The Lost Honour of Tony Buddenbrook

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Throughout the German social novel of the nineteenth century, bourgeois honour was linked to the nobility's. As a class, the bourgeoisie largely defined itself in relation to the lengthy traditions of the nobility right down to the turn of the twentieth century, when noble titles were as coveted as ever and a feudalization of tastes and values was rampant, as both classes closed ranks to oppose the common enemy, Social Democracy. The failure of the 1848 Revolution dashed the hopes of many liberals and compromised the credibility of those hopes. In a work whose final setting is the Berlin barricades of 1848, Spielhagen's *Problematische Naturen*, there is an all too noisy rejection of the nobility. His bourgeois hero is ultimately revealed to be of noble origin in any case, which illustrates the whole equivocation in this and other novels. He takes on noblemen on their own terms and outshines them in those graces supposedly confined to his social superiors, such as dancing or pistol-shooting. The values of the nobility then still prevail, and Spielhagen's hybrid hero, located between two classes and hence without the intact identity of either, must founder. His death on the barricades, *intended* to overlap with the honour of a cause, is rather a desperate, private solution.

But the resilience of the bourgeoisie had been reasserted in a work predating Spielhagen's, written by the class's greatest apologist in the nineteenth century, namely in Freytag's *Soll und Haben*. This work proclaims the ideological programme for bourgeois values - honour and economic superiority through work, and cultural superiority ('*Bildung ist Macht*') through self-education and resourcefulness. In Freytag's view, the nobility has abdicated, and the bourgeoisie is its natural heir in the political and commercial arenas. Bourgeois honour manifests itself in self-sufficiency, and self-assertion when required to withstand the lures of the nobility. In the novels of Fontane we then have a problematization of the nobility to redress the balance of Freytag's dismissal of the class, and an overturning of Freytag's confident self-image of the bourgeoisie. With Fontane the less attractive side of the latter is frequently emphasized - the moneygrubbing, philistinism and obsession with upward social mobility. His critique of the nobility is that of a disappointed lover. Through the figure of Dubslav Stechlin he eternalizes the nobility in a swansong to its idealized form, a style of existence never approached in his works by bourgeois aspirations.

In this respect, as in so many others, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* stands poised between two centuries,[1] though its own time-setting fades out with the year 1877. The demarcation of class boundaries, which in the nineteenth century novel saw a struggle between bourgeoisie and aristocracy, becomes in *Buddenbrooks* a struggle confined to the class surviving further into the twentieth century. The patriciate of Lübeck is fully as caste-ridden as the bourgeoisie in Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel*, with the unbridgeable gap between levels *within* the class. But, wholly in keeping with the setting, the leap is rarely made beyond the bourgeoisie to the nobility. An exception is Ralf von Maiboom, a set figure in the lineage of Spielhagen's dissolute noblemen, who eventually takes the consequences of his ruin and commits suicide. A further exception is Thomas's account to a delighted Frau Permaneder[2] of his encounter with Graf von Groß-Poggendorf, in which he meets the Count's snub with a proud self-assertion that instantly alters the Count's treatment of him. Thomas tells this story to explain why he does not wish to have dealings with Ralf von Maiboom, and his appeal to bourgeois honour slighted by the nobility is a strand not developed, but familiar from a string of nineteenth century novels. However, for all his proud protestations, Thomas eventually does buy the Pöppenrade crop with disastrous results, and this dénouement is symptomatic of the ironic recanting throughout Mann's novel of those bourgeois virtues which are stylized in Freytag's work. Indeed, Mann's exploration of the "decline of a family" may be read as the exploding of Freytag's myth of the ethos of work, as the lost honour of the German mercantile middle class.

Buddenbrooks upsets the balance of Freytag's title, exploring the expanding *Soll* at both the ethical and financial levels. The financial decline of the Buddenbrook family entails a loss of honour in the professional, social and personal realms. To gauge the extent of this loss, it is instructive to compare the fate of Thomas Buddenbrook with the following excerpt from a Lübeck representation of the *Totentanz*. Goaded by the figure of Death, *der Kaufmann* orders his affairs with dignity:

> Der letzte Mahner kommt
> mir trotzig angerennt,
> Doch bin ich nicht fallit,
> hier ist mein Testament;
> Den Geist vermache ich Gott,
> das Gut den rechten Erben,
> Dem Satan meine Schuld,
> Den Leib dem Tod im Sterben.[3]

Four hundred years on, the reality of Thomas's last testament shows the decline not only of a family, but of a long established code of professional honour. For *his* spirit is not commended to God, but flirts with Schopenhauer; the firm over which he presides is dissolved, and not made over to his male heir, for in this at least he reads the signs aright; and finally his pain-racked body, on which his personal vanity has lavished ever more attention, lies spread-eagled in the mud. The *dehors*, the strenuously maintained exterior and progressively the barrier to reality, are comprehensively defiled. Furthermore, this leaves just Christian and Hanno of the male Buddenbrook line, Christian, whose late alliance is a travesty of the marriage of passion, and Hanno, whose death is described in impersonal terms in the celebrated penultimate chapter of the novel. One effect of this is to deny him "einen eigenen Tod" as Rilke's Malte puts it, and with this ultimate dishonouring the family line is arrested, ending in the sterile circle of the eight ladies clad in black.

The loss of family honour can also be explored through the different, fruitful perspective of the character of Tony, variously described as "eine der perfektesten Chargenfiguren, die ein deutscher Romanautor ersonnen hat"[4] and as the main figure of the novel.[5] The daunting dictates of the family code of honour emerge from earlier history, for instance when Madame Antoinette Buddenbrook threatens to drown herself as the family silver is being plundered by Napoleonic troops. Signs of the erosion of this honour are also present from the outset, with the first social gathering disturbed by a letter from the outcast Gotthold, who has broken ranks and married for love. This plight is avoided by Tony with the exit of Morten, but the incident with Gotthold does illustrate a phenomenon which is to bedevil Tony too, namely a snowballing circular quality in events deviating from the linearity of the novel. For Gotthold has suffered from the start through being held responsible for the death of his mother, whom his father loved passionately. This conception of marriage as a union of love, and of the son as other than the welcome continuation of the family line, belongs to an era chronicled in the family album, but alien to subsequent generations.[6]

On the commercial side, a sentence of Konsul Johann's grandfather has become virtually a family motto: "Mein Sohn, sey mit Lust bey den Geschäften am Tage, aber mache nur solche, daß wir bey Nacht ruhig schlafen können" (40). This is ironized when the Konsul's parting words to Grünlich after the wedding are instructions about smuggling laces past customs officials (113). The accents are also indicative, the male business talk across the bartered bride, and her brief exposure of the whole charade as she seeks assurance from her father that he is satisfied with her. But by this stage the

loss of Tony's outer honour is sealed, and that of the family firmly committed to a downward spiral. Just where the process begins is impossible to isolate, for when Tony says to her teenage girlfriends: "Ich werde natürlich einen Kaufmann heiraten [. . .] das bin ich meiner Familie und der Firma schuldig" (62), the false consciousness is already firmly established, the fetishization of family and firm, and the effacement of the individual. Yet at this stage, and indeed throughout the novel, Tony is more perceptive than those around her on many counts. She reads Grünlich's overtures to her family correctly, and her proud rebuffing of her suitor contrasts with the blinded, conventional formulae of her parents. On the one side stands Tony, clearsighted, but with a sense of self that spills over into self-importance and is in any case largely defined by the weight of family obligations and, as she sees it, her predestined role. On the other side stand her parents, who baulk neither at arranging an attack on her intransigence in the Sunday sermon nor at moral blackmail when Grünlich threatens suicide in his feigned distractedness. Tony is damned by their wilful blindness, and her father's false assumptions of honour in accepting Grünlich's credentials as "Bücher zum Einrahmen" (78). The *Verfall einer Familie* is at least in part the revenge of these hollow observances.

The episode with Morten then provides the counterpart to the empty shell, a genuineness and substance which briefly allow her natural side to flourish away from family influences and the assumed fronts of home life. Tony is even prepared to overthrow her "predestination" in marrying a medical student instead of a merchant. Morten's own bourgeois pride is ironized here, for he inveighs against the nobility at the same time as he, more clearly than anyone else, is aware of Tony's own aristocratic bearing, likening her to a princess. Yet he would have her as his bride. But patriarchal intervention on both sides settles these ripples in the order. The whole unequal battle within Tony between the classical concepts of duty and inclination is sealed by the Konsul's Goethean image of being "Glieder in einer Kette" (101). Once the institution of the family is brought into play, the individual - most certainly the individual woman[7] - must succumb. Upon her return to Lübeck Tony feels the pressure of tradition even in the familiar, stern buildings, and her entry to the family house has to wait for delivery of a consignment of corn, stagemanaged to impress on her the relative significances. Her one refuge is the realm of memories, the only private domain in this world of public honour and dishonour. Her most treasured impulses in life are internalized, but solely as sentimental props, in no sense as productive of further spiritual growth. Inasmuch as "inner development" was "the only area of development

open to women in the nineteenth-century novel",[8] Tony then is something of a disappointment. But she avoids the fate of those heroines pulled in opposite directions by "psychological needs" and "social imperatives".[9] The one resolution literary convention finds to this struggle is death, but Tony consistently subordinates the former force to the latter, and she alone of the immediate family lives on. Morten's impetus does ripen belatedly when she interests herself in economic and legal affairs. In fact as a child she has fraternized with labourers and clerks at their workplace, and from the outset her "sentiment and sensibilities"[10] are directed to the economic wellbeing of the family. She thus does not match the stylized image, surviving into the twentieth century, of the German woman in the family as untainted by "the heartlessness and brutality of economic competition".[11]

Nonetheless, active participation in this competition is reserved for the male family line, which via Thomas to Christian and Hanno shows ever less will to pursue honour thus, for as in the mediaeval conception,[12] honour needs to be seen to be actively pursued. For Tony as a woman, the only possibility of active pursuit is marriage, and since this is prescribed, her sphere of activity is confined to affirming, tirelessly, what male heads have achieved in the past and what she would fondly believe they still achieve. Within *these* limits only a sort of negative dignity is possible, and she becomes an absurd figure in a far more modern sense, rather than absurd meaning ridiculous.

When Tony finally capitulates to the marriage with Grünlich, it is entirely in accordance with the accents of the work that she should pay obeisance to her family by inscribing the event in the family album rather than appraising her suitor, almost as penance for her quest of an individual destiny. The initial compromising of her own honour - her individual dignity - leads her to cling tenaciously to the Buddenbrook family and firm as the only way her sacrifices can be rendered meaningful. Her aversion to her husband is only acknowledged when it coincides with the financial advantage of the family firm in not rescuing Grünlich. If indeed the idea of 'intact honour' was synonymous in commercial circles with solvency,[13] then Grünlich has lived parasitically on both family funds and the family name, relying on that dowry of solidarity that the family extends to those it takes to its bosom. With his bankruptcy he is *dis*honoured, and the family must disengage itself. But it is crucial to note that the financial burden to the firm, not any emotional burden borne by Tony, is what decides her father on this extreme move. He invokes the magical word *Firma*, whereupon she jumps up on cue and exclaims: "Gut! Genug! Nie." "Sie sah beinahe heroisch aus", comments the narrator: "Das Wort 'Firma' hatte eingeschlagen." (150) But the irony,

though so heavily directed at Tony, rebounds more on the concept *Firma* itself, as the verbal gymnastics of the Konsul in this scene strive to blend a feeling of remorse at his hand in the marriage with his business sense and instincts to preserve the family's fortunes.

In any case, the narrator, who along with the characters around Tony never takes her very seriously, dismisses her individuality all too sweepingly. Consider the following, in the wake of Grünlich's accusation of having luxurious tastes, to which Tony agrees. The narrator comments:

> Sie würde mit der gleichen Ruhe erklärt haben, daß sie leichtsinnig, jähzornig, rachsüchtig sei. Ihr ausgeprägter Familiensinn entfremdete sie nahezu den Begriffen des freien Willens und der Selbstbestimmung und machte, daß sie mit einem beinahe fatalistischen Gleichmut ihre Eigenschaften feststellte und anerkannte [. . .] Sie war, ohne es selbst zu wissen, der Meinung, daß jede Eigenschaft, gleichviel welcher Art, ein Erbstück, eine Familientradition bedeute und folglich etwas Ehrwürdiges sei, wovor man in jedem Falle Respekt haben müsse. (140)

Thomas Mann must have had passages like this in mind when he claimed *Buddenbrooks* was perhaps the only Naturalistic novel to have been written in Germany. Note the narrator's complete reduction of the figure to a ridiculous and slavish cluster of inherited qualities. Note too the patriarchal narrator's claim to sovereign analysis of his character: "Sie war, ohne es selbst zu wissen, der Meinung [. . .]"[14] And finally note the superimposed notion of honour which follows this usurping of her self-knowledge: "Eine Familientradition [. . .] und folglich etwas Ehrwürdiges." All this undersells Tony in a manner already seen in her role as pawn in the financial transactions between her father and Grünlich.

Fortunately for the veracity of characterization and of the narrative itself, this narrator needs to be read against his omniscient grain. For the universality of his verdict above is belied by Tony's refusal to return to Permaneder, even though her stance is an affront to family honour. In this action we see an amalgam of individual spiritedness - the last time it significantly flares with Tony - and the idolization of the family. Nonetheless she refuses to defer to the arguments of Thomas in favour of papering over the cracks to spare the family a further scandal. The pretext for her flight - *das Wort* uttered by Permaneder - is indeed laughable alongside the deadly insult to honour as which she construes it. At a deeper level, she finds unbearable the Bavarian's disregard for the Protestant work ethic: "Ein Mann ohne Ehrgeiz, ohne

Streben, ohne Ziele!" (257) she protests, and the self-importance of her wounded pride is also open to ironizing. But there is a strikingly independent tone, too, in her arguments at this stage. She views her decision to seek a divorce as "die Handlungsweise, die ich mir selbst und meinem Kinde und euch allen schuldig bin", and both the hierarchy of considerations and the fact that she is prepared to assert her own sense of family obligation against Thomas's interpretation, speak for a sense of self that is contrary to the narrator's earlier claim. She refuses to efface herself in the interests of keeping up family appearances: "Der heimliche Skandal, der im stillen an einem zehrt und die Selbstachtung wegfrißt, der ist viel schlimmer!" And she goes on: "wo ich mich und meine Herkunft und meine Erziehung und alles in mir ganz und gar verleugnen lernen müßte, nur um glücklich und zufrieden zu erscheinen - das nenne *ich* merkwürdig, das nenne *ich* skandalös [. . .]" (262). Here we see a highly developed sense of personal honour which two loveless marriages have been unable to crush. She daringly overrides abstract interpretations of family honour by its male head and refuses to submerge her individuality the way she did in her first marriage, and then again in her second as an attempt to restore the family name.

A series of events follows which all hold initial promise: the birth of a male heir to the firm, his name Johann a vain attempt to charm back the original core of the family, then Thomas's election as Senator as a defeat for Hagenström, and the marriage of Tony's daughter Erika - "aber sie, sie selbst, Tony Buddenbrook, war die eigentliche Braut"(303). In all these cases, Tony's unquenchable optimism becomes progressively circular. It does of course buoy her through to the end, but has ever less basis in reality, and this distance is what both saves her from succumbing to the general decline and preserves a degree of personal honour.

The ultimate loss of face of the firm comes when news of the failure of the Pöppenrade harvest reaches Thomas during the elaborate hollowness of the centenary celebrations. Hanno alone seeks to hasten and acknowledge the symbolic close with the double line he draws across the family album, but the façades of firm and family totter on through many more pages, with Tony playing an ever more background role. She registers, while alone outwardly surviving, the hammer blows to the family's fortunes. As the judgement on her son-in-law draws nigh she gives vent to a rare expression of despair:

> Alles ist fehlgeschlagen und hat sich zum Unglück gewandt, was ich unternommen habe [. . .] Ich habe immer so innig gewünscht, es zu etwas zu bringen im Leben und ein bißchen Ehre einzulegen . . . Nun bricht auch dies zusammen. So muß es

enden . . . Das Letzte. (376)

In fact it is not the last blow at all, for the sale of the family house, priceless in Tony's eyes, is still to come.

The desire "ein bißchen Ehre einzulegen" both motivates and sustains Tony throughout the novel. The foundering of her efforts accompanies and contributes to the decline of the family honour, but is certainly not a basic cause. As a woman who generally defers to the male head of family, her position is defined by marriage. In Fontane's novels the macrocosm of society is frequently exposed through the brittleness of its microcosm, marriage, with the additional dimension of wounded aristocratic honour seeking restitution in the duel. In *Buddenbrooks* the constellation is similar despite the non-aristocratic setting, with Tony's marriages determined by social and family pressures. But there is an increased individuality with her, both in her protracted resistance to the idea of marrying Grünlich and in her refusal to return to Permaneder. In both cases her stance is not dictated by rebellion against the conventions themselves, but a colouring of these by personal inclination, restoring the individual family member to the faceless family in whose name alliances are arranged.

Towards the end of the novel the reader has a strong sense of circularity of the narrative. When Weinschenk is released from prison, Tony addresses her daughter in the following terms: "Liebes Kind [. . .] ich muß dich nun etwas fragen, etwas Ernstes! . . . Du liebst deinen Mann doch noch immer von ganzem Herzen?" (436) The reader registers an echo here, and is left in no doubt about the connection by the narrator: "Und da Frau Erika Weinschenk, geborene Grünlich, hierauf [. . .] genau so pflichtgemäß antwortete, wie Tony selbst einstmals unter ähnlichen Umständen ihrem Vater geantwortet hatte [. . .]" (436). The repetition of the situation and the sentiments are poignant, but the virtual quotation marks around what Tony says are unlikely as conscious or even unconscious on her part. Rather they may be viewed as revealing the narrator manipulating the linkages of the narrative. Inasmuch as this explication is meant to illuminate the theme rather than create a narrative structure, it is an instance of Thomas Mann being, as Susan Sontag calls him, "an overcooperative author", installing "in the work itself [. . .] the clear and explicit interpretation of it."[15]

A further example comes with Tony's musings to Thomas at Travemünde. This is a more complex case, because although the words are often recalled verbatim, they are a compression of a much longer passage. Tony and Thomas walk to the settings of Tony's earlier trysts with Morten: "wobei Tony Buddenbrook aus unbekannten Gründen

jedesmal in eine begeisterte und unbestimmt aufrührerische Stimmung geriet" (457). The fiction of "aus unbekannten Gründen" is hard to maintain at any level. If meant to underline a complicity between reader and narrator, and counterpoint this awareness against the characters' blindness, it presupposes either an unlikely insensitivity in Thomas or a degree of self-forgetfulness in Tony which must extend to the many other occasions where she refers to speeches by Morten. The effect, despite its transparency, is to submerge Tony as a character of reflection not beneath the dictates of family but beneath the mechanism of the narrative, with its reliance on cyclical recurrence and the evoking of associations. The character's feigned ignorance - feigned by the narrator - veils a winking nudge to the reader. This tends to make Tony lose her consistency as a fictional figure, over and above the question of her honour at the level of mimetic characterization.

A further effect is to leave in suspension the psychological dimension of such utterances. For when we are told how Tony echoes Morten's revolutionary zeal, what are we witnessing in her? Is it a potential that is never realized, a ludicrous parroting of concepts she has never digested and far less applied, or a sentimental lingering over the speaker rather than the contents of his speech? Probably, as in all good irony, all three, but irony at this level borders dangerously on either sheer disorientation of the reader or else the character becoming a pretext for the narrator's stratagems. This is not to overlook the fact that *all* characters in the novel are caught up in a reduction of that individualism feted by the Classical era.[16] Tony's position is ambivalent inasmuch as she, alone of her generation of the family, genuinely adheres to the old values even as they crumble around her. However quixotic this may be, it does leave her an integrity not accorded to Thomas or Christian which defies the narrator's attempts to reduce her still further, fuelling that ridicule that secondary literature has largely taken at face value.

This much at least can be affirmed about her ambiguous status at the end of the novel. Everything about the family which she has upheld more strenuously than any other family member has gone, yet she remains with her personal core intact. She has lost her outer honour, as the refrain of sour backbiting from Uncle Gotthold's three daughters continuously reminds us. But a surfeit of honour, at the outer level only, lies at the heart of the family's decline, so that what she laments as compromising her family ironically exempts her from its fate. Her situation undoubtedly has tragic potential. However, her enactment of that situation is not slanted towards high tragedy, but neither is she to be written off as "the 'silly goose' of comic relief." [17]Her stature

is most clearly seen in her lengthy resistance to the first marriage before its finalization, and to the second marriage when its perpetuation would continue to sacrifice her for the sake of the family front. Fontane had explored the tensions between personal and class honour at the level of the aristocracy. Tony's characterization provides a fascinating parallel at the level of the bourgeoisie. Such honour as she retains deserves to be salvaged, not least from her narrator.

Footnotes

1 Harald Weinrich sees the turn of the twentieth century as marking the end of the theme of honour in literature. See H. W., "Mythologie der Ehre", *Terror und Spiel. Probleme der Mythenrezeption*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann, München 1971, p. 341. But one must not forget 'latecomers' like Arnold Zweig's *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa* (1927), tracing as it does the honour of the last vestiges of the Friderician state. For introduction and access to the Weinrich article I am grateful to Alan Corkhill.

2 Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, Frankfurt/M. 1960, pp. 311-12. Subsequent page numbers in the body of the text refer to this edition.

3 Johannes Schildhauer, *Die Hanse: Geschichte und Kultur*, Stuttgart 1984, p. 98.

4 Eberhard Lämmert, "Thomas Mann: *Buddenbrooks*", *Der deutsche Roman*, v. 2, ed. Benno von Wiese, Düsseldorf 1963, p. 194.

5 Jürgen Scharfschwerdt, *Thomas Mann und der deutsche Bildungsroman*, Stuttgart 1967, p. 32.

6 Karin Hausen, "Family and Role-Division: The Polarization of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century - an Aspect of the Dissociation of Work and Family Life", *The German Family*, ed. Richard J. Evans and W. R. Lee, London 1981, p. 59: "So marriage [. . .] was transformed during the age of sensibility into the mainly spiritual union of the marriage partners through love alone."

7 There are parallels in Thomas's life. First he renounces Anna, the flowershop assistant, who significantly bears a string of children later. His own decision to marry is not without an element of the mercenariness associated with Grünlich (see 198).

8 Marianne Hirsch, "Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm", *The Voyage in Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel et al, Hanover and London 1983, p. 26.

9 Ibid., p. 27.

10 Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, London 1984. Speaking of the English novel of the nineteenth century, Coward's description of the heroine matches that in fn. 11: "Yet she is the silent woman, necessarily silent and outside the cruelty and viciousness of the economic order [. . .] The marriage of this heroine whose sentiment and sensibilities put her above the economy provided a sort of validation of the social structure" (p. 178).

11 Hausen, op. cit., p. 79 (n. 54).

12 See p. 19ff. of this volume.

13 Weinrich, op. cit., p. 345.

14 This is not an isolated example. Cf.: "aber ihr Herz war leicht und frei - sie wußte selbst nicht, wie sehr" (457).

15 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other Essays*, New York 1966, p. 8.

16 Paul Michael Lützeler even speaks of a "Destruktion des Bildes vom bürgerlichen Helden" in this work, in *Deutsche Romane des 20. Jahrhunderts. Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler, Königstein/Ts. 1983, p. 12.

17 Patricia D. Tobin, *Time and the Novel*, Princeton 1978, p. 71.