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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THOMAS MANN'S USE OF NAMES IN
BUDDENBROOKS

H. Christoph Kayser

Today, just one year before the celebration of his 100th anniversary, the literary stature of Thomas Mann is firmly established. He is considered a classic writer and there are few German authors throughout history who surpass his fame. Thomas Mann's works have been translated into most languages of Western Civilization and his name is well known and highly regarded in the international literary community. His writings have caught the fancy of critics and scholars from the very beginning, and there are no indications of a let-down in the concern with his works. The most recent bibliography¹ lists approximately 15,000 titles of secondary literature on this accomplished and celebrated artist.

Characteristic features of his artistry which have been mentioned repeatedly include refined subtleness, detailed exactitude, ironic versatility and an incredible density of his literary compositions. The structure of one of his great novels, The Magic Mountain, has been compared

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with the fabric of a tapestry² in which many thousands of fine threads are skillfully woven into an entity of dazzling beauty. Thomas Mann employed this composition technique with its requirements of painstaking accuracy, infinite patience and artistic skill from the very beginning of his writing career and developed it to a level of perfection, which has seldom been attained. The use of names is an integral part of his writing technique. For Thomas Mann names constitute artistically essential threads in the fabric of his elaborate word tapestries. There is hardly a novel or short story in which names do not significantly contribute to the overall literary meaning of the work.³

My observations on Thomas Mann's use of names in his first novel are guided by both literary and onomastic principles. The literary approach which tends to rely more heavily on the intuitive and associative qualities evoked by language, will be complemented by the more factual and empirical direction of the traditional onomastic method.

The name of the novel Buddenbrooks is the family name of its protagonists. Its main function is undoubtedly that

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of denotation. But at the same time it delineates the social status and the local roots of its bearers. The name Buddenbrook is a traditional name among the old North German nobility. It is not a common name, but it has survived to the present time. Its origin is not fully clarified. The second syllable "brook" is low German and means "swamp," "wet field." Etymologically it is related to the English "brook." The first part of the name has been explained in two ways. Max Gottschald⁴ interpretes it as the proprietor Budde, thus Buddenbrook would mean Budde's swamp. Hans Bahlow,⁵ however, recognizes in "budde" the low German root of "dirt," "morass," which would point in the same direction as "brook." While the etymological analysis of its composition does not furnish any striking clues for Thomas Mann's choice of the name, its linguistic roots and its historical use do so, for it evokes associations with the North German landscape and its landed nobility. Its local and social color make it an appropriate name for a patrician family in the old hanseatic merchant town of Lübeck in Northern Germany.

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In the first notes on the novel which Thomas Mann compiled before he began to write the name appears in the form of Buttenbrook.⁶ Here it already has the low German tinge, but not yet necessarily the suggestion of nobility. I suspect--without being able to ascertain it positively--that a literary influence was instrumental in attaining this added quality. In Theodor Fontane's novel Effi Briest the name Buddenbrook is used in conjunction with a duelling episode. Buddenbrook is the second of major von Crampas and as such of nobility. Thomas Mann knew Effi Briest as the notes for the Buddenbrooks prove. The third notebook informs us about a planned literary reference to Fontane's novel: "Morten, when talking about Tony's nobility, remarks in passing that the name Buddenbrook exists as the name of noblemen."⁷ This remark can only refer to Fontane's Effi Briest.⁸ As the name Buddenbrook is clearly mentioned as a name of nobility, the probability is great that Thomas Mann's option for the final form of this name with its inherent noble ring, was ultimately determined by this literary figure in Fontane's Effi Briest. Thus, a literary in-

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fluence in addition to the linguistic reasons can be discerned for Thomas Mann's choice of this name.

An interesting footnote to the discussion of the name Buddenbrook is the malicious interpretation of Alfred Kerr. This famous literary critic of the early twenties used popular etymology in a poem where he refers to Thomas Mann as Thomas Bodenbruch, which means "crack in the floor or the ground."⁹

Most other names of the leading families in the home town of the Buddenbrooks are clearly North German, e.g. Oeverdieck, Döhlmann, Kröger, Kistenmaker, Hagenström and Möllendorpf. In the case of this last name Thomas Mann added a little ironic twist by using the form "dorpff." The common form of the German word "village" is either "dorp" (low German) or "dorf" (high German). "Dorpff" has no valid linguistic basis, it simply sounds funny and gives an ironic association to the members of the family. Among the high society of this town only one family has a clearly descriptive name, the family of senators Langhals, meaning "long neck." It is Mrs. Langhals, however, who is characterized

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by the name. Whenever she appears she uses a long handled lorgnette to examine her environment. In doing so she calls to mind a long necked curious bird.

Another technique in using names for personal characterization is employed within the immediate family circle of the Buddenbrooks. As the family names cannot serve this purpose, the first names assume the role. The old Konsul Kroger is named Leberecht, meaning "live in the right way." Although the original meaning of this pietistic "sentence name"¹⁰ refers to a Christian life, Thomas Mann has given it a more secular, almost hedonistic accent. Leberecht Kröger is a true "Lebenskünstler," an artist in enjoying life, and in utilizing all the amenities life can offer to a man of means. He lives in style, to such a degree that his in-laws, the more money conscious and conservative Buddenbrooks frown on his generosity and several times voice their fear that he might exhaust his entire estate.

Leberecht Kröger's son is called Justus--the "just" or the "righteous" one. He, too, is doing justice to his

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name. He is the exact opposite of his father. In his later years he develops an almost pathological thriftiness which is a direct outgrowth of the rigid justice he exercises towards his own good-for-nothing son. He has expelled this son from his house and disinherited him. Unfortunately his wife is secretly supporting this son which constantly undermines his endeavours for righteousness. Thus, his name and his concept of justice are invested with the ironic ambiguity which characterizes Thomas Mann's writings. The ironic implications are further underscored by the linguistic relatedness and the semantic contrast in the names of father and son, for Justus is the Latin word for "just," "righteous" which in German means "gerecht." Leberecht and "gerecht" are built on the same roots, but Justus' stubborn pursuit of justice and Leberecht's enjoyment of life are diametrically opposed behavioral patterns.

The technique of contrasting the meaning of a name with the characteristics of its bearer is employed very effectively in the case of Gotthold Buddenbrook. The name Gotthold indicates being "loved by God." This son of the

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old Konsul Buddenbrook first displays disrespect for the social status of his family by marrying the daughter of a small shop owner and then develops a very strong desire for his father's money which in turn leads to an even deeper and irreconcilable breach between him and his father, who, after all, had paid Gotthold his legal inheritance. The unfounded hatred for his mortal father creates an ironic contrast to the love that--according to his name--is shown him by his eternal Father.

A remarkable variation in the contrastive use of first names can be observed in the case of the oldest Buddenbrook. His wife calls him Jean, which is the French equivalent of Johann. The French first name Jean stands in contrast to the North German family name Buddenbrook. It turns out, however, that what appears to be a contrast is meant to achieve a higher level of unity in the person who bears this name. Jean Buddenbrook's wife also has a French name: Antoinette. When we further consider that Jean Buddenbrook is well versed in the French language and that one of his wife's favorite expressions is "Assez!" (enough!) and when

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we learn about their fabulous honey-moon in Paris from where they brought back many cherished mementos, it becomes apparent that we are dealing with ardent admirers of French culture. Their French first names, therefore, have to be understood as a sign of reverence for France, as a sign of cultural sophistication and openness to the world. Thus, the combination Jean Buddenbrook creates, similar to the mystic "coincidentia oppositorum," a union of two seemingly opposed entities, in this case of the French and German culture. Jean Buddenbrook is the embodiment of this union that transcends national boundaries and prejudices, and the two contrastive parts of his full name aptly reflect it.

The same effect is achieved with the name of Jean Buddenbrook's friend Jean Jacques Hoffstede. While this man's name further underscores Jean Buddenbrook's love for everything French, the connotations of his name are a degree more specific. Jean Jacques Hoffstede is the poet of the Buddenbrook house. With this information the connotation of his first name becomes evident. It evokes the

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great, controversial French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau. The literal meaning of his family name corresponds to his true position in life: he has found a place (stede) at the court (Hoff), i.e., at the Buddenbrooks, such as medieval troubadours found at the courts of kings and dukes. Thus, Jean Jacques Hoffstede's position and role in the novel is fully contained in his name.

This poet's name and the connotations it evokes reveal another technique frequently encountered in the writings of Thomas Mann. This is the technique where he brings the connotative meaning of a name into focus by adding the profession or occupation of its bearer. The reference to Jean Jacques Rousseau in Hoffstede's name becomes obvious the moment we learn he is a poet.

The other striking examples of this widely used technique are the names Brecht and Pfühl. Here the relationship is established between the last names and the respective occupations. Mr. Brecht is a dentist and his treatment of the youngest Buddenbrook and his father Thomas is--corresponding to the level of technology at that time--

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almost exclusively restricted to tooth extractions. These are operations that require muscular strength on the part of the dentist and psychological endurance on the part of the patient, especially if the tooth does not cooperate and breaks off, as happened shortly before Thomas Buddenbrook's death. Such unpleasant experiences are implied in the name Brecht, whose final "t" cannot disguise the verbal stem "brech" of the word "brechen" to break. Although the German name Brecht is totally unrelated to the verb "brechen," Thomas Mann creates this association by utilizing the partial homonymy (Brecht- brechen) and by combining it with the profession of the dentist. As a last safeguard he has Hanno Buddenbrook point out the intended relationship between name and profession: "Already the name of this man reminded him dreadfully of the noise that arises in the jaw when by pulling, twisting and lifting the roots of a tooth are broken out...." (p. 348).¹¹

In the case of Herr Pfühl we encounter a musician, more specifically, the organist of Saint Mary's Cathedral, who regularly joins Gerda Buddenbrook, the wife of Thomas,

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in playing and enjoying music. The point of reference Thomas Mann establishes is the unlimited emotional indulgence in the sounds of music being practiced by Herr Pfühl. The characterizing connotation implied in his name is present on three levels. 1. The name Pfühl means "feather pillow" or "down cover," thus it is denoting something soft. 2. In a figurative sense the name is used for persons who appear to be weaklings or sissies. 3. By omitting the initial "P" you arrive at "Fühl," the stem of the word "fühlen," meaning to feel, to be emotionally involved. On the sounding level there is hardly a difference between the two forms "Pfühl" and "Fühl." Here, the ideas of softness and emotion in relation to music join to characterize this man and his profession by means of his name.

There are two professional groups in this novel that seem to have spurred Thomas Mann to special efforts in his descriptive naming. They are the pastors and the teachers. Among the clergy we find names like Matthias, Tränen-Trieschke, Hirte or Wunderlich all containing succinct characterizations and ironic connotations. The same holds

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true for teachers with names like Goldener, Stengel, Ballerstedt or Modersohn. However, the short time available to us does not allow any detailed analysis of the hidden connotative meanings of these names. But I would like to ask your indulgence for two more instances of strikingly descriptive naming.

There is an extremely pious spinster who regularly attends Mrs. Buddenbrook's religious evening meetings, the so-called Jerusalem-evenings. She bears the hilariously appropriate name of Fräulein Himmelsbürger--Miss citizen of heaven. And to top it off, she is living in the "Holy Ghost Home," the Heiligen Geist Spital which happens to be one of the oldest German old folks homes in the town of Lübeck.

Another superb example for Thomas Mann's artistic use of names can be found toward the end of Tony Buddenbrook's first marriage. While talking to her father she nervously presses a dainty handkerchief in her hands. It bears the monogram AG which stands for Antonie Grünlich. Not until all details of this unhappy marriage become known, does the

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double meaning of this monogram reveal itself. Tony had married Grünlich because of parental pressure, sacrificing herself for the good of the "Firma," the family business. Throughout the four years of her marriage, and inspite of their daughter, she did not learn to love her husband. In the course of the highly unpleasant business meeting between Grünlich, his banker Kesselmeier and Konsul Buddenbrook towards the end of this episode we learn that Grünlich's marriage with the wealthy Tony Buddenbrook was motivated exclusively by financial considerations. The announcement of his engagement saved him from impending financial ruin. When Grünlich realizes that there is no chance that his father-in-law will bail him out for a second time he loses his temper and yells the sad truth into Tony's face: "...Only because of your money did I marry you..." (p. 158)¹². With this final outburst the marriage is exposed as a cool calculating business deal between both parties. While Konsul Buddenbrook thought he had married off his daughter advantageously, Grünlich had chased the dowry from the very beginning. In the light of these facts the AG on Tony's

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handkerchief reveals a deeper meaning, for it can also be read as the abbreviation of "Aktiengesellschaft," meaning "business corporation." In the context of the novel the AG indicates the business like character of this marriage which in reality was Bendix and Antonie Grünlich, Inc. The ironic double meaning of the AG monogram allows Thomas Mann to sum up the entire story of this ill-fated marriage in two letters. This is indeed an ingenious artistic achievement.

In summarizing our observations a highly diversified picture of Thomas Mann's names emerges. One prominent principle in his choice of names seems to be the achievement of an ironic effect. The means for attaining this differ widely. He constantly varies the technique of correspondence or contrast between name and individual character. These techniques of correspondence or contrast can be based on the first name (Leberecht/Gotthold), the family name (Langhals/Ballerstedt) or both names together (Jean Buddenbrook). Further dimensions are added by the correlation between a name and a profession (dentist Brecht,

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organist Pfuhl). The social and/or local color of a name can be a sufficient reason for its occurrence (Buddenbrook). On the whole Thomas Mann's use of names in his first novel already shows a high degree of artistic refinement. While it is possible to discern the technique of correspondence or contrast as the prevailing principle, the individual variations of this principle which create a wide diversity of uses defy any strict categorization. This short study of names again confirms Thomas Mann's place in world literature as a master of words and an artist who commands the highest respect and admiration.

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NOTES

¹Harry Matter, Die Literatur über Thomas Mann. Eine Bibliographie. 1898-1969 (Berlin/Weimar, Aufbau Verlag, 1972).

²Warren R. Maurer, "Names from the Magic Mountain" in: Names Vol. 9 No. 4 (Dec. 61), p. 248-259.

³cp. the postulate of "literary significance" in: J.C. Rudnyckyj, "Function of Proper Names in Literary Works," Stil und Formprobleme in der Literatur (Heidelberg, 1959), pp. 378-83.

⁴Max Gottschald, Die Deutschen Personennamen. Sammlung Goschen Bd. 422 (Berlin, Walter De Gruyter, 1955) p. 46.

⁵Hans Bahlow, Deutsches Namenlexikon (München, Keyser, 1967) p. 79.

⁶Paul Scherrer, "Aus Thomas Manns Vorarbeiten zu den Buddenbrooks" in: Quellenkritische Studien zum Werk Thomas Manns. (Bern/München, Francke, 1967) p. 7.

⁷Herbert Lehnert, Thomas Mann - Fiktion, Mythos, Religion (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1965) p. 62. This is my translation of the German original as quoted in this book.

⁸loc. cit.

⁹Alfred Kerr, "Thomas Bodenbruch" in: Caprichos-Stephen des Nebenstroms (Berlin, Spaeth, 1926) p. 168-169.

¹⁰Such sentence names were created during the period of German pietism in the 17. and 18. century. They originated from adhortative religious sentences like: Furchtegott, Gottlieb, Gottfried, etc.

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¹¹This is my translation of the German version to be found in: Thomas Mann, Buddenbrooks. Fischer Bücherei EC 13 (Frankfurt, 1960) p. 348.

¹²loc. cit. p. 158.