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Thomas Manns transatlantische
Autorschaft

Herausgegeben von
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Mit Beiträgen von Roman Seebeck,
Veronika Fuechtner, Todd Kontje,
Maryann Piel, Paulo Soethe,
Morten Høi Jensen und Nikolai Blaumer



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Joseph in America

Abstract

This short essay focuses on the most “American” of Mann’s novels in the larger context of his fictional universe. *Joseph der Ernährere* offers an oblique response to Nazi Germany refracted through the lens of ancient Egypt, but it also reflects Mann’s ongoing engagement with the meaning of America. Mann creates a comic counterpart to historical tragedy, granting humanity a vision of redemption in an utterly debased world. The laudable cosmopolitanism of Mann’s world view unfortunately goes hand in hand with a less admirable tendency to project racial difference and sexual desires onto “dark” continents in his literary works.

One of the more gripping chapters in *The Magician*, Colm Tóibín’s fictional biography of Thomas Mann, describes how Thomas, Katia, and Erika Mann barely managed to get out of Europe at the outbreak of the Second World War. Mann had been giving lectures in Holland and Sweden in the summer of 1939 on a short trip back to Europe from exile in America when the war began. He knew that they had to return to the United States immediately or risk being trapped abroad for the duration of the war. Fortunately, Mann’s American patroness, Agnes Meyer, was able to book the Manns on a last-minute flight to England that brought them to an overbooked ship sailing for New York. Once on board, Katia and Erika found a place for Mann to sit each morning so that he could resume writing his latest novel, *Lotte in Weimar*. “All Thomas wanted to do was work.”¹

The image of Mann recreating events that took place in Weimar more than a century ago on a ship packed with refugees escaping war-torn Europe reinforces the impression propagated by his American publicists of an author with heroic powers of concentration. The Book-of-the-Month Club advertised *Doktor Faustus* with a photograph of Mann in his California home, but added that, if necessary, “he could concentrate in a boiler room.”² Mann’s seeming indifference to his physical location is captured in his famous proclamation as he disembarked in New York from a voyage across the Atlantic: “Where I am, there is Germany. I carry my German culture in me.”³

Recent scholarship has challenged the myth of Mann as a self-absorbed writer with an insular notion of his German identity. Hans Rudolf Veget’s *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner* (2011) reminds readers that Mann lived in the United States for fourteen years and died as an American citizen in Switzerland.⁴ Tobias Boes views Mann as a cosmopolitan intellectual and writer of world literature who used his cultural capital to

1 Colm Tóibín: *The Magician. A Novel*. New York 2021, p. 308.

2 Tobias Boes: Thomas Mann’s Hands: Literature as Art and Profession in the German Fin de Siècle and the U.S. Middlebrow. In: *Market Strategies and German Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Ed. by Vance Byrd/Ervin Malakaj. Berlin 2020, pp. 333–355, here p. 351.

3 Thomas Mann: *Ein Appell an die Vernunft 1926–1933*. Ed. by Hermann Kurzke/Stephan Stachorski. Frankfurt/M. 1994, p. 446. In the following, quotations from the five-volume edition of Thomas Mann’s essays by Kurzke/Stachorski are referenced with the abbreviation “E” followed by the number of the respective volume.

4 Cf. Hans Rudolf Veget: *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner. Leben und Werk im amerikanischen Exil 1938–1952*. Frankfurt/M. 2011.

wage war against Nazi Germany.⁵ My own interest in Mann focuses less on his biography than his fiction, which I would term *worldly* in the sense described by Edward Said, in that his works engage with actual events and the ideologies behind them in the era of global commerce, mass migration, and European imperialism.⁶ Mann's understanding of Germanness was expansive and inclusive. Already in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* Mann turns a self-deprecating confession that he is "kein sehr guter und richtiger Deutscher" into a claim that his complex heritage actually makes him more German, based on his conviction "daß eine den Nationalsinn zersetzende Neigung zum Kosmopolitischen nach maßgeblichem Urteil vom Wesen der deutschen Nationalität untrennbar ist; daß man seine Deutschheit möglicherweise verlieren muß, um sie zu finden".⁷ The laudable cosmopolitanism of Mann's world view unfortunately goes hand in hand with a less admirable tendency to project racial difference and sexual desires onto "dark" continents in his literary works. As a case in point I will focus in this short essay on the most "American" of Mann's novels, *Joseph der Ernährer*, in the larger context of his fictional universe. *Joseph und seine Brüder*, a tetralogy that concludes with *Joseph der Ernährer*, offers an oblique response to Nazi Germany refracted through the lens of ancient Egypt, but it also reflects Mann's ongoing engagement with the meaning of America.

As Tóibín underscores in the opening pages of *The Magician*, young Thomas Mann associated the Americas with the Brazilian birthplace of his mother, Julia Mann. At night, when he and his brother were getting ready for bed, "their mother would tell them about the country of her birth, Brazil, a place so vast, she said, that no one knew how many people were there or what they were like or what languages they spoke."⁸ Her stories piqued the imagination of Heinrich and Thomas, and gave her an "allure" that "came from the atmosphere of foreignness and fragility that she exuded with such charm."⁹ This touch of the exotic, which both stigmatized and distinguished the Mann family from their fellow Hanseatic patricians, recurs on a regular basis in Thomas Mann's fiction.¹⁰ His second novel, *Königliche Hoheit*, features an American heroine whose German grandfather is rumored to have married "eine Dame mit indianischem Blut"¹¹ in the Americas. Tonio Kröger's "schöne[], schwarzhaarige[] Mutter" hails from "ganz unten auf der Landkarte".¹² Decades later, Mann will refer to the dark-skinned prostitute who infects the protagonist of *Doktor Faustus* with the name of a Brazilian butterfly, *Hetaera Esmeralda*. The disease eventually causes

5 Cf. Tobias Boes: *Thomas Mann's War. Literature, Politics, and the World Republic of Letters*. Ithaca 2019.

6 Cf. Todd Kontje: *Thomas Mann's World. Empire, Race, and the Jewish Question*. Ann Arbor 2011. See Edward W. Said: *Culture and Imperialism*. New York 1993, p. 13.

7 Thomas Mann: *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. Ed. and text-critically revised by Hermann Kurzke. Vol. 13.1 of the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* of Thomas Mann's works, letters and diaries. Ed. by Andreas Blödmann/Heinrich Detering/Eckhard Heftrich [et. al.]. Frankfurt/M. 2009, p. 78. In the following, quotations from the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* are referenced with the abbreviation "GKFA" followed by the number of the respective volume and subvolume.

8 Tóibín: *The Magician*, p. 2.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

10 Cf. Heinrich Detering: *Juden, Frauen und Litteraten. Zu einer Denkfigur beim jungen Thomas Mann*. Frankfurt/M. 2005.

11 GKFA 4.1, p. 291.

12 GKFA 2.1, p. 247.

Adrian Leverkühn's premature death, but not before it provides demonic inspiration for works of genius.

On the one hand, then, America stands for what Nietzsche would term the Dionysian, a primitive realm of racially-marked exoticism that can fuel creativity but also consume the artist. On the other hand, however, Mann aligns America with modern powers that seek to impose their civilization onto other national cultures. In *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, Mann traces a long history that leads from "alten Rom mit seinem Gedanken einer universalen Vereinigung der Menschheit"¹³ to the modern "Vereinigung der westlichen Welt, der Erben Roms, der 'Zivilisation' gegen Deutschland".¹⁴ *Buddenbrooks* already pits Lübeck's cosmopolitan patricians against militant forces from the "preußisch-amerikanischen Weltstadt"¹⁵ of Berlin that occupy the Hanseatic city-state and make life miserable for the artistically gifted Hanno Buddenbrook. Mann will remain suspicious of any form of government that stifles internal debate and crushes foreign foes.

Mann's ambivalent attitude toward the Americans recurs in his depiction of Egypt in *Joseph und seine Brüder*, in which he casts the African nation as both an irrational underworld and an ancient empire. From Jacob's perspective, Egypt is a primitive land of darkness, a swamp-like morass of filth and sexual debauchery, a backward realm of barbaric rituals that contrasts with the spiritual purity of his single God moving forward toward the promise of redemption. As Joseph discovers, however, Egypt is in fact a decadent society in a late stage of civilization torn by religious strife. Its citizens are heirs to an empire they did not conquer themselves; its leading cities hubs in a far-flung network of commercial ties and home to a polyglot compendium of the human race. Upon entering an Egyptian city, Joseph "sah Häute in allen Abschattungen vom Obsidian-Schwarz über viele Stufen von Braun und Gelb bis zum Käseweiß, er sah sogar gelbes Haar und azurfarbene Augen, Gesichter und Kleider von jedem Schnitt, er sah die Menschheit".¹⁶ Egypt therefore confronts Joseph with a dual challenge: he must acknowledge the powers of darkness and yet move toward the light, and he must learn to manage the diversity of a vast empire without turning into an authoritarian tyrant.

The first theme predominates when we consider the overall plot structure of *Joseph und seine Brüder*. Three times Joseph descends to a symbolic underworld, as he is cast into the well by his brothers, sold into slavery in Egypt, and sentenced to prison when falsely accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife, and three times Joseph ascends to positions of greater power. This mythic pattern of ritual death and resurrection serves a political purpose. As he began writing *Die Geschichten Jaakobs*, Mann was increasingly concerned with what he termed the "revolutionären Obskurantismus" of Neoromantic reactionaries all too eager to cast reason aside.¹⁷ These irresponsible purveyors of a conservative revolution either inadvertently or actively abetted the Nazi

13 GKFA 13.1, p. 46.

14 GKFA 13.1, p. 53.

15 GKFA 13.1, p. 154 f.

16 GFK 8.1, p. 797.

17 Thomas Mann: *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*. Ed. By Peter de Mendelssohn. Frankfurt/M 1974. Vol. XI, p. 48. In the following referenced with the abbreviation "GW" followed by the corresponding volume number.

penchant for myth over reason, grand theatrical gestures over intellectual debate, and fascist dictatorship over a functional democracy. Mann set out in *Joseph und seine Brüder* to acknowledge the appeal of the irrational, but to insist on the power of the intellect. Joseph's descents to the underworld do not end with his dissolution into the seething mass of the collective Volk, but mark instead a necessary step on the way to solidifying his sense of self and making judicious use of his political authority. In this way, Mann explained in an essay of 1942, he took "Der Mythos [...] dem Faschismus aus den Händen" by narrating "die Geburt des Ich aus dem mythischen Kollektiv."¹⁸

While critics have been quick to applaud Mann for his repudiation of Nazi ideology, they have been less eager to acknowledge the extent to which his fictional universe reproduces Eurocentric prejudices. Simply put, the deeper Joseph descends into Egypt, the blacker it gets, until he reaches the realm of love-crazed Mut-em-enet, Potiphar's wife, who in her obsession to seduce Joseph enlists the aid of black Tabubu. "Eine Vettel reinsten Wassers war etwa die schwarze Tabubu, [...] mit Brüsten, die Schläuchen glichen,"¹⁹ who is versed in "der Kochkunst der Negerländer"²⁰ and conducts weird rituals of "schmutziger Liederlichkeit"²¹ that reduce her once-demure mistress to a bubbling cauldron of insatiable lust. The association of Egypt with irrationalism, unbridled sexuality, and racial difference continues Mann's tendency to project dark impulses onto places defined by their difference from Northern Germany: the slovenly Clawdia Chauchat with her androgynous sex appeal stems from Dagestan on the edge of Asia; the cholera that kills Gustav von Aschenbach originated in India; Christian Buddenbrook's dissolute character degenerates further during his protracted stay in South America. In the case of *Joseph und seine Brüder*, however, Jacob's prejudice against "Keme, das Schwarze,"²² is repeatedly exposed as just that: a prejudice that does not correspond to reality. Joseph has seen the great city of Wase, "Kernpunkt und Fokus" of the Egyptian world, which is distinguished by "ihre Gemischtheit und rassenbunte Jahrmarkslustigkeit."²³ While on a symbolic level Joseph's journey to Egypt is a descent to the underworld, a return to the realm of the mother, both in the sense of his own mother's southern origins and Johann Jakob Bachofen's "großen 'Zurück' von der mütterlich-nächtigen Idee der Vergangenheit,"²⁴ it also introduces him to an actual empire whose multifarious peoples he will have to manage when he ascends to his position of power as Pharaoh's right-hand man.

The tension between national unity and regional diversity plays itself out primarily in the realm of theology in *Joseph in Ägypten*, although as the narrator later observes, "Es heißt die Einheit der Welt verkennen, wenn man Religion und Politik für grundverschiedene Dinge hält, die nichts mit einander zu schaffen hätten noch haben dürften."²⁵ As in most premodern societies, gods were local in ancient Egypt, intimately linked to the language and customs of a particular people. At the time when Joseph is taken down to Egypt, however, that had begun to change. Two formerly regional gods

18 E 5, pp. 189, 196.

19 GKFA 8.1, p. 1203.

20 GKFA 8.1, p. 1218.

21 GKFA 8.1, p. 1278.

22 GKFA 7.1, p. x.

23 GKFA 8.1, p. 794.

24 GW XI, pp. 48–49.

25 GKFA 8.1, p. 1441.

were being elevated to transregional significance, albeit in very different ways. On the one hand, the priests of the city of On had begun to reduce the panoply of gods to a single divinity, Atum-Rê. These religious authorities were clever, in that their new understanding of God managed to offend no one and left "die tatsächliche Vielheit der Götter Ägyptens unangetastet".²⁶ They used the image of the triangle to explain their capacious monotheistic theology: the base was broad and allowed for the continued existence of local deities, but the sides converged in a tip that represented the sole God. The one did not exclude the other: Atum-Rê's "Horizont war weit und vielumfassend, [...] [...] er war weltweit."²⁷ On the other hand, the priests of the Theban city of Wese elevate a different local god, Amun, to a position of sole authority as Amun-Rê, but their God is exclusive rather than inclusive: "dessen Horizont [sei] in der Tat so eng [...], daß er nicht nur nichts kenne und wisse als Ägyptenland, sondern auch hier wieder, statt gelten zu lassen, nichts könne als verzehren und einverleiben, indem er sozusagen nicht über seine eigene Nase hinaussehe."²⁸

Mann's distinction between the tolerant God of On and conservative deity of Wese has no basis in Egyptian history, but rather alludes to the contrast between Mann's cosmopolitan concept of Germanness and the narrow-minded nationalism of the Nazis.²⁹ The distinction is consistent with Mann's long-standing suspicion of centralized states and imperialist aggression. In the aftermath of the First World War, Mann expressed his distaste for national unification in his diaries: "Mir wäre es recht, wenn das Reich sich auflöste, und etwa ein unpolitisch-machtloses Nebeneinander von Republiken mit einem Bayern plus Deutsch-Österreich (oder auch diese einzeln) entstände."³⁰ Fifteen years later he was appalled by the Nazi government's move toward complete state control within the new Reich: "Das eigentliche Problem ist das der 'Totalität,' der Einheit von Staat und Kultur, wie sie jetzt durch 'Gleichschaltung' erzwungen werden soll."³¹ In 1942 Mann interrupted work on *Joseph der Ernährer* to publish an English-language essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "How to Win the Peace," in which he predicted the demise of the modern nation-state. Mann acknowledged that "[p]eoples, languages, national cultures, will exist in the future too, will probably always exist. But the absolutism of the national state is as antiquated today as the absolutism of kings was at a certain time in the past."³²

Seen in this light, Joseph's challenge as Egyptian overlord in *Joseph der Ernährer* is to administer a coordinated federal plan that stops short of totalitarian control. As in the case of *Joseph in Ägypten*, the political conflict is expressed in theological terms. There the tension lay between the rabidly nationalist supporters of Amun-Rê and the cosmopolitan devotees of Atum-Rê. The new pharaoh, Echnaton, supports the more tolerant god, but he further refines the move toward monotheism. Whereas the priests of Atum-Rê used the image of the triangle to illustrate their concept of a

26 GKFA 8.1, p. 752.

27 GKFA 8.1, p. 753.

28 GKFA 8.1, p. 754.

29 Cf. GKFA 8.2, p. 1008 (to 8.1, p. 754).

30 Thomas Mann: *Tagebücher 1918–1921*. Ed. by Peter de Mendelssohn. Frankfurt/M. 1979, pp. 84–86, here p. 86 (November 19, 1918). In the following, quotations from Peter de Mendelssohn's and Inge Jens's ten-volume edition of Mann's diaries are referenced as "Tagebücher" followed by the respective volume number.

31 *Tagebücher* 2, pp. 123–125, here p. 123 (June 30, 1933).

32 Thomas Mann: *How to win the Peace*. In: *Tagebücher* 5, pp. 1058–1070, here p. 1066.

single God who tolerates the continued existence of local deities, Pharaoh embraces the new, more strictly monotheistic god, Atôn, represented by the single image of the sun. In effect, Pharaoh removes the base of the triangle with his concept of a purely spiritual God of peace, who not only supersedes all Egyptian gods, but the gods of every nation on the earth. In devoting himself to his spiritual reveries, however, Pharaoh loses touch with the people he is supposed to govern. When he goes so far as to issue “Unterdrückungsbefehlen und Anordnungen der Zerstörung” of Egypt’s ancient gods, he goes too far, and ends his life as “einem in königlichem Luxus abgeschlossenen Fremdling.”³³

Joseph, in contrast, manages to combine deference to Pharaoh with shrewd political skills. After coaxing Echnaton to interpret the dreams that predict the coming famine, Joseph insinuates that he, Joseph, might be the man to manage state affairs. Once he has assumed control, he works to break down local opposition to his plan. He begins his reign with an extensive tour of Egypt’s provinces, and then sets about bending recalcitrant local lords to his will. He moves serfs from one estate to another to make clear that their allegiance is no longer to the feudal lord but to the Egyptian state and grants poor relief on the condition that they modernize their farming techniques. To the abject poor he gives enough grain for survival, while those with money – both at home and abroad – pay a high price for the grain Joseph judiciously doles out from storage. In this way he not only consolidates the unity of the nation, but also binds foreign peoples back into the fabric of the once unraveling empire. To this extent, Joseph practices what his recent editors describe as an effort to replace an outmoded feudalism with “einer modernen zentralistischen Staatsverwaltung.”³⁴

In two ways, however, Joseph stops short of complete collectivization that would reduce all citizens to faceless servants of the secular state. First, Joseph demands only a twenty per cent tax from those serfs reassigned to new properties, rather than expropriating all their profits, and he allows landowners to retain their right to sell and inherit their land, even though it also belongs to Pharaoh. “Nicht umsonst haben wir von einer Verzauberung des Eigentumsbegriffes durch Josephs Maßnahmen gesprochen,” comments the narrator, for “Josephs Wirtschafts-System war eine überraschende Verbindung von Vergesellschaftung und Inhaberefreiheit des einzelnen.”³⁵ Second, Joseph exempts the priests and their temples from the new taxes, and indulges “die Anhänglichkeit des kleinen Mannes an die alten Götter des Landes [...], diese Pietät, die Pharaon gern zugunsten der Lehre von seinem Vater im Himmel mit Stumpf und Stiel ausgerodet hätte.”³⁶ Joseph wisely realizes “daß das Volk sich dem Läuternd-Neuen viel zugänglicher erweisen werde, wenn man ihm zugleich erlaubte, an seinen althergebrachten Glaubens- und Kultgewohnheiten festzuhalten.”³⁷

Joseph functions less like the administrator of a machine-like state bureaucracy than as a benevolent patriarch of a socialist system that retains vestiges of both modern capitalism and ancient feudal hierarchies. “Was bleibt also übrig als die Links-Diktatur?” questioned Mann in 1936 in response to the fascist subversion of democratic

33 GKFA 8.1, p. 1909

34 GKFA 8.2, p. 1419 (to 8.1, 1546); see also GKFA 7.2, 93.

35 GKFA 8.1, p. 1859.

36 GKFA 8.1, p. 1860.

37 GKFA 8.1, p. 1860.

institutions. “Der Liberalismus als politisches Prinzip ist wirklich tot,” he concluded, and thus “eine aufgeklärte Diktatur [sei] das Wünschenswerte.”³⁸ Mann viewed President Roosevelt as just such an enlightened despot and casts Joseph in his mold. The diplomacy that Joseph displays when introducing his New Deal to ancient Egypt reflects Mann’s long-standing preference for a combination of local diversity and global cosmopolitanism over state centralization and imperialist nationalism, just as Joseph’s descent to the Egyptian underworld is one of many returns to the realm of the mother in Mann’s fiction. The location may shift from South America to Asia or Africa, but the structural opposition between Hanseatic normalcy and the exoticism of the Global South remains the same.

Joseph und seine Brüder is a work of transatlantic fiction. Conceived in Germany but completed in California, its final volume pays homage to the leader of Mann’s adopted country, but in a way that underscores the continuity of his convictions in the face of what might seem radical change. Joseph casts a magic spell over a land in crisis in a way that reflects the progressive policies of the New World and yet retains respect for Old World traditions. He emerges from multiple descents to the Egyptian underworld strengthened in his sense of self and in his commitment to progressive social change. Most of Mann’s protagonists are not so fortunate; after completing the massive *Joseph* tetralogy and the spin-off novella, *Das Gesetz*, Mann turned his attention to the story of Adrian Leverkühn, whose downfall parallels that of Nazi Germany. In *Joseph und seine Brüder*, however, Mann creates a comic counterpart to historical tragedy, granting humanity a vision of redemption in an utterly debased world.

38 Tagebücher 2, p. 350–351, here p. 351 (August 13, 1936).

