Mann, Heinrich (1871 – 1950)

From a young age and starting nearly a decade before his younger brother THOMAS MANN, Heinrich Mann was a prolific and respected German author in a number of genres, though he is principally remembered as a novelist. His work can be divided into three overlapping phases, according to the changing political situations of Germany that affected his style and themes: Wilhelmine (1899 – 1919); Weimar (1920 – 1932); and Exile (1933 - 1950). The first phase was characterized by social satire from the point of view of aestheticism, the second by “engaged” political writing, and the third by a turn to the historical novel followed by his most interesting formal experiments. Mann is best remembered for two novels of the first phase that had roughly the same goal of attacking paternal authoritarianism in German culture: *Der Untertan* (1918; translated as Man of Straw, literally The Subject), one of the premier German works of social satire of the 20th century; and *Professor Unrat* (1905), which served as the basis for the filmscript of Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel*.By the time of his death, Mann was nearly forgotten in West Germany, dismissed as a political pamphletist, though by the same token officially celebrated in East Germany for his anti-fascist stance.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Lübeck, Mann spent years moving from place to place, including Palestrina in Italy and Lake Garda in Switzerland, before settling in Munich and then Berlin. His first marriage was to Maria Kanová in 1914. Mann’s celebrated break from his brother Thomas began in 1915, when the latter published a patriotic piece supporting Germany’s involvement in WWI, and lasted until 1922. Mann left Germany very soon after the Nazi rise to power in 1933. *Ein ernstes Leben* (1932; A Hard Life) was his last novel published in Germany until the end of WWII. Mann spent time in France before arriving in the USA, where he lived in poverty and integrated into neither the emigrant community nor American life. His second wife, Nelly, committed suicide in 1944. Mann was planning his resettlement in Germany when death took him in 1950 in Los Angeles.

WORK

Mann was heavily influenced by French 19th-century authors, and above all by Flaubert and Zola, on whose work he published celebrated essays. Mann was also heavily influenced by the philosophy and social criticism of FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE. His Wilhelmine novels and plays unceasingly excoriate the German bourgeoisie for its excessive materialism, paternalism, militarism, and the emptiness of people’s lives. While *Professor Unrat* and *Der Untertan* remain the best known of these works, *Die kleine Stadt* (1909; The Little Town) shows far more complexity and successfully interweaves the themes of politics, art, and domesticity. The lifting of theater censorship in the Weimar Republic allowed Mann to write for the stage, but while his courageous political position in favor of democracy can be admired, his writing from this period is tendentious and at times inauthentic – as when he tries to depict proletarian struggle, for example. Exile brought Mann’s only foray into the historical novel, as he told in two parts the life story of Henri IV who overcame France’s corrosive civil wars – a clear allusion to Mann’s Germany. Deprived of a reading public, Mann wrote his last two novels for himself, and they show a strongly inward turn while not abandoning his main themes. The last novel Mann published in his lifetime, *Der Atem* (1949; Breath), makes use of INTERIOR MONOLOGUE technique and multiple languages while foregoing coherent plot construction. Similar features characterize *Empfang bei der Welt* (1956; Society Reception), completed in 1945 but published only after Mann’s death.

Cross-References: aestheticism, interior monologue, Thomas Mann, Friedrich Nietzsche

Key Critical Works:

Grollman, Stephen A. *Heinrich Mann : Narratives of Wilhelmine Germany, 1895-1925*. Concentrates on the first phase of Mann’s writing.

Gross, David. *The Writer and Society: Heinrich Mann and Literary Politics in Germany, 1890-1940*. Expanded edition of Gross’s 1969 book that stopped at 1920.

Gunnemann, Karin Verena. *Heinrich Mann's Novels and Essays : the Artist as Political Educator*. Emphasis on the political pedagogical value of Mann’s work from his first publications through the end of the Weimar Republic. Interesting illustrations.

Hamilton, Nigel. *The Brothers Mann : the Lives of Heinrich and Thomas Mann, 1871-1950 and 1875-1955*. A double biography that tracks an uneasy and at times deeply hostile relationship between two giants of German literature who happened to be related.

Linn, Rolf N. *Heinrich Mann*. Deals selectively with the works that Mann himself felt were most important. A good introduction to HM’s work.

Roberts, David. *Artistic Consciousness and Political Conscience : the Novels of Heinrich Mann, 1900-1938*. Shows the shift in the relation of art and politics in HM’s work through the opposing theories implied in his essays on Flaubert of 1905 and on Zola in 1915. Special attention is given to *Die kleine Stadt*, *Der Untertan*, and the two novels on Henry IV.

Winter, Lorenz. *Heinrich Mann and his Public; a Socioliterary Study of the Relationship between an Author and his Public*. Assumes previous knowledge of a selection of Mann’s novels, which are divided into three periods.