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I CANNOT SAY I HAVE A FAVORITE NOVEL (not one, anyway), but can say that certain novels changed my life, or at least marked it indelibly. Such a one is Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which I read when I was in college. It was the summer after freshman year and I was working as a typist in the large office of an auto insurance company in Chicago, addressing form letters to people who were behind on their premium payments. I truly hated that job, but Barnard College was expensive even with my scholarship, and my family was not wealthy; my parents and I had agreed that I would work over the summer to help pay the difference.

Carrying the book around with me on my daily commute to the Loop was a reminder that the mind-numbing job was only temporary, that I would soon be back in New York on Morningside Heights, thinking about Things That Mattered. Thomas Mann (through no fault of his own) was the perfect alibi for my sophomoric arrogance, or rather, my insecurity. He appeared to me as the most profound, most excitingly intelligent writer I had ever encountered; and the miracle of his prose, even in translation, was that he made his reader, me, feel intelligent as well. The story of Hans Castorp, a likable but quite ordinary young German (the narrator keeps reminding us of his ordinariness), who becomes transformed—refined, as it were--into a thinking being during his long sojourn in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, could not but appeal to me. I too was quite ordinary, the daughter of a Jewish immigrant family who was doing her best to become American, "just like everybody else." At the same time, I yearned for the cultural sophistication that Mann promised and that I associated mainly with Europe. The fact that Hans Castorp and the woman he falls in love with at the sanatorium speak to each other in French, and that Mann did not hesitate to give us their dialogues untranslated, was proof of his high expectations from his readers. I knew French, had even learned it before I learned English, during the months my family had spent in Haiti on our way to the United States seven years earlier. I felt validated![1]

And then there were the intellectual fireworks between Settembrini and Naphta, the Enlightenment humanist and the Jesuitical dialectician, who vie for Hans Castorp's admiration and concurrence as if they were sparring over possession of his soul. Their debates were a whole educa-

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tion, and while I didn't follow all their arguments, I felt their magic. In the end, the magic comes crashing down with the outbreak of World War I, which sends Hans Castorp back to the everyday world below and to an almost certain death, along with so many other young men in that conflagration.

All in all, *The Magic Mountain* delivered on its promise. I was enthralled with Thomas Mann.

And now? By a tried-and-true narrative logic, what comes next should be a deflation: as a young, insecure reader I was enthralled, but now that I am older and presumably wiser, I see many faults in the novel: my earlier response was exaggerated. Not so. I reread it recently, in the newer translation by John E. Woods (I had read the one by H.T. Lowe-Porter, Mann's first translator), and was still enchanted with it, even as I noticed things I had not seen before. For example, the object of Hans Castorp's love is described as "Asiatic," a woman from the eastern reaches of the Russian Empire, whose "Kirghiz eyes" captivate him; but I forgave Mann that bit of ethnic stereotyping, just as I forgave myself for having failed to notice, at age eighteen, what any college student today would surely remark on: the source of the captivating Clavdia Chauchat's sway over Hans Castorp is her gender ambiguity. Her "Kirghiz eyes" are exactly the same as those of a boy Hans had been infatuated with when he was in school.

What really drew my attention this time was the often ironic tone of Mann's narrator, whose distance from his characters (not only from Hans Castorp, but from all the other residents of the sanatorium, as well as the two talkative philosophers) gives a comic cast to the tale which undercuts the reader's tendency toward identification or solemnity—this despite the fact that the book deals with some potentially very solemn subjects, such as illness and its relation to genius, the relativity of time and space, the desire for death as a *basso continuo* of life, not to mention love and war and honor. Mann's irony can be unsettling, especially because we are also aware that he takes these subjects seriously. To state the obvious, he is not a simple writer. Reading him is an adventure.

Great literature, we are told, remains timely despite the passage of time. Does *The Magic Mountain* speak to our present moment? In the very first paragraph upon opening the book anew, I come upon the remark, in Mann's Foreword, that the story he is about to tell "took place long ago." Further down the page, he elaborates:

> [T]he extraordinary pastness of our story results from its having taken place before a certain turning point, on the far side of a rift that has cut deeply through our lives and consciousness. It takes place, or, to avoid any present tense whatever, it took place back then, long ago, in the old days of the world before the Great War, with whose beginning so many things began whose beginnings, it seems, have not yet ceased.[2]

The Magic Mountain appeared in 1927, less than ten years after the end of World War I; yet the years it describes, just before the war, appeared to Mann as occurring in an entirely different time, a different world even, separated from the present by the "rift" of the war. H.T. Lowe-Porter, in her translation, wrote "deep chasm" instead of "rift," which appears weak by comparison.[3]

A reader today cannot help wondering whether the pandemic of 2020 may not have been a similarly deep chasm, marking the beginning of a new epoch, whose beginnings will go on for a long time. The great flu pandemic of 1918, to which this one has been compared, is not remembered as epoch-making, and Covid 19 may also recede into the background once "normalcy" has returned. But Mann's insight about the discontinuities in history, together with his reflections on the relativity of time and space, provoke our thinking just as they did that of his first readers, and of those who came after.

NOTES

1. In the more recent translation by John E. Woods, the pages and pages of dialogue in French are given in English, with an occasional sprinkling of French words whose meaning is immediately clarified. We are told that Hans and Clavdia are speaking French to each other, but we are not shown it. Is that a sign of democratization (you don't need to have an "elite" education to read *The Magic Mountain*), or merely of the decline of foreign language study in the English-speaking world, even among the educated?

2. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage International, 1996), xi-xii.

3. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), v.