literatur für leser:innen

43. Jahrgang
2023

Thomas Manns transatlantische Autorschaft

Herausgegeben von
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Peer Review:	lliteratur für leser:innen ist peer reviewed. Alle bei der Redaktion eingehenden Beiträge werden anonymisiert an alle Herausgeber:innen weitergegeben und von allen begutachtet. Jede:r Herausgeber:in hat ein Vetorecht.
Verlag und Anzeigenverwaltung:	Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Gontardstraße 11, 10178 Berlin Telefon: +49 (0) 30 232 567 900, Telefax +49 (0) 30 232 567 902
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Erscheinungsweise:	3mal jährlich (März/Juli/November)
Bezugsbedingungen:	Jahresabonnement EUR 54,95; Jahresabonnement für Studenten EUR 32,95; Einzelheft EUR 26,95. Alle Preise verstehen sich zuzüglich Porto und Verpackung. Abonnements können mit einer Frist von 8 Wochen zum Jahresende gekündigt werden. Alle Beiträge sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Übersetzung, Nachdruck, Vervielfältigung auf photomechanischem oder ähnlichem Wege, Vortrag, Funk- und Fernsehsendung sowie Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen – auch auszugsweise – bleiben vorbehalten.

Morten Høi Jensen, Brooklyn, New York

The Question of Why. *Der Zauberberg* and the Meaning of Life. An Essay

Abstract
This essay examines why ordinary readers, even a hundred years after its publication, are still drawn to *Der Zauberberg* not just for its formal appeal, but also for its revelatory potential, its promise of holding deep significance. The "novel of ideas" has been repeatedly discredited throughout the twentieth century, and Thomas Mann has sometimes been discredited as a fusty practitioner of the genre. Yet something about *Der Zauberberg* seems to transcend the limitations of this form.

I first read *Der Zauberberg* when I was twenty-three years old, the same age as Hans Castorp when he arrives at the Berghof International Sanatorium in the late summer of 1907. I read the novel at the behest of my paternal grandfather, whom I subsequently began to refer to, half in jest, as "my Settembrini." Like the Italian humanist of Mann's novel, my grandfather was, for much of my life, an important pedagogical influence, an eloquent and literary rhetorician, even, at times, a bit of an organ grinder. With a background in the Danish navy and mechanical engineering, he, too, believed in the "Welt der Arbeit und des praktischen Genies," and was even prone to wax poetic about the Enlightenment values of progress, reason, and democracy.[1] In a speech at his seventy-fifth birthday, I made a point of telling him that I thought of him as "my Settembrini."

The next time I read *Der Zauberberg,* I was thirty years old, the same age as Hans Castorp when he leaves the Berghof for the flatlands, at which point the novel abandons him to his uncertain but hardly promising fate in the trenches of the First World War. At the time, I happened to be in Davos, having traveled there to do some research for a book I was planning to write about *Der Zauberberg*. It was late January, 2018. I had set off from Copenhagen, stopped over in Lübeck to see Mann's birthplace, and then, as accurately as I could, followed in Hans Castorp's footsteps, taking the train from Hamburg to Landquart and finally to Davos. As I arrived at the station late that snowy January evening, I couldn't help but think of Settembrini seeing off Hans Castorp in the summer of 1914, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye as the young engineer disappears into the distance.

What brought me here? What prompted me to come all this way? Why had I decided to write an entire book about *Der Zauberberg*? After all, I'm not a Thomas Mann expert, or a Germanist, or even an academic or scholar of any kind. Was it not presumptuous to think that I would have anything new to say about a novel that, in the hundred years since its publication, has been exhaustively studied, interpreted,

1 Thomas Mann: *Der Zauberberg*. Ed. and text-critically revised by Michael Neumann. Vol. 5.1 of the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* of Thomas Mann's works, letters and diaries. Ed. by Andreas Blödorn/Heinrich Detering/Eckhard Heftrich [et. al.]. Frankfurt/M. 2002, p. 92. In the following, quotations from the *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe* are referenced with the abbreviation "GKFA" followed by the number of the respective volume.

 https://doi.org/10.3726/lfl.2020.03.07

analyzed, scrutinized, and deconstructed? What did I know, what did I think, that hadn't been known or thought already?

One day during my seven-week stay in Davos – seven years seeming a bit of a stretch – I was seated in the grand Jugendstil lobby of my hotel, when I noticed an American woman seated in a sofa group a few feet away from me. A waiter arrived with her coffee or tea, saw that she was ensconced in *Der Zauberberg*, and asked her what it was about. I smiled to myself, because it's the sort of question any novel-lover dreads. What do you say? It's like that Monty Python sketch, the All-England Summarize Proust Competition, in which contestants have 15 seconds to summarize *In Search of Lost Time*.

"Well," she began, "it's sort of about everything. You know, the meaning of life." As I listened, I recalled a passage I underlined in *Der Zauberberg* a few days prior. I turned back through pages, to the chapter titled "Launen des Merkurs," and read:

> Wie jedermann, nehmen wir das Recht in Anspruch, uns bei der hier laufenden Erzählung unsere privaten Gedanken zu machen, und wir äußern die Mutmaßung, daß Hans Castorp die für seinen Aufenthalt bei Denen hier oben ursprünglich angesetzte Frist nicht einmal bis zu dem gegenwärtig erreichten Punkt überschritten hätte, wenn seiner schlichten Seele aus den Tiefen der Zeit über Sinn und Zweck des Lebensdienstes eine irgendwie befriedigende Auskunft zuteil geworden wäre.[2]

As I read this, I suddenly recalled the way I had felt when I first read the novel seven years earlier: that I had been confronted with all of life – with music and feeling; with progress and reaction; with love and death.

In the following days, I began to wonder about Hans Castorp, and why it was that I had never found him, as some readers invariably do, vague or boring. Had I self-identified with him too easily, coming from a similar part of the world? Or was there something else that endeared me to him?

Before the narrative proper begins, he is described as a "einfache[r], wenn auch ansprechende[r] junge[r] Mensch," a description that is repeated almost verbatim in the first sentence of the first chapter.[3] We learn that he is twenty-three-years old, that he was orphaned at a young age and grew up in the care of his grandfather and his uncle, and that he has recently completed his engineering exams and will soon embark on a career with the ship-building firm Tunder and Wilms in his native city of Hamburg.

What else? He is blonde and blue-eyed, impeccably well-dressed, and seems to everyone back home to be "unverfälschtes und rechtschaffenes Erzeugnis hiesigen Bodens."[4]

But all is not as it seems with our young hero. (Nothing in this novel is ever as it seems). As we read on, we gradually learn that, back in Hamburg, the family doctor suspects Hans Castorp of being anemic and has prescribed him a daily glass of robust porter – believed to help build his blood, but which Hans Castorp enjoys for its soothing, dozing effects. We also learn that although he is a decent tennis-player and oarsman, he prefers sitting on a terrace of the boathouse with a drink in hand, "und

2 Ibid, p. 349.
3 GKFA 5.1, p. 9.
4 GKFA 5.1, p. 50.

die leuchtenden Boote betrachtete, zwischen denen Schwäne auf dem bunt spiegelnden Wasser dahinzogen."[5]

More significantly, we learn that work, that supreme virtue of bourgeois society, doesn't really agree with Hans Castorp. It strains his nerves and tires him out. He prefers "die freie Zeit […], die unbeschwerte, an der nicht die Bleigewichte der Mühsal hingen."[6] When he first meets the Italian humanist Ludovico Settembrini, he says with remarkable candor: "Recht gesund fühle ich mich eigentlich nur, wenn ich gar nichts tue."[7]

What are we to make of this? On the one hand, Hans Castorp is presented to us as an ordinary, healthy young man, firmly grounded in the norms and values of his burgherly environment. Yet the more we read on the more misleading this early impression begins to seem; and the more misleading it seems, the more our initial impression of Hans Castorp begins to fall apart.

The philosopher Alexander Nehamas, in his reading of the novel's early chapters, alerts us to an incident that occurs on the morning of Hans Castorp's first day at the Berghof. Standing on the balcony of his room, taking in the mountain vistas that surround him, he suddenly overhears a Russian couple in a neighboring room having sex. Hans Castorp responds a little prudishly:

> Nun, es sind Eheleute, in Gottes Namen, soweit ist die Sache in Ordnung. Aber am hellen Morgen, das ist doch stark. Und mir ist ganz, als hätten sie schon gestern abend keinen Frieden gehalten. Schließlich sind sie doch krank, da sie hier sind, oder wenigstens einer von ihnen, da wäre etwas Schonung am Platze.[8]

As Nehamas shrewdly points out, Hans Castorp's comment that at least one of the Russians must be sick "casts his own presence at the sanatorium in an ambiguous light. Since he, too, is there, why should he be different from them?"[9] Nehamas reminds us that Hans Castorp has come to Davos not simply to visit his cousin but to recuperate a little himself. At the end of the second chapter it is mentioned, almost in passing, that his family doctor had in fact insisted on a change of air. It turns out that Hans Castorp returned from his final exams looking a little pale, a change in constitution that is put down to the long period of concentrated work he had just completed. And since his cousin is in Davos, why not also take this opportunity to pay him a visit?

Nehamas demonstrates that the reader is presented again and again with evidence that our young hero is not actually well, yet we choose repeatedly to overlook this evidence, just as Hans Castorp himself does. We are thus complicit in his self-deception. And by repeating that self-deception, the reader deceives herself also. "In depicting self-deception in his character, Mann induces it in his readers," Nehamas writes.[10]

But if Hans Castorp is not as healthy as he thinks, is he then sick? And if he is not actually sick, then what, if anything, is wrong with him?

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5 GKFA 5.1, p. 50
6 GKFA 5.1, p. 56–57.
7 GKFA 5.1, p. 94.
8 GKFA 5.1, p. 64.
9 Alexander Nehamas: *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault.* Berkeley 1998, p. 23.
10 Ibid., p. 25.

Notice, by the way, that Hans Castorp is only ever referred to by his full name – a habit that is "somehow necessary, as if to fortify his insufficiently firm grip on the will to exist," as Stephen D. Dowden puts it.[11] Something about Hans Castorp is undefined. When asked by the director of the Berghof why he chose to become an engineer, he claims it was purely by chance, and that he could just as well have become a doctor or a clergyman. Similarly, when local citizens of Hamburg wonder if Hans Castorp will one day take part in the city's political life, given his good family name, they cannot decide if he would stand as a conservative, like his grandfather, or as a progressive, given that he has entered the field of commerce and technology. "Das war wohl möglich – und ebenso wohl auch das Gegenteil."[12]

For a young man from Hamburg (a city loathed by the poet Heinrich Heine for its industry and commerce) Hans Castorp is in fact anything but ordinary. (If he were, he wouldn't waste his time languishing in the mountains but get right to work instead). And yet the narrator *wants* us to regard him as typical – not in the sense of being your average, robust German burgher, as we have partly deceived ourselves to believe that he is, but in the sense of being a young man on the cusp of adulthood at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Der Zauberberg, the narrator tells us in the foreword, takes place "in den alten Tagen der Welt vor dem großen Kriege."[13] This is the historical sense in which the novel is a *Zeitroman*, or time-novel, as Mann himself called it; "it seeks to present the inner significance of an epoch, the pre-war period of European history."[14] As the narrator explains, people live out their lives not in a vacuum, but as products of the historical epoch they are born into. And one sea change that characterized the old world before the war was a general collapse of traditional values, particularly the authority of religion. Without God, human beings are thrown back on what Mann himself, in *Joseph and His Brothers*, described as the "Vielfache und beängstigend Zweifelhafte" of the living world."[15] A world in which, as Hermann Broch puts it in the third volume of *Die Schlafwandler* (1930–32), itself a considerable *Zeitroman*, "nichts [bleibt übrig] als der Akt des Fragens als solcher."[16]

In *Der Wille zur Macht*, Nietzsche writes about the origins of nihilism that "es fehlt das Ziel. Es fehlt die Antwort auf das 'Wozu'?"[17] Is Hans Castorp a nihilist? The philosopher Nolen Gertz tells us that it is entirely possible to be a nihilist without knowing it – a lack of awareness is in fact the point of nihilism, he writes.[18] And as we have seen from Nehamas's reading, Hans Castorp is certainly lacking in self-awareness. We are told in the first chapter that he "had not planned to take this trip particularly seriously, to become deeply involved in it," yet the sight of this paperbound book *Ocean Steamships* lying neglected on the seat beside him – "indes der hereinstreichende Atem der schwer keuchenden Lokomotive seinen Umschlag mit Kohlenpartikeln

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11 Stephen D. Dowden (ed.): *A Companion to Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain*. Rochester 1999, p. xii.
12 Ibid., p. 58.
13 Ibid., p. 11.
14 Thomas Mann: The Making of "Der Zauberberg". In: *The Atlantic*. 1/1953, pp. 41–45, here p. 44.
15 GKFA 7.1, p. 402.
16 Hermann Broch: *Die Schlafwandler*. Frankfurt a/M 1976, p. 475.
17 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Aus dem Nachlass der achtziger Jahre*. In: *Werke IV*. Frankfurt a/M 1976, p. 149.
18 Cf. Nolen Gertz: *Nihilism*. Cambridge 2019, p. 60.

verunreinigte"[19] – suggests otherwise. Hans Castorp is not aware of it, but he has already begun to lose interest in his profession. And he has lost interest because the Zeitgeist has responded with "hollow silence" to the question: why?

It was the American woman's answer to the waiter that set me on this path of thinking, this sudden realization that what had drawn me to *Der Zauberberg* when I was twenty-three, even though I wasn't aware of it at the time, was the feeling that here was a novel engaging with the most important question of all: how do we affirm life, how do we find meaning, in a time and place that offers us none? It was the same question that had prompted me to write about the nineteenth century Danish novelist Jens Peter Jacobsen, whom Mann read and admired, and whose novel *Niels Lyhne* (1880) exerted a profound influence on Mann's generation of German writers. With this in mind, *Der Zauberberg* suddenly looked to me like a bridge between the nineteenth and the twentieth century; by looking backward and forward at the same time, by portraying, simultaneously, the world before and after the First World War, it enacted a unique double perspective on the modern world.

Der Zauberberg is sometimes derided as a purely intellectual novel, a charge leveled at almost everything Thomas Mann wrote. In his review of *Death in Venice*, published in *The Blue Review* in 1913, the English novelist D. H. Lawrence claimed Mann's novella was "too well done," that it had "none of the rhythm of a living thing," and that its "carefully plotted and arranged developments" wrung all the unexpected from the cloth of life.[20] Hermann Hesse, Mann's friend of many decades, found *Royal Highness* "too intellectual, too contrived, too manneristic."[21] Vladimir Nabokov, no slouch when it comes to literary rivalry, plainly regarded Mann as a second-rate peddler of novels of ideas.

In his amusing "Conversation on Der Zauberberg," Erich Heller's fictive interlocutor complains that "everybody and everything in the novel 'represents' something."[22] Settembrini stands for the West, reason, and progress; Clavida Chauchat for the East, disease, and death. And so on. In *Der Zauberberg*, a pencil is never just a pencil. But is the novel really so allegorical that its characters become mere conduits for Big Ideas?

Thomas Mann often downplayed the learning and information with which he supposedly saddled his writing. Addressing the literary editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1951, Mann acknowledged that he sometimes noticed "with embarrassment" that people regard him as a

> man of encyclopedic knowledge. What an illusion! In reality I am, for a (forgive the phrase) world-famous writer, almost inconceivably ill-educated […] I did develop into a hard worker when it became necessary to supply the scholarly foundation for a work of fiction, that is, to collect information in order to play literary games with it – or strictly speaking, to scandalously misuse it.[23]

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19 GKFA 5.1, p. 12.

20 D. H. Lawrence: German Books: Thomas Mann. In: *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*. Ed. by Edward D. McDonald. London 1961, pp. 308–313, here pp. 312 f.

21 Richard Winston: *Thomas Mann: The Making of an Artist*. New York 1981, p. 19.

22 Erich Heller: *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German*. London 1958, p. 193.

23 Richard Winston/Clara Winston (ed.): *Letters of Thomas Mann, 1889–1955*. New York 1971, p. 627.

On occasion, I have felt that the scholarship surrounding Mann has done him a disservice. It has taken his own self-mythologizing too much at face value. Of course, Mann himself is to blame for much of this. As Marcel Reich-Ranicki once put it, "ein überaus feierliches, ein würdevoll-mächtiges Thomas-Mann-Bild" has congealed in the reading public's mind largely because the author himself repeatedly engaged in discussions of the nature of artistic genius, German artistic tradition, and so on.[24] Not to mention, the scholarship on Thomas Mann obviously has its necessary place.

But scholarship cannot answer a simple question for me: why am I so drawn to this novel? Why are all its characters and ideas and its whole atmosphere so alive to me? Why do I not find, as some readers often do, Thomas Mann's prose to be cold, critical, and distant?

Perhaps it is not possible to answer those questions definitively, if at all. Great literature moves us and works on us in mysterious ways, and no amount of analysis or interpretation can satisfactorily explain why. *Der Zauberberg* is a complex and intricate novel; like Joyce's *Ulysses*, it will surely continue to keep scholars busy for centuries yet. For the rest of us, the general or common readers, it is a treasure chest of a novel that, like a Rorschach blot, changes shape and meaning with each reading, both by design and by the simple fact we are different readers each time we return to it. Standing at the station in Davos-Platz after my seven weeks were up, thinking again of Settembrini seeing off Hans Castorp, I recalled something the late Polish poet Adam Zagajewski once wrote: "we are still dealing with the heroes of *Der Zauberberg*."[25] For as long as that hollow silence is with us, I don't imagine that will ever change.

24 Marcel Reich-Ranicki: *Thomas Mann und die Seinen*. Stuttgart 1985, p. 13.
25 Adam Zagajewski: *A Defense of Ardor: Essays*. New York 2004, p. 18.