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Kafka, tuberculosis & “Magic Mountain”

by Jeffrey Meyers

On the mania shared between the Bohemian writer and the German novel.

Mann’s and Kafka’s lives and work stand at opposite poles of modern German biography and literature. Mann was a patrician North German Protestant, Kafka a middle-class Czech Jew. Mann was a high school graduate and professional writer, Kafka a doctor of law and high-ranking civil servant. Mann had a wealthy wife and six children, Kafka was a bachelor with no issue. Mann lived in America for fourteen years, Kafka wrote an imaginary account of the country. Mann, an ironic realist, was an internationally revered novelist who won the Nobel Prize and died at the age of eighty. Kafka, an expressionistic modernist, published very little in his lifetime and was not well known when he died at the age of forty.

Both novelists keenly appreciated each other’s work. Kafka, who admired Mann as the greatest contemporary German writer, praised “Tonio Kröger” in a letter of 1904 to Max Brod and in 1917 told Brod that “Mann is one of those writers whose works I hunger for.” As early as 1921 Mann had “developed a considerable interest in the writings of Franz Kafka,” and in 1925 he called the posthumously published *The Trial* “remarkable.” In his “Homage” to *The Castle* in 1940, Mann wrote, “never has the divine, the superhuman, been observed, experienced, characterized with stranger, more daring, more comic expedients, and with more inexhaustible psychological riches.”

In 1924, when Kafka died of tuberculosis and Mann published *The Magic Mountain*, the life of one and art of the other came together. In this novel, Mann portrayed the sanatorium setting where Kafka had lived during his last tragic years. At that time the treatment for tuberculosis, which had no cure, was the same in Davos, Switzerland, the Alpine setting of Mann’s novel, and in Kafka’s sanatoria in the high mountains of Czechoslovakia and Austria. Kafka could have been a character in Mann’s novel. His grim medical experiences and attitude toward his disease, doctors, and fellow patients, his excursions and emotional life, his psychology and symptoms from 1917 to 1924 are amazingly similar to Hans Castorp’s, in the novel’s time frame, from 1907 to 1914. Kafka’s experiences confirm the clinical authenticity of the novel and illuminate the character of Mann’s paradoxical hero.

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Joseph Conrad captured the mixture of luxury and morbidity, the unrealistic and horrific essence of the Alpine sanatoria, when he wrote of "Davos-Platz, where the modern Dance of Death goes on in expensive hotels." In March 1924, three months before his death, Kafka planned to enter a sanatorium in Davos, but could not obtain the necessary travel documents. Kafka, like Castorp, switched to a narrow-gauge mountain railway that slowly puffed its way up the steep incline to the Wienerwald sanatorium in Austria, his last—and futile—hope. Both men were met at the train station by an open carriage or sleigh that carried them for a short ride past the dark woods and glistening snow and into the town.

Both sanatoria were large, impersonal health resorts with an international, multilingual clientele. The remote yet cosmopolitan group of sufferers were bound together by their serious illness and threat of death. For many years Kafka had hastened his early death by refusing to be ill with the other ill and resisting conventional medical treatment. He chose, instead, tranquil valleys and country inns (precisely like those described in *Buddenbrooks* and *Doctor Faustus*) with sunny balconies and nourishing vegetarian meals, where he could control his own way of life and write in peace. Later on—hypersensitive to noise, finicky about food, and too weak to endure pain—he condemned the sanatoria with characteristic gallows humor. They were excruciating prisons, he said, designed "exclusively for the lung, houses that cough and shake with fever day and night, where you have to eat meat, where former hangmen dislocate your arm if you resist injections." Patients were forced to become living experiments: "Here the torture goes on for years, with pauses for effect so that it will not go too quickly, and—the unique element—the victim himself is compelled by his own will, out of his own wretched inner self, to protract the torture."

Similarly, Mann describes the "coughing that had no conviction and gave no relief, that did not even come out in paroxysms but was just a feeble, dreadful welling up of the juices of organic dissolution." He also portrays tormenting medical operations: the procedure that deliberately collapsed lungs to rest them and the fictional character Anton Ferge's description of the violation of his body, a kind of surgical rape: "The pleura, my friends, is not anything that should be felt of. . . . Never in my life have I imagined there could be such a sickening feeling, outside hell and its torments."

Kafka finally gave up hope and realized that the agonizing torture chambers in the high mountains would not significantly improve his condition. In *The Magic Mountain* no one is ever cured. Settembrini, completely disillusioned, is still sick. Clavdia Chauchat flees, still inwardly tainted. Joachim Ziemssen, the sons of Tous les deux, the gentleman rider, Leila Gerngross, Dr. Blumenkohl, Karen Karstedt, and many others die.

When he first arrived in the sanatorium the intensely private and reserved Kafka was hostile to his fellow-sufferers. He complained about the tiresome egoism of the patients, their tedious talk about the medical profession, the latest therapies, sick relatives, and miracle cures.

Mann also satirizes the self-obsessed inhabitants of the International Sanatorium Berghof such as Frau Stohr, who "talks about how fascinating it was to cough." The patients compete for attention by displaying their pathological symptoms, by boasting about the severity of their disease and their "utterly insufficient remnant of sound lung-tissue."

But as the corrosive bacilli devoured his own lungs and larynx (in the novel Ziemssen also dies of a tubercular larynx), Kafka eventually became more sympathetic, shared their suffering and felt the first stirring of solidarity with the sick victims. Castorp, who nourishes his own disease so he can prolong his stay in the mountains and avoid beginning his engineering career in Hamburg, eagerly wants to become a real patient. He arrives in a healthy condition, but immediately develops a cold, catarrh, and fever, and begins to cough up blood. He is fascinated by what he imagines to be the ennobling and spiritualizing aspects of disease; he associates illness with distinction and genius, sympathizes with the *moribundi* and loves the sight of a coffin. He visits the sick and dying, attends funerals, and grieves for the death of his beloved cousin Ziemssen. Kafka, reversing his original stance and focusing on his own illness, wrote his sister Ottla, "one of the gains of being with other sick people is that one takes the disease more seriously."

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Kafka soon learned to distrust the encouraging but false assurances of the doctors. The imminent recovery that the physicians repeatedly promised if he would only prolong his stay in the mountains seemed increasingly unlikely. Doctors, he felt, "both believe in conventional medicine and are helpless when you need them most." Mann's Dr. Behrens constantly prolongs the stay of his incurable patients, and explodes when Castorp suggests that he has a financial interest in the sanatorium: "I'm not the proprietor here! I'm on hire. I'm a doctor! I'm nothing but a doctor, I would give you to understand. I'm not a pimp." For both writers the unhealthy climate, diabolical atmosphere, and medical treatment are actually conducive to illness, and intensify rather than cure the disease. The doctors are godlike creatures licensed to treat their victims, but their inept and dangerous procedures merely prolong the agony.

In order to cope with and compensate for their illness, both Kafka and Castorp believe that tuberculosis has a psychological as well as a physical etiology. Kafka wrote that his disease "was actually a mental illness bursting its own banks" and that "the body cannot be healthier than the psyche." This is essentially the belief of Mann's Dr. Krokowski, who asserts in his dramatic lectures that "Symptoms of disease are nothing but a disguised manifestation of the power of love; and all disease is only love transformed."

Kafka's friends remarked on the odd serenity, even cheerfulness, with which he seemed to accept his disease. His biographer Reiner Stach observes that "he always spoke of his illness in positive images . . . read it as a sign, even assigned it moral dignity . . . [called it] 'an illness bestowed upon

me.' " From the beginning, he interpreted his tuberculosis and the upheaval of his normal life as a cathartic crisis. Alluding to the traditional horizontal cure, wherein the patients were wrapped up like mummies and like the dead did not feel the cold, and suggesting his impending doom, he stated, "it is not the kind of tuberculosis that can be laid in a lounge chair and nursed back to health, but a weapon that continues to be of supreme necessity as long as I remain alive." Kafka felt he had made a kind of Faustian pact in which he traded health for creative power, and his pathological "weapon" fired up his imagination as it devoured his body. Pain hurt him into art, and, he insisted, "it is possible for nearly everyone who can write to objectify pain while suffering it." He told his publisher that his illness, which had been lurking for years, had finally broken out and was "almost a relief." In a similar fashion Castorp, half in love with easeful death, nourishes and embraces his disease in order to further his hermetic education, achieve more penetrating insight, and deepen his human emotions.

One of Kafka's excursions proved dangerous and was strikingly like Castorp's. Out on a walk but unable to reach his destination, only two miles away, he kept slipping in the snow and when darkness descended was forced to retrace his steps on the deserted track. In his diary he called it "a senseless path, without an earthly destination." In the crucial "Snow" chapter of *The Magic Mountain*, Castorp sets out on skis. He had "a lively craving to come into close and freer touch with the mountains, with their snowy desolation; toward them he was irresistibly drawn." Lost and exhausted, he lies down in the heavy snow and is tempted to go to sleep and die there before regaining his will to live.

Mann's novel describes in satiric detail the various social strata and mores in the sanatorium. Tuberculosis attacks the young, induces euphoria, heightens the feverish glow of the eyes and skin, and enhances the aesthetic attractiveness of the victim. Stimulated by isolation, gossip, fever, and emphasis on the body; uprooted from family ties and unrestrained by ethical conventions; living with foreigners in a disturbing atmosphere and eager to enjoy the short time left in life, the patients jeopardize their health with flirtation and sex, reckless folly and loose morals. Kafka believed there was a close connection between disease and love, and his paradoxical observation about the love life in the sanatorium applies to Castorp as well as to himself: "far from family and friends, in a quiet snowy setting, relying only on each other, [the patients are] dangerously ill and hence full of lust for life." Sexual intimacy inevitably awakened new and illusory desires, and provoked a fever that "spread his unhappiness to his lungs." Specifically connecting his pathological and emotional life, he said that Felice Bauer, the first of his three fiancées (none of whom he married), was a living symbol of his infection and inflammation. One of Mann's major themes is the ineluctable connection between love and death: "*l'amour et la mort*." Castorp, consumed by tormenting passion, is perversely attracted to rather than repelled by Clavdia Chauchat's wasting disease.

Kafka perceived the disturbing ambiguity of the decaying yet desirable flesh that inspires love while it warns of death: "It is soft flesh, retentive of a good deal of water, slightly puffy, and keeps its freshness only a few days. Actually, of course, it stands up pretty well, but that is only proof of

the brevity of human life." The same theme recurs in the novel when Dr. Behrens tells Castorp that the human body is essentially composed of water, Ziemssen is painfully aware of the tubercular ulcers on Marusja's swelling bosom, and Castorp takes possession of Clavdia's X-ray which dramatically reveals the extent of her consumption.

The dying Kafka described the morbid symptoms that prevail throughout The Magic Mountain. "It is not life or death," he noted, "but life or one-fourth life, breathing or gasping for breath, slowly . . . burning down with fever." Toward the end, he is forced to acknowledge the uselessness of the painful treatments and face the inevitable result of his consumption: "all this has no other purpose but to slow down the development of the abscesses, from which he must ultimately suffocate, to draw out this wretched life, the fever and so on, as long as possible." Finally, he described the stages of his ever-constricting existence that led to the still more straitened circumstances of the grave: "before long, I will be confined to Prague, then to my room, then to my bed, then to a certain position in bed, then to nothing more."

Kafka, terminally ill, was forced to face the reality of corrosive tuberculosis and impending death. The Berghof sanatorium satisfies Castorp's Romantic infatuation with disease, encourages the morbid fascination with his own condition, and fulfills his death wish. It stimulates his interest in the psychology of suffering and acquiescence in disease, which is both spiritual and physical, exalting and degrading. Mann's aesthetic point of view is tragicomic, Kafka's personal view is necessarily tragic, but both writers thought the artist's attempt to love was doomed and he had to suffer in order to create. They believed in the Nietzschean paradox that disease could bring new awareness to the author who survived its grave assaults and that physical pain could be transformed into creative achievement. "Sickness itself can be a stimulant to life," Nietzsche declared, "only one has to be healthy enough for this stimulant. . . . We seek life raised to a higher power, life lived in danger."

Jeffrey Meyers recently authored *Robert Lowell in Love* (University of Massachusetts Press).

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