

Death, the Cradle of Life

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Man's search for wholeness, or a "fullness of harmony," is of universal import. This theme has inspired artists in every field to create master-works. The German born author, Thomas Mann, is no exception, for in his novel *Magic Mountain*, he probes the widely-loved "quest" theme to the fullest.

Magic Mountain was to have been a brief story based upon a personal experience. Mann's wife, suffering from a lung ailment, was obliged to spend six months in a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. Toward the last of that period Mann spent three weeks with her and there experienced the tantalizing "high altitude" atmosphere of a prewar luxury *Kurhaus*.

Everything including time, he says, is thought of on a luxurious and lighthearted scale, so strangely ironic when barely under the surface are creeping disease and death. The cure always lasts several months or several years, during which time the patient readily adjusts to the deceptive sense of well-being. He soon loses his capacity for solid ideas and useful action, and he often becomes incapable of life in the "flatland" of responsible living.

To Mann, the irony was profoundly symbolic of the social-political-philosophic state of pre-World War I Europe. The symbolism became the idea for a brief story which, during the next decade, deepened and grew with the profundity of its multiple ideas until it finally appeared in 1924 as a two-volume novel. It has been translated into all the European languages and has found a wide audience in America.

The force and fascination of Mann's novel derive partly from its pertinence to our complex and troubled time, and partly from the intriguing theme of the quest. As all seekers after the Grail have been willing to pass through evil, suffering, and death to attain it, so Mann's hero, Hans Castorp, "voluntarily embraces disease and death, because his very first contact with them gives promise of extraordinary enlightenment and adventurous advancement, bound up, of course, with correspondingly great risks." In the writing of *Magic Mountain*, Mann himself seems to be seeking after the very knowledge, wisdom, and consecration which so involve his "foolish hero." The dream of both is the dream of Humanity—the idea of the human being made whole through his total search—or the "conception of a future humanity that has passed through and survived the profoundest knowledge of disease and death and stands in reverence before the mystery that is enduring man."

To the author, *Magic Mountain* was always “like a symphony, a work in counterpoint, a thematic fabric.” He takes a time motif, a symphonic form, and the dominant chord, “death, the cradle of life,” and overlays an amazing synthesis of all knowledge, all philosophy, and all human pursuit extant in 1907 to 1914 Europe. Against this chaos, he sets adrift his hero, Hans Castorp, “life’s delicate child,” who has but the “decent leanness of youth.” Wholeness is not freely given; it must be searched and suffered for; it must be earned by struggling against opposing forces. Settembrini, the humanist of the story, is one such force, and he warns Hans away from the central search. Settembrini’s warning, if heeded, would have sent Hans prematurely back to the “flat-lands” to be shaped with his age into “idiotically symmetrical crystallogometry.”

Mann’s hero, “neither genius nor dunderhead,” has saving graces, however, which qualify him for the process of evaluation and refutation. They are his flushed face—Hans blushes “to be gaping at disease and death from the breastwork of material well-being”; his acute apperceptions, which so aggravate the good doctors; and his determination to “get used to not getting used.” Because of these qualities, we are willing, fascinated even, to see Hans’ soul subjected to the Job-like play between God and Satan as well as to every enticement conceived by ingenious man.

Hans’ real story begins, as Mann’s idea for it began, at Davos, in a baked-Alaska world of symphonic inversions. The delightful egg-froth exterior deceptively hides the ice beneath, and against the icy pull, Hans, the guest, protests, declines, criticizes, laughs at, tries out, and accepts. His metabolism is now “sanctified” and his mummy shroud of downy blankets becomes a perfect preburial for Hans of the “narrow hyper-civilized breast.” The guest has become comrade.

From his comfortable “grave,” Hans is reborn to a strange almost passive search. He is fed “soup everlasting,” a sumptuous array of food and ideas. His path is middle-of-the-road, and exasperating to Settembrini, who warns him away, then dubs him a wag. But for all the gourmet offering, physical and mental, that makes up over half the book, Hans’ face still burns, his apperceptions remain acute, and he yet tries to get used to not getting used.

He is now ready for the greatest risk of all, freedom, which lies in a perilous, uncharted region. On skis, he sets off to be completely alone with his “stock-taking” activities. He now has a “lively craving to come in touch with snowy desolation.” The path is through fear, valour, and reverence.

The storm bursts. He sees the “action of blind, nonsentient forces which have no purpose to destroy him, but are merely indifferent to him.” He knows that progress under such circumstances is impossible, but he labours deeper and deeper into this callous sphere of snow. It is a fierce

struggle, but Mann's "simple" hero, with fevered face, beats against "sensory confusion." Here the author plays another chord of inversion. In a white snow burial, Hans sees, in vision, man at his blackest in the very act of tearing and feasting on new life. Hans is "sicker than he had ever been." Again the inverted chord. Out of his darkest vision comes his greatest illumination, a dream of love where "death shall have no sovereignty over man's thoughts again."

Hans is reborn to a new mastery over his will. He no longer travels middle-of-the-road. He has chosen defiance for his role. He now says what he thinks and "rounds off his period." He says, "Let me do it." He .

Behrens, the doctor, presents the patients of the Berghof with a gramophone (casket) and Hans directly takes over its operation. Its music fills him with a new enchantment, a new burden of love. After the other patients have retired, Hans plays his favorites with a familiar "fellow-feeling" that increases each time he listens to them. Each of them is an echo of his own experiences, live burial, pan-piping freedom, rejected love, family ties, and from these he now understands the triumphant idealism of music, of art, of the human spirit, and of its "power to shroud with a sense of beauty" the actual fact.

It is from the vocal recitative performed by a patient, a lad of parts and discernment, that Hans gains a true conception of the spirit. Mann is explicit.

After so many years of ascent from one stage of being to another, Hans has now reached a point where he is conscious of the meaningfulness of his love and the object of it. The song (the German lied, "Lindenbaum") meant a whole world which he must have loved, else he could not have so desperately loved that which it represented and symbolized to him.

His life had been marked by stages, adventure, and insights which made themes for his stock-taking, and these ripened him into an "intuitional critic of the sphere" with a love of its exquisite image.

Mann again sounds his dominant chord, "death, the cradle of life." Music, the symbol of love has come from a casket, and behind the beloved song is death. It is only through self-conquest that love triumphs. What is needed is an artist of such "sound-enchantment" that the song's volume can subdue the world to a "fullness of harmony." Hans has not lost his dream of love.

He awakes to see the world at "cross purposes"; he hears the "rushing pinions of eagles." The whirlwind comes, and he is ready. His third burial will be in blood and fire, the "universal feast of death and extremity of fever." All evidence indicates that when Hans goes into the war singing, he does so with near perfect inner harmony; the fever is no longer burning in his face, but in the world. He has perceived; he has endured; and he is at last used to not getting used.

Fortunately Settembrini's warning to turn from the search was not heeded. Reason is not enough, Hans found, for it is, in itself, sterile. Faith and a fearless dream must be added.

Mann's synthesizing genius took a time motif, a symphonic form, and the quest theme and created a masterwork. *Magic Mountain* is not only a novel, but a tremendous "musical" experience, and its message is vital to our day. We desperately need its dream of man rising anew from his state of disease, war, and death to a wholeness and harmony.

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