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Thomas Manns transatlantische
Autorschaft

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



PETER LANG

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Celebrity and the Cultural Nation. Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*

Abstract

Mann's 1939 Goethe novel, *Lotte in Weimar*, is a valuable text through which to understand the role of celebrity in the literary and political landscape of the early 20th century. I explore the ways in which an engagement with the field of Celebrity Studies makes possible a reading of Mann's Goethe as a palimpsest of the historical celebrity author, Mann, a 20th century celebrity author, and Hitler, Germany's most famous politician in the media age. Mann's own experiences in the spotlight, especially those gathered in his exile years, inform the social and familial relationships at the center of the novel. Furthermore, Mann takes an ironic stance towards the "Goethe Mythos," thereby undermining the validity of the cult of genius and inviting a reading that recognizes its shared features with the cult of modern celebrity that made possible Hitler's rise to power.

With his 1939 Goethe novel, *Lotte in Weimar*, Thomas Mann appears to withdraw from the contemporary world, reimagining a meeting between the 67-year-old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the now matronly Charlotte Buff, the woman on whom the love interest in Goethe's first novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774), was based. However, the novel's historical setting serves as the backdrop for the exiled author's reflection on the influence granted to celebrities, literary and political, in his own time. The central plot of the novel, leading up to the reunion between Goethe and Lotte, is characterized by its slow-moving dialogues between Lotte and members of Weimar society, demonstrating the seemingly universal desire to gain access to or foster a relationship with the novel's central celebrity. However, from those closest to Goethe, particularly his longtime secretary, Riemer, and his son, August, Lotte learns of the negative influence celebrities have on those in their proximity and the impact of the outsized influence they are granted. In particular, the power dynamics between Goethe and his son reveal the familial impacts of modern celebrity, which is no longer solely determined by blood lineage, and the relationship between Goethe and Riemer makes visible the pitfalls of a social ordering system that rewards those who contribute to the mythification of a famed person. I posit that an engagement with the field of Celebrity Studies makes possible a reading of the novel that recognizes both Mann, the contemporary representative of the German cultural nation, and Hitler, Germany's first political celebrity in the media age, in Mann's Goethe character.

Celebrity Studies as a Tool for Understanding *Lotte in Weimar*

The relatively new field of Celebrity Studies views celebrity and celebrity culture as a lens through which to observe shifting social norms and values. Of particular interest to the field is the role of celebrity in society, the intersection of celebrity, gender, race, and aging, as well as the relationship between fan and celebrity. Mann and Goethe are especially fascinating personages in this context because each was recognized as Germany's most prominent literary voice in their respective lifetimes, with their influence reaching beyond the literary sphere. Both authors are also representatives

of literary fame at crucial moments in the development of modern celebrity. Many scholars trace the development of early modern celebrity back to the 18th century, a period in which renown could be achieved through extraordinary accomplishments, making it possible to achieve positions of influence without being 'anointed by God' (i.e. royalty and religious leaders). The ability to gain access to the highest social orders can be observed by the addition of 'von' to Goethe's name, signaling his acceptance to the aristocratic class despite his bourgeois background. The early 20th century is similarly critical in the formation of modern celebrity. Due to the proliferation of print media, especially picture media, and the ever more accessible film industry, the relationship between celebrity and the public evolved, creating greater opportunity for the development of parasocial relationships. Indeed, it wasn't only the film stars, whose larger-than-life projections heightened the allure of celebrity. Many more influential people, such as authors, politicians and businessmen, were familiar to the lay person thanks to features in newspapers and magazines that were often accompanied by photographs.¹

Celebrity Studies also strives to understand how and why celebrities tend to have such great influence on those in their proximity. Just as royalty maintained their power by claiming their appointment by God, the modern celebrity relies on a circle of supporters to validate their superiority. The celebrity's public recognition is facilitated by influential supporters, and, in the 20th century especially, the media. This system of social ordering expands access to the highest social levels, but simultaneously creates a divide between the glorified and glorifiers. As will be shown below, the relationship between celebrity and supporter is dramatically different the closer the relationship becomes, with the modern celebrity often acting as a tyrant to those closest to them. This tyranny is often invisible to those outside of the celebrity's inner circle, a sign of the successful mythification of the celebrity subject.² With *Lotte in Weimar*, Mann creates an opportunity to witness the processes by which celebrities are raised above ordinary people, and the relationships that contribute to their mythification. The reader experiences this revelation through Lotte's eyes, who arrives in Weimar with great hopes for rekindling her 44-year-old relationship with Goethe. Instead, she finds the author to be unapproachable and distant, surrounded by yes-men that hope to secure their positions by remaining in his proximity. For Mann's contemporary readers, the allusions to Hitler and his inner circle simultaneously underscores the relevance and the danger of celebrity in their political reality.

1 For an extended discussion on celebrity and its form and influence in the 20th century see Sharon Marcus: *The Drama of Celebrity*. Princeton 2019; Fred Inglis: *A Short History of Celebrity*. Princeton 2010; Richard Schickel: *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*. Garden City 1985.

2 Cf. Detlev Schöttker: *Ruhm und Rezeption. Unsterblichkeit als Voraussetzung der Literaturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart 2000, pp. 480–82. Schöttker lays out the relationship between the mythification of the celebrity subject (citing Friedrich Gundolf's *Dichter und Helden*) and the influence of mass media of the early 20th century on celebrity culture (expanding on Julian Hirsch's theories in *Die Genesis des Ruhmes. Ein Beitrag zur Methodenlehre der Geschichte*), highlighting the exacerbated distance between fan and celebrity during this time.

Thomas Mann: Celebrity Author in America

When Thomas Mann began his exile, a result of the increasingly dangerous influence of the Nazi regime, he was already well-known on the world stage as the 1929 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Despite his prominent position, Mann withdrew from the public political sphere in the first years of his exile to protect his ability to publish in Germany, resulting in great criticism from his family and fellow exiles. However, he reversed course in 1936; in response to Eduard Korrodi's³ criticism of German authors who chose to leave Germany, Mann wrote an open letter taking a firm stance against Germany's ruling party. Despite the somewhat self-serving timing, considering that the loss of his German citizenship was already imminent, and his German publisher had relocated to Switzerland,⁴ the letter's near immediate translation foreshadowed the international influence Mann would hold as an anti-fascist defender of the German cultural nation. The author took on an especially prominent role in the United States, the most famous German émigré after Albert Einstein, garnering media attention for his literary work and activism.

Even before setting foot on American soil, Mann's celebrity status began to take shape around 1930, helped by the expert marketing by his American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. Mann's image as representative of the German cultural nation developed over three visits in 1934, 1935 and 1937, leading up to his move to Princeton in 1938. Features on Mann in the print media bolstered this image; for example, on June 10th, 1934, the *New York Herald Tribune* published a piece on Mann entitled "The most Eminent Living Man of Letters," and the very next day his image graced the cover of *Time* magazine, the first non-anglophone writer featured in this manner. Mann notably received honorary doctorates from several prestigious institutions, including Harvard (1935), Yale (1938) and Princeton (1939).⁵ The acceptance of the honorary degree from Harvard was especially meaningful, as it confirmed to the NS-Regime and fellow émigrés his break from fascist Germany and, on a personal level, made the revocation of his honorary degree from Bonn University the following year sting a bit less.

The image Mann projected to his American audience was in line with much of the self-fashioning he had employed throughout his career; the pragmatic literary genius carried something of old Lübeck in him, he had an "Aura eines unnahbaren Klassikers,"⁶ exuding a calm confidence that made a positive impression on influential people. For instance, Mann received extensive support from Agnes Meyer, co-owner and co-editor of the *Washington Post*, who gave Mann access to her extensive network and provided generous financial sponsorship. Mann's role as quasi-ambassador to the German cultural nation was underscored by an invitation to the White House from President Roosevelt. However, Mann's influential role in the United States was not only achieved through his powerful connections, public appearances, media

3 Editor for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

4 Cf. Donald A. Prater: *Thomas Mann: Deutscher und Weltbürger. Eine Biografie*. Munich 1995, p. 344.

5 Hans Rudolf Vaget: *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner. Leben und Werk im amerikanischen Exil 1938–1952*. Frankfurt/M. 2011, p. 297.

6 Dieter Wolfgang Adolphs: Thomas Manns Einflußnahme auf die Rezeption seiner Werke in Amerika. In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*. 64/1990, H. 3, pp. 560–580, here p. 561.

interviews and lectures, but also aided by his ability to determine which of his texts would reach his English-speaking readership. For instance, there was a conscious effort to stop the translation and distribution of Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1920), as it revealed his support of Germany's role in World War I. While some literary critics attempted to draw attention to Mann's older political writing, the suppression of Mann's *Betrachtungen* in the American market was so successful that it was not officially translated until 1983. When he spoke about the book at Princeton in 1940, Mann distanced himself from the nationalist politics he had supported at the time, explaining that "[he] was fighting for Goethe's Germany, not for the Kaiser, or for Ludendorff."⁷ Mann's earlier political essays were also cleverly described as "autobiographical reflections,"⁸ disguising the overt nationalist stance he held.

In 1936, between Thomas Mann's second and third American journeys, the author began writing *Lotte in Weimar*. It would be 37 months before the novel was finished, the manuscript traveling with Mann to five countries, his literary work repeatedly stalled by lecture tours, a move across the Atlantic, and time spent advocating for fellow political émigrés. As Schöll points out, the novel confronts Mann's personal challenges on two levels: first, he explores the incoherence of his understanding of German cultural heritage and the values of the new political nation. Second, Mann questions the validity of the "Goethe Mythos," complicating his portrayal of the celebrity author by taking an ironic stance towards the genius-cult that defined Goethe's celebrity.⁹ I will add that Mann's own self-fashioning efforts, as outlined above, speak to his personal understanding of the mechanics of celebrity, demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the constructed nature of celebrity, and highlight his awareness that this manufactured reality relies on the proliferation of the celebrity image through influential supporters and the media.

Goethe as Hitler-Figure

Mann's experiences with celebrity in America, and his observations of Hitler's rise to power in the German and international media, provide important context for understanding the Goethe character he creates. Mann thematizes the 20th century cult of celebrity by transposing the methods and values of modern celebrity culture atop the cult of genius dominant in the *Goethezeit*. Riemer is, as Baier explains, a crucial character through which to understand the parallels between Goethe and Hitler that Mann alludes to. Riemer is first introduced when he visits Lotte at the Hotel Elephant, during which he dominates the conversation with long-winded monologues centering on the lack of public recognition he receives for his influence on Goethe's life and work. He even claims that "diejenigen seiner Briefe, die von mir sind, goetischer sein mögen als die von ihm diktierten." With this, Riemer demystifies *das große Ich* in Mannian style, reducing the artist (*Dichter*) to an artisan (*Schriftsteller*) and by

7 Thomas Mann: *On Myself and other Princeton Lectures. An Annotated Edition Based on Mann's Lecture Typescripts*. Ed. by James N. Bade. Frankfurt/M. 1996, p. 67.

8 Adolphs: *Einflußnahme*, p. 567.

9 Julia Schöll: Goethe im Exil. Zur Dekonstruktion nationaler Mythen in Thomas Manns "Lotte in Weimar". In: *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch*. 16/2003, pp. 141–158, here p. 143.

extension Goethe's work from *Meisterwerk* to *Menschenwerk*¹⁰ However dismissive Riemer acts in Lotte's presence, in public he participates in upholding Goethe's public image, most explicitly by writing for and as him. Over the course of the conversation it becomes apparent that Riemer lives unhappily in Goethe's shadow, but remains close because he sees the relationship as his best chance of achieving renown himself.¹¹ In this scene, Mann shows the dangerous impact celebrity has on society: this new social ordering system rewards those who contribute to the mythification of celebrity in hopes of benefitting from their proximity to an imperfect idol. Considering Mann's statements on the "Verantwortung der Intellektuellen" in the rise of the Nazi Party since 1930,¹² Riemer must be read as an example of the failure of intellectual resistance. The well-educated and well-connected members of Hitler's inner circle are choosing, like Riemer, to stand behind a man whose place among the elites is constructed by and upheld through the cult of celebrity.

Mann continues to explore the social relationships that contribute to the mythification of celebrity during a lunch hosted at the author's home. The scene depicts the much-anticipated reunion between Lotte and Goethe. However, the meeting is not the emotional event Lotte had hoped for. The small circle, including Lotte, her daughter, Riemer and Goethe's son, August, is met by the aloof and distant author. The distance between the guests and the mythical celebrity is emphasized when his *Hofrat* gives detailed instructions on how best to interact with Goethe. Once seated at the table, everyone's attention focuses on the revered host. He explains to his guests, "Die Deutschen sind ein Volk, welches eine große Aehnlichkeit [sic!] mit den Chinesen aufweist," before citing a supposedly Chinese proverb, which claims "Der große Mann ist ein öffentliches Unglück."¹³ His guests laugh hysterically at this statement, except for Lotte, who is horrified at Goethe's acknowledgement of the tyranny he imposes on the public. In 1940 it would be difficult to read this scene without making the connection between the "großer Mann" in the proverb and Hitler. Mann implies with this scene that the Germans have a general "Mißverständnis der Größe und dem dumpfen Nationalismus."¹⁴ By having Goethe's guests laugh along with this statement, more focused on remaining in their host's good graces than on the content of his statement, Mann satirizes the German's endorsement of Hitler's ever more tyrannical actions, shining a light on the role mythification of celebrity plays in the proliferation of facism.¹⁵

10 Thomas Mann: *Lotte in Weimar*. Ed. and text-critically revised by Werner Fritzen. Vol. 9.1 of the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* of Thomas Mann's works, letters and diaries. Ed. by Andreas Blödom/Heinrich Detering/Eckhard Heftrich [et. al.]. Frankfurt/M. 2003, p. 81 f. In the following, quotations from the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* are referenced with the abbreviation "GKFA" followed by the number of the respective volume.

11 Christian Baier: *Zwischen höllischem Feuer und doppeltem Segen. Geniekonzepte in Thomas Manns Romanen Lotte in Weimar, Joseph und seine Brüder und Doktor Faustus*. Göttingen 2011, p. 157.

12 Hinrich Siefken: Thomas Manns "Dienst an der Zeit" in den Jahren 1918–1933. In: *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch*. 10/1997, pp. 167–185, here p. 167.

13 GKFA 9.1, p. 411.

14 Schöll: Goethe im Exil, p. 151.

15 Cf. Werner Fritzen's commentary in GKFA 9.2, p. 18.

Mann through Goethe, Goethe as Mann

It was not lost on Mann that he was also a “großer Mann;” not only did he draw parallels between Goethe and Hitler, but he also saw himself in a similar position of influence. Mann had engaged with Goethe’s life and work throughout his career,¹⁶ and “humbly and proudly [...] placed himself”¹⁷ in Goethe’s authorial lineage. It is therefore unsurprising that Mann masterfully adopts the Goethian style in *Lotte*, mimicking the author’s voice in meticulous detail, making it possible to speak on current political issues through him. For instance, Mann’s imagined Goethe speaks critically about German people’s nationalistic, separatist tendencies;

Der Deutsche, statt sich in sich selbst zu beschränken, muß die Welt in sich aufnehmen, um auf die Welt zu wirken. Nicht feindlicher Absonderung von anderen Völkern darf unser Ziel sein, sondern freundschaftlicher Verkehr mit aller Welt, Ausbildung der gesellschaftlichen Tugenden, auch auf Kosten angeborener Gefühle, ja Rechte.¹⁸

The political situation in Germany in 1816, one defined by anti-Napoleon sentiment, makes it possible for Mann to overlay his anti-Nazi position with Goethe’s viewpoints.¹⁹ It is entirely plausible that Goethe, the “Weimarer Skeptiker,” “Weltbürger,” “Verehrer Napoleons,” and “ironische[r] Kritiker des deutschen Nationalismus,”²⁰ could have uttered these words. When his fictional Goethe expressed disdain for Germans’ willingness to follow a “verzückten Schurken,” who teaches his followers “Nationalität als Isolierung und Roheit (sic) zu begreifen”²¹ Mann’s allusion to Hitler’s dangerous influence is overt.²²

The impact of Goethe’s celebrity on those closest to him, specifically his son August, can also be read as Mann’s reflection on the impact his fame has on his own children. In his description of the younger Goethe, who is defined by his inadequacies in comparison to his father, Mann appears to ruminate on a life lived in a father’s shadow. August is described as having “eine geringere Stirn, eine schwunglosere Nase, einen kleineren und weiblicheren Mund,” even his teeth are “etwas zu klein[.]”²³ Despite his deficiencies, August’s proximity to Goethe allows him to see past the facade of celebrity. This is most evident when he recites for Lotte the poem his father wrote following his mother’s passing. Lotte reacts as August had hoped, perceiving the poem to be “wenig bedeutend” and “übertrieben.” August successfully creates a moment for mutual recognition: “Und dabei hatte [Lotte] [...] den Verdacht – und las es mit einer gewissen Deutlichkeit in den Augen, mit denen er sie ansah – daß er ein solches Urteil hatte herausfordern wollen.”²⁴ The younger Goethe silently confirms that Lotte has not been fooled by the mythification of Goethe, having known him before he became famous, and retaining the ability to recognize him as an imperfect human.

16 Tobias Boes: *Thomas Mann’s War: Literature, Politics, and the World Republic of Letters*. Ithaca 2019, p. 22.

17 Fritz Kaufmann: Imitatio Goethe: Thomas Mann and his French Confreres. In: *Monatshefte*. 48/1956, no. 5, pp. 245–259, here p. 247.

18 GKFA 9.1, p. 166.

19 Cf. Stanley Corngold: *The Mind in Exile: Thomas Mann in Princeton*. Princeton 2022, p. 163.

20 GKFA 9.2, p. 16.

21 GKFA 9.1, p. 327.

22 Helmut Koopman: “German Culture is Where I am”: Thomas Mann in Exile. In: *Studies in 20th Century Literature*. 7/1982, no. 1, pp. 5–20, here p. 15.

23 GKFA 9.1, pp. 227 f.

24 GKFA 9.1, p. 234.

I posit that Mann writes a bit of his eldest and most famous children, Erika and Klaus, into his August character. Both Erika and Klaus were writers and politically active members of the anti-Nazi resistance, and the family members, along with Thomas Mann's brother Heinrich, that applied the most pressure to their father to break his silence on the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. Both recognized the disingenuous, politically disengaged celebrity image that their father projected until 1936, and both hoped to move him to action. Like August, they saw the flawed man their father was; he was more concerned with his ability to publish and preventing the possible seizure of his property than using his international platform to speak out against fascism. However, Mann could not be compelled into action, even withdrawing his agreement to contribute to Klaus' journal, *Die Sammlung*, when it featured an openly anti-fascist editorial in its premiere issue leaving "keinen Zweifel... ' wo wir, die Herausgeber, und wo unsere Mitarbeiter stehen."²⁵ Moreover, both Klaus' and Erika's literary endeavors were inherently entangled in their father's literary career. As the children of a celebrity author, they benefited from their connection to their father, but with access to the most elite literary circles came the comparison to their father. In Mann's August character the familial harms resulting from celebrity, experienced by those closest to the modern celebrity, are brought to light, revealing the complication of celebrity lineages in comparison to the royal lineages of the past.

A German Novel Without a German Audience

Even though Mann's novels were banned in Germany, the German edition of *Lotte in Weimar* hit the literary market in German-speaking hubs in time for Christmas 1939. Unfortunately, the German exile community proved difficult to reach, with only 12,000 copies sold by the end of the war. On the other hand, the English edition, entitled *The Beloved Returns*, was relatively successful with Mann's most important readership outside of the German-speaking realm,²⁶ selling 26,000 copies within just a few months.²⁷ Despite a general misunderstanding of the novel as a simple authorial self-reflection, it had overall very positive reviews in the American press and abroad. However, the critical aspects of the novel, such as the exploration of the cult of celebrity, were somewhat obscured by the publisher's marketing choices. The novel was advertised as a "Weihnachtsbuch," and its description invoked the genius-cult Mann was criticizing, describing it as "Schöpfung höchster Meisterschaft."²⁸ Yet the book sales and reviews do not paint a full picture; the publication of the novel was a meaningful signal of the perseverance of the German cultural nation, one that existed before the German state and will continue after the fall of the current regime. As one *Lotte* reviewer pointed out, Mann's choice to write a novel with the belief that a German readership still existed was a powerful act of resistance.²⁹ In addition, passages from *Lotte* deemed most damning against the NS-Regime were illegally distributed in

²⁵ Prater: *Deutscher und Weltbürger*, p. 297.

²⁶ Cf. Adolphs: *Einflußnahme*, p. 560.

²⁷ Cf. GKFA 9.2, p. 127.

²⁸ GKFA 9.2, pp. 127 f.

²⁹ Cf. GKFA 9.2, p. 131.

Germany under the title “Goethes Unterhaltung mit Riemer.”³⁰ This makes clear that the novel had indeed been interpreted by some as commentary on the Hitler-cult that had taken hold in Germany, and was seen as a tool to prompt reflection on Germany’s decline into barbarism.

A richer reading of Mann’s *Lotte* is possible when considering the important role celebrity played in Mann’s transition to the American literary market and the rise of Hitler. Rather than understanding the novel as a retreat into German literary tradition during the author’s years in exile, the novel highlights the dangers of celebrity in the age of fascism. Mann’s critical viewpoint on the cult of celebrity is informed by his emigration to the US, where he crafted his media image through the relationships he fostered with influential people and successfully obscured his past political missteps. Mann’s image in the US as an outspoken anti-fascist highlights that the mythification of celebrity serves to uphold a false, or at the very least, highly manipulated, public image. By demystifying the great Goethe in his novel, Mann chips away at the facade of the celebrity author, despite benefitting from the cult of celebrity himself. Furthermore, by thematizing the inherent tyranny of the great man, Mann warns not only of the tyrant himself, but especially of the circle of supporters that glorify him.

³⁰ Prater: *Deutscher und Weltbürger*, p. 418.