“Und wir sind nicht vergessen”: Refugees and the Literary Representation of Exile from National Socialism

Steven W. Lawrie

Abstract

On the basis of a sample of interviews with former refugees from National Socialism, the following study examines the extent to which the literary depiction of exile can be reconciled with the recollections of the real-life experience of enforced emigration. Klaus Mann’s novel Der Vulkan serves as the literary yardstick against which experiences are measured, since Mann’s work is commonly recognized as characteristic of exile literature in its thematisation of the phenomenon of enforced migration. This study identifies commonalities and differences between the interviewees’ recollections of aspects of exile and Mann’s literary representation of these, and concludes that, beyond topics such as the relationship with the host community, the need for a sense of home and a meaningful purpose in exile, an overriding priority both in the case of Mann’s novel and amongst the interviewees is the intention to preserve the memory of the individuals who experienced exile.

novel Der Vulkan [The Volcano] the reality of the exile experience as it was recalled by former refugees from National Socialism. The examination concludes that beyond the details concerning individual aspects of exile, a more important common denominator between the interviewees’ accounts and the literary representation of exile lies in the intention to preserve a record of individual refugees and victims of National Socialism.

A comparison of real-life experiences of exile and their literary depiction must firstly address the question as to the extent to which a literary presentation of exile can be viewed as an accurate reflection of the experiences of ordinary refugees, in as far as those writers who sought to describe the privations of enforced emigration for the ordinary refugee were themselves in a comparatively privileged position. Like Klaus Mann, many of their number had already led cosmopolitan lifestyles prior to 1933,\(^2\) spoke foreign languages and, due both to their established reputations and to the existence of networks of literary associates, could call upon the support of fellow intellectuals in their quest for the vital visas, affidavits and for straightforward financial help. It is significantly easier to elicit the assistance of “Freunde/Die ich gestern nicht kannte”\(^3\) [Friends/I didn’t know yesterday] when one’s name is Bertolt Brecht or Anna Seghers\(^4\) than if one is an unknown individual in the vast wave of around half

---

2 Friedrich Albrecht states: “Klaus Mann fühlte sich in den internationalen literarischen Salons zu Hause […] Bereits als Zwanzigjähriger kannte er fast alle Länder Europas, seine Reisen hatten ihn darüber hinaus durch Nordafrika, die USA und Ostasien geführt.” [Klaus Mann was at home in the international literary salons. At the age of twenty he was already familiar with almost all European countries, and additionally his travels had taken him through North Africa, the USA and Eastern Asia.] Friedrich Albrecht: Klaus Mann der Mittler: Studien aus vier Jahrzehnten. Bern: Lang 2009, p. 39. The extent to which Klaus Mann felt at home abroad is evident, too, in his own words: “Man lebte in Amsterdam, in Zürich, in Paris, ohne diese schönen Städte als ‘Exil’ zu empfinden. Paris war einem schon seit langem eine Art ‘deuxième patrie’; in Amsterdam gab es Freunde und Arbeit; in Zürich gab es Freunde und das Elternhaus.” [One lived in Amsterdam, in Zurich, in Paris, without perceiving these cities as ‘exile’. One had long since viewed Paris as a ‘deuxième patrie’; there were friends and work in Amsterdam; in Zurich there were friends and the parental home.] Klaus Mann: Der Wendepunkt: Ein Lebensbericht. Frankfurt/M: Fischer 1952; Berlin-Weimar: Aufbau 1974, p. 394. Although Der Wendepunkt does address the grimmer sides of exile, passages such as the following underline the distinction between Mann and the ordinary refugee: “Welch geselliges Exil! Welch animierte Verbannung! […] [Ü]berall die vertrauten Gesichter!” [What a convivial exile! What an animated expatriation! Everywhere the familiar faces!] Ibid., p. 411. Further references to this work will be given as W in the main text, followed by page number.


4 Brecht was assisted, amongst others, by the writers Karin Michaelis and Hella Wuolijoki and, on arrival in the USA, by Lion Feuchtwanger and the actor Peter Lorre. See Marianne Kesting: