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## LECTURING IN EUROPE ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY KLAUS MANN

"Is Mark Twain still alive? Has Sinclair Lewis published some of his works under the nom de plume of Upton Sinclair? Is it true that Dr. Kinsey has been paid five million dollars for the movie rights of his recent best-seller about the Human Male and his Behaviour? Do *all* American authors employ ghost writers? Are there any starving poets in the United States? Why is there so much talk about liquor in Ernest Hemingway's stories? Is Dorothy Thompson still married to Theodore Dreiser? Do American readers understand the problems of Gertrude Stein? What are the major works of Elsa Maxwell? Why is she so famous?"

If you want to lecture in Europe on the subject of modern American literature, these are some of the questions you will be asked. Many people over there want to hear about American literature, as I was to find out in the course of a long, strenuous tour through various European countries, on either side of the Iron Curtain.

In Amsterdam, however piquant the highbrow gossip from Paris, London, Rome, and Budapest, nothing seemed to fascinate my Dutch friends as much as what I had to tell them about the trans-Atlantic literary scene. A meeting was arranged under the auspices of a local writers' organization—which marked the beginning of my career as a lecturer in Europe.

### IN HOLLAND

Dutch groups of students, club women, educators, business men, people from all walks of life seemed eager for a bit of first-hand information about "New Faces and Tendencies in American Literature." In the city of Eindhoven, famed for the radio sets and other high-class gadgets produced there on a mammoth scale by the Philips factories, I addressed a crowd of engineers and skilled workers—more expert, to be sure, at handling U. S.-made machinery than at appraising U. S. writers, but not without a certain intellectual curiosity and, in some cases, quite well read.

Prodded by the "English Debating Club" in Copenhagen and similar groups in Stockholm, I decided to venture on a quick excursion up north. My visit in Copenhagen was especially pleasant, thanks to the hospitality of the "English Debating Club," an organization which has done for years, and is still doing, quite an impressive job in promoting Anglo-American culture throughout Denmark.

"Yes, we're pretty active," the Club's Secretary General observed. "And, I daresay, we might do even better, if only you Americans were a *little* more cooperative!" At this point his round, gentle face assumed a somewhat hurt, reproachful expression. "Now, take the English—they're different. The British Council, here in Copenhagen, sees to it that we get as

many speakers as we can possibly use—and first-rate speakers, at that! But American lecturers, particularly experts in creative writing, make themselves as scarce as American dollars. Why is that?" he wondered. "Do your authorities not realize that intellectual values are as significant, from a propagandistic point of view, as any economic or political assets? Are they unaware of the enormous international prestige carried by names like Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Thornton Wilder, and Eugene O'Neill? Why are those men not being used as American good-will ambassadors all over the world, especially in countries such as ours where your literature enjoys such vast popularity?"

The Danes—quick, witty, clever—are remarkably good at conducting open forums, question periods, round-table conferences, and the like, as I was to find out on various occasions. Whatever domain I touched—the novel, poetry, the drama, literary criticism—my audiences always showed not only knowledge and understanding but also a very keen and independent critical sense.

### IN DENMARK

A question I was asked repeatedly, in Copenhagen and elsewhere, had to do with what one of my interlocutors described as "the anticlimactic development typical of most American writers." Was it not true that our authors usually were at their best in their early books—only to decline, to peter out later? Names like William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Joseph Hergesheimer, were mentioned as evidence. Had Thomas Wolfe (greatly admired in Europe) ever attained again the poetic intensity and inspired eloquence he commanded in his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*? Could Steinbeck's more recent work compete with *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*? Even Hemingway—once a major influence on a whole generation of young European writers—was called a "disappointment." If most of my hearers seemed to think rather highly of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the "real Hemingway," to them, still was the one who wrote *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

What was the reason for this curious and somewhat alarming phenomenon—the terrific waste of talent, or genius, in the realm of American letters? Why did so many of our most promising playwrights and novelists fail to develop their own potentialities? Were American writers corrupted by easy success, by big money, and publicity—in short, by "Hollywood"? Or was it rather something inherent in their very nature and temperament, a lack of intellectual substance and direction, that prevented them from maturing, from becoming "masters" and "grand old men" in the European sense?

(Continued on page 194)



## LECTURING IN EUROPE ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

(Continued from page 194)

My trip to Czechoslovakia was arranged before the Communist coup. A group of Czech intellectuals, the so-called "Anti-Fascist Society," wanted to hear my speech on American letters. The invitation remained valid—as I was informed by telegram—in spite of political developments. So I went, to say in Cominform-controlled Prague the same things about U.S. poets and novelists I had said before in the centres of western capitalism. Would I get away with it?

I did. The members of the "Anti-Fascist Society"—scholars, writers, journalists, doctors, lawyers—listened with a certain detached, noncommittal curiosity. Of course, the discussion following my address was not free of ominous undertones. Some stouthearted Marxists made a point of heckling me with a vengeance. Were American authors—they asked—really free to write as they pleased? Was our much-vaunted freedom of the press not a mere illusion, a hypocritical trick? (On that occasion, one of the hecklers quoted the expression "freedom of misinformation" coined by Dr. Adolf Hoffmeister, Czech delegate to the UNESCO congress at Mexico City.) And what did I have to say about that objectionable vogue of mysticism dominating the American literary scene at the present moment? Wasn't there, among our creative minds, a dangerous tendency to dodge the most pressing social issues, to indulge in escapism and withdraw to the sterile seclusion of the Ivory Tower?

It was in this half-literary, half-political context that the Kafka problem came up. His inordinate success in the United States was interpreted by one of the speakers as an unwholesome symptom, an alarming sign of the prevalent escapist trend. "If it is true that Kafka was a genius," the uncompromising Anti-Fascist argued, "it is also true that he was a pathological case, a manic-depressive suffering from a virulent persecution complex. Only muddle-headed dilettantes and irresponsible snobs can idolize such a neurotic."

I left Prague, after a two-week stay, rich in experiences and impressions. Many of the people I came in contact with were admittedly worried, frightened, almost desperate, while others seemed full of hope and enthusiasm. Some of my friends told me how much they enjoyed living in a "people's democracy"; but more often I had to listen to the whispered confessions of those who hated the new régime and were anxious to get out of the country, to escape to some faraway place—preferably to the United States.

For me too it was time to leave Europe. But first of all there was an engagement in Vienna to fulfill. Another audience interested in news about Steinbeck, Wilder, O'Neill, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Saroyan. But if my lecture was gradually getting stale on me, there were enough new and exciting things,

wherever I went, to keep my mind alert and occupied.

### IN GERMANY

Besides I had to prepare a new speech—not on Americans, for a change, but on a great European: André Gide. The German version of a book written about Gide's work and personality had just been published in Switzerland—which may have come to the attention of the observant, literature-conscious French Military Government at Baden-Baden, Germany. The head of the *Centre de l'Éducation Française* approached me with the request to talk about the celebrated French author and Nobel Prize winner to various groups of Germans throughout the French-occupied zone.

I made my speech in Baden-Baden (practically untouched by the war, full of French soldiers and civilians, looking very much like a French Provincial town), Freiburg, Mainz, Tübingen, and other centres of the French-controlled area. As most of my lectures took place under the auspices of universities and similar institutions, I had ample opportunity to come in touch with German academic youth, for the first time since 1933. Much to my surprise, I found the teen-agers easier to get along with than any other age-group in post-war Germany. The older people who helped Hitler to power and supported his régime have a bad conscience, which makes them resentful and apologetic. The young, on the other hand, harbour no such feelings of guilt. The more intelligent, more open-minded among them would like to learn something new—sound facts and valid ideas to replace the erroneous and, as it turned out, unworkable doctrines on which they were brought up. Why not listen to a *Vortrag* on André Gide?—a newly-discovered name, a new challenge and promise to those ignorant, but eager boys and girls.

The French are more keenly aware of this psychological situation than any of the other occupying powers. A remarkable effort is being made, in the French Zone, to stimulate cultural life in general and, in particular, education. "Our main handicap is the scarcity of qualified, trustworthy teachers and speakers," I was told by a high official in charge of the Educational Branch—an unusually attractive and capable woman by the name of Madame Giron. "Don't you want to stay here for some time? There would be plenty to do for you. This is one place where lecturers are really wanted."

But I had a lecture engagement in Paris, one in Brussels—and there was Berlin! Berlin was a "must"; for that particular invitation had been extended to me by U. S. authorities. There was something curious, indeed, almost incredible about military orders stating in dry words that "Mr. K. M. (Ameri-

(Continued on page 196)