CHAPTER 2

The Greatest Living Man of Letters

At the time when Buddenbrooks first became a matter of comparative, instead of merely national literature, it was natural enough to define the scope of its author in terms of Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. H. G. Wells, Samuel Butler, Romain Rolland. Today, with The Magic Mountain coming into its logical position in a whole world’s excited awareness, these comparisons begin to strike qualified judges as unconsciously trivializing. The names which would be appropriate instead are Dante, Goethe, Balzac, Shakespeare.

—Promotional brochure published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1930

Ever since the days when such formidable mediocrities as Galsworthy, Dreiser, Tagore, Romain Rolland or Thomas Mann were being accepted as geniuses, I have been perplexed and amused by fabricated notions about so-called “great books.” That, for instance, Mann’s asinine Death in Venice, Pasternak’s melodramatic, vilely written Dr. Zhivago, or Faulkner’s corn-cobby chronicles can be considered “masterpieces,” or at least what journalists term “great books,” is to me the same sort of absurd delusion as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair.

—Vladimir Nabokov, in a televised interview, 1965

For the majority of the years that Thomas Mann spent cultivating his reputation as a representative writer first in Germany, and then on the European scene, he remained a nonentity in the United States. The first American edition of a Mann story (Tonio Kröger, in a translation by Bayard Quincy Morgan) wasn’t published until 1915; the first of his novels (Royal Highness, translated by A. Cecil Curtis) followed in 1916. Both were commercial failures. H. L. Mencken was thus almost certainly correct when he asserted, in an editorial for his journal the Smart Set, that there were “but half a dozen [people] who could name offhand the principal works of Thomas Mann” in the United States in 1920.1 This disinterest, furthermore, was mutual. Mann’s diaries, letters, and essays of the period show little curiosity about the United
States. As late as 1929, he dismissed Americans as a “childish race” in print (GW, 10:703). He would not set foot in the New World until 1934.²

In light of this rocky start, it is all the more surprising to discover that by around 1930, Mann’s books and the author himself were routinely showered with hyperbolic praises in the American press. This development began in 1922, when the little magazine the Dial introduced Mann to the US public as “generally and rightly looked upon by his countrymen as their most distinguished living man of letters,” and reached a first high point in 1930, when Alfred A. Knopf, hoping to capitalize on Mann’s recent Nobel Prize, published a brochure (quoted in the first epigraph to this chapter) that not only compared the author to Dante and William Shakespeare but also declared him to be “a very great man indeed.”³ By then, the locution “the greatest living man of letters” had already become a fixture of marketing materials; in 1934 the respected journalist Dorothy Thompson gave it the veneer of a neutral judgment when she titled one of her reviews “The Most Eminent Living Man of Letters.”⁴ Time magazine’s cover profile of the author, the first such story dedicated to a non-Anglophone writer, was published the same year and simply called “Great Mann.”⁵ Other journalists and critics coined even more outlandish epithets: “man of genius and gentleman,” “the greatest interpreter of the human spirit,” “the dean of novelists.”⁶

Given that Mann himself did not visit the United States until well after this discourse had become entrenched in the American press, it clearly did not owe anything to his personal charisma or even to his own active interventions. The flattering descriptions were, instead, the creation of actors in the American cultural field, especially Alfred A. Knopf. Indeed, publishers in the 1920s began to discover the considerable value of promoting not only books but also authors. A 1922 article in the New York Tribune averred that following the First World War, “the simple [promotional] paragraphs of an elder age assumed a new and more interesting form, dealing not only with the books, but with their authors, concerning whom all sorts of personal information was set afloat and widely read and quoted.”⁷ Ordinary readers eagerly participated in this process, and embraced the authors who were promoted to them as inspirational figures. The books that these readers purchased served a recreational as well as an educational and practical function. They were tools for finding one’s way in a changing world and thus often acquired meanings that their original creators could neither anticipate nor fully control.

Thomas Mann’s rise to literary prominence in the United States thus took place within the larger context of a newly emerging and distinctively American cultural formation, the “middlebrow.” The mere evocation of this term
may on first sight appear both slanderous to Mann’s reputation and deeply insulting to his present-day readers. For after all, is the middlebrow not by definition antithetical to “serious” modern literature, and more specifically to that other developing cultural category of the 1920s with which Mann is more commonly and more favorably associated, to “modernism”?

Vladimir Nabokov certainly thought so. In the second epigraph that introduces this chapter, he gestures toward the middlebrow by his repeated derogatory use of the phrase “great books,” a lexical conjunction that entered the American vocabulary around 1920 and reached its peak usage around 1940. As Nabokov himself recognizes, the notion of the “great book,” which is closely related to that of the “great man of letters,” can only partially be reduced to seemingly synonymous terms such as the “masterpiece.” It is instead, as the cultural historian Joan Shelley Rubin has shown, a signature phrase of the middlebrow idiom.8 Nabokov then follows up on his condemnation by providing some book recommendations of his own, all of them gospel texts of the modernist movement: “My greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose are, in this order, Joyce’s Ulysses, Kafka’s Transformation, Bely’s St. Petersburg, and the first half of Proust’s fairy tale, In Search of Lost Time.”9

However, in a bit of irony that seems to have escaped the Russian master, this pronouncement itself makes use of one of the most characteristic forms of the middlebrow, the ranked list. With pedantic earnestness, Nabokov lays down the law: not just what texts should count as great literature, but also their internal hierarchy. This telling detail suggests that modernism and the middlebrow perhaps aren’t as antithetical to one another as Nabokov himself believed. And indeed, the novel that Nabokov ranks above all others, Ulysses, was published in the United States in the Modern Library imprint at Random House, another institution that Rubin identifies as essential to the development of middlebrow taste. There, it stood side by side with a 1932 reprint of The Magic Mountain by that “formidable mediocrity” Thomas Mann.10

Modernism and the middlebrow have, in other words, never truly stood in opposition to one another. “Ordinary” readers have always shown an appetite for experimental literary texts (from Joyce’s Ulysses [1922] to David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest [1996]), and the high priests of modernism frequently acquired their place in the canon through a process of commodification virtually indistinguishable from that also applied to more conventional celebrities.11 Some authors of stylistically ambitious fiction, like Ernest Hemingway, have reveled in this crossover dimension. Others, like Jonathan Franzen, have been appalled by it. Thomas Mann, who was certainly a more formally demanding author than either Hemingway or Franzen, belongs in
the former camp. Although he never compromised in his fiction, he also delighted in his popular success, and saw no inconsistency between his reputation as a literary heavyweight and the fact that his face adorned the front pages of magazines in American dentists’ offices.

The process by which Mann was canonized as the “greatest living man of letters” in the New World certainly had many similarities to his staging as a representative writer in the Old. But there were enormous differences as well, and these would turn out to be consequential for literary history, including literary history back in Germany.

The Struggle for American Culture

As the last chapter already made clear, the German word Kultur and the English word “culture” are at best highly problematic synonyms. Nineteenth-century German society was characterized by a dearth of democratic civic traditions, for which the burgher class compensated with an exaggerated pride in its own cultural achievements. In America the situation was very different. The United States in the late nineteenth century was a country rich in republican customs, but as yet without many hegemonic cultural traditions that could have played a dominant role in reinforcing national identity. American identity was then (and indeed continues to be to this day) far more likely to be defined by social values like the ones codified in the Bill of Rights or the Gettysburg Address than by poems, folk songs, or popular plays. This fact does not imply, of course, that Americans did not have any culture of their own, as chauvinist discourse in Germany liked to aver at the time. But it does mean that culture was talked about differently and that it played a different role in society at large.

The few intellectuals, almost all Anglo-Saxon by heritage, who did worry about the nature of “American culture” during this period mostly modeled their thought on English thinkers. In contrast to the German-speaking world, English critics viewed culture primarily as an expression of class identity rather than of nationality. To be “cultured” meant to be able to display wit, beauty, and refinement and to thereby testify to the intellectual and spiritual suppleness that were thought to be prerequisites for elevated social positions. In America the Unitarian theologians who clustered around Harvard University in the early nineteenth century wedded these so-called “genteel virtues” to an expressly religious program that viewed a cultured sensibility as an important step toward the attainment of salvation. This fusion of aesthetic refinement with moral responsibility also gave rise to a specifically American conception of the representative writer. Such writers were tasked with
the secular equivalent of the social function traditionally performed by the clergy. That is, they were “duty bound to remain immersed in democratic society—guiding, criticizing, and elevating it.”¹³ In sharp contrast to the German tradition, in which poets were expected to refrain from social commentary and writers who strayed too far into contemporary affairs risked being denigrated as mere Literaten, American intellectuals thus from a fairly early period onward drew an intimate connection between elite literary activity and civic engagement. This emphasis would later also become one of the distinguishing characteristics of middlebrow culture.

Initially, however, the social transformations of the twentieth century seemed a threat to the equation between culture and democracy. The rapid modernization and urbanization of the United States created a fear of what in the parlance of the time was known as the “standardization” of minds. American civilization, so conservative thinkers fretted, was extremely good at channeling social energies toward economic improvement, but it lacked the institutions necessary to instill a sense of culture in the masses. At the same time, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of unprecedented immigration to the United States from non-English-speaking countries. Many of these immigrants were illiterate, a fact that only increased conservative fears about the ability of Anglo-American culture to guide and elevate the populace. These fears were matched by equally strong worries that immigrants might cling to the traditions of their respective countries of origin rather than embrace the cultural identity of their new home. In a famous address given on Columbus Day 1915, the former president Theodore Roosevelt thus averred that “there is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.”¹⁴

One need only remember that this address was given less than half a year after the sinking of the Lusitania to realize that one of its main targets was the German American community, which in the early twentieth century offered by far the strongest challenge to the dominance of Anglo-Saxon traditions in America.¹⁵ Indeed, there was something of a battle going on at this time between the American and the German approaches to culture and to representative art. This battle can best be illustrated with a reference to two different publishing projects undertaken in the United States during the years immediately before the First World War, which both attempted to introduce a popular readership to “classic” (i.e., representative) works of literature. These two projects mark the opposite poles of the cultural force field in which Thomas Mann’s reception would unfold during the interwar period.
On one side of this force field stood the fifty-one-volume anthology *The Harvard Classics*, which Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard University, compiled and published in 1909. Popularly known as the “Five Foot Shelf,” *The Harvard Classics* represented a practical response to a thesis that Eliot had advanced on several earlier occasions in speeches and letters, namely that in an age in which only 3 percent of adult Americans possessed a college degree, all basic elements of a liberal education might nevertheless be obtained by spending just fifteen minutes a day reading from a collection of books that could fit on small bookshelf. The motivation behind the endeavor was thus civic and educational in nature: in a twentieth-century spin on the genteel tradition, Eliot hoped to instill in his harried readers the virtues of republican democracy by providing them with a universally accessible version of a liberal education.

During the 1920s, Eliot’s “Five Foot Shelf” would inspire the rise of the so-called Great Books courses at American colleges and universities—first at Columbia, where John Erskine began teaching a version of such a class in 1920, and later also at the University of Chicago. The defining feature of these courses was that they approached time-honored books as though they were contemporary works. Discarding philological erudition and hermeneutic acrobatics, the teachers in Great Books courses instead challenged their students to reflect on the ways in which Plato, Shakespeare, or Ralph Waldo Emerson might speak to the problems of contemporary society. Thomas Mann, too, eventually found a home in these courses, where his reputation lives on long after he fell out of favor with mainstream American society.

There was another important feature about Eliot’s project that would have ramifications for Mann’s reception during the interwar period. Like the Great Books courses that followed in its wake, it treated scientific treatises, autobiographical reflections, essays, and even holy scriptures as exactly equivalent to literature. After all, what counted most in a text was not in what context or by whom it was written, but rather what it had to say to the reader. As a result of this preconditioning, American readers tended to treat Mann’s literary and nonfictional works on equal footing, instead of regarding the author (as his own countrymen did, and largely continue to do to this day) as primarily a novelist whose essays were of secondary importance.

Eliot’s attempt to adapt the genteel tradition to the needs of the modern American nation can be contrasted with the anthology *The German Classics of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, which the Harvard German professor Kuno Francke launched in 1913. If Eliot’s *Harvard Classics* was a populist attempt to provide a liberal education to a fragmented public, the Francke
edition represented an unmistakable attempt to agitate for German Kultur in an age in which American public opinion was rapidly turning against it.\textsuperscript{16} It was published in twenty sumptuous volumes, each with an imperial eagle embossed in gold leaf on the cover (figure 2.1). The cheapest version, bound in buckram, sold for ninety dollars and was thus priced well out of reach of the average consumer. The most expensive version, the “Emperor edition” in pigskin, retailed for $675, or roughly the price of a Ford Model T.

In sharp contrast to Eliot’s Harvard Classics, the Francke edition stuck to a very conservative definition of Kultur, anthologizing only traditional literary genres, such as plays, poems, and short stories. Its aim was not to lead

**Figure 2.1.** A volume of the Kuno Francke edition of *The German Classics*, showing the imperial gold eagle and fine leather binding, 1914. Carpe Diem Fine Books, Monterey, CA.
its readership toward civic engagement but rather to promote the enduring value of German cultural traditions in an age in which many Americans associated Germany primarily with Prussian militarism and the kaiser’s bellicose rhetoric. Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—these intentions, however, the whole project was soon overshadowed by the disastrous spirit of hypernationalism that seized so many German intellectuals in the fall of 1914. Julius Petersen, for example, a Basel professor who wrote the introductory essay to the volume dedicated to contemporary short stories, warned his readers that “the wild alarm Germania est delenda is trumpeted as a so-called duty of human civilization” and reassured them that the authors whose works he had anthologized had “heard the call to arms” summoning them to a defense of the fatherland.17

The Francke edition serves as a vivid illustration of how different the German and American approaches to culture really were in the early twentieth century. But its significance is increased even further by the fact that Petersen’s volume was the place in which the first Mann story to be rendered into English, Bayard Quincy Morgan’s translation of Tonio Kröger, was published. Petersen’s claims, of course, accurately describe Thomas Mann’s own world view in 1915, a time when the author would proudly characterize his Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man as a form of “intellectual military service” in the struggle of German Kultur against French and British “civilization” (R, 1, translation modified; GKFA, 13.1:11). Ironically, then, the most important thing about the Francke edition for Mann’s later reception in America may be that it utterly failed. The grand dinner that Francke organized to celebrate the launch of his anthology in the spring of 1913 also proved to be the swan song of the project. Subscriptions dropped off almost immediately after the German army invaded Belgium, and by 1915 the German Publishing Society, which Francke had founded to finance the project, had gone bankrupt.

Two important facts resulted from this development. First, it meant that Mann’s chauvinistic wartime opinions remained largely unknown in America. A few American journals published reviews of Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, and Mann’s name would later also appear in early histories of the war, such as Charles Francis Horne’s The Great Events of the Great War of 1920, in which he is called a mouthpiece of “the Boches” who declared “that Kultur is above morality.”18 But most ordinary Americans never learned about his early political utterances. The second and even more important consequence of Francke’s failure was that Mann’s name never became associated with the older conception of representative art that The German Classics so thoroughly embodied. This was important, because over the course of the First World War, the American reception of German culture changed dramatically.
There was a tremendous and frequently violent backlash against all things German, and even artists who had no connection to the kaiser’s policies were frequently subject to book burnings and acts of iconoclasm. Immigrants changed their names en masse and abandoned their prior practice of voluntarily segregating themselves in German-speaking communities. The notion that German culture might thrive on American soil without any kind of cross-pollination with other traditions was irrevocably dead.

**Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, H. L. Mencken, and the Rise of Middlebrow Culture**

The First World War had a devastating effect on the attempt to transplant a German notion of _Kultur_ to American soil, but it proved equally cataclysmic to the genteel tradition. A new generation of intellectuals moved to the forefront of cultural life in the United States during the second decade of the twentieth century. Arguably the three most important figures in this transition were Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, and H. L. Mencken. Between them, these three men would help provide a theoretical foundation for what we now commonly call the “middlebrow.” Each in his own way would also contribute to Mann’s rising fame in the United States during the 1920s.

For present purposes, the most important of the three was Van Wyck Brooks, who rose to prominence in the United States through the publication of his book _America’s Coming-of-Age_ in 1915, as well as through his editorship of the _Seven Arts_, a short-lived but highly influential little magazine that appeared from 1916 to 1917. In _America’s Coming-of-Age_, Brooks argued, greatly influenced by William Morris’s critique of the division between culture and practical life in capitalist societies, that contemporary American culture had become riven into, “on the one hand, a quite unclouded, quite unhypocritical assumption of transcendent theory (‘high ideas’),” and on the other “a simultaneous acceptance of catchpenny realities.” To these two opposite poles—culture lost in theoretical abstraction vs. culture as a cliché reproduction of existing circumstances—Brooks gave the names “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” proudly noting that they represented a genuinely American contribution to cultural theory: “I have proposed these terms to a Russian, an Englishman, and a German, asking each in turn whether in his country there was anything to correspond with the conceptions implied in them. In each case they have been returned to me as quite American, authentically our very own, and, I should add, highly suggestive.”

The point of the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow as Brooks originally proposed it was not to differentiate between aesthetically complex
and therefore “good” art, on the one hand, and simplistic popular trash on the other. For Brooks, highbrow and lowbrow were, instead, equally undesirable elements. “The ’Highbrow’ is the superior person whose virtue is admitted but felt to be an inept unpalatable virtue; while the ‘Lowbrow’ is a good fellow one readily takes to, but with a certain scorn for him and all his works,” he wrote. What was missing, according to Brooks, was the “genial middle ground” on which reflection and practice, sophistication and common sense might meet. Curiously, it took almost two decades until someone (the literary critic Margaret Widdemer in the pages of the Saturday Review of Literature) introduced the term “middlebrow” to designate this meeting place.

Thomas Mann was not among the European interlocutors whom Brooks consulted to gauge the originality of his conceptual coinage. But when an American journalist in the late 1930s accused Mann of expressing “middle-class” rather than “high-brow” ideas in his writings, he eagerly aligned himself with the middlebrow, albeit with a telling interpretive twist. In his 1943 Library of Congress lecture “The War and the Future,” he recalled the encounter in the following terms: “Such a person holds a false and reactionary concept of the banal. . . . What the high-brow journalist was characterizing as ‘middle-class ideas’ is actually nothing else than the liberal tradition. It is the complex of ideas of freedom and progress, of humanitarianism, of civilization; in short, the claim of reason to dominate the dynamics of nature, of instinct, of blood, of the unconscious—the primitive spontaneity of life” (LC, 24; GW, 12:918). Indeed, if we understand the term “middlebrow” in the original adulatory sense given to it by Brooks, rather than as a synonym for artistic pretension, then Thomas Mann can without hesitation be called a “middlebrow” author. He was, after all, as proud of the intellectual ambition of all his works as he was of his “common touch,” and of the fact that ordinary readers felt drawn to his works. Novels such as The Magic Mountain or Doctor Faustus were, furthermore, written with the unmistakable ambition to affect a transformation in German social life through aesthetic means.

The congruence between Brooks’s vision and Mann’s writing is nicely illustrated by a long novella that the little magazine the Freeman serialized in 1922–23, at a time when Brooks oversaw its cultural pages: the self-proclaimed “idyll” “Bashan and I” in a translation by Herman George Scheffauer. “Bashan and I” (which was retitled “A Man and His Dog” when Alfred A. Knopf published it in a new translation by H. T. Lowe-Porter) is a decidedly odd story, a lengthy paean to the loving relationship between a man and his short-haired pointer, written in the first person and based on autobiographical material. Beneath the tranquil surface of the story lurk unplumbed
depths, however. In one of the most memorable and disturbing scenes, the narrator and his dog, out on a ramble through the wooded parks surrounding Munich, stumble upon the residues of a suburban development that was abandoned fifteen years earlier. The project is described in terms that recall Goethe’s *Faust* but lead up to a bathetic anticlimax: “The building society conceived things on a rather large scale. They enclosed the river between dykes, they built quays and planted gardens, and, not content with that, they had embarked on clearing the woods, dumped piles of gravel, cut roads through the wilderness. . . . But no one walks there save Bashan and myself, he on the good stout leather of his four paws, I in hobnailed boots on account of the gravel” (*SD*, 465–66; *GW*, 8:565–66). The historian David Blackbourn has pointed out that large-scale land reclamation efforts, particularly in marshy environments like the one described here, formed an integral part of German claims to cultural superiority over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As if to drive home this point, the deserted streets in the unfinished development are named after German authors of “quality” literature from the last three centuries: Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Martin Opitz, Paul Fleming, Gottfried August Bürger, Adalbert Stifter.

What, then, the story seems to ask, is the relationship between these signs of victorious German culture and the general desecration that seems to have befallen them? How might we connect the narrator’s feigned reverence with his hobnailed boots and his no-doubt less respectful canine companion? And what sort of “idyll” is this exactly? Is it an innocent exercise in the suburban bucolic or would it behoove the reader to remember the phrase inscribed in so many pictorial idylls: *et in Arcadia ego*? The story thus highlights the tensions between traditional high culture and the pragmatic demands of the modern age without, however, coming down on either side. Cultural monuments, so “A Man and his Dog” seems to inform us, are perhaps best approached in casual attire, yet at the same time, they also provide reflective meaning and contemplative substance to what otherwise would be a mere forest walk. It is a decidedly middlebrow attitude, and one that, though expressed in an entirely German formal and conceptual vocabulary, might have struck Brooks as congruent with his American cultural criticism.

Brooks’s editorship at the *Seven Arts* was closely intertwined with the work of that journal’s most influential contributor, Randolph Bourne. In his most famous essay, “Transnational America” (1916), Bourne takes issue with the then-popular metaphor of the United States as a “melting pot”—a crucible that strips immigrants of their heritage and molds them into uniform Americans. Claiming that the most vital and energetic regions of America
can be found in the Midwest, where German and Scandinavian settlers had stuck to their cultural traditions, Bourne argues that here, the “foreign cultures have not been melted down or run together, made into some homogeneous Americanism, but have remained distinct but cooperating to the greater glory and benefit, not only of themselves but of all the native “Americanism” around them.” The result, so he concludes, is a kind of “federated ideal,” a notion of America as “transplanted Europe, but a Europe that has not been disintegrated and scattered in the transplanting as in some Dispersion. Its colonies live here inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge, but do not fuse.”

Randolph Bourne was, in short, America’s first theorist of what we now call “multiculturalism,” even if still of a blatantly Eurocentric sort. But his vision of American society as inherently “transnational” (a term that Bourne appears to have invented) also sounds surprisingly similar to the vision of a European republic of letters that Mann would advance a decade later in his lecture to the Warsaw PEN Club, or in essays such as “On National and International Art.” Both writers propose that the antidote to what Bourne calls the “weary old nationalism” afflicting twentieth-century Europe might consist not in the overcoming of national sentiments altogether, but rather in a new federation of cultures, all proud in their historical achievements and yet willing to emphasize their commonalities over their differences.

Bourne died in the global influenza pandemic that followed the Armistice, but not before his ideas had spread to other people who would seek to implement them in the world of practical affairs. The publisher Scofield Thayer was one such man. In 1919 he took over the little magazine the Dial, purged it of its previous sympathies with Soviet bolshevism, and let it be known that he henceforth intended it to function as a “Seven Arts without politics.” The Thayer Dial is nowadays generally remembered as a lighthouse of the modernist movement, made eternally famous by the fact that it published T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land and bestowed upon him the lucrative Dial Award for 1922. But a closer look reveals that the qualities that made the Dial distinctively modernist are surprisingly hard to differentiate from those characterizing the emerging category of the middlebrow. The journal’s editorial line was defined by a kind of cultural synopticism, that is, a belief that the world’s cultures shared deep communalities and could therefore communicate with one another across vast distances of time and space while remaining true to their individual natures. The opening page of The Waste Land, with its multilingual dedication and epigraph as well as its references to Arthurian legends and to Richard Wagner, was a prime example of this quality. Thayer’s decision in 1921 to start publishing Thomas Mann stories such
as *Tristan* or *Death in Venice*, which like Eliot’s poem fused material drawn from modern life with mythical elements, can be seen in the same vein.

It is but a short step from the “modernist” synopticism of *The Waste Land* to the “middlebrow” pragmatism of the Great Books movement, which similarly insisted that *The Satyricon*, the Grail legend, and Wagner operas all stand at equal distance to the modern reader. Thayer, in fact, had little patience for the thesis that historical cataclysm might force ruptures in the production and reception of literary texts. When he published his very first Mann story, for example ("Loulou" in a 1921 translation by Kenneth Burke), he prefaced it with an essay by the British diplomat Alec W. G. Randall, which advances the somewhat astonishing thesis that “the flood of literature produced in Germany after the Armistice . . . does not indicate in the least a change of imagination, a transformation of intellect on the part of German writers.”

When viewed as a form of pedagogy, this antihistoricist commingling of world cultures in the pages of the *Dial* serves as a powerful, if unorthodox, realization of Bourne’s vision for a transnational America. That Thayer indeed had pedagogical intentions along those lines is documented by his decision to hire a number of cultural correspondents in various European countries, whose contributions went a long way toward making the *Dial* the kind of federation of cultures that Bourne had envisioned. The illustrious list of names included Maxim Gorki for Russia, Hugo von Hofmannsthal for Austria, and José Ortega y Gasset for Spain. The German correspondent chosen by Thayer was Thomas Mann, who was thus from the very beginning represented in the pages of the *Dial* not just as an author of stories like the pathbreaking *Death in Venice* but also as a journalist and essayist.

Between 1922 and 1928, Mann published a total of eight “German Letters” in the *Dial*. In the scholarly literature, these have been dismissed as “odd jobs,” and indeed a letter that Mann wrote to his German publisher shows that he accepted the commission primarily because the American journal paid him in dollars at a time when his income was threatened by galloping inflation (*GKFA*, 22:445). Despite all this, however, both the topic and the tone of his letters document a marked (though clearly unplanned) congruence with the larger aims of the *Dial*. The very first letter, for example, consists of a sharp attack on Oswald Spengler, the proponent of a segregationist “morphological” model of cultural differences, and invokes Goethe’s conception of world literature to argue that “the cultural life of Europe was never more plainly ‘in the sign of trade’ than before the great war,” that “translation flourishes,” and that as a result of it “France, Italy, Spain, America” are now “taking [German spiritual products] into their languages” (*GL*, 646).
The third bright star in the firmament of American cultural criticism of the 1910s and 1920s was H. L. Mencken, the editor (with George Jean Nathan) of the literary magazine the *Smart Set* from 1914 to 1924, and the sole editor of the *American Mercury* from 1924 to 1933. If Brooks’s theorization of the middlebrow and Bourne’s arguments for transnationalism went a long way toward conceptually defining a particularly American notion of culture (cosmopolitan and intellectually sophisticated, yet without ever losing sight of the common man), then Mencken did more than anybody else to disseminate this new vision among the larger populace. Bourne and Brooks enjoyed stellar reputations in intellectual circles, but journals such as the *Seven Arts*, the *Dial*, and the *Freeman* barely registered more than ten thousand subscribers. The *Smart Set*, by contrast, counted more than sixteen times that number, while the more intellectually rigorous *American Mercury* still reached circulation figures of over eighty thousand. Their editor-in-chief became a veritable celebrity. The journalist Walter Lippmann called Mencken “the most powerful influence on a whole generation of Americans.”33 Thomas Mann’s son Klaus fell under Mencken’s spell as well when he first came to America, referring to him as a “legend” in his autobiography *The Turning Point*.34

Mencken was the son of German immigrants, took an active interest in all things German, and was particularly well-versed in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is thus not surprising that he became acquainted with Thomas Mann at a fairly early date, reading him in German long before any of his stories ever appeared in the United States. Curiously, though, especially in light of his highly prolific output, Mencken never once reviewed any of Mann’s stories for the American press, nor did he publish them in either the *Smart Set* or the *American Mercury*. His active contribution to Mann’s fame in the United States was instead confined to a single, albeit decisive, intervention: it was he who in 1921 persuaded Alfred A. Knopf to acquire the American rights to Mann’s works, despite the fact that Knopf’s earlier attempt to publish *Royal Highness* had been a commercial failure.35

Like Randolph Bourne, Mencken in his essays of the 1910s and early 1920s relentlessly agitated against the Anglo-Saxonist vision of the United States as a “melting pot,” fashioning himself in the process as a champion for German American culture.36 Beyond this crusade, however, Mencken’s real significance for Thomas Mann lay in the fact that he managed to make US literary culture a part of the larger fashionable social life. The *Smart Set* began its existence in the early twentieth century as a belletristic extension of the society pages, publishing the amateur literary efforts of the New York idle rich. The names of its contributors mattered as much to the readership as the
actual contents of any given issue. When Mencken and Nathan took over, the journal became much more respectable, but it still profited immensely from the implication that it provided a peek at the life of “the smart set” in the dual sense of that term. Mencken’s outsized personality and the fortunes of his journal were, in fact, inseparably coupled. Mencken and his contributors helped naturalize the idea that literature, theater, and the arts were a necessary part of an up-to-date lifestyle. Two much longer-lasting magazines took up this basic message and helped make it a part of an unmistakably American identity: *Vanity Fair* (founded in 1914) and the *New Yorker* (founded in 1925). Like Mencken’s earlier publication, these journals combined society items and sophisticated criticism into a new form of cultural expression.

Thomas Mann profited from this development because his strongly articulated authorial habitus—his elegantly tailored suits, his impeccable manners, his charisma at the microphone, and even his large and highly interesting family—made him a natural target of interest for an American readership accustomed to consume cultural news alongside the society columns. To be sure, Mann’s personality and habits were entirely different from those of most US celebrities, and he frequently felt ill at ease during public social occasions in his adopted country. His diaries contain very little information about the various parties at which he was feted and frequently register only his exhaustion, even when he found himself in the company of bona fide movie stars (see, e.g., *Tb.*, April 3, 1938; *Tb.*, March 18, 1940). But precisely this difference made him an irresistibly attractive subject for the larger American public. Mann was not a down-on-his-luck refugee in a threadbare suit like so many other German intellectuals who streamed to the United States in those days. He came crowned in an aura of European sophistication and mystery, almost like a latter-day Count of Monte Cristo. No wonder, then, that US magazines devoted extensive coverage to his works and that both *Life* (in 1939) and the *New Yorker* (in 1941) ran rather gossipy biographical essays about his stay in America. Mann reciprocated the attention by making the *New Yorker* his regular reading material, though like so many others since then, he seems to have opened it mainly for the cartoons (*Tb.*, April 30, 1941).

**Alfred A. Knopf and the Making of a Modern Classic**

Between them, Brooks, Bourne, and Mencken thus staked out a new and typically American cultural formation. This formation aimed to be intellectually attuned to modern existence while remaining accessible to the larger populace. It tried to be cosmopolitan in nature, assimilating influences from around the world (or at least the western hemisphere) as long as they seemed
useful to the exigencies of modern American life. And finally, it aspired to be glamorous. Thomas Mann embodied all these qualities, and in so doing became the prototype for an authorial type that remains important to the international publishing industry even in the twenty-first century.

Of course Thomas Mann initially spoke very little English, and throughout the 1920s remained stubbornly uninterested in American affairs. He required the help of others in order to become a success on the US literary market. In popular thought, we often reduce the complex processes by which books or authors are inserted into languages and cultures that are not their own to the singular dimension of “translation.” But translation involves far more than just the juxtaposition of words from one language to another. Translation is an alchemical process that alters the base elements that it touches. Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin for “to ferry across,” and just as Gustav von Aschenbach discovers that he is not quite himself anymore after a mysterious ferryman carries him across the Venetian lagoon, so the American Thomas Mann ended up a very different author from the German one.

The first thing that Mann needed was a publisher, someone capable of making his oeuvre available to a general readership and of promoting it with all the financial might of a major press. He found such a publisher in Alfred A. Knopf, a man who from the very beginning embraced the new cultural precepts established by Brooks, Bourne, and Mencken. Born in 1892, Knopf founded his eponymous publishing house at a very young age in 1915. He aspired to make the very best in European literature accessible to an American readership, in editions marketed specifically to a middlebrow audience. He took great pride in the facts that the very first order for his books in 1915 came from Marshall Field’s department store in Chicago and that Midwestern bookstores consistently ranked among his best clients. One of the earliest books that Knopf acquired for his new press was a 1916 English translation of Mann’s *Royal Highness* by A. Cecil Curtis, which Knopf bought sight unseen from the British firm of Sidgwick and Jackson. It proved to be a spectacular failure, no doubt because a few months after the sinking of the *Lusitania* nobody in the United States wanted to read a love story between an American heiress and a fictional prince whose external appearance resembled that of Kaiser Wilhelm II. After Mencken convinced him that Mann was nevertheless an author worth pursuing, Knopf and his wife Blanche immediately traveled to Europe, where in 1921 they met with Samuel Fischer and secured from him the exclusive American rights to Mann’s oeuvre under the stipulation that Knopf publish *Buddenbrooks* and at least one subsequent book every year thereafter.
These imposing demands would have a profound effect on the ways in which Knopf marketed Thomas Mann in the United States. It was simply not possible to satisfy the pace stipulated by Fischer with literary translations alone, especially since Mann specialized in such long novels. For a while Knopf was able to fulfill his contractual obligations by offering reprints and by buying up existing translations of Thomas Mann works. By the late 1920s, however, he was forced to add collections of nonfictional works. These were initially selected to shed further light on the intellectual context from which the fictional masterpieces had sprung. A reviewer of the 1933 volume *Past Masters and Other Papers*, for example, described the essays contained therein as “foothills surrounding the *magnum opus* [i.e., *The Magic Mountain*]. They make it easier of access, and they contain the same rich vein of gold, lying even closer to the surface.” Soon, however, they acquired a life of their own, and Mann became equally known as an essayist and as a novelist. In Germany, such a development would likely have done harm to his reputation as a first-rate writer. In America, however, with its more capacious definition of what constituted “culture,” it only increased his fame. By the early 1930s, Mann’s now well-established name in America was positively inseparable from that of Alfred A. Knopf, and Knopf reacted forcefully whenever Mann did anything that might have endangered that exclusive relationship, offering improved contractual arrangements where necessary, but also threatening legal action against competing firms.

Knopf’s greatest strength lay in marketing, and he developed a meticulously curated promotional strategy for his firm. The critic Catherine Turner has summarized this strategy with the words, “Knopf sold the works that he published as the functional equivalent of civilization rather than just as good books. Even works like Mann’s, which questioned accepted definitions of civilization, were sold for their abstract quality to signify civilized life.” The promotional slogans that Knopf employed for *The Magic Mountain* (a work that certainly “questions accepted definitions of culture”) illustrate what this meant in practice. In a 1927 ad in *Publisher’s Weekly*, Knopf advertised the recently released tome as a “*Divine Comedy* for our disastrous age,” and in a pamphlet that he released to capitalize on Mann’s 1929 Nobel Prize, the work is described as “a complete *Pilgrim’s Progress* for the physical and psychic life of modern man.”

Two qualities are worth highlighting about these sentences. First, they place Mann’s works within an international web of cultural classics, a strategy reminiscent both of the pedagogic philosophy underlying the Great Books movement and of Thayer’s editorial line for the *Dial*. Second, they highlight the use value of these difficult works for the practical life of mod-
ern man, thereby realizing the central tenet of Brooks’s “genial middle ground” between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Similar strategies can be found throughout the many different ads that Knopf placed for The Magic Mountain during the period 1927–30.

Knopf did not content himself with vague phrases such as “the physical and psychic life of modern man,” however. He was quite specific about the practical lessons that ordinary American readers might be able to draw from Mann’s works. In marketing The Magic Mountain, for instance, Knopf adapted the novel’s famous climactic sentence—“for the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts” (MM, 496–97; GKFA, 5.1:748, emphasis in original)—as a promotional slogan. He glossed this phrase for potential customers with the explanation that Mann’s novel presented an instructive picture of “the world that achieved its logical self-expression in 1914” and that it juxtaposed this image with a “vision of goodness and love.”

From an early point onward, Mann’s talents at novelistic depiction where thus intertwined in the minds of ordinary readers with the distinctively middlebrow claim to explain the contemporary world as it was and as it ought to be. This link would only become stronger when his essays were published.

Knopf’s efforts to promote Mann as an artist capable of synthesizing an entire era of European thought in a way that would be accessible to ordinary Americans meant that the publisher consistently downplayed two important features about his author. The first was Mann’s rarefied style. Knopf never made any efforts to promote Mann as being somehow among the most “advanced” or “original” writers of his time. His focus was instead exclusively on promoting Mann as a modern classic—a writer whose work may have been ambitious and demanding, but ultimately also timeless and accessible to anyone willing to invest the prerequisite effort. The second was the author’s political engagement. During the 1920s, when Mann’s political work was confined mostly to speeches, and during the early 1930s, when he fell silent about the Nazis, this aspect was easy enough to manage. But once the publication of An Exchange of Letters had established Mann as a major voice of the antifascist exile community, Knopf’s job became much harder. In vain did he implore his charge, “Tommy, you are a Dichter and you must dicht!” (Reg., 54/26).

Knopf instead tried to popularize Thomas Mann as a personality rather than just as a name on the title page of long and difficult novels. In this, of course, he was reacting to the governing spirit of the 1920s—the decade in which artistic labor became socially fashionable in America. Particularly illustrative in this regard are the events surrounding Mann’s first visit to
the United States in 1934, on the occasion of his fifty-ninth birthday and of the US release of the novel *Joseph and His Brothers* (later retitled *The Tales of Jacob*). To mark the occasion, Knopf hosted a glamorous gala reception to which he invited local politicians, industrial titans, and celebrity guests. He also convinced mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia to provide his German guest with a police motorcycle escort and rented a boat so that journalists would be able to intercept the arriving author on his ocean liner before he ever set foot on American soil (*D*, 211; *Th.*, May 29, 1934). The fruit of all these efforts was extensive media coverage, the most important piece of which was the “Great Mann” story in *Time* magazine.

Behind the scenes, however, Knopf had to struggle mightily to make this promotional success happen. After all, the Nazis had been in power for little more than a year, and while Mann’s outspoken words about Hitler in the latter days of the Weimar Republic were not widely reported in the United States, prominent Americans were nevertheless wary of getting entangled in European affairs that they as yet little understood. Knopf consequently assured the politicians and titans of industry whom he invited that “the purpose of [Mann’s] visit is purely literary, and no political significance whatever is to be attached to it.” Clearly not everyone found this argument convincing. Arthur Hays Sulzberger, for example, the publisher of the *New York Times*, wrote back to explain that he was having a “pretty difficult job here in keeping free of all political aspects of the present situation in Germany,” and that he would therefore have to decline the invitation.

By the time that Mann settled in the United States for good, this situation had changed, of course. Indeed, when reporters swarmed the author in 1938 to record his opinions about the Anschluss, they were utilizing Mann’s fame to advance a narrative that was diametrically opposed to the one his publisher had originally tried to pitch. There is a dialectical logic to this process: first, Mann was stripped of the status as a merely German writer and instead promoted as the author of modern classics. He was furthermore billed as an intensely charismatic figure whose mind corresponded with those of the literary giants who walked before him and who could teach his readers to look beyond the plight that afflicted them in modern industrial societies. After Hitler came to power and it became clear that the biggest threat to American social beliefs emanated not from any abstract cultural malaise but rather from the concrete actions of specific individuals across the Atlantic Ocean, this preceding process of literary beatification gave Mann an advantage that so many of his less fortunate countrymen lacked. Because he so manifestly stood above the partisan fray, Mann was able to speak out against Hitler and be perceived as a voice of reason rather
than be dismissed as an agitator for a specific political agenda, as were so many of his fellow German émigrés.

**Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter and the “English Garb” of Thomas Mann**

In his attempts to popularize Thomas Mann for a US audience, Knopf possessed an invaluable ally in the translator Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter (whose first and middle names were invariably reduced to initials on the title pages of the books that she translated, since female translators were still commonly regarded as intellectually suspect). Mann knew this as well, as he demonstrated in an unpublished 1939 letter to Knopf:

> If there’s anything that can reconcile me to the unnatural fact that my books—which are all very German works indeed—today are almost nonexistent in their original languages and live their uprooted and necessarily imprecise life practically only in translation—masterful translations in some cases, it is true—then that thing would be (apart from the knowledge of the lawless and forced nature of present circumstances and the sure conscience of their ephemeral character) the vicarious interest of the educated American public in my work: a splendidly good-natured receptiveness that has only been deepened by highly intelligent reviews, and which proved itself movingly adequate to Mrs. Lowe-Porter’s admirable translations of *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain*, and the Joseph novels.

As these lines show, Mann was very much aware that his present impact as a writer was almost exclusively due to the wide distribution and warm reception of his works in English translation, and he knew that he owed this reception in no small part to Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter. At the same time, however, his decision to strike out the clause in which he praises her translations as “masterful,” leaving only the more toned-down description of them as “admirable,” indicates he was also aware of her many faults as an interpreter of German prose.

During the early 1920s, several translators (most prominently among them Kenneth Burke and Herman George Scheffauer) worked concurrently to produce new translations of Thomas Mann stories. This situation changed when Martin Secker and Alfred A. Knopf hired Lowe-Porter to translate *Buddenbrooks* and eventually installed her as Mann’s sole authorized translator for the Anglophone market—against the express wishes of the author, who at the time expressed reservations about her linguistic abilities and was also
displeased to see *The Magic Mountain* translated by a woman (GKFA, 23.1:154). Mann would have preferred Scheffauer, a native speaker of German with whom he would later briefly collaborate on a German book series, but Knopf blocked this suggestion with the forceful assertion: “Mr. Scheffauer’s reputation is nothing like as important or noticeable, outside perhaps of Germany today, as you would seem to think.” Why Knopf ultimately preferred Lowe-Porter over Scheffauer has never been decisively established, though contrary to what is frequently written he appears to have acted not out of any personal predilection, but simply on the advice of his British business partner. At any rate, in the following years Lowe-Porter quickly established herself as the English-language voice for Thomas Mann (so established, in fact, that when Kenneth Burke published an essay on Thomas Mann in his 1931 collection *Counter-Statement*, he chose to quote from her translation of *Death in Venice* rather than from his own). As Knopf moved aggressively to consolidate his holdings, Lowe-Porter would eventually also retranslate most of the stories that had been rendered by other translators in the early 1920s.

The quality of Lowe-Porter’s Mann translations has attracted an enormous amount of critical commentary. The initial evidence is fairly damning. Lowe-Porter may well not have said, as her obituary in the *New York Times* quoted her as saying, that “the Germans are too anxious to impress their German style on English. I want to get rid of German because English is what I want to be.” But she did confess that “I sometimes do not really understand T. Mann until I have dressed his thought and put English garb on it” and prefaced her very first translation, of *Buddenbrooks*, with the admission that she had intended to “transfer the spirit first and the letter so far as might be.” Perhaps most damningly, she also once boasted “of never sending a translation to the publisher unless I felt as though I had written the book myself.”

Unreflective criticism of these utterances ignores, however, that mainstream translation theory in the early decades of the twentieth century still favored readability in the target language over fidelity to the source language—an attitude that we find both in the Anglo-French theorist Hilaire Belloc, whom Lowe-Porter apparently read, and in the German theorist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, whose influence cast a long shadow over the philological training of Lowe-Porter’s husband, Elias Avery Lowe, in Germany during the early 1900s. It also turns a blind eye to the fact that Lowe-Porter borrowed her metaphor of “dressing Mann’s thought and putting English garb on it” (on another occasion, she also speaks of “chang[ing] the garment of his art into one which might clothe her for the marketplace”)
from the author himself.⁶¹ In his 1939 lecture “The Making of The Magic Mountain,” Mann explains that “oddly enough, it is not a difficulty for me, but rather the reverse that I have to discuss The Magic Mountain in English. I am reminded of the hero of my novel, the young engineer Hans Castorp. At the end of the first volume, he makes an extraordinary declaration of love to Madame Chauchat, the Kirghiz-eyed heroine, veiling its strangeness in the garment of a foreign tongue” (MoM, 41; GW, 11:602–3).

Mann is referring, of course, to the famous section of The Magic Mountain that is composed entirely in French, in which Hans Castorp not only finds the courage to declare his love for Madame Chauchat, but also discovers a number of things about himself simply because he is forced to dress his self-reflection in the “garment of a foreign tongue.” This was not the only time Mann employed this metaphor. Almost twenty years earlier, on March 16, 1920, Mann received his author’s copy of A. Cecil Curtis’s translation of Royal Highness in the mail. Thumbing through the pages of this volume, Mann confessed that: “Truly, the garment of this foreign tongue fits as though it had been custom-made. . . . No, perhaps I’m not so truly ‘national’ after all” (GKFA, 2:232; emphasis mine). Although it is true that Mann on many later occasions complained about the inevitable flattening and the occasional distortion that his thoughts suffered in English, we thus also find a long-standing acknowledgment that the opposite might equally be the case and that translation into another language, far from disguising his intentions, might in some ways help to reveal his true nature.

What conclusions can be drawn, then, if we approach Lowe-Porter’s Mann translations not simply as the products of professional malpractice, but rather as the outcome of a conscious (and ultimately highly successful) effort to clothe his art for the American marketplace? The first observation is that Lowe-Porter’s English greatly reduces both the syntactic and the symbolic complexity of Mann’s compositions. When Lowe-Porter requires five leisurely sentences to render what Mann accomplishes in three in the opening paragraph of Death in Venice, for example, she obscures an important expression of the disciplined “classical” style that characterizes the novella (SD, 378). And when she translates the crucial word Edelrost in the opening paragraph of The Magic Mountain not as “patina,” but rather as “mould” (MM, v), she misreads a key metaphor intended to alert the reader to the fact that Hans Castorp’s seven years in Davos should be read not as a process of decay but rather as one of transubstantiation and ennoblement. Even the translation scholar David Horton, who has conducted what is not only the most rigorous but perhaps also the most sympathetic study of Lowe-Porter’s renditions to date, has to concede that “the rich intricacy and integration
of the original is frequently reduced in Lowe-Porter’s version, toning down precisely the multiple qualifications and ambivalences which are considered so central to Mann’s style.”62

Qualification and ambivalence (in other words, irony) are indeed unmistakably the biggest victims of Lowe-Porter’s translations. One of the most characteristic elements of Mann’s prose is his subtle way of combining description and commentary in a single sentence, by letting a narrator utter a sentence that at first sight appears straightforwardly descriptive but that actually, through the use of linguistic pastiche or of grammatical markers such as modal particles and inexplicit modifiers, expresses an inner distance to the subject matter at hand.63 No wonder, then, that Erich Heller, the author of an important early study of Mann’s ironic narration has lamented that “in English, alas, the ironically draped velvet and silk [of the original creations] often look like solemnly donned corduroy and tweed.”64

T. J. Reed, another pioneering British critic of Mann’s œuvre, has given us a less colorful but more nuanced version of the same assessment. What Lowe-Porter’s translations bring to the fore by a kind of distillatory process, so he claims, are those elements of Mann’s art that he assimilated from the larger German cultural tradition and then dissolved in his ethereal prose style: “cultural matter is what remains when the volatile element of irony has been driven off by translation.”65 Even this assessment is still overly simplistic. First of all, Mann’s irony can never be separated from his relationship to German culture. In Death in Venice, for example, irony was a fundamental component in what Oliver Jahraus has called Mann’s strategy of “hybrid representation”—his way of completely assimilating a representative style only in order to show that he had already transcended it.66 In The Magic Mountain, on the other hand, it was the signal of Mann’s turn toward democracy: the device by which he was able to repeat many of the same claims that he had articulated six years earlier in Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man and yet do so as if his formerly sacrosanct opinions were now surrounded by scare quotes.

Just as importantly, however, Lowe-Porter transformed Mann’s text not only through a strategy of stylistic reduction (“driving off”) but also through one of addition. Anybody who compares extended passages of her prose to the German original, for instance, is quickly struck by the large number of foreign terms, especially from the French but also from the Italian and the Latin, that she introduces. In Death in Venice, for instance, the simple German term Fahrlässigkeit (GKFA, 2.1:509), meaning “carelessness,” is rendered as “laissez-aller” (SD, 383), while the phrase “es schien folglich, daß er nicht allzu sehr ruhen dürfe” (GKFA, 2.1:524; evidently he ought not rest too much) is translated as “evidently it would not do to give himself up to sweet far niente”
The Greatest Living Man of Letters

In *The Magic Mountain*, Joachim Ziemssen’s “ritterliche Haltung” (GKFA, 5.1:116; chivalrous posture) becomes a “preux chevalier” (MM, 75), while the term *Gereiztheit* (GKFA, 5.1:1034), so crucial for the last chapter of the novel, is rendered not simply as “petulance,” but rather with grand flourish as “hysterica passio” (MM, 681). Lowe-Porter’s love of foreign terms is so pronounced that it even induces her to commit one of her most famous howlers, when she translates the word *Baiser* (GKFA, 5.1:230) not according to its German meaning as “meringue” but rather according to its French meaning as “kiss” (MM, 150), and thereby accuses poor Frau Stöhr, who is merely guilty of having transgressed the dietary strictures of the Berghof sanatorium, of having committed adultery.

The reason for all these unnecessary additions is clearly that Lowe-Porter hopes to emphasize Mann’s immersion not solely in the German cultural tradition but rather in European humanist culture at large. The middlebrow nature of this strategy is revealed by her simultaneous sprinkling of what we might best identify as the debased detritus of an American liberal arts education around the pages of her translations. Thus, Mann’s invocation of Mme. de Stael’s phrase “alles verstehen heißt alles verzeihen” (GKFA, 2.1:513; to understand all is to forgive all) is retranslated back to the original “tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner” (SD, 386), while elsewhere a simple “Eintritt dieses Ereignisses” (GKFA, 5.1:490; coming to pass of this event) turns into a “crossing of the rubicon” (MM, 323) and a musical phrase delivered “mit Ausdruck” (GKFA, 5.1:506; with great expression) is rendered with pedantic preciseness as having been played “con espressione” (MM, 333). Lowe-Porter also greatly overemphasizes Mann’s play with archaic phrasings. In the opening paragraph of *Death in Venice*, for example, she renders the phrase “an einem Frühlingsnachmittag des Jahres 19.—, das unserem Kontinent monatelang eine so gefahrdrohende Miene zeigte” (GKFA, 2.1:501) as “in that year of grace 19—, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat” (SD, 378)—a curious formulation taken straight out of the sermons of the nineteenth-century American revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney.

The combined effect of all these changes is that they turn *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain* from mere masterpieces into “Great Books” of a kind that ordinary readers in interwar America could easily recognize. Since Mann’s journey to his mature political vision was obscured in the Lowe-Porter translations, in which the narrator keeps speakers such as Naphta and Settembrini at a continuous safe distance rather than tempting the reader to adopt their points of view, Mann came across as a foam-born master exegete of the contemporary European soul. Alfred A. Knopf, as we have already seen, was keen to reinforce precisely this image of Thomas Mann as
an author who, through his ability to synthesize the intellectual big picture, was able to keep aloof from the social and political strife of his era.

The *Saturday Review, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Shaping of Public Opinion*

Knopf’s marketing strategy, which established Thomas Mann as the celebrity author of literary classics, and Lowe-Porter’s tendency to privilege affirmative content over stylistic ambiguity in her translations both were the direct product of a distinctively American cultural climate that came into being during the 1920s. But their efforts were accepted and elaborated when Mann’s works were distributed to the larger American public. His reinvention for the US market was thus not exclusively, or even primarily, the work of any one figure within the publishing industry. It instead arose as a natural response to a particular cultural moment. Nothing makes this clearer than a look at the two most important instruments for the mass dissemination of literary culture in America during the 1920s and 1930s, the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The *Saturday Review of Literature* was founded in 1924 by the Yale professor Henry Seidel Canby, one of the most important arbiters of middlebrow taste in America during the interwar period and an admirer of Thomas Mann (he served as the master of ceremonies for the 1934 gala reception honoring the author). The broad expansion of literary culture in US society during the 1920s created an unprecedented thirst for accessible literary reviews, especially since few Americans in the early twentieth century had access to a well-stocked bookstore staffed by a knowledgeable sales force. The genteel magazines of the late nineteenth century, such as *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, or the *Atlantic Monthly*, could not cater to this demand. Daily newspapers, such as the *New York Times* or the *New York Herald Tribune*, eagerly stepped in to fill the gap. The *Saturday Review*, as well, began its life as a supplement to a daily paper (the *New York Evening Post*) before Canby, sensing the opportunity of the moment, established it as an independent publication whose circulation would eventually number in the hundreds of thousands.

The *Saturday Review* was from the very beginning aimed squarely at a middlebrow readership, a fact that distinguished it from *Publisher’s Weekly* (targeted mostly at trade professionals). This did not mean that it was parochial in scope or unsophisticated in intention. From our contemporary vantage point, the 1920s are often described as an “isolationist” decade. While this moniker may very well apply to official US policy, a closer look at the *Saturday Review* reveals that it only imperfectly describes the attitudes and
interests of ordinary Americans, who were, after all, keenly aware of such developments as international radio broadcasting or the first attempts at transatlantic aviation. From the very beginning, Canby’s newspaper reviewed important new American books and titles published abroad, even if they weren’t yet available in translation. Collective reviews of the latest fiction to have been published in Germany became a regular feature in the *Saturday Review*. They were typically written by knowledgeable native correspondents and appeared as often as semimonthly. Another regular column, the “Reader’s Guide” by May Lamberton Becker (author of several popular advice books and nicknamed the “reference librarian of the nation”), frequently featured queries by readers desiring to know, for example, “what novels of fairly recent appearance in French, Russian and German have been translated into English.” The *Saturday Review* also published quite sophisticated essays on the current state of literary translation and on the economics of what we nowadays call “world literature.” A 1925 article by Ernest Boyd, for example, compares the translation practices of English and American firms, pointing out that most translations into English to have appeared after the Great War had been commissioned (though not necessarily executed) by Americans—a situation which, of course, precisely describes what also happened in Mann’s case.

Thomas Mann’s name made frequent appearances in the *Saturday Review*, so much so that the paper highlighted its early coverage of the famous author as one of its proudest achievements when it commemorated its tenth anniversary in a series of articles. Mann was first presented to a general readership in May 1925, at a time when his fame was otherwise still confined to the little magazines. Ironically, the person to introduce him was Frank Thieß, who twenty years later would come to lob bitter accusations at his colleague for having moved to America. Two weeks later, the *Saturday Review* printed an appraisal of the German edition of *The Magic Mountain* by A. W. G. Randall, which was followed in short order by an article on the Dial Press’s *Death in Venice and Other Stories*. In August of that same year, readers were also given a first interview with the author. The steady coverage only intensified after the 1927 publication of the American edition of *The Magic Mountain*, and by 1929 Mann’s reputation was so secure that US publishers featured him in blurbs for quite undemanding publications, such as the photo book *Animals Looking at You*. In later years, Thomas Mann’s image would also repeatedly appear on the cover of the *Saturday Review*.

This coverage of Thomas Mann produced a very specific image of the author for an American audience. He was promoted as an icon of cultural distinction, as somebody who could be used to signal taste and familiarity
with European culture at a time when Americans were still unsure about their own grandeur as a nation. Evidence for this is provided not only by the reviews themselves but also by the many other occasions on which his name appears in the paper. The ranked mini-list also employed by Nabokov was a common vehicle in this regard. Readers were supplied with ammunition for their next after-church or cocktail-hour conversation by being told that Mann ranked as a “close second” to John Galsworthy as “the greatest living master of the large-scale family novel,” or that “Bashan and I” could be considered as one of the three greatest contemporary fictions about men and their dogs. May Lamberton Becker in particular was a serial offender in this regard, dropping Mann’s name into her answers to numerous readers’ queries. But Mann’s works were also highlighted in other ways. In December 1927, for example, two editors of the Saturday Review featured The Magic Mountain in their annual list of Christmas recommendations, alongside middlebrow reads such as Trader Horn, The Rise of American Civilization, or Adventures in Reading.

As a result, the Saturday Review increased Thomas Mann’s readership and, more importantly, created a much larger audience that knew him by reputation and was capable of repeating certain clichés about his works. And these clichés stood in a symbiotic relationship both to the publishing strategies pursued by Alfred A. Knopf and to the translation choices made by Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter. In the 1925 interview with Mann, for example, the interviewer Aldo Sorani informed American readers—long before they would have been able to make up their own minds about the German author’s novels—that “the novel of today turns away from narrative.” Instead, in The Magic Mountain, “a thesis heads each chapter, made up of at least two dissertations. Nothing happens beyond the contrast of views.” Later reviews told readers that in Mann’s novels “individuals are presented only as the exponents of groups,” that “instead of plot, he chooses a pattern,” and that instead of “creating” new worlds, he “interpreted” the existing one. Some of these assessments were no doubt meant to be negative, but in their sum, they created a definite image of Thomas Mann as a very specific kind of writer: a novelist of ideas, whom one read for his philosophical disquisitions, not out of admiration for his literary method, his plots, or his character portraits.

By the time that Mann first arrived in the United States, however, the Saturday Review of Literature was no longer the most important instrument for disseminating his fame among the American public. As a book review, the paper could inform people about literature, but it could not induce them to buy it—and during the hardships brought on by the Great Depression, ordinary readers certainly thought twice about every penny that they spent.
on leisure activities. Another publishing revolution of the mid-1920s, how-
ever, the Book-of-the-Month Club, could directly distribute novels into read-
ers’ homes, whether they had consciously chosen those titles or not. The
importance of mail-order book publishing in the United States during the
1930s is hard to overestimate. At the start of the Great Depression, there
was one bookstore in the United States for every thirty thousand people, and
fully a third of the population lived in small towns without direct access to
bookstores whatsoever. Harry Scherman, a successful ad man with expert-
tise in mail-order circulars, founded the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1926
with the express goal of reaching this untapped market, and he succeeded
admirably. A year after it launched, the club already had sixty thousand mem-
bers; in 1947, its peak year, that figure stood at almost nine hundred thou-
sand. Throughout the 1940s, the Book-of-the-Month Club was one of the
largest customers of the US Postal Service, comparable in mail volume to
such companies as Sears or Montgomery Ward. There were many copycat
book clubs as well, and Time magazine estimated in 1946 that there were as
many as three million subscribers in total.

The Book-of-the-Month Club naturally targeted a middlebrow audience,
and most of its regular judges were also frequent contributors to the Satur-
day Review. This included Henry Seidel Canby himself. Despite this overlap
between the two institutions, however, it took more than a decade for one
of Mann’s works to be chosen. An anxious 1934 letter to Alfred A. Knopf by
the journalist Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who was fretting about whether to
recommend Joseph and His Brothers to the club, shows what the difficulty may
have been: “I wonder—just on the general subject of translations, whether
it isn’t legitimate to make some of these slight changes in the style of the
original which would bring it more within the spirit of the language into
which it is set? For example, where the German sentences are notably lon-
ger and more involved than any now constructed by people writing in Eng-
lish, would it be a crime to break them up into shorter ones?” Canfield
Fisher’s fears appear to have been well founded. Mann’s sales figures for the
Book-of-the-Month Club (roughly eighty thousand copies of Stories of Three
Decades, his first selection, and just over two hundred thousand copies of
Doctor Faustus, his second-to-last) were impressive for an author of serious,
stylistically difficult fiction but still noticeably lower than the club average,
which stood at roughly ninety-five thousand copies per title in the mid-1930s,
and at roughly three hundred thousand copies per title in the mid-1940s.

In light of such adverse sales considerations, then, the fact that the club
disseminated no fewer than five Thomas Mann titles during the period
from 1936 to 1951 seems all the more significant. There are two probable
reasons for this. The first is that the club judges, for all their consciousness of the limitations of their audience, genuinely believed that it was their task to introduce ordinary Americans to the higher ideas of their time. In this regard they were faithful followers of Van Wyck Brooks. The strategies that the club pursued to achieve this aim closely mirrored those pioneered by Knopf a decade earlier. It deemphasized the Germanic nature of Mann’s thought and instead positioned him in a long line of western literary classics. Canby’s appraisal of *Joseph the Provider*, for example, draws explicit comparisons to Milton’s *Paradise Lost.*81 It also deemphasized stylistic novelty and emphasized intellectual depth. Clifton Fadiman’s review of *Doctor Faustus*, which is arguably Mann’s most radical novel from a stylistic viewpoint, begins with the words, “Like all of Dr. Mann’s novels, this is reading meant for intellectuals. The reader must go slowly, because the novel brims over with aesthetic, religious, and philosophic asides.”82 And finally, it ran lots of feature stories on Thomas Mann as a person, which invariably focused on his iron discipline, his ability to write on trains, and his beautifully furnished home office in Pacific Palisades—qualities that would have served to connect the intellectual sphere in which Mann moved with the world understood and admired by the club’s white-collar audience (figure 2.2).

The second reason for the continual promotion of Thomas Mann was that the club, much like the *Saturday Review*, clearly viewed it as part of its core mission to satisfy American interest in European culture. As early as 1929, just as he wrapped up his duties as a foreign correspondent for the *Dial*,

![Figure 2.2](image)

*Figure 2.2.* A photo of Thomas Mann, documenting the Book-of-the-Month Club’s efforts to make the author relatable to an American white-collar audience. *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, October 1948.
Mann became a member of the club’s “European advisory committee.” And over the subsequent two and a half decades, the club again and again chose books in translation to disseminate to its audience—including no fewer than twenty-nine titles by German-language authors, though no other writer came close to matching Thomas Mann’s popularity. The majority of the chosen titles were historical works of fiction and fictionalized biographies, such as Franz Werfel’s *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, about the Armenian genocide, or Stefan Zweig’s *Mary, Queen of Scots*. This pattern casts light on another way in which standard narratives about Mann’s place within literary modernism give way to competing accounts about his relationship to middlebrow culture with only a slight change in perspective. Both *Joseph and his Brothers* and *Doctor Faustus* have frequently been celebrated as paradigmatically modernist engagements with myth and as ambitious modernist epics. Most of the American readers of these novels, however, would instead have approached them as easily recognizable examples of time-honored popular forms: the historical novel and the artist’s novel.

Each of the four novels distributed by the club sold well over one hundred thousand copies, while *Joseph in Egypt* and *Doctor Faustus* surpassed the two hundred thousand mark. The peak of Mann’s fame and financial fortune in the United States thus came in the early 1940s. By then, however, the marketing strategies first designed by Knopf almost two decades earlier had long been overtaken by the calamitous rush of world history. The carefully curated image of Thomas Mann as the embodiment of European sophistication, as the spiritual heir to the classics of the western canon, and as the author of philosophical novels capable of standing up to the chaos of modern existence may still have sold books in Topeka, but it held no more appeal in New York. In the mid-1930s “engagement” had become the new watchword in US intellectual circles, and Brooks’s vision of a “congenial middle ground,” where high culture might fructify the barren soil of ordinary reality, now seemed almost laughable.

Even the *Saturday Review* did not entirely escape this development. In May of 1937, it ran an editorial about the youth of the day, who apparently believed that “the Thomas Mann cult is a vast reservoir of sentimentality, and [that] in these desperate days it is our duty to root out the sentimental.” This was such a notable departure from the paper’s previous editorial line that Canby himself took to the pen to issue a rebuttal. Mann could still be helpful, so he claimed two weeks later, because he dealt in large ideas and could therefore answer the only question that really mattered, which was, “Is Western Civilization really crumbling then?” Canby expressly did not
allude to what would seem to be the most obviously interesting thing about Thomas Mann in 1937: the fact that he was an exile from Hitler’s Germany, who might have been uniquely qualified to offer an informed personal perspective on the rise of European fascism and the threat that it posed to intellectual life. Instead, he praised him only as a purveyor of abstract thoughts, a novelist of ideas. The bombshell publication of Mann’s letter to the dean in the pages of the *Nation*, and later on of *Reader’s Digest*, would change all this and alter Mann’s reception in the United States almost overnight.