Taking the Cure: A Stay at Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain"

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There are those who say that the human race is infected by two sicknesses: the sickness of the body and the sickness of the spirit. In fact, both afflictions are potentially fatal. The first sickness can be traced to a number of causes: namely, an outside intrusion (infection), or an inner failure (malfunction). The second sickness comes solely from within: emotional distress, deep anxiety, or that decline sometimes called failure of the will. A mixture of the two sicknesses sometimes happens; and it has been proven that the sickness of the mind often can affect the health of the body—and cause what is called psychosomatic illness.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the hero suffers from the second sickness, and it debilitates him so much that he contemplates suicide. His sickness of spirit comes from inner torment: from being unable to take action "against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as he himself describes it.

It is only when Hamlet begins to act and to plot against his uncle, the usurper and regicide Claudius, that he finds a modicum of relief from his torment. Indeed, once he engages in action, he becomes a new man.

The subject of Shakespeare's play is the spiritual malaise of one man. In Thomas Mann's 1924 novel, The Magic Mountain, the subject, as so many critics have told us, is the malaise of an entire group of people, indeed a generation. These critics—too numerous to mention—have suggested that Mann's intent was to use illness as a metaphor for the condition of pre-World War I European society.

Such a theme would be an ambitious one, to be sure. Novels normally do not attempt to describe the decay of an entire society—how could they? Novels are not tracts or scientific reports, and whenever they attempt to become either of these things, such as we find in as Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities (1930-43), they are no longer fiction but prose seminars.

Within memory, only the Austrian novelist Heimito von Doderer has tried such a task and succeeded: in his novel die Daemonen, published in English as The Demons (1961). In it, he presented Viennese society seven years after the Great War. He was relatively successful in drawing a portrait of some members of that society—but proved nothing about the whole of Austrian society. There was, perhaps in the end, nothing to prove. (Sometimes the decadence of a society is highly exaggerated.)

The danger in such fictional enterprises clearly lies, as mentioned, in the fact that

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undertakings of this order usually fail as fiction. Novelists who launch their paper vessels on a voyage to Ultima Thule, that is, who try to draft a report to the world, are sure to run aground on the sand bar of rhetoric. John Dos Passos tried a similar project, in USA (1938); but he overloaded his ship with so many characters and literary techniques that it had sunk long before it reached its third and final volume. I think of the old Jewish saying, "A community is too heavy for one man to carry alone."

I

The difference in the matter of Thomas Mann's novel, the telling difference, is that the community he chose to portray in The Magic Mountain—that of patients in a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium—is revealed chiefly through the behavior of its individual patients and not through the medium of some committee report. Mann's story is that of persons, and does not pretend to describe an entire society.

It was not the first time that Mann had focused his attention on a group of persons. He began his literary career with Buddenbrooks (1901), a novel about an established merchant family of Lubeck, Germany. He presented, as the subtitle declares, the "Verfall einer Familie," that is, the decline of a family. He described how the Buddenbrook dynasty, under the pressure of social events and their own growing ineptness, fell from the heights of political and financial superiority to the depths of social decay. The story ends with the tragic death of its last viable heir.

Eleven years later, after numerous short stories, and a trivial romantic novel, Royal Highness (1909), Mann returned to the theme of Verfall in the 1912 novella, Death in Venice. After this work, a little over twelve years passed before Mann published another novel, and this time in 1924, six years after the end of the great world conflict.

The setting was a sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps, where people suffering from lung disease came to be cured through the application of rest and the latest surgical techniques.

The atmosphere there was decadent only in the matter of the self-destructive behavior of some of its despairing patients. There is no particular sense of the end of an age. The novel in fact begins some years before the opening shots of World War I. Indeed, the novel's last pages describe its hero on the battlefield, having left the sanatorium to become a soldier in the German army.

Save for this historical afterlogue, it is hard indeed to place this story in any but the modern age. It is, rather, more like an allegory that concerns all those who become afflicted with a mortal illness and are forced to enter a medical institution.

Where then, one might ask, is the timely analysis of prewar society, before the "breaking of nations"?

II

Published as it was, six years after the Great War's end, der Zauberberg was issued in English under the title The Magic Mountain. The title could as well have been "The Enchanted Mountain," since Zauber can also be translated as "enchantment"—even "sorcery." For over this small cosmos of the clinic there does lie a kind of sickly spell—very like the enchantment of that fabulous castle where Sleeping Beauty dreamed, waiting for her Prince Charming.

The difference, of course, is that Mann's long novel is no fairy tale and there is no rescuer to save the heroine/hero. Few of the characters in The Magic Mountain are spared the fate that befalls many seriously ill patients.

The intent of the work, as Mann once stated in a letter to his friend Felix Bertaux was "to revive the Bildungsroman." But let us be a little skeptical regarding this statement (and the others Mann made about...
his novel, to be noted later). It is true that the story has a hero, a young hero—but he has already grown up and the only “education” he receives is in the disappointments of love and the way men die. In fact, his first lesson begins when he arrives at the sanatorium, for he is lodged in a room just vacated by a resident who has passed on.

But let us set the scene now. The stage is the International Sanatorium Berghof, located not far from Davos in the Swiss Alps. The time, as the novel begins, is about 1912—long before antibiotics became the treatment of choice for tuberculosis. Indeed, in 1912 the usual treatment prescribed for tuberculosis patients was a long period of rest—usually in a mountain retreat. It was thought by the medical establishment of the day that pure mountain air would do wonders for those with lung problems. Physicians then believed that the air of the lowlands was “heavy” and “moist,” and was bad for those with “weak lungs.”

In such institutions doctors were prone to experiment with questionable surgical interventions, including collapsing the diseased lung in order to let it “recuperate” in a passive state. This helped in certain cases, but in others it hastened the inevitable end.

The mise en scène of the Alps possesses an emotional power in itself. In the hands of extravagant writers such as Balzac or Zola, the surroundings would have been dealt with in either an exotic or sensational manner. But Thomas Mann employs a bizarre combination of the eternal with the mortal. He shows us the mountains of the Alps with their icy grandeur and the perpetual change of seasons, regulated by the eternal timetable of nature—and against this places his fragile, ailing patients.

What of the hero of the story? He is a blithe young man from Hamburg named Hans Castorp, who comes to visit his ailing cousin Joachim Ziemssen. Hans is about to begin his professional career as an engineer and thinks that visiting his cousin will be a lark. He finds it not very much of a lark and actually ends up remaining beyond the planned three weeks—as a patient, for during his visit he develops symptoms of lung disease.

Castorp is not only young but impressionable, and as he comes to know the patients in the sanatorium, it dawns on him that this is a world nothing like that in the lowlands. Here, life is perpetually overshadowed by death, and the spirit is often overwhelmed by anxiety over one’s fate. He is a wide-eyed observer, and it takes time for him to comprehend everything around him. During this time he falls in love, witnesses pitiful dramas among the patients, and learns how to endure tedium, which, as the narrator tells us, is “an abnormal shortening of the time consequent upon monotony.”

Yes, time. That is a major feature of the narrative of The Magic Mountain, and the subject of several lectures by the narrator. However, in addition, an important part of Hans Castorp’s story is his falling in love with a fellow patient, the Russian Clavdia Chauchat—a hopeless love that comes to no satisfying end. Hans’s cousin Joachim, too, shows an attachment to a pretty patient. But it fails as well. The truth is, the fulfillment of love is a very rare event in the fiction of Thomas Mann.

As suggested, the novel is not a scientific portrait of the unfortunate victims of a disease. It is an artistic canvas that has many figures in the foreground. In the background, there are shadings and highlights—not of society, but nature. For along with time, the author is preoccupied with the backdrop of the majestic mountains. Time and the seasons pass—but human frailty seems inconsequential in this setting.

Though the world of the sanatorium seems ageless, there is a vague attempt to place a time limit on the story. In his preface, Mann writes that the story takes
place “in the old days, the days of the world before the Great War, in the begin-
ning of which so much began that has scarcely yet left off beginning.” But once into the story, this vague gesture is lost in the general drama of life at the sanatorium.

III

This was not a new setting for Thomas Mann. Earlier in his career, he had written about life in a sanatorium. In 1912, his wife Katja had spent some time in a tuberculosis sanatorium as a patient. Mann made much use of this experience in a story he called “Tristan.” This was a melodrama about the love of an intellectual patient for a very impressionable married woman. The affair falls through, chiefly upon the appearance of the woman’s husband who forces the intellectual to back off and retreat, completely humiliated.

The relationship of “Tristan” to The Magic Mountain is thin, chiefly because “Tristan” is of much slighter material. One could say it was a finger exercise for the later work. But both works could have existed one without the other—as it is, though, they are part of the same constellation: Thomas Mann’s galaxy of bedeviled and unfulfilled human beings.

Life in a sanatorium, of course, is not like life in the outside world, for it is a clinical melting pot of society, where human beings live under the threat of losing their lives. Each patient wonders: Will I survive? In Mann’s day, this was an especially valid question, for despite the many tuberculosis sanatoriums and the abundance of “cures,” the death rate for TB patients was high.

Regarding these alpine sanatoriums, science tells us that thin air requires more effort in breathing than the air at lower levels; thus, those who came to the alpine clinics and who were already seriously ill were, in many ways, going to their deaths. The “beneficial” rest in the rarefied atmosphere of the high mountains proved so straining that for many it was ultimately fatal. One could even say that many of the sanatoriums of that day were medical death factories.

For this reason, it might be said, we can see in this situation a symbol of the corruption of prewar society, of a willingness by people to believe whatever they were told—sometimes against common sense.

To some extent, this is true. Patients did indeed follow the advice of their physicians—as today. Laymen then, as now, did not presume to know better than their doctors, and most of them obediently took their doctors’ advice. (Most people in Europe also reasoned that, since rest at a spa was commonly recommended for poor health, why should not a sanatorium be good for tuberculosis?)

The cure itself, as we learn in the novel, was not without a regimen: this consisted chiefly of taking regular rest periods out in the open air, the patient protected by a heavy wrapping of blankets or furs. It is hard to believe that this dangerous exposure to the alpine elements could in any way be considered as contributing to a “cure”—and Mann notes that after each rest, many of the patients’ temperatures climbed higher. In fact, from today’s viewpoint the logic of this cure makes no sense, and seems pure medical madness. It is like prescribing, in an even earlier era, mercury for syphilis.

Hans Castorp sees all this, but he does not question it, for he has come only to visit his cousin and not to inspect the sanatorium. He is, as the narrator tells us in the beginning, “an unassuming young man” from Hamburg. An orphan, he has graduated from engineering school and is about to embark on a career in his uncle’s construction firm. His decision to visit his ailing cousin is purely a way of putting off his entrance into his professional career.

Young Castorp quickly learns some unpleasant facts of life at the Berghof: his room is next to that of a Russian couple
who frenetically—and noisily—make love each night. Another day, while walking by a room in the hall he hears a man coughing horribly, and it seems to him "as if one could look right into him when he coughs," so gruesome is that sound.

Hans comes to know the many different patients and their conditions. There is the "gentleman rider," an upper-class patient who maintains decorum while dying of his disease. There are young patients who, despite their illnesses, flirt shamelessly with each other like young people everywhere. Even Hans’s cousin Joachim behaves like a lovesick boy, though being a military man by profession, he pretends the opposite: that he does not care. Eyes forward!

Now we have seen that the patient is sick. But can we say at the same time that society is sick? Can one presume that the illness of persons infected by a disease reflects the illness of society? Surely, victims of disease are victims in their own right and do not represent any social malaise.

This is plainly the message Mann sends us in his portrayal of the poor souls on his Enchanted Mountain. Nearly everyone is sick there, many are dying, and the young man who has come to visit soon finds himself joining the ranks of the patients and learning more than he ever wanted to know about illness. But he learns nothing about society’s disease; only about how disease affects the spirit of individuals.

Hans Castorp stays a while on the mountain, and thanks to Mann’s storytelling gift, we the readers remain confined as well. We not only meet the patients in the sanatorium, but also learn their thoughts about their afflictions. Sometimes we learn too much. For, in a lamentable lapse, Mann added to this cast of characters two quarrelsome intellectuals: the Jesuitical Settembrini, and his opponent, the rationalist Naphta. There is too much space given to their debates, which do nothing but bring the story to a screeching halt.

Not merely do their philosophical discussions interrupt the narrative, but they are extensive and wearying, keeping the reader from the true matter at hand. Like Tolstoy’s philosophical interludes in War and Peace (1864-1869) these stretches of woolgathering are simply too lengthy and too rhetorical.

To some critics the arguments elevate the novel to the realm of "the novel of ideas." No label is more fatal to the general reader’s interest. For the novel of ideas is not a novel of people or situations; it is really an attempt—as mentioned at the beginning of this essay—to turn a work of fiction into a debate. It is as if one entered a theater expecting to see a dramatic performance, and found instead a panel discussion.

The Magic Mountain is thus weakened by this distraction; not through an effort to portray society in the terms of a sanatorium, but through the failure to tell a good story. To some extent, Thomas Mann keeps abandoning his story in order to pontificate over various topics, time, the philosophy of life in the modern world, as well as the nature of the human organism.

This is not helpful in the enjoyment of the story, and for the most part Mann’s novel succeeds only when he hews to the experiences of Hans Castorp and his life at the International Sanatorium Berghof.

In his introduction to the novel, Mann writes that Hans Castorp is a “simple-minded though pleasing young man.” In fact, though, simple-minded as he may be, it is upon him that the entire fiction relies. So long as we follow his adventures, we are happy and interested. But when the Castorbian saga stops and the narrative slips backward into rhetorical nip-ups, the story simply begins to die, like a Berghof patient coughing up blood.

This is almost fatal as the debates take on an endless and tendentious character and seem about to overwhelm the story. Then, near the point where the entire novel seems to have become moribund,
a new character is introduced: Mynheer Peeperkorn, a representative of a new kind of patient, the Dionysian. This injects a restorative serum into the novel, and blunts the attitudinizing of the philosophers of the mountaintop—who at times seem to interest the author more than the story itself. For Peeperkorn is no philosophical debater: he is the god Pan. Peeperkorn is a wealthy Dutch sea captain, a nervous imbiber of the cup of life. He cannot complete a sentence, and speaks in jerky phrases. He keeps the liquor flowing for those who join his circle, including Hans Castorp. He also is somewhat of a Don Juan, for when he appears at the sanatorium, it is with Clavdia Chauchat at his side. She, who earlier left the mountaintop, has returned as Peeperkorn’s mistress.

With this turn of events, Mann returns to storytelling—people begin to emerge from the interminable debates and authorial philosophizings. And Hans Castorp resumes his passion for the soiled Russian dove.

Mann once wrote to the Austrian socialist Ernst Fischer, that both Death in Venice and The Magic Mountain were “extremely romantic conceptions.” Unfortunately, Mann tended to say a lot of contradictory things about his works in his letters—and readers of The Magic Mountain are unlikely to find anything very romantic about this novel (or about Death in Venice, for that matter). Rather, there is a lot of grim reckoning.

Peeperkorn and Frau Chauchat are not at all romantic characters. They strike one immediately as pathetic, lost souls. The wealthy Peeperkorn ekes out his miserable existence by buying the friendship of others, while Chauchat haughtily mistreats the men who pursue her, in order to avoid making any real commitments.

In this we become aware once again of the air of death that permeates the Berghof. We wonder: Are all relationships in this enchanted kingdom doomed? So Mann would have us believe.

Mann once made yet another contradictory remark, to the Swiss critic Robert Faesi, stating (in 1925) that perhaps his novel “is the only humorous novel of our day,” a bizarre comment, about as helpful as his remark that the book was a “romantic” story. For if there is any humor in The Magic Mountain, it is closely related to gallows humor.

It must be clear by now that from this writer’s viewpoint Mann’s novel has little to do with social criticism of the pre-World War I years—and prewar society; rather, it has a great deal to do with the delineation of human frailty. Further, it seems that despite his often cavalier attitude towards his characters, Mann has taken up the mission of imparting to the pathetic victims of lung disease on his Zauberberg a tragic sense of life.

Tragic in what sense? A reasonable question. In an essay called “On Myself,” Mann once claimed that his novel was “a book of sympathy with death.” But here again, it seems we cannot take Mann at his word. For it seems clear to me that the writer is in fact acknowledging, in his novel, the tragedy of man’s fate: in this special case, the fate of physical illness.

Let us also add at this point that the purpose of sanatoriums, and hospitals as well, was not to hasten mortality. After all, life in such institutions was a battleground. Medicine was struggling against bacillus, courage struggling against cowardice, and spirit against circumstance. The purpose of the International Sanatorium Berghof was to heal and certainly not to kill. The fate of its inmates was one of circumstance.

It is impossible, however, to believe that Mann was on the side of death; what he meant was merely that he was cognizant of that terrible struggle that went on between men and disease, and he sympathized with those who took part in it. His approach was to show this struggle as a kind of dance of death.
Death is certainly not the hero of the novel. Hans Castorp is the hero. (Mann writes in his Foreword: "...It must needs be borne in mind, in Hans Castorp’s behalf, that it is his story, and not every story happens to everybody..."). And we need to remember that at the end of the novel it is Castorp who is the last person we see.

This is not to forget the motif of time. The story unfolds in the years before the outbreak of World War I. And Mann claims that this is what gives the story its particular flavor and importance. “Is not the pastness of the past the profounder, the completer, the more legendary, the more immediately before the present it takes place?” Yet the mulling over time and its influence on life and fiction—over which Mann wastes many a paragraph—is intrinsically a nonstarter. The novel does not take place in a vacuum; it is a story with a beginning and an end.

Alfred Kazin once accused Mann of suffering from a “tiresome Olympian irony.” And one can heartily agree that, in the case of The Magic Mountain, this kind of haughtiness is often evident and works against the seriousness of the story. For it reminds us of the kind of Victorian novelist who addressed his audience as “Dear Reader,” and was very superior in relating his narrative.

Nevertheless, though The Magic Mountain has its flaws, it survives. There remains a core of profoundly depicted emotions: Hans’s affection for his cousin Joachim—who dies after returning from his flight to the flatlands; Hans’s pathetic love affair with Clavdia Chauchat, a truly damned soul; and finally, the portrait of Hofrat Behrens, a dedicated physician who originally came to the Berghof with his stricken wife to find a cure for her, and remained after her death. He himself is not in the best of health, and Mann comments: “He had settled down as one of the physicians who are companions in suffering to the patients in their care....”

In a letter in 1930 to André Gide, Mann noted bitterly that “I repeatedly hear the most scathing judgments of it [The Magic Mountain], mostly to the effect that it is not a novel, not a creative work, but a product of intellect and criticism.” Then, a few lines later, Mann makes the striking comment that the novel’s “purely narrative elements, I think, balance the analytical qualities so that the whole remains tenable as structure and work of art.”

Thus, Mann believed that his novel was saved from the fate of being classified as a sterile novel of ideas by its narrative art. Instinctively, one might say, Mann knew that no novel could survive purely as “a product of intellect and criticism.” Instinctively, Mann created immortal characters—who managed to override the tedious pages in which Mann was spinning wool about time and human destiny.

In fact, one could almost say that the work succeeds despite the author’s lapses, when he became uncertain as to its purpose and asked himself if it was to be a romance, or a comedy, or a black comedy.

George Steiner has noted the “metaphysical hauteur of Mann’s stance” as a way or explaining the often grave and ponderous positions that the writer took in his fictions. In such commentaries on Mann’s often toffee-nosed treatment of his characters (including, of course, towards the “simple” Hans Castorp) critics such as Steiner have forgotten that in many of his important works Mann found himself perpetually torn between making them products “of intellect and criticism” and “works of art.”

So the lure of the novel of ideas was a kind of siren call that Mann was constantly struggling to resist. Can we even imagine that while writing The Magic Mountain Mann repeatedly asked himself what kind of a book he actually should be writing? Should it debate the problems of society or should it simply follow Hans Castorp’s footsteps down the long hall-
ways of the sanatorium?

"The backbone of a novel has to be a story," E. M. Forster wrote in his Aspects of the Novel. And though this statement was made in 1927, too late to be of any help to Mann in his enchanted mountain, one might note that it supplies us with the reason for the enduring success of Mann's long novel.

For the work, in spite of its longueurs, does bring home to the reader that tragic sense of life I have mentioned—and this because Mann does not show his characters as victims of society, of capitalism, nor even of history, but of, as already noted, circumstance. For circumstance is certainly one of the most tragic aspects of our human lives. To impart this convincingly was Mann's great achievement. For Mann's instinctive genius managed to show the tragic fate of the victims of lung disease.

Thanks to his literary instinct, he was able to overcome his innate yearning to become immured in tendentious and fruitless philosophizing. Instinct overcame the bewitchment that struck Mann while visiting his Magic Mountain, and enabled him to awake from the philosopher's dream of bedazzled and empty chatter.

1. The quotations used in this essay are from Helen Lowe-Porter's translation of The Magic Mountain.