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What We Owe to American Literature

Klaus Mann

*Klaus Mann is the son of Thomas Mann, and is shown here with his sister Erika at a tea given recently in New York. The youngest of the Mann family, he nevertheless took an active part in German literary life before 1933; and afterwards edited his own magazine Die Sammlung in Amsterdam. His book *Escape to Life*, written together with Erika Mann, was published last spring, and depicts the full scope and significance of the German intellectual emigration. He divides his time between New York and Hollywood.*

AMERICAN literature has meant more to me and given me more than any other foreign literature, with the single exception of the French.

When I was a kid, during the last World War, I got terribly excited about the "Leather Stocking"—a title that still sounds to me like a poor translation of its German version "*Der Lederstrumpf*," so much more familiar to me—and at night, before I fell into sleep, I thought with a lot of pity about Uncle Tom who had to suffer so much. I never got tired laughing about Tom Sawyer's adventures which my father used to read aloud to us children. And then, a little later, when I was about thirteen years old, I started reading the amazing stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and I adored him almost as intensely as I adored our own E. T. A. Hoffmann. I kept on dreaming about that diabolic Black Cat, and I never could forget the heart that wouldn't stop making its horrible, deadly little noise. I felt Poe's stories to be much more thrilling than any vulgar mystery story, and I still feel the same way about them.

And then, of course, I became familiar with the works of Walt Whitman. This was after the war. Whitman's genius was "discovered," at that time, by the young people in Germany—just as certain young Englishmen are now discovering the greatness of the German poet Hölderlin. During the post-war years—the high-time of *expressionism*—Whitman, whose verses were published then in an almost perfect translation, was very much *en vogue* in Germany. His all-embracing enthusiasm fitted very well to the mood and spirit of a young European generation that had just escaped the horrors of war and destruction. After the catastrophe of war, the young people sought spiritual consolation, and actually did find it, for a while, in a somewhat hysterical belief that "*man is good*," and will be able to organize a better way of living. We loved Walt Whitman as his powerful voice gave us promises and hopes—hopes we needed so badly—and the grand melody of his verses was the song-of-songs of Democracy: a new kind of Democracy, however, that was not dry and a little dull, like the democracy our own President Ebert preached and represented, but a Democracy that seemed full of life and blood and mystery—a very fascinating sort of Democracy, indeed.

And then, a little later again, we got the first authentic and plastic impressions of real American life by reading *Babbitt* and *Main Street* and *An American Tragedy*. We learned something about the social struggles and economic conditions in the U. S. A. as we studied the precise and passionate reports of Upton Sinclair. Sinclair Lewis, for a certain time, was

among the most successful foreign authors in Germany, together with Romain Rolland, Galsworthy and the Norwegian Knut Hamsun. Dreiser and Upton Sinclair were famous too, at that period, and Hergesheimer was fairly popular with the German public; the highbrows discussed Sherwood Anderson, and there was a great deal of talk about Eugene O'Neill whose early plays have been produced in Berlin and the other major German cities.

And then we read the books of Ernest Hemingway, and Faulkner, and John Dos Passos—which meant a new and stimulating experience to many young European writers. Many of us have tried pretty hard to imitate that fascinating *staccato* of Hemingway's narrative style—which is seemingly very simple, yet mysterious and really very refined. John Dos Passos, also, has exercised a strong influence upon a certain group of modern German novelists. One of the most gifted authors of the post-war period, Alfred Döblin, created something like a German version of *Manhattan Transfer* when he wrote his great epic *Berlin Alexanderplatz*—which, by the way, happened to be the most impressive and most successful book he has ever produced . . . Others have been influenced by Thornton Wilder; others by Faulkner or Thomas Wolfe.

American literature, of course, has received and absorbed a great deal from Europe. The novels of Dreiser and Frank Norris wouldn't exist as they do, without the stimulating pattern of the French and English social novel. The realism of the *American Tragedy*, however, is not quite the realism of Zola's *Germinal* or of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. There is a new element in that striking American realism. And the American style of our decade went a decisive step further than the Dreiser generation could do. For those masters—Dreiser and his generation—who have given to the world the first authentic epics of American life—still lacked a certain touch, a mysterious element, that Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe and some others finally have found.

That *new realism* I have in mind, is more complex—I would like to say: more *complete*—than the somewhat mechanical naturalism of the XIX century. This "new style" also is plain realism; yet it seems more profound, and it embraces moods and elements that used to be neglected. There is a new vision of life. For Life is deeper and more horrible and more beautiful than any purely rationalistic spirit ever could grasp. He who possesses sensitive feeling for the entirety and the complexity of life, and who wants to transmit it to others, must find, or must invent, a *new style* which we may call: *realism plus surrealism* . . . And some American writers have succeeded in finding or in creating this style. (Cont. on page 28)