whose genealogy reaches back to the category of the *person* developed both in Roman law and Christian theology.² Both traditions consistently define human being by distinguishing between its personal aspects and its animal aspects, whereby the personal is understood as dominating the merely animal. A person is a human subject, whose reason and will lords over the simple fact of living; and it is the person who thereby is accorded the civil rights and privileges that are established and protected by law. Juridical precepts exclusively involve the *persona*, as opposed to the *homo*, since only the *persona* enjoys a legal status, since only the *persona* possesses an abstract identity recognized by the state, for example, the citizen, the father, the wife, the son, the daughter, and so forth. This objectification begins as a self-objectification, insofar as the person is the subject who has subjected one's animal being, someone who has transformed its living existence into a property. As the medieval theorists affirmed, one *is born* as a human being, but one *becomes* a person—*homo naturae, persona iuris civilis vocabulum* (“man is a term of nature, person is a term of civil law”); and it is precisely this definition of personhood as a civil, legal imputation which is perpetuated in modern liberalism.³ In extremely precarious cases, the exile is depersonalized, reduced to animal conditions, praying for legal recognition, begging for renewed legal status, which would ensure that one's life is once again regarded as one's rightful property. Until that moment, the exile suffers an expropriation, incapable of self-transcendence and therefore outside the law.

² This genealogy is fully traced in Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, Z. Hanafi, trans. (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 64–103.

³ Donellus (1517–91), cited in Esposito, *Third Person*, 81.

In contrast to the abstract, quasi-immaterial concept of the person, the experience of the refugee is highly concrete. No longer capable of enjoying the resources and assistance that one generally finds at home—among family members or within one’s community, from familiar settings and from dependable institutions—the banished subject generally prays for a new familiarity, a new community, a new culture—institutions that would recognize and therefore restore the subject’s personhood. Assimilation to fresh surroundings, adopting a different culture, would provide the ground for a new sustainable life and confirm the path to re-appropriation. Yet, locating a fresh supportive network has never been the only option open to exiles or, for that matter, to immigrants, whose circumstances frequently recall the plight of exile. One alternative course, feasible or not, would be to take along one’s familiar culture, to transport the conditions of home into the foreign dwelling. Rather than pray for external support, the subject could turn inward, drawing sustenance from the culture that is lodged within. The exile thus remedies the precarious consequences of having been uprooted, of having been cut off from one’s home, by bringing the home culture along. In other words, by transporting one’s culture as one’s rightful property, the subject perpetuates its status as a person, regardless of the new legal context.

Perhaps the most noteworthy expression of this line of action comes from Thomas Mann. On the morning of February 21, 1938, as he disembarked from the *Queen Mary* in New York Harbor, reporters asked the renowned Nobel laureate, “Whether he found his exile a difficult burden”:

“It is hard to bear,” he admitted, “but what makes it easier is the realization of the poisoned atmosphere in Germany. That makes it easier because it’s actually no loss. Where I am, there is Germany. I carry my German culture in me. I have contact with the world and I do not consider myself fallen.”⁴

⁴ “Mann Finds US Sole Peace Hope,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1938), 13. The German version is found among Mann’s papers: “Es ist schwer zu ertragen. Aber was es leichter macht, ist die Vergegenwärtigung der vergifteten Atmosphäre, die in Deutschland herrscht. Das macht es leichter, weil man in Wirklichkeit nichts verliert. Wo ich bin, ist Deutschland. Ich trage meine deutsche Kultur in mir. Ich lebe im Kontakt mit der Welt und ich betrachte mich selbst nicht als gefallenen Menschen.”

Mann's declaration, despite its optimism, does not neglect the pain of exile. Marginalized and then excluded by the nation of his birth, the famous author tersely acknowledges his difficulties: "It is hard to bear." Unlike ordinary travelers, whose luggage contains items needed or desired for a temporary sojourn away from home, Mann, specifically as an exile, carries an additional burden that instead consists in deprivation. He is loaded down not with possessions but rather by the fact of dispossession. In this case, the lightness of his baggage is inversely proportionate to the weight of his encumbrances. The less he carries, the more he has to bear as loss.

Six days before, when he left Cherbourg with his wife Katja and their son Michael, Mann only vaguely flirted with the idea of remaining long in the United States. It was his fourth trip to America and, like Hans Castorp, the unsuspecting hero of *The Magic Mountain*, he initially had little intention of an extended stay, planning instead to attend the opening of the Thomas Mann Collection at Yale University, followed by a swift cross-country lecture tour. His bags were packed accordingly, including sufficient clothing and some manuscripts of current works-in-progress. Otherwise, all else was left behind. Yet already on the ocean liner reports had been received of Hitler's accelerated advance to annex Austria and "reclaim" the Sudeten German lands. The threat of Nazi expansion cast its shadow on the celebrated author's first days in New York, where the idea of emigration would gradually assume greater urgency. His American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, tried to dispel the dire mood by providing quiet dinners, cozy rooms at the Hotel Bedford, and tickets to the Booth Theater for a performance of Kaufman and Hart's hit comedy *You Can't Take it With You*.⁵ The play's title would hardly have been lost on the seasoned ironist.

Facing the reporters on the gangplank in New York, Mann starkly admits that exile is a difficult burden to bear, but then, without hesitation, he immediately converts his victimhood into a victory. He adroitly picks up on the newsman's prompt and effects a transcendence based on a crucial negation: what he has lost is in fact "no loss." The burden of exile is not really a burden because the Germany that

⁵ See Donald Prater, *Thomas Mann: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 275.

he has left behind is not truly Germany. Rather, the eternal virtues and values of “German culture” are borne within, having been transported across the Atlantic, safely stored in the writer’s very being. “Where I am, there is Germany.” This proprietary claim can be and has been interpreted in at least two ways.⁶ For those who detect inclinations to megalomania in the author, Mann appears to overburden himself with the responsibility of representing his nation to the “world.” Critics thus denounce Mann’s inflated estimation of his representative role, his belief that he and he alone could embody the entirety of German culture. Is German culture any less present where Theodor Adorno now lives, where Hannah Arendt, Hermann Broch, Erwin Panofsky, Albert Einstein, and countless other writers, artists, scientists, and politicians now dwell? What gives Thomas Mann the exclusive right to speak for the values and ideals of an entire national tradition?

That said, in the view of more generous interpreters, Mann is hardly presenting himself as the incarnation of German culture, but rather is making the much more humble claim that he can console himself by the fact that he is able to retain what he has inherited from his education, that the artistic and intellectual traditions, which had always motivated and sustained his work, is property still in his possession, that this legacy is still readily accessible. Accordingly, when Heinrich Mann records his brother’s claim in his memoir, *Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt*, he glosses it with a verse from Goethe’s *Faust*, “Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vätern hast / erwirb es, um es zu besitzen” (“What you have inherited from your fathers / acquire it, in order to possess it,” v. 682–83).⁷ Heinrich Mann specifically refers to the “ideas and opinions, images and faces” (“Vorstellungen und Meinungen, Bildern und Gesichtern”) that the artist bears in his soul—material that is “no longer bound to any nation” (“an keine Nation mehr gebunden”), like the immortal, transcendent lines of Goethe’s tragedy that occasions this very reflection. A culture that is no longer bound to its territorial origin is a legacy that has undergone a certain

⁶ For an overview, see Helmut Koopmann, “Lotte in Amerika, Thomas Mann in Weimar,” in *Wagner, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann: Festschrift für Eckhard Heftrich*, H. Gockel, M. Neumann, and R. Wimmer, ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1993), 324–42.

⁷ Heinrich Mann, *Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1982), 215. Cf. Koopmann, “Lotte in Amerika,” 324.

abstraction or dematerialization, a process that is analogous to and in fact concomitant with the abstraction of personhood.

In this regard, Thomas Mann hardly exhibits delusions of grandeur. Instead, like many of his compatriots, he sees German culture on the brink of total asphyxiation, poisoned by the lethal atmosphere of fascism. His views are thus in line with general efforts among those driven out by the Nazi regime. Ever since the seizure of power in 1933, resistant movements emerged to redeem German culture from fascist perversion and oppression. In 1935 Heinrich Mann himself opened an impressively large congress, the International Union of Writers, with a speech entitled “Die Verteidigung der Kultur” (“The Defense of Culture”), which calls upon exiles to take their culture with them for safekeeping. Thomas Mann, as well, would work with figures like Peter de Mendelssohn to establish a “Deutsche Akademie in New York” and participate in the founding of the “American Guild for German Cultural Freedom,” pleading “for free German cultural life beyond the Reich’s borders” (“für das freie deutsche Kulturleben außerhalb der Reichsgrenzen”).⁸ Deterritorialized, German culture is now transportable. The true Germany has itself emigrated from a false Germany.

Thomas Mann’s attempts to defend German culture, already indicated in his gangplank interview, imply that this heritage is under threat of complete obliteration. He thus remedies his precarious circumstances not only by bearing his cultural support system within, but also by depicting Germany itself in the precarious situation of exile. The nation of his birth now depends on him. To retain its true value, Germany must pray to him. This kind of reversal is common enough: someone in a vulnerable position prevents further wounding by wounding the threatening other. On a fundamental, nearly physiological level, Mann reacts to his predicament by fleeing and by retaliating. To be sure, this flight-*and*-fight response offers but an emotional consolation in the face of continued difficulties. It is somewhat reminiscent of what Diderot identified as the *esprit de l’escalier*—the “staircase wit” that furnishes the perfect retort only after one has taken leave of the

⁸ Thomas Mann (1938), *Gesammelte Werke* 11: 942.

adversary. From a political realist perspective, Mann's personal denunciation of the Nazi regime, however significant and well broadcasted, however much it might sustain and even organize collective support among the growing community of refugees, would remain purely symbolic, at least until it could inspire and motivate a deadly, military response, capable of dismantling the fascist machine of war and murder. And certainly, the lives of millions, including the life of Thomas Mann, would continue to be precarious to varying degrees, until that moment when this formidable menace was definitively decimated. Since the time of Machiavelli and Hobbes, political realism has always insisted that the security of one party depends on the insecurity of the other, that the cure for impotence is always increased power.

All the same, Thomas Mann's portside pronouncement can hardly be limited or reduced to a political realist prescription for the maximization of power. Instead, it rests on the dual presupposition that something like cultural heritage exists and that it is somehow transportable. "I carry my German culture in me." In addition to being transported across the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, Thomas Mann himself acts as a stalwart vessel, freighted with what he regards as his nation's timeless values and accomplishments. The implication is that these goods are now viewed as caught in a highly precarious situation. Like an assiduous proprietor, Thomas Mann protects the cultural assets that in turn protect his personal status as an internationally acclaimed author with a singular voice: "I have contact with the world and do not consider myself fallen."

In brief, Thomas Mann remains upright by securing the cultural goods that secure his own personhood. Yet, although security works to assure his status, this kind of securitization cannot evade another, perhaps more insidious threat, namely the threat of complacency. If security spells the removal of care—*se-cura*—it invariably entails a promise as well as a peril, an existence that may be *carefree* but may also be *careless*. In an essay published only two months after Thomas Mann's arrival to New York, Walter Benjamin reflected on the nomadic state of the German intelligentsia and the tendency, among liberal thinkers, to promulgate the idea of German culture heritage (*Kulturerbe*):

Das ist angesichts des Zynismus verständlich, mit dem die deutsche Geschichte zurzeit geschrieben, deutsche Habe zurzeit verwaltet wird. Aber es wäre nichts gewonnen, wenn auf der andern Seite unter den drinnen Schweigenden oder denen, die draußen das Wort für sie führen dürfen, die Süffisanz der Erbberechtigten sich hervortäte, der Bettlerstolz eines andern *omnia mea mecum porto* zum guten Ton würde. Denn die geistigen Besitztümer sind derzeit um nichts besser gewährleistet als die materiellen.

This is understandable, in view of the cynicism with which German history is currently being written and German property currently administered. Yet nothing would be gained if, among those who are silent inside Germany or those who are able to speak for them outside, the complacency of would-be inheritors were given free rein, or if the beggarly boast "*Omnia mea mecum porto*" were to become the accepted tone. For these days, intellectual possessions are no more secure than material ones.⁹

The text is from the concluding paragraph of a short piece that Benjamin wrote on the significance of the exiled Frankfurt School, which, in his opinion, laudably maintains a critical approach to culture rather than relying on an affirmative, unquestioned concept of culture. Entitled *Ein deutsches Institut freier Forschung*, Benjamin's article appreciatively acknowledges the encouragement and real financial support that German refugees have received in the world's "great democracies," with the Institute of Social Research at Columbia University in New York and the Institut des Recherches Sociales at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris; yet, the social efficacy of these establishments depends on an undaunted willingness to interrogate cultural products. For Benjamin, preserving cultural heritage is meaningless if such preservation involves protecting these works, values, and ideals from all manners of assault. The precariousness of culture cannot be taken as an excuse for keeping culture safe from critique. By regarding one's culture as some inalienable property, one risks falling into complacency.

Benjamin's article appeared in the Swiss journal *Maß und Wert*, edited by Ferdinand Lion, a long-time personal friend of Thomas Mann, who regularly contributed to the journal. It is therefore most probable that Benjamin's reference to

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Ein deutsches Institut freier Forschung" (1938), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 3: 525. ["A German Institute for Independent Research," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, H. Eiland and M. Jennings, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 312].

the “beggarly boast” was directly targeted at the famous author’s comment in New York Harbor, which had already been widely disseminated among the German communities in exile. For Benjamin, Mann’s claim, that he carries German culture in him, unmistakably recalls the Latin dictum *omnia mea mecum porto*, “I carry all my things with me.” Although Benjamin can partially condone the sentiment, insofar as it has traditionally expressed philosophical triumph in the face of adversity, it rests on a number of presuppositions that Benjamin would certainly want to challenge, in particular, the manner of dematerialization and abstraction, which is prerequisite for culture’s transportability. In linking the phrase *omnia mea mecum porto* to the idea of “intellectual possessions” (*geistige Besitztümer*), Benjamin calls attention to the idealism that has always motivated its usage. Variably attested in a number of ancient sources, the dictum does indeed appear to summarize an especially Stoic denunciation of materiality.

One of the most vivid instances comes from the versified fable that Phaedrus wrote about the Greek poet Simonides.¹⁰ The poem’s opening line declares a straightforward moral: “The learned man always has riches in himself” (*Homo doctus in se semper divitias habet*). The story then introduces Simonides, the great lyric poet, who overcame poverty by traveling across Asia Minor, composing victory songs for an agreed wage in hard coin. After amassing a sizeable fortune, Simonides boarded a ship to take him to his home on the island of Ceos; but a rough storm broke out and instantly destroyed the old vessel. Some of the passengers frantically grabbed their purses and precious jewels, but Simonides took nothing, proclaiming, “All my things are with me” (*Mecum mea sunt cuncta* [14]). Only a few were able to swim away loaded down with material things; and those who managed to escape death unexpectedly encountered pirates, who subsequently robbed them of all their possessions. Ultimately, the survivors, including Simonides, landed on the shores of Clezomenai. A great lover of literature immediately recognized the famed poet by his voice and proceeded to supply him with clothing, money and servants. The others, stripped of everything, desperately tried to collect alms by displaying a

¹⁰ Phaedrus, *Fabula* 4: 21, “De Simonide.”

drawing of a shipwreck on tablets. When Simonides saw his poor shipmates, he admonished them: “I said that all my things are with me; what you took along has already come to nothing” (*Dixi ... mea / mecum esse cuncta; vos quod rapuistis perit* [26–27]).

The difference between Simonides, who jumps overboard with nothing, and his shipmates, who grab whatever is in reach, illustrates the distinction between two economic systems. As Phaedrus’s fable indicates, Simonides was frequently accredited with being the first poet who sold his work for money, precisely at a moment in history when earlier, aristocratic methods of gift-giving and material exchange were being supplanted by coinage. Whereas the anonymous crewmen hope to subsist on bartering, trading their goods—precious jewels or poignant drawings—for food, Simonides understands that his voice alone possesses value as a producer of desirable poetry.¹¹ Everyone on board faced the precarious event of shipwreck, yet only one managed to regain his losses.

The insufficiency of material goods again furnishes the theme in Cicero’s employment of the phrase, which he attributes to Bias of Priene, one of the legendary Seven Sages. When his town was being invaded, all struggled to flee with as many possessions as they could bear; Bias alone walked away with nothing. A neighbor urgently advised the philosopher to grab his belongings, but he calmly replied: “I’m doing so, for I carry all my things with me” (*facio, nam omnia mecum porto mea*).¹² The contents of a sagacious mind cannot be pillaged or destroyed. Mental portage is clearly a benefit in this mutable, contingent, and violent world. The same lesson is underscored by Valerius Maximus who, in his version of the story, explains that Bias escaped with everything “in his heart, not on his shoulders, things not to be seen with the eyes but valued by the spirit [*nec oculis visenda, sed aestimanda animo*].”¹³ The learned man understood the value of the spirit and the disposability of the physical. As long as one is able to detach goods and carry (*portare*) them in one’s mind, they remain invulnerable to damage or loss.

¹¹ Anne Carson reflects at length on Simonides’ role in the move toward a monetary system in *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10–27.

¹² Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 1.1.8.

¹³ Valerius Maximus, 7.2.

Physical objects are forever at risk, liable to damage, loss, or theft, while objects secured in the mind are far less vulnerable and even approach a kind of immortality. This accomplishment, the result of discipline, exercises, and meditation, greatly attracted the Roman Stoics of the Imperial period. Thus, Seneca relates the same story, now concerning the philosopher Stilbo, who lost his home, wife and children at the hands of Demetrius, the notorious destroyer of cities. This terrifying general arrived to taunt the wise man by asking if he lost anything, to which he replied:

“All my goods are with me” [*omnia bona mea mecum sunt*]. Behold the man strong and vigorous! He was victorious over the very victory of his enemy. “I have lost nothing,” he said; and made [Demetrius] doubt whether he had actually conquered. “All of my things are with me” [*omnia mea mecum sunt*]: justice, virtue, prudence—the very fact that he considered nothing good that could be taken away.¹⁴

As in the Simonides story, perishability signals a lack of value. Culture is what can be *imported* into the mind, that which is not bound or restricted by the material conditions of production. Having studied the great works of moral philosophy, Stilbo is no longer in need of the unwieldy scrolls. Because the content is detachable from the parchment or paper, the tyrant poses no real threat. For Thomas Mann, who carries German culture in him, for the Nobel Laureate, who recognizes himself as a producer of literature endowed with value, culture can pass through precarious circumstances unscathed insofar as it is essentially spiritual, non-material. Yet, as Benjamin in horrifying concision underscores, “These days, intellectual possessions are no more secure than material ones.”

Thanks to his belief in the culture’s basic detachability from its material provenance, Thomas Mann, arriving into New York, can transform his exile into an *opportunity*. An opportunity implies a convenient or promising time for entering a new phase in life, a moment when one literally stands “before the port” (*ob-portus*) that leads from one place to the next. The *opportune* moment evokes the harbor, recalling the point of embarkation where one can bear (*portare*) goods to profitable ends. In Latin, the adjective *opportunus* originally described a favorable wind in the harbor, gesturing to Portunus, the god who watched over ports and whose temple at

¹⁴ Seneca, *Epistle* 9.18–19

Rome was erected in the Forum Boarium near the bend in the Tiber where cargo barges arrived to and from the city. The opportunist is always prepared to close the door (*porta*) on one part of life in order to open the door onto another. The fresh overture is premised on a closure. Benjamin, however, reminds us that keeping cultural value safe in transport, although beneficial to the individual bourgeois writer, gains nothing for society at large, especially for those trapped on the other side of the closed door. In redeeming culture from precariousness, a general precarity persists. As history would have it, the winds that proved favorable for Thomas Mann at the Port of New York would not blow as benignly for Benjamin at the Catalonian border town of Portbou.

Needless to say, the conclusion of World War II did nothing to end the horrific peril of many lives. Even after the Nazi's program of expropriating and depersonalizing entire populations had been brought to a halt, the consequences would continue to be felt across the globe. Germany's unconditional surrender could barely heal the millions wounded, killed, and murdered, the millions who suffered unspeakable loss—a devastation of humanity which found an analogue in the millions displaced, homeless, and poverty-stricken in the war's aftermath. With or without justification, the fate of ethnic German populations was especially dire, humbled by military defeat and profound shame, compelled to cope with occupied cities that lay buried in rubble. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the wake of the Reich's collapse, a German cultural heritage, especially when tied to a particular territory, would come to represent a considerable liability. In many cases, this cultural identity hardly counted as personal property but rather as a marker of a racialized, all-too-physical body.

With tragic irony, it was this kind of embodied culture that would haunt the German population of Romania, the people of Banat, Transylvania and Bukovina who, in 1945, were singled out by the Soviet Union for forced labor under the rubric of war reparations. Due to their ethnic affiliation alone, tens of thousands of German-Romanians, regardless of individual responsibility, were sent to Russian camps to work in deadly harsh conditions. Rather than being a possession willingly

transported, their German cultural heritage became a rationale for mass deportation.

In her recent novel, *Atemschaukel*, published in 2009, the year she, too, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Herta Müller strives to give voice to this terrifying experience. She relates the story of Leopold Auberg, a seventeen-year-old bound for the camps, who speaks in the first-person. Müller's account is based on her work with the German-Romanian poet, Oskar Pastior, who provided a vast array of details from his own traumatic experience in the Soviet camps. The book opens with a theme both familiar and strange:

Alles, was ich habe, trage ich bei mir.
 Oder: Alles Meinige trage ich mit mir.
 Getragen habe ich alles, was ich hatte. Das Meinige war es nicht. Es war entweder zweckentfremdet oder von jemand anderem.

All that I have I carry on me.
 Or: All that is mine I carry with me.
 I carried everything that I had. Mine it wasn't. It was either repurposed or from someone else.¹⁵

In the opening sentence, the deported narrator begins by observing that his baggage amounts to nothing more than what he is able to carry. And as the novel unfolds, we learn how this poverty is linked to the protagonist's neediness and crippling hunger. His life is precarious insofar as it is entirely dependent on the Russian wardens for sustenance. With the second, corrective sentence—a clear translation of the Stoic *omnia mea mecum porto*—the narrator exhibits an attempt at self-fortification, a desire to immunize himself from precarity by transforming mere baggage into inalienable property. Yet, this dream is immediately exposed as delusional: what Leopold manages to take along with him to the labor camp is explicitly not his property. Property implies a personal proprietor, but Leopold's personhood, reduced to race, has fully collapsed into his animal, impersonal being.

For his journey to the north, Leopold's family has removed the home's electric gramophone from its leather case, to be used as a makeshift suitcase. The

¹⁵ Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2009), 7 [*The Hunger Angel*, P. Boehm, trans. (New York: Picador, 2012), 1 (translation modified)].

privilege of voice, even one that is mechanically reproduced, is denied him. Indeed, one could read the novel's entire first-person narrative as a desperate struggle to find a voice. The attention paid to physical survival, to the preservation of mere life, which is sustained throughout Müller's account, essentially reduces Leopold to a non-person. In contrast to Thomas Mann, who was able to remain a person supported by his cultural property, Leopold, the compelled laborer who has nothing, persists as a non-person or a depersonalized subject. He therefore fails to possess language entirely, finding himself instead possessed by language:

Es gibt Wörter, die machen mit mir, was sie wollen. Sie sind ganz anders als ich und denken anders, als sie sind. Sie fallen mir ein, damit ich denke, es gibt erste Dinge, die das Zweite schon wollen, auch wenn ich gar nicht will. (232)

There are words that do with me what they will. They are completely different from me and think differently than what they are. They occur to me, so that I think, there are first things that already want a second thing, even when I don't want it at all. (221; modified)

The inability to gain cognitive, volitional control over language is symptomatic of Leopold's precarious life—a life unprotected by law. Even before his internment, Leopold's homosexual adventures marked him out as an outsider; and after his return, he could only view his family's home as another prison. Yet, rather than strive to defend himself from this precarity, he fully embraces it and thereby discovers a neutral, impersonal voice—one that rejects the law that divorces a sovereign person from a subsumed body. His language, which consists in listening to words that do with him what they will, expresses a renunciation of the law that enthrones personhood by separating life from itself. Thus, he initially accepts his deportation, which he prefers to view not as banishment but rather as an escape from a home that was never his. All the same, his experience in the labor camp exposes the limit of a depersonalized life, one that grapples with a subjectivity that is denied the protection of personhood; as Hannah Arendt would express it, a subjectivity that is utterly refused the "right to have rights."

Mann, Benjamin and the narrator of Müller's lyrical novel offer reflections on the precarity of culture under extreme conditions, all by having some recourse to the

Latin dictum *omnia mea mecum porto*, which further connects the fate of culture to various forms of subjectivity. Thomas Mann, with or without modesty, regards himself as the embodiment of a culture torn from the territorial confines of the nation-state. His personal exile, therefore, discloses the fact of Germany's exile from Germany. *Kultur*—in the specific German sense of *Geisteskultur* or *Bildung*—must find a new home within the space of American *culture*, which would come to include, at least in Adorno's estimation, the American culture industry.¹⁶ For Benjamin, this transportation, however justified, can only maintain a rather untenable concept of culture. The wisdom of the Latin dictum thus falls apart, insofar as the distinction between intellectual and material possessions is no longer operative in the face of totalitarianism. Despite the initial attempt to re-appropriate Stoic virtue and with it the feasibility of personhood in the midst of dire circumstances, Müller's protagonist can only mock the ideal of a culture rendered safe from material contingency, compelled to carry possessions as remnants of a culture that was never his. Yet, precisely by transporting and transmitting only what he has but can never own, he hits upon a unique opportunity, exposing the limits of all attempts to *immunize* oneself from the *community* of humans—a community that shares what is, in the end, of vital importance, namely the vulnerability and the inescapable fragility of our mortal existence.

¹⁶ Adorno reflects on the distinction between the German sense of *Geisteskultur* and the implications of the American culture industry in his speech for the Hessische Hochschulwochen für staatswissenschaftliche Fortbildung in Bad Wildungen, July 9, 1958: "*Kultur* and Culture," M. Kalbus, trans., *Social Text* 27 (2009), 145–58.