

FEASTING WITH THE BUDDENBROOKS

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There's a memorable dinner in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* at which a certain "bacon broth" is served, a local specialty described as "a bouillon made with sour cabbage, in which [is] served the entire meal – ham, potatoes, beet-root, cauliflower, peas, beans, pears, sour plums, and goodness knows what, juice and all." Anyone who's read Mann will recognize that that passage could practically serve as a recipe for *Buddenbrooks* itself. The novel is a full meal in one bowl, with local color, landscapes, nuggets of scientific fact, droll characters, death-bed scenes, disquisitions, and melodrama, stirred together, juice and all.

When it appeared in 1901, *Buddenbrooks* brought its twenty-six-year-old author almost immediate fame as well as a good deal of money, every first novelist's two deepest desires. *Buddenbrooks* was singled out for special mention when Mann won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929. It's still Mann's most popular novel in Germany. My own German paperback edition went through thirteen printings in a dozen years, a total of 267,000 copies – a remarkable number even if you count in all the student readers doing forced labor. This book has legs.

Part of the continuing appeal of *Buddenbrooks* must be its nostalgic coziness, even though it tells the story a family's decline. (For some reason, the book's German subtitle, *Verfall einer Familie*, "the decay of a family," does not appear in the standard English edition.) Mann himself described *Buddenbrooks* as cheerful at its core, and there's a touch of the early, comic Dickens in some of the Buddenbrook family gatherings, particularly in the long, affectionately drawn housewarming party that begins the book and in the rich cast of minor characters. Figures such as the good-natured Bavarian yokel, Herr Permaneder; or Herr Brecht, who sweats and goes pale along with his dental patients while he's working on their teeth; or Christian Buddenbrook,

the wastrel scion who hypochondriacally complains of pains caused by his nerves being “too short” on one side – all these and their fellows, like mezzotints, evoke the oddity of a time gone by.

It’s not just our own remove that creates the book’s nostalgia. That housewarming dinner carried a soft sepia glow even for the books’ first readers, harkening back as it did sixty-six years to 1835, before most of them had been born and before city-states like the one whose life Mann depicts had been absorbed into a unified, powerful Germany. The book’s first audience inhabited a world where Friedrich Nietzsche had enunciated his doctrine of the superman, Sigmund Freud had dropped his first plumb lines into the subconscious, and the lush, late-Romantic strains of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler filled the cultural atmosphere.

Mann was on good ground to write about the Buddenbrook family – it was, without much disguise, his own family. That was so plain even at the time of the book’s appearance that the Mann house in Lübeck became known as the Buddenbrook house. The pale gray light of the town (never named in the book but clearly Lübeck), the beach at Travemünde, the northern German weather, the hard-edged Plattdeutsch dialect spoken familiarly by the older generations – all these are rendered with the accuracy of an ironist and the clear affection of someone who known them firsthand. Mann himself trained to enter the family grain business, which was dissolved after the death of his father, the model for Thomas Buddenbrook, whose death in the novel causes the Buddenbrook firm to close. The author puts in his own appearance as the short-lived Hanno, who shares Mann’s boyhood dislike of school and his obsessive love of music.

Buddenbrooks is one of those comfortably, or perhaps comfortingly, *physical* novels, solid as an old armchair. Its rich naturalistic details – from the powder on the wart on a bridegroom’s nose to the small diamond ring worn by a high-living bachelor headmaster – are

the sort of telling minutiae that call to mind the story, possibly a canard, that Mann was once seen observing a departing friend through opera glasses. Hairstyles and hands and costumes are everywhere meticulously differentiated, and always to a purpose. The thick black hair on the back of a doctor's hands evokes the anxiety and disgust of his young patient. The contrast between Elisabeth Buddenbrook's black-and-gray striped silk dress and her daughter-in-law Gerda's Zouave jacket and plaid skirt registers more than a change in fashion – it mirrors the course of the whole Buddenbrook family, from the sobriety of the older generations to the exotic and colorful artistry of the last. In the same way, the decline of the family reflects the larger decay of an entire social order, the patrician, pre-industrial middle classes epitomized by the old patriarch Johann Buddenbrook. Mann writes with such artistry that you can practically feel the textured wallpaper.

And smell the food. The bacon-broth analogy is apt in more ways than one; there's so much food in *Buddenbrooks* that the act of reading it whets one's appetite. It comes as no surprise that Mann, while at work on the book in Italy, wrote to his mother requesting the recipe for a dish he intended to include in the novel. The smell of coffee or sausages or lemon cakes often hangs over a scene, and after a while it begins to seem as though a slight digestive disorder is the first sign of anyone's physical decline. In a story about the physical and economic decline of a family of prosperous grain merchants, what better metaphor for basic bourgeois malaise than an inability to digest one's nourishment, one's own family commodity? Mann in late middle age would lovingly recall "the enraptured hours after school when I sat snug with a whole plate of open sandwiches before me and read Schiller." And isn't all of life in his *Magic Mountain* regulated according to meals, to scheduled portions of "soup-everlasting"?

More than anything, it's the round, complex, troubled figure of Thomas Buddenbrook who keeps *Buddenbrooks* warm to the touch today. For all the book's vivid characters, this lonely businessman stands out as someone we all know, a man of our own day amid the book's slightly dusty trumpery of dowries and long dresses. He's a prototype of the solitary, alienated men of twentieth-century novels. Beset by the unnamable modern anxiety that now rides the daily commuter trains into the city, Thomas Buddenbrook comes off the page and looks out at us questioning, moving his little Russian cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other. The scene in which he sits in the garden in his little cane rocking chair, reading about death, and in a dizzying moment of epiphany comes to terms with his own approaching disappearance from the earth is one of the triumphs of the book.

Whether you share Mann's almost inborn sense of decline, of constant slippage under the surface of things, is a matter of taste and temperament, but nowhere is Mann so powerfully himself, and so much of his age, as when he's got his eye on decay. Social and individual disintegration was a vogueish topic Mann's day. (His older brother Heinrich, who wrote the novel on which the 1930 Josef von Sternberg film *The Blue Angel* was based, and it was Mann's son who wrote *Mephisto*, a basic Bible of decline.) You can sense a characteristic late-Romantic morbidity in the account of Elisabeth Buddenbrook's death and in the famous "typhoid chapter," in which the narrative abruptly changes tone and announces Hanno's death by relating with clinical detachment the grueling symptoms of the disease. This is a man who wrote about death the way Sam Shepard writes about cars.

In retrospect, Thomas Mann stands as a kind of Brahms in literature: titanic, serious, inclined toward the big themes and the booming chords, a conservator of a great tradition yet who's strung with modern nerves, "difficult" at the same time that he is superbly melodic. He

was detached and yet at home with the largest movements of the human heart. If you've never read *Buddenbrooks*, I can only say: *feast*.

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