

Thomas Mann, Epilogue to *Buddenbrooks* (1905)

Abstract

Thomas Mann (1875–1955) was one of the most accomplished German authors of the twentieth century. Published in 1905, his breakthrough novel *Buddenbrooks* followed the decline of a Lübeck merchant family over a period of generations. [The novel's subtitle, *Verfall einer Familie*, translates as *The Decline of a Family*]. Formal innovations such as changing narrative perspective were coupled with a descriptive realism stripped of edifying literary allusions. Mann's descriptions were so true to life that he was almost called as an expert witness in a libel trial against an author whose portrayal of a local lawyer was too close for comfort.

Source

Newspaper clippings from various sources have recently been sent to me, and they are all reporting about the same event: namely the defamation suit that the attorney Ritter, in Tondern, brought against the author Dose, in Lübeck, and in the end finally lost – everyone knows what is at stake here.

I do not know the attorney, I do not know the writer, and I have not read his book. But I did see that in the proceedings mention was made several times of my novel “Buddenbrooks,” and of course that caught my attention, all the more so when I noticed that I had come within a hair of being called before the court in this matter as an expert witness.

Well, quite contrary to the expectations of Mr. Dose and his attorney, I would not have been a witness for the defense, – I would have been a witness for the prosecution, at least to the degree that I could by no means have supported the two gentlemen in their assertion that when a writer portrays living persons it happens unconsciously. When I wrote “Buddenbrooks,” I looked with full consciousness at the realities from which I formed my work, adding my own very personal material. Had I been accused of defamation, then I would have spurned as disreputable a defense based on the concept of unconsciousness. I would have said to myself, “The middle-class laws are clearly different from those which I harbor within myself; but I enjoy, like everyone else, their protection, and they also apply to me. And when in my artistic activity I happen to come into conflict with them, then that is a mishap which was probably unavoidable, unfortunately, and I will have to deal with the consequences myself.” This is how I would have addressed myself in this matter and I would have accepted a judgment of censure without any grumbling or griping.

The opportunity was missed to accuse and condemn me. But now, since it was missed, I should be left in peace, and my name should not be dragged before the court after the fact and in relation to a case that has nothing to do with me. Indeed, it is an improper and unjust mode of behavior to insult me in absentia in the open courtroom.

Did this happen? Yes, it did, and for this reason I am writing down these thoughts and plan to publish them in Lübeck. It happened in connection with the plaintiff's attorney in the Dose case, who spoke in his plea of “Bilse novels,” and as an example of such he mentioned my story “Buddenbrooks” by name.

Was there anyone in the courtroom who, upon hearing these words of Mr. von Brocken, experienced something akin to indignation? I have received no sign of this. The gentleman whose task it would have been to answer him was the solicitor of the defendant, who, as a lawyer, must have felt that in this case “legitimate interests” were being damaged in the most frivolous fashion. He, however, limited himself to expressing regret that I had not been called as a witness, and did not defend me as someone who had

been insulted. Is it any wonder that I myself speak now in my own defense? Because I am concerned about the opinion my fellow citizens have of me – and this is only natural.

If one wanted to christen in the name of Lieutenant Bilse all the books in which an author, being motivated by none other than artistic considerations, has portrayed contemporaries, living persons from his circle of acquaintances, then one would have to collect under this rubric whole libraries of works from world literature, among them those considered among the most enduring of all. To give one good example, when Goethe's novel "Werther" appeared and immediately created a powerful, far-reaching effect, the individuals who had inspired the characters of Lotte and her husband had every reason to feel compromised. They did not run to the courts. They understood that it would have been small-minded to be resentful towards the author who, in his book, had endowed them with a life a thousand times more sublime, intensive, and enduring than the existence they led in middle-class reality – and they remained silent.

"Excellent!" say my fellow citizens. "Now he compares himself to Goethe!" God forbid, no. But Goethe was not always the genius far removed from all accusations of slander that he is today. He was also once a man of his day, contemporary, modern, was some young man from Frankfurt who "wrote," who used his life to make fiction, to shape into books the impressions he gathered of the world and people around him, just like I do. And if you ask me with whom of the two I feel more related, with Goethe or with Bilse, then I answer you without any delusions of grandeur at all: rather with Goethe.

In answering the question, if one has a right, in a high moral sense, to allow oneself liberties, as I have allowed myself in "Buddenbrooks," everything depends on whether one is, according to one's being and certainly not according to one's accomplishments, a kind of Goethe or a Bilse. Bilse was a flawed pamphleteer, for whom the word "pamphleteer" was already too good (since even to deserve this name, he would have to have had some talent), who expressed his pint-sized submissive spitefulness in poor sentences, and whose scandal had rendered him so little notoriety that in a few years not a soul would remember him. I would be pleased if my fellow citizens were to honor me by believing that my fate would take a different turn!

Which turn? I know full well that there are those in Lübeck who see in me the notorious bird that fouls its own nest. They do me an injustice, and their thinking is unjust – but I do not know how I should swear this to them, since they are convinced that nothing is holy to me. If I were to speak as a native of Lübeck and member of a Lübeckian family, then I can say that, in my own way, I have done just as much to honor my hometown and my family as my father – who is perhaps not quite forgotten in Lübeck – did in his way. I have managed to arouse in hundreds of thousands of Germans an interest in the life and character of Lübeck, I have directed the gaze of hundreds of thousands of readers to the old gabled house on Meng Street. And I have created a situation whereby hundreds of thousands of people would consider it an interesting reminiscence if they were to have the opportunity to meet personally the individuals after whom the characters populating my book are modeled, and one can not even rule out completely the possibility that readers in Germany will continue to enjoy these characters well past the time when the individuals who inspired them – and I myself – will have long since ceased to be among the living.

My fellow citizens will find this hard to believe. They will think, "It is simply not possible, that this little Thomas Mann, who was running around here with us and who was so unusually lazy in school, and who did not want to make good, that he is now a writer, a decent one, not just like Bilse, but rather one who will be listed in the literary history books." Perhaps this is not possible. But if in Lübeck I am not considered to be a writer, then this does not mean that I should therefore be labeled a traitor and a desecrator of the homeland. Without a sense of family and homeland, without love for family and homeland, books like "Buddenbrooks" are not written; and whoever knows me, whoever has read certain works of mine that came after this book, he knows, despite all my artistic libertinism, how deeply to the core I remain a citizen of Lübeck.

I salute my homeland from deep in my heart. It should not think so badly of me!

Source: Thomas Mann, "Ein Nachwort [zu *Buddenbrooks*]", (1905), in Thomas Mann, *Reden und Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main, 1965, pp. 714–17.

Translation: Richard Pettit

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