

Isolated World Citizen

By Philip Toynbee
(Special to The Whig-Standard)

The figure of Thomas Mann has already been an elusive one, impossible to fit into any of the literary or political categories in which our minds rejoice. The frontispiece to a new American symposium shows a rather prim-looking moustached man, sitting upright in a Victorian armchair, a cigar between the fingers, and the two hands disdainfully holding a manuscript in front of his rimless spectacles. This might be a successful product of Harley Street or the City. And in fact Mann is the proud scion of a line of patrician business men from the Hanseatic town of Luebeck, and his first great novel, Buddenbrooks, was written both to honour and obituarize his own family. Not the least bewildering phenomenon about his life is that this mature and epic work was published when its writer was only twenty-five years old. Unlike poets, novelists are almost invariably late to develop, and their early work is usually best forgotten. But Mann's first novel is comparable in stature to his last one.

In the literature of this century, Mann has always been a solitary figure, outside the changing fashions. If a contemporary English critic were asked to list the most important novelists of the last fifty years, he would probably mention four or five French names, four or five English ones and two or three Americans. Reminded of Mann, he would flick his fingers in exasperation at his omission, and quickly include him in an honourable position on his list. This is partly due to the very simple fact that Mann is a German. Not only is it true that in the past Germany has produced no novelist of world fame and reputation (unless Goethe be considered a novelist), but also Germany has always been culturally apart from that Mediterranean Europe to which, for cultural purposes, England undoubtedly belongs. (It is significant that Englishmen learn French before they learn German, and that France, not Germany, is the representative European country in the English mind).

For a long time Mann chose to emphasize this cultural isolation. He even rejoiced in it; and during the First World War he wrote a deeply and consciously reactionary pamphlet glorifying the cause of the German Empire. And one aspect of that was certainly the 2000-year old conflict between Northern and Southern Europe; between the Teutons and the peoples of the Mediterranean; more specifically, between Kultur and Civilization. Teutonically enough, Mann describes his literary work during that war in military terms—"I bore the arms of thought for two years" and "returned a disabled veteran".

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But the stiff and constricting ideology of the German Junkers could not hold him for long; he is a man and writer of expansive spirit, and he was bound to break out of the self-elected bonds of his early nationalism. The rise of the Nazi Party only hastened a process which was in any case inevitable. From the early twenties onwards Mann was an outspoken and representative figure of the democratic and "Europeanizing" Weimar Republic. He and his family left Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933, and since that time he was a militant opponent of all that his beloved Fatherland had become. Representative now of the "other" Germany, the exiles who had rejected their country's perversion, Mann wandered somewhat disconsolately from Switzerland to Czechoslovakia and back, before settling at last in America. He is now an American citizen, living his resolutely family life in California.

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Yet in spite of Mann's change of heart, in spite of the fact that he has become almost too good to be true in his perfectly genuine role of "world citizen", Mann remains apart, both in his art and in the peculiar atmosphere which surrounds him. His great novels, "The Magic Mountain", the "Joseph" books, "Lotte In Weimar", "Dr. Faustus", are very different from each other. But none of them at all resembles any other novel of our time. He is the heir of Goethe and a writer of such voluminous intensity that more meagre contemporary talents are sometimes overpowered, almost appalled by his controlled exuberance. He cannot, of course, be universal, as Goethe was before him, because our modern specialization of knowledge makes true universality impossible. But in his understanding of music and history, of psychology and theology, philosophy and medicine and archaeology, Thomas Mann is the nearest thing we have to a universal writer.

Yet he remains apart! As this very peculiar and adulatory symposium suggests, he is the God of a cult. Just as Marx was not a Marxist, so Mann is certainly not a Mannite. He is too sardonic to worship at his own shrine. But the members of his cult, often cranky, often hysterical and misguided in their praises, have made a kind of smoke screen round their idol which may easily offend a more cautious approacher. Behind it there sits a figure by no means Olympian; a writer who is often verbose and clumsy; a political moralist who is often platitudinous; but a great and dignified and humorous product of our age.

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ISOLATED WORLD CITIZEN

By Philip Toynbee

(Special to The Whig-Standard)

The figure of Thomas Mann has already been an elusive one, impossible to fit into any of the literary or political categories in which our minds rejoice. The frontispiece to a new American symposium shows a rather prim-looking moustached man, sitting upright in a Victorian armchair, a cigar between the fingers, and the two hands disdainfully holding a manuscript in front of his rimless spectacles. This might be a successful product of Harley Street or the City. And in fact Mann is the proud scion of a line of patrician business men from the Hanseatic town of Luebeck, and his first great novel, *Buddenbrooks*, was written both to honour and obituarize his own family. Not the least bewildering phenomenon about his life is that this mature and epic work was published when its writer was only twenty-five years old. Unlike poets, novelists are almost invariably late to develop, and their early work is usually best forgotten. But Mann's first novel is comparable in stature to his last one.

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Übersetzung Dr. Matthias Stuber, München

Isolierter Weltbürger - Der einsame Weltbürger – Der isolierte Weltbürger

Von Philip Toynbee
(Speziell zu 'The Whig-Standard')

Die Figur des Thomas Mann war bereits schwer fassbar, unmöglich in eine der literarischen oder politischen Kategorien zu passen, derer sich unser Geist erfreut. Das Titelbild zu einer aktuellen amerikanischen Konferenz zeigt einen eher steif aussehenden Mann mit Schnurrbart, der aufrecht in einem viktorianischen Sessel sitzt, eine Zigarre zwischen den Fingern, und die beiden Hände, die geringschätzig ein Manuskript vor seine randlose Brille halten.

Dies könnte ein erfolgreiches Produkt von ‚Harley Street‘ oder ‚The City‘ sein. Und tatsächlich ist Thomas Mann der stolze Spross einer Reihe patrizischer Geschäftsleute aus der Hansestadt Lübeck, und sein erster großer Roman, Buddenbrooks, wurde sowohl zu Ehren als auch zum Nachruf seiner eigenen Familie geschrieben. Nicht das am wenigsten verwirrende Phänomen in seinem Leben ist, dass dieses reife und epische Werk veröffentlicht wurde, als sein Autor erst fünfundzwanzig Jahre alt war. Im Gegensatz zu Dichtern entwickeln sich Romanautoren meist immer spät und ihr Frühwerk wird normalerweise am besten vergessen. Aber Thomas Manns erster Roman ist in seiner Gestalt mit seinem letzten vergleichbar.

In der Literatur dieses Jahrhunderts war Thomas Mann immer eine „solitäre“ Figur, außerhalb der sich ändernden Moden. Wenn ein zeitgenössischer englischer Kritiker gebeten würde, die wichtigsten Romanautoren der letzten fünfzig Jahre aufzulisten, würde er wahrscheinlich vier oder fünf französische Namen nennen, vier oder fünf englische und zwei oder drei Amerikaner. An Thomas Mann erinnert, „schnalzte er verärgert über seine Unterlassung mit den Fingern“ und nahm ihn schnell in eine ehrenvolle Position auf seine Liste. Das liegt zum Teil an der sehr einfachen Tatsache, dass Thomas Mann ein Deutscher ist. Es stimmt nicht nur, dass Deutschland in der Vergangenheit keinen Romanautor von Weltruf und -ansehen hervorgebracht hat (es sei denn, Goethe wird als Romancier betrachtet), sondern Deutschland war auch kulturell immer von jenem mediterranen Europa getrennt, zu dem England für kulturelle Zwecke zweifellos gehört. (Es ist bezeichnend, dass Engländer Französisch lernen, bevor sie Deutsch lernen, und dass Frankreich, nicht Deutschland, das repräsentative europäische Land im englischen Kopf ist).

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Lange Zeit entschied sich Thomas Mann dafür, diese kulturelle Isolation zu betonen. Er freute sich sogar darüber; und während des Ersten Weltkriegs schrieb er eine zutiefst und bewusst konservativen Text, in dem er das Deutschen Reiches glorifiziert. Und ein Aspekt davon war sicherlich der zweitausend Jahre alte Konflikt zwischen Nord- und Südeuropa; zwischen den Germanen und den Völkern des Mittelmeers; genauer gesagt, zwischen „Kultur“ und „Civilization“. Teutonisch genug beschreibt Mann sein literarisches Werk während dieses Krieges in militärischen Begriffen – "Ich trug zwei Jahre lang die Waffen des Denkens" und "kehrte als versehrter, Veteran zurück".

Aber die strenge und einengende Ideologie der deutschen Junker konnte ihn nicht lange halten; er ist ein Mann und Schriftsteller mit expansivem Geist, und er musste aus den selbstgewählten Fesseln seines frühen Nationalismus ausbrechen. Der Aufstieg der NSDAP beschleunigte nur einen Prozess, der ohnehin unvermeidlich war. Seit den frühen zwanziger Jahren war Thomas Mann eine

realistische und repräsentative Persönlichkeit der demokratischen und "europäisierenden" Weimarer Republik. Er und seine Familie verließen Deutschland, als Hitler 1933 an die Macht kam, und seitdem war er ein militanter Gegner all dessen, was sein geliebtes Vaterland geworden war. Stellvertretend für das "andere" Deutschland, die Exilanten, die die Perversion ihres Landes abgelehnt hatten, wanderte Thomas Mann etwas untröstlich von der Schweiz in die Tschechoslowakei und zurück, bevor er sich zuletzt in Amerika niederließ. Er ist jetzt amerikanischer Staatsbürger und lebt sein entschiedenes Familienleben in Kalifornien.

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Doch trotz Thomas Manns Sinneswandel, trotz der Tatsache, dass er fast zu gut geworden ist, um in seiner vollkommen authentischen Rolle des "Weltbürgers" wahr zu sein, bleibt Mann für sich, sowohl in seiner Kunst als auch in der eigentümlichen Atmosphäre, die ihn umgibt. Seine großen Romane "Der Zauberberg", die "Joseph"-Bücher, "Lotte in Weimar", "Dr. Faustus" unterscheiden sich sehr voneinander. Aber keiner von ihnen ähnelt einem anderen Roman unserer Zeit. Er ist der Erbe Goethes und ein Schriftsteller von so umfangreicher Intensität, dass manchmal dürftigere, zeitgenössische Talente überwältigt werden, fast entsetzt sind über seine kontrollierte Ausgelassenheit. Natürlich kann er nicht so universell sein, wie Goethe es vor ihm war, weil unsere moderne Spezialisierung des Wissens wahre Universalität unmöglich macht. Aber in seinem Verständnis von Musik und Geschichte, von Psychologie und Theologie, Philosophie und Medizin und Archäologie kommt Thomas Mann einem Universalschriftsteller am nächsten.

Doch er bleibt für sich! Wie dieses sehr besondere und lobende Symposium nahelegt, ist er der Gott eines Kultes. So wie Marx kein Marxist war, so ist Thomas Mann sicherlich kein Mannist. Er ist zu „sardonisch“, um ihn in seinem eigenen Schrein anzubeten. Aber die Mitglieder seiner Sekte, oft launisch, oft hysterisch und fehlgeleitet in ihrem Lob, haben eine Art Nebelwand um ihr Idol gemacht, die einen vorsichtigeren Näherkommenden leicht beleidigen könnte. Dahinter sitzt eine Persönlichkeit, keineswegs olympisch; ein Schriftsteller, der oft ausführlich und ungeschickt ist; ein politischer Moralist, der oft platt ist; aber ein großes, würdevolles und humorvolles Produkt unserer Zeit.

(OFNS Urheberrecht)