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Myth and Modernity: Orphic Traces in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the influence and reception of the mythological tropes of descent and return as seen in Thomas Mann's 1924 novel, *The Magic Mountain* and, more broadly, within the context of the early twentieth-century modernity. Making reference to Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Strauss, and Modris Eksteins, it draws connections between Castorp's desire-driven journey of descent and Germany's own inwards turn. Moreover, by analyzing the traces of the Orphic myth noticeable in the novel and examining the importance of Orpheus myth to modernist sensibilities, this paper argues that despite the promise of unity the novel appears to signal, Castorp's inability to retain his vision reveals Mann's novel as a satirical commentary not only on the individual's fragmentation but, significantly, on the cultural atomization of early twentieth century Germany.

Key words: *modernity; bildungsroman; fragmentation; katabasis; Orpheus myth*

Thomas Mann's 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain* follows the development of young Hans Castorp, who travels to the Berghof sanatorium to visit his ailing cousin, Joachim. Despite only intending to stay for three weeks, the date of his departure is continually postponed, until Castorp himself receives a medical diagnosis that extends his stay indefinitely. Thus, Castorp's three week visit turns into seven years. Castorp's journey to the Berghof also marks the beginning of his individuation process as he seeks knowledge and experience the world. To this extent, Mann's novel appears to take on the form of a *bildungsroman*. Directly translated from German as "formation-novel," the *bildungsroman* is defined by Chris Baldick as a novel primarily concerned with the main character's development and quest for identity as he transitions from childhood to maturity. And indeed, Castorp's development appears to reach its apotheosis in what I argue is the novel's most important section, the "Snow" chapter. Yet, for all the promise of growth and maturity the "Snow" chapter seems to offer, Castorp's eventual return to the flatlands leads not to wholeness and integration; rather, he returns only to join in the brutal fighting of the First World War. Thus, Mann's novel may be more productively read as a failed *bildungsroman*. Indeed, like the ancient bard Orpheus, Castorp returns from the "underworld" of the Berghof to find that he will be literally and metaphorically "torn apart" by the violent energy of the flatlands. In light of Mann's failed *bildungsroman*, Castorp's return to the realm of life acquires a more profound significance in the context of early twentieth-century Germany. While some of the earlier critical material on Mann's novel reflects a mythic phase of literary scholarship, it is interesting to revisit some of the themes of individuation, descent and return in order to read Mann's novel in a new way. This paper argues, then, that although Castorp's "Snow" dream appears to signal his achievement of unity and wholeness, his inability to retain this vision reveals Mann's novel as a

satirical commentary not only on the dissolution of his “hero,” but, importantly, on the cultural atomization of Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Certainly, too, the “Snow” chapter signals its own centrality to the novel as a whole: after skiing to the top of the neighbouring mountain, Castorp experiences a vision of balance in which life and death, civilization and primitivism coalesce. Yet for all Castorp’s desire for unity, I argue that the chapter, in fact, reveals the novel’s more central preoccupation with the individual and cultural fragmentation that results from the reification of death. Castorp’s dream at first seems to present a promise of harmony and unity which would indeed mark a radical shift in Castorp’s development into a mature individual ready to be integrated into society. However, unlike the protagonist of a traditional coming-of-age novel, Castorp remains unable to individuate: his cathartic dream escapes his memory; and years after his epiphany in the snow, he returns to the flatlands to enlist in the Great War. Moreover, the tragedy of his fate is alluded to in no uncertain terms – indeed, the narrator suggests that Castorp is more than likely to lose his life in the war. To this extent, the “Snow” chapter is, I argue, crucial to Mann’s novel. In it, Castorp’s last gasp of aesthetic unity shatters with the disappearance of his dream from memory. And from this last vision of unity onwards, Mann’s irony makes such moments impossible to retain. Thus, the novel’s closing image of Castorp’s desperate confusion on the battlefield becomes a powerful expression of Germany’s own failure to “individuate” in the early twentieth century and, indeed, of the fragmentation resulting from the reification of death leading to the Great War.

There are powerful arguments for such a view of German history. Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring* describes the progression of Weimar Germany into precisely the atomized Germany that Castorp comes to represent – if only in an individual manner – by the end of *The Magic Mountain*. More broadly, Eksteins undertakes a historical investigation of the reification of death beginning

with Weimar Germany's desire for war and manifested in the rise of German fascism in the early twentieth century. Although Eksteins ends his study with World War Two, he earlier describes the Great War as the precursor to the absurdity of this ecstatic violence. For Eksteins,

The Great War was the psychological turning point, for Germany and for modernism as a whole. The urge to destroy and the urge to create became increasingly abstract. In the end the abstractions turned to insanity and all that remained was destruction, *Götterdämmerung*. (328)

As shown below, Castorp can be seen as Mann's personification of Germany's dissolution; where Mann's ends, Eksteins' investigation begins. By the end of the Second World War, "Death was to be looked on, it seems, as a reward, as "compensation" for sacrifice. Death was the antithesis of work. Death was the supreme manifestation of life." (330). Eksteins' mythic approach to modern Germany's development unto the Second World War closely resembles Castorp's own trajectory. When Castorp returns to the flatlands, the realm of life down below has become, ironically, a realm of death. Castorp thus can be seen as representative of a society which, too, fails to "individuate." Although he wishes to integrate himself into society, he remains unable to achieve a sense of harmonious unity – neither within himself nor within the larger society he is a part of. Germany's trajectory into modernity, like Castorp's, leads it not to coherence and unity, but rather to individual and cultural atomization.

Although Castorp has to literally ascend to the heights of the Berghof sanatorium, his narrative trajectory may be read, in seeming paradox – and like his nation's – as a journey of descent. Castorp, like Eksteins' description of Weimar Germany, embarks on a "journey inwards." And this inwards turn, both in Castorp's and in Eksteins' early twentieth-century Germany, becomes a narrative of descent. Indeed, overall Eksteins' narrative depicts Germany's decline into the frenzied violence resulting from its reification of death, while Castorp's journey to the Berghof sanatorium may be read as a metaphorical descent into the 'heart' of Europe's increasing delirium.

Crucially, too, the centrality of desire as a driving force behind Castorp's motivation to stay at the sanatorium brings to mind the myth of Orpheus, where desire for unity drives the Orphic narrative of descent. As such, Mann's novel may be productively read as an elaboration of the myth of Orpheus. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, Orpheus is the legendary poet and musician from the earlier Greek phase of classical mythology. When his new bride Eurydice dies, Orpheus journeys to the underworld to convince Hades, the god of the underworld, to return her to him; and because the power of his song is so strong, he succeeds. But Hades' condition is that Orpheus must not turn back to gaze upon Eurydice until they return to the realm of the living. Orpheus complies, but near the end of his journey, he becomes impatient. Turning back to see Eurydice, he loses her forever. Some versions of the myth have it that upon Orpheus' return to the realm of the living, the Maenads – Dionysus' female followers – take revenge on him by tearing him apart. Following this dismemberment the myth describes, with this complex and violent trope, Orpheus' head continuing to sing and prophecy as it floats down the river Hebros.

Out of the Orphic story, two lines of investigation into Mann's novel open up: first, the motif of the descent into the realm of the dead; and second, if only symbolically, the notion of dismemberment within the context of Eksteins' outlook of the individual's societal atomization. Putting these discursive threads together, I argue that, like Eksteins' discourse of ecstatic national disintegration, the Orphic myth may be productively used as a lens onto Mann's *Magic Mountain* to illuminate the historical significance of the albeit ironic promise of Castorp's individuation. John E. Woods' 1995 translation of *The Magic Mountain* is particularly well-suited to this comparative study. Compared to Helen Lowe-Porter's 1928 translation, Woods' version makes the irony and humour of Mann's prose much more accessible to a modern English-speaking audience. And indeed, the translation of the novel's dialogue into speaking English rather than the

more archaic-sounding English of 1928 emphasizes more strongly the temporal distance between antiquity and the modern period. Orpheus' quest, followed by his return to the realm of the living, ends in his fragmentation. To place the novel's ending alongside the myth's, Castorp, too, faces the military threat of an Orpheus-like dismemberment. In short, Castorp's own journey to the Berghof sanatorium may be read as an Orphic descent into a metaphorical hell. Yet, like Orpheus, Castorp's return to the realm of the living does not fulfil the promise of unity he should be able to achieve. The crucial point is that he, too, appears about to be "torn apart" – psychically and physically – by the ecstatic destruction of the First World War he enters. Thus, the violence Castorp encounters upon his return to the world "down below" is revealed to be, in fact, Mann's rewriting of the ancient hell, reified in the twentieth century. Indeed, in the novel's very last lines, Castorp is left confused and on the battlefield, seemingly standing for a Germany which is unable to achieve unity. Thus he may be seen as a modern 'Orpheus,' yet, importantly, one whose song – "der Lindenbaum" becomes a song of death, rather than a song of homecoming.

To return to Eksteins' historical analysis of modern Germany's trajectory, the urge towards the splintering of the national identity may be seen in the desire that drives Castorp's 'quest' for unity. In seeming paradox, in Eksteins' view, it is this very desire for unity which leads to Germany's entry into the Great War; yet, ironically, it is precisely this nationalist spirit which leads to its own disintegration with the loss of the First World War and the rise of German fascism that follows. In both Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, this desire for unity acquires a mythical dimension; and indeed, the novel's Orphic resonances reveal this very aspect of Castorp's desire. Castorp's desire for unity becomes manifest in the novel most explicitly in his infatuation with Clavdia Chauchat, a Russian member of the Berghof society who becomes tied, in Castorp's consciousness, to Pribislav Hippe, the object of his childhood fascination. Castorp's

desire for Clavdia drives much of the novel's narrative, yet, ultimately, the harmonious relationship he dreams of becomes an impossibility, just as Orpheus's gaze backwards at Eurydice causes him to lose her forever. This central relation of desire acquires an endless aspect, never leading to any real unity; yet it is precisely this kind of desire which is essential to the novel as a whole. Through Castorp's ultimately unfulfilled desire, Mann ironizes the promise of unity not only for modern Germany, but for the modern individual in the early twentieth century. Importantly, of course, this desire for unity is what ultimately leads to the very fragmentation of modern Germany that Eksteins describes. More deeply still, Germany's desire for unity becomes something more akin to the death drive Freud describes in his famous essay "Civilization and Its Discontents:" "besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state." (35). Thus, importantly in Mann's novel, desire for unity becomes a kind of death drive.¹ And the erotic charge of Castorp's desire therefore parallels both Germany's reification of death leading up to World War Two, as well as recalling the deeply-rooted aspect of this desire for unity seen in the myth of Orpheus.

But there is another key to understanding these possible readings of Mann's novel. In arguing that Castorp's failure to individuate reveals Mann's novel as an allegory of modern Germany, the trope of Orphic descent reveals the deeply satirical aspect of Mann's novel. Walter Strauss's work on the Orpheus myth in *Descent and Return: the Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* provides a theoretical framework through which to analyse the Orphic aspects of Castorp's development. Strauss purports to evaluate the status of the Orphic myth in modernity.

¹ There exists in the German literary tradition the theme of the *Liebestod*, that is, of the 'love-death.' See, for instance, Linda and Michael Hutcheon's "Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'" for a more in-depth analysis of the *Liebestod* theme in Wagner and its connections to Freudian death drive.

By following the development of the Orpheus myth's appearances in modern literature, Strauss demonstrates that Orpheus continues to be relevant. Indeed, to Strauss, Orpheus is especially important to the early twentieth century as it speaks to the period's most acute anxieties and desires: namely, the anxiety of identity (or lack thereof), the desire for renewal and, indeed, the restorative potential of art in the modern age. He identifies the mythic Greek terms "*katabasis*" and "*sparagmos*" as major moments in the Orpheus myth, and describes Orpheus as a "reconciler of opposites," (18) embodying aspects of both the Apollonian and Dionysian. *Katabasis* is defined by Chris Baldick as a "descent into the underworld, or a literary account of such a journey to the land of the dead, constituting a temporary visit followed by an anabasis (ascent)," and Strauss's use of the term "*sparagmos*" is in translation of "dismemberment." Whilst Strauss's use of these terms is apt in his reading of the Orphic myth in modernity, for the purposes of my paper I will use them as tools rather than attempting a mythic reading of Mann's novel as an end in itself.² Indeed, to avoid recycling the terminology of an older school of thought, I will apply some of Strauss's insights to Mann's novel. However, I will elaborate on Castorp's "*katabasis*" – his stay at the Berghof – as a descent into the realm of the dead, and will refer to what could be called the moment of "*sparagmos*" or "dismemberment" in Castorp's development as his fragmentation instead, so better to draw Eksteins' historical thesis in line with Mann's equally satirical comprehension of German history.

Thus, the overlaps between Castorp's failure to individuate, the theme of Orphic dismemberment, and the trajectory of the early German nation-state as described by Eksteins' *Rites*

² It is worth mentioning that there is a certain irony present in Mann's own elaboration on mythic themes in *The Magic Mountain*. That is to say, while Mann does indeed incorporate many references to classical mythology in his novel, he does so in a way that simultaneously critiques the status of Western civilization during the early twentieth century. As such, to simply do a mythic reading of Mann's novel would be to miss the larger point of his narrative. Still, given that the mythological references are as prominent as they are, it remains worthwhile to incorporate, for example, a discussion of the novel's Orphic resonances, while acknowledging at the same time Mann's often ironic references to classical mythology.

of Spring become increasingly clear. I argue that these overlaps allow for a compelling reading of Castorp as a kind of Orphic figure in Mann's novel, and, moreover, of Castorp's individuation process as an allegory for Germany in the context of modernity. Castorp's quest for unity, manifested in his desire for Clavdia Chauchat, and culminating in the vision of unity he experiences in the "Snow" chapter proves to be driven by a desire for an impossible unity which ultimately evades him. As such, like Orpheus who is dismembered by the maenads upon his return to the realm of the living, the end-game of Castorp's development proves to be his own fragmentation. Thus, although Castorp's "Snow" dream appears to signal the achievement of a sense of unity and wholeness, close attention to the motif of fragmentation reveals Mann's novel as a satirical commentary on the cultural and individual atomization of Germany in the early twentieth century.

All told then, in order to arrive at Castorp's fragmentation as an allegory of the cultural and individual atomization of Germany leading up to the First World War, this paper is organized into five sections which both follow the order of the larger themes outlined above, and serve to connect Castorp to the Orpheus myth as well as the context of early twentieth-century Germany. In the first section, close readings of the Berghof as a metaphorical 'underworld' reveals the strong polarity the novel establishes between the 'flatlands' and the Berghof sanatorium. Castorp's journey to the Berghof thus becomes one of *katabatic* descent from the realm of life – the flatlands – to the 'underworld' of the Berghof. Moreover, the sanatorium may be read as a microcosm of the European intellectual tradition during the twentieth century. Mann's symbolic representation of Europe becomes characterized by the feverish violence Eksteins describes and, indeed, the equally willful 'disease' of *ressentiment* and nihilism Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* warns

against: “. . . *a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is and remains a *will!*” (599).

The essay’s second section expands upon the mythic resonances of the trope of descent to modern sensibilities, making reference to Strauss’s work on the specific importance of the Orphic myth to modernity. No less than Strauss, Maurice Blanchot’s retelling of the Orpheus myth in *The Gaze of Orpheus* illuminates the role of the artist in the context of the disillusionment of the modern subject. The usefulness of these outlooks is to contextualize an analysis of *The Magic Mountain* through the lens of the myth, placing it in dialogue with other well-known literary works making use of similar tropes. Indeed, this comparative work reveals that, unlike many of his contemporaries Mann’s use of the tropes are much more satirical, thus revealing the cautionary nature of his novel.

Before turning to what I argue is the novel’s most important chapter, this paper’s third section analyzes in more depth a reading of Castorp as an Orphic figure by evaluating his position as what Strauss calls the “reconciler of opposites” (18). Castorp’s position in-between manifests itself in the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of his character, which are represented by his simultaneous drives towards individuation and mystical union. This tension is felt throughout the novel, and it becomes increasingly important in relation to the conflict between Castorp’s overwhelming desire for the Eastern other and his identity as a civilized, bourgeois German in the early twentieth-century. Castorp’s liminal position appears to lead towards a resolution wherein Castorp would be able to achieve a sense of harmony in occupying the ‘in-between’ position. However, I argue that, his inability to retain the vision of harmony he experiences in the “Snow” chapter leads, in fact, to his ultimate fragmentation.

Here, we turn to the crucial fourth section of the essay, in which close readings of the “Snow” chapter reveal Castorp’s ascension to the heights of the neighbouring mountain to be the apotheosis of his spiritual development. Indeed, there prove to be many reasons to believe, as Irvin Stock does in his essay “The Magic Mountain,” that Castorp’s erotically-driven development down the “bad path” (496) brings him to a heightened state wherein he sides with humanity itself rather than either of the opposing philosophical perspectives between which he has been precariously balanced. However, I argue that his ultimate inability to retain the vision of unity and harmony he experiences marks the moment of his decline, beginning with his spiritual fragmentation. Thus, contrary to the promise of balance his “Snow” dream seems to offer, Castorp’s return to the flatlands marks the moment of his fragmentation becoming literal: like Orpheus, Castorp becomes literally torn apart.

Finally, having interpreted the resolution of Castorp’s narrative trajectory as one of fragmentation, in the concluding fifth section I return to Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring* as an entry point to understanding Castorp’s journey of self-development as a national allegory. Moreover, Castorp’s failure to hold onto the vision of unity he experiences in the “Snow” dream and, indeed, Castorp’s death upon his return to the flatlands proves to represent Mann’s view of a larger phenomenon in the early twentieth-century Europe. Arguably, the final ironic reversal of the realm of life into a realm of death – death becoming the “supreme manifestation of life” (Eksteins 330) – reveals the status of modernity and, indeed, the individual’s role in it. Not only does the mythic “hero” become satirized by Mann, but indeed the entire mythology and culture out of which he emerges is revealed to be only the shattered remains of what it once was. Thus, Mann’s novel will be seen to powerfully highlight the impossibility of the individual’s successful integration into the fragmentation that results from the violence of the First World War.

I. 'Descent' Into the European Intellectual Tradition

“Whoever has at some time built a ‘new heaven’ has found the power to do so
only in his *own hell*”

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*

The psychological aspect of Mann’s novel assigns a central role to the trope of a quasi-mythic *katabasis* in *The Magic Mountain*. Through the *katabatic* journey of descent, the protagonist’s downward trajectory is intimately linked to his development. He descends into hell in order to learn some truth about life; and with this newly-acquired knowledge he is equipped upon his return to the realm of life. At the very beginning of the novel, Castorp is described by the narrator as a “perfectly ordinary, if engaging young man” (Mann xi). Through his journey and stay at the Berghof sanatorium, Castorp begins a process of self-education which drives the plot of the novel. In order to ground a discussion of the relationship between the psychological and mythological aspects of the novel, I turn to Carl G. Jung’s mythologically driven version of personal individuation, which he defines in his essay “Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation” from *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* as a “process or course of development arising out of conflict between the two fundamental psychic facts” (Jung 288). For Jung, these two “fundamental psychic facts” are the existence of the conscious and unconscious in the psyche. Castorp’s task would then be to balance the tension between the conscious and unconscious aspects of his mind, as well as between the social and individual realms of existence. Indeed, his journey

to the ‘underworld’ of Berghof sanatorium, which is governed by disease and death, illustrates this very process of individuation. Castorp’s development is also directly linked to what Modris Eksteins calls Germany’s “journey inward” – this is to say, the trope of *katabasis* is the central connection between the narrative of Castorp’s development and the novel’s allegorical aspect. Moreover, in keeping with Jung’s mythologically driven psychological theory, the sanatorium itself may be read as a manifestation of Europe’s “collective unconscious.” As such, Castorp’s integration into the Berghof sanatorium may be seen as symbolic of the German nation’s position in the context of pre-First World War Europe; and the increasingly chaotic atmosphere of the sanatorium arguably mirrors the rising tensions of the world ‘down below.’

Not only might Castorp’s journey to the “underworld” of the Berghof be seen as a ‘descent’ into the “collective unconscious” of Europe, but it also mirrors his psychological “journey” into the depths of his psyche – Jung’s “unconscious.” Yet, Mann, a modern writer, plays with the traditional form of the bourgeois novel of self-formation and appropriates it to suit the context of modernity. As it becomes increasingly clear, Mann is not writing a *bildungsroman* – a novel of education – in the traditional sense. He does not use the form in a didactic sense – that is, for the purpose of painting the picture of the individual’s “becoming” in the modern age. Rather, Mann’s use of the *bildungsroman* form is satirical in *The Magic Mountain*. Ultimately, Castorp’s successful re-integration into civilization is an impossibility because civilization *itself* is consumed by its own chaotic violence. Thus, Castorp’s failure to successfully individuate reveals Mann’s version of the bourgeois novel of self-education as compelling and moving critique of the Western tradition’s trajectory into the tumult of the early twentieth century.

The predominance of illness and disease over the Berghof society, the physical and psychological distance from the realm of the living “down below” – that is, in bourgeois European

society – suggests that the Berghof is, indeed, a kind of “underworld,” despite its mountain location. For example, upon Castorp’s arrival at the sanatorium, he and his cousin Joachim, whom he has come to visit, discuss the altitude of the institution: “. . . We’re dreadfully high up ourselves, keep that in mind. Five thousand three hundred feet above sea level” (Mann 8). Castorp notices a difference in the atmosphere of the mountain, in comparison to the flatlands: “And in his curiosity, Hans Castorp took a deep breath, testing the alien air. It was fresh – that was all. It lacked odor, content, moisture, it went easily into the lungs and said nothing to the soul” (9). The narrator’s emphasis on the “alien” air, its “lack” of “odor, content, moisture,” and, most notably, the fact that it “said nothing to the soul” here suggests an entry into an ethereal kind of an underworld. Moreover, Joachim’s casual remark about the altitude of the sanatorium is especially revealing:

Our sanatorium lies at a higher altitude than the village, as you can see . . . A hundred fifty feet. The brochure says ‘three hundred,’ but it’s only half that. The highest of the sanatoriums is Schatzalp, across the way, you can’t see it now. They have to transport the bodies down by bobsled in the winter, because the roads are impassable. (9)

The first image associated with the sanatorium’s altitude that comes to Joachim’s mind is the image of death: the bodies descending the mountain on bobsleds in the winter. This association reveals the intimate relation between death and the mountain; indeed, it is its very height that causes this association. This seemingly *en passant* reference serves as Castorp’s and, by extension, the reader’s introduction to the Berghof sanatorium, establishing from the moment of his entry that the Berghof is a place where death and disease reign. Furthermore, the following exchange illustrates the difference in perception between Castorp, who has just arrived, and Joachim, who has become accustomed to the environment:

“The bodies? Oh, I see. You don’t say!” Hans Castorp cried. And suddenly he burst into laughter, a violent, overpowering laugh that shook his chest and twisted his face, stiffened by the cool wind, into a slightly painful grimace. “On bobsleds! And you can sit there and tell me that so calm and cool? You’ve become quite the cynic in the last few months.”

“That’s not cynical at all,” Joachim replied with a shrug. “Why do you say that? It doesn’t matter to the bodies . . . (9)

Castorp’s hysterical reaction to Joachim’s comment, in contrast to Joachim’s cool, “cynical” demeanour, highlights the difference between the flatlands’ and the Berghof’s attitudes towards death. Death, in the “underworld” of the Berghof, is unremarkable. Indeed, the unexceptional status of death in the sanatorium is arguably because the Berghof arguably constitutes a realm of death itself.

The centrality of illness to the Berghof institution also emphasizes the underworld-like aspect of the sanatorium. Disease manifests itself not just physiologically, but psychologically. Indeed, disease is at the heart of the structure of the institution, and, in order to belong, the residents must display at least some degree of illness. By the time his three weeks draw to an end, Castorp has developed a cold, and decides to postpone his return home to visit Director Behrens and Dr. Krokowski. Upon examining Castorp, Behrens declares,

I can admit to you now that I haven’t liked your looks from the start, not since the first time I had the undeserved honor of making your acquaintance – and was pretty sure of my guess that you were secretly one of the locals, and would finally come to appreciate the fact yourself . . . (177)

Thus, through his diagnostic, Castorp gains admittance into the Berghof as one of its residents, as opposed to being simply a visitor – he, too, comes to belong to this land of the dead. Behrens tells Castorp: “First and foremost: there’s the air up here. It’s good for fighting off illness, wouldn’t you say? And you’d be right. But it is also good *for* illness, you see . . .” (179). As such, the effect of the Berghof’s environment on Castorp’s health suggests that it is the atmosphere of the sanatorium itself that brings about Castorp’s illness. Moreover, and as the essay will soon need to explore, the sanatorium may be seen as a microcosm of the European intellectual tradition during the early twentieth century: it, too, becomes characterized by illness, representing moral decline.

Perhaps the most influential German philosopher of the twentieth-century, Friedrich Nietzsche anticipates and cautions against precisely this moral decline which *The Magic Mountain* illustrates through the Berghof's feverish and debased atmosphere. In his famous three essays from *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche warns against the dangers of the 'disease' of herd-mentality. Moreover, he recognizes the threat of nihilism to Europe which he describes, too, in terms of a spiritual *malaise*. This *malaise*, Nietzsche claims, can lead to the spiritual decline of European society. And arguably, Mann's *Magic Mountain*³ portrays this very threat as it becomes real in the early twentieth century through fictional narrative, just as Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* captures the real events of twentieth-century history. The residents of the Berghof sanatorium come from a variety of nationalities: German, Russian, French, and English. Indeed, the sanatorium's residents seem to represent a cosmopolitan Europe; and their removal from the world 'down below' makes the world of the sanatorium far more important for them than the political circumstances of the flatlands. However, the frivolity with which they live, the increasing fever that characterizes the Berghof and, indeed, the centrality of illness to the Berghof society suggests that the collection of the various Europeans who constitute the sanatorium's population may be seen as a microcosm for the Europe 'down below.' That is to say, the outwardly manifested disease of the sanatorium may be interpreted to represent the *malaise* which seizes the intellectual tradition of Europe itself as political tensions rise, leading to the Great War.

Beginning with his diagnosis, Castorp gradually integrates into the Berghof society. And importantly, as a resident, Castorp becomes affected by the culture of disease which characterizes

³ It is interesting to note that, while Mann holds Nietzsche in high esteem and makes many reference to his philosophy in many of his works, his later essay titled "Nietzsche's Philosophy in The Light of Recent History" presents Nietzsche in a far less positive view. In light of the destruction resulting from the wars of the twentieth century, Mann goes as far as to say of Nietzsche: "What we see before us is a Hamlet figure, the tragedy of insight exceeding strength, and our feelings should be those of awe and pity." (*In Light of Recent History* 166).

the sanatorium and, indeed, Europe itself. Castorp's gradual integration into the sanatorium's community acquires even greater significance by the end of the novel when, as Stock notes, the Berghof degenerates into an atmosphere of both nihilism and feverish hostility. By the end of the novel, having lost Clavdia – the object of his desire which had initially motivated his stay – Castorp becomes increasingly removed from life itself. And indeed, as Stock remarks,

it appears as all the Berghof's patients suffer from the same increasing malaise, wasting energy and feeling first in crazy fads and then in the crazy mutual hostility (including crazy anti-Semitism). The Berghof becomes a more and more obvious picture of Europe, a Europe fatally detached from reality and on the eve of the 'thunderbolt' which will, at a fearful price, bring it back. (517)

II. Orpheus in Modernity

“How can a beginning be made from the impossible?”

– Maurice Blanchot, “Rilke and Death's Demand,” *The Space of Literature*

The trope of descent and return is one that appears throughout history in literatures separated by vast distances. Besides the Orphic myth, another especially well-known mythical version is Odysseus' descent into Hades in the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey*. Likewise, “Inferno,” the first section of Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century epic poem *The Divine Comedy* famously features a *katabatic* descent into hell. Indeed, that the trope lends itself to such a wide range of literary works from different continents, and spanning over thousands of years, indicates

a certain universality about the symbolism of the literary motif of descent. Closer to the present day, the fact that several of the most celebrated modernist writers have incorporated the trope of descent and return in their narratives demonstrates the trope's particular relevance to modernist sensibilities. For instance, although Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* is concerned with the fallouts of Europe's colonial project, "the horror" which Marlow discovers at the heart of Europe's imperial project arguably lends itself to a comparison with the larger themes of moral decay and death in Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Notably, there are significant similarities between Marlow's "horror" and the dissolution of Castorp's dream of unity in the "Snow" chapter. Indeed, the last image the reader has of Castorp entering the battlefield is strikingly reminiscent of Marlow's description of his "wrestl[ing] with death" (87):

It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary (Conrad 87).

Thus Marlow and Castorp appear to be connected by their "journeys inwards:" Castorp into the "heart" of pre-First World War German society, and Marlow, into the "heart" of the British imperial project. And in both cases, their narratives of descent prove to be intimately tied to the modern anxieties of decline, discontinuity, and the (im)possibility of wholeness and regeneration.

While tropes of descent and return seem to have been almost universally used throughout world literature, the trope of Orphic descent seems to have been of specific interest to the modernist period specifically. Besides Mann, other modern European writers and artists were engaging with this myth whilst re-appropriating it for twentieth-century art and narrative. As already touched upon above, in *Descent and Return: the Orphic Theme in Modern Literature*, Strauss notes and writes about the development of Orpheus over the last hundred and fifty years. To this extent, he

evaluates the treatment of Orphic tropes from Novalis to Gérard de Nerval, Stéphane Mallarmé, and, finally, Rainer Maria Rilke. Strauss writes:

My aim is not to inquire what Orpheus was in antiquity, or what he is at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but what he *becomes* in the modern age; the aim is to examine the metamorphosis of Orpheus, seen in the context of lyrical reflection and reflective lyricism – the poet-as-thinker. Orpheus is not only poetry; he has become, in modern times, the agony of poetry – a sort of ambassador without portfolio of poetry . . . His metamorphosis is the change in poetic climate itself, placed against an ever-darkening sky in which poetry recedes more and more toward secret and unexplored spaces, spaces that are obscure and must be illuminated by constellations of the mind ever threatened by disaster and extinction. (Strauss 17)

One further example will serve to link the Orpheus myth to the modernist temper. Rilke, whose poetic engagement with the Orpheus myth in his works is perhaps the most widely known, undergoes something of a transition in his understanding and use of the myth. In his essay “Rilke and Death’s Demand” from *the Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot describes Rilke’s transformation in such a way that, to Blanchot, Rilke becomes an Orpheus figure himself. For Blanchot, Rilke’s ‘Orphic’ transition occurs when, having faced a kind of spiritual death upon writing *the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke is nevertheless able to eventually “return” to life and to writing again. Thus, in this case, Rilke’s example highlights the importance of the myth’s element of renewal to the modernist temperament.

More aesthetically, Blanchot’s *Gaze of Orpheus* provides a modern mythic interpretation of the Orpheus myth in relation to the creative process of art. In Blanchot’s interpretation, Orpheus – the artistic creator – must journey to the underworld to retrieve his muse Eurydice. However, when his gaze backwards at Eurydice binds her to the realm of death forever, thus “killing” her, Orpheus must return to the realm of the living alone. Blanchot’s interpretation is particularly interesting because, to him, the moment of Orpheus’ backwards gaze marks the moment of the shift in his purpose. As the power of his song is unable to conquer death and bring Eurydice back

to life, Orpheus must return to the realm of the living as a mortal, having come face to face with his mortality, and must find “inspiration for life” out of his “desire for death.” Blanchot’s interpretation thus re-appropriates the tropes of the Orphic quest in the context of modernity. Orpheus, in Blanchot’s interpretation, serves as a model for modernity – more specifically, for the modern artist, who must find a way not to *retrieve* what modernity has lost but, in fact, to create out of the tumult of modernity something *new*.

For Blanchot, too, Eurydice represents “the furthest that art can reach. Under a name that hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend” (Blanchot 170). The purpose of the Orphic descent, for Blanchot, is “a coming face to face with Nothingness” (Strauss 10); yet, having faced this Nothingness, the modern artist’s purpose changes. His real task thus becomes to continue creating art not despite but *because* of his loss. And indeed, Blanchot’s Orpheus does succeed in this task. To this extent, Blanchot’s interpretation of the Orphic myth highlights the regenerative power of art in modernity. Yet while Mann may be seen as engaging with the same tropes as some of his modern contemporaries, his use is arguably much less optimistic. Unlike Rilke or Blanchot, for example, Mann appears to be less confident about the status of the modern individual or, indeed, of the regenerative power of art in the modern age. In contrast to Blanchot’s Orpheus, Castorp’s return to the realm of life is not accompanied by an ability or even a will to restore art or life. Castorp’s sudden return to the realm of life is, in fact, only to join in the destruction of the First World War. Therefore, the significance of *The Magic Mountain*’s Orphic resonances prove to be radically different from Rilke or Blanchot’s interpretations. Through Castorp’s ultimate demise in the war, Mann’s novel arguably satirizes the possibility of regeneration, thus serving as a powerful warning to his society about the effects of the war’s reification of death on human life.

III. Castorp: Reconciler of Opposites

“Death kicks over its traces in the midst of life, and this would not be life if it did not, and in the middle is where *homo Dei*'s state is found – in the middle between kicking over the traces and reason – just as his condition is somewhere between mystical community and windy individualism.”

– Thomas Mann, “Snow,” *The Magic Mountain*

Having established the Berghof as a metaphorical “underworld,” and having emphasized the particular relevance of the Orpheus myth to modernity, I now return to Strauss in order to ground an analysis of Castorp as an Orphic figure in *The Magic Mountain*. Besides the trope of descent, the centrality of desire as a driving force behind Castorp’s motivation to remain at the sanatorium suggests that, in this rather obvious way, Castorp’s descent into the “underworld” of the Berghof may be read as, specifically, an Orphic descent. Strauss’s analysis of Orpheus focuses on the transformative aspect of Orpheus, his metamorphosis. For Strauss, Orpheus is a kind of mediator, whose position is in a way liminal, occupying a space in between. More specifically, Strauss observes, “A problem which remains fundamental to an analysis of the myth is the position occupied by Orpheus with respect to Apollo and Dionysus” (Strauss 6). Expanding on this point, Strauss writes:

On another level, since Orpheus is at the beginning as much a religious phenomenon as an artistic one, the fusion may be expressed thus: the Apollonian way designates essentially a separation from the gods, making possible the “principle of individuation” and of human autonomy, primarily through enlightened Reason; the Dionysiac way designates, essentially, nonseparation, indeed, union with the gods, through the darker and irrational powers of the body and soul, in close conjunction with the “chthonic” elements of the earth. Orpheus serves as a mediator between the two orientations – without, however, losing his identification with the followers of Dionysus.” (7)

Arguably, the tension Strauss describes between the Apollonian and Dionysian in Orpheus may be seen in Castorp as well. Indeed, as has been noted by Martin Swales, “Castorp is poised between clashing opposites” (Swales 55). He is both part of bourgeois twentieth-century Germany, while also seeking a kind of mystical union with the Eastern other, represented, in the novel, by both Pribislav Hippe and Clavdia Chauchat. Thus, an analysis of Castorp’s liminal position between opposing drives serves to both highlight the significance of the promise of harmony and unity the “Snow” chapter will be seen to present in the next section, while also demonstrating what is truly at stake in his inability to hold onto the vision of unity he sees in his dream.

Considering the extent of Nietzsche’s influence on twentieth-century writers like Mann, and, indeed, his seemingly direct references to Nietzsche in *the Magic Mountain*, an analysis of Castorp’s position in between the Apollonian and the Dionysian would be incomplete without making reference to the ways in which Mann’s novel engages with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In *the Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche observes the artistic and intellectual separation between the Apollonian and Dionysian, and he finds classical Athenian tragedy to be the highest form of art. For Nietzsche, Athenian tragedy’s superiority is attributed to its successful fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian elements which allows the Attic theatrical experience to present a rounder view of the human experience. Yet, Nietzsche’s early vision of Athenian tragedy’s seamless weaving together of the Apollonian and Dionysian transforms in his later works into an increasing respect for the Dionysian. Castorp’s liminal position with reference to these two orientations, too, culminates in what may be seen as his own destruction at the hands of the agents of his Dionysian release.

The Apollonian aspect of Castorp’s character is seen in his educational endeavours noted in the chapter titled “Research.” Castorp sets out to learn about human anatomy, biology,

chemistry. He is, indeed, as Settembrini describes him, “life’s problem child,” yet he becomes the student of the humanist, the novel’s major proponent of enlightenment reason. And when he meets Naphta, Settembrini’s philosophical and, indeed, rather Nietzschean opponent, Castorp learns from him, too. While the results of his process of self-development – whether or not he does, in fact, individuate – remains ambiguous at best, the important point is that his desire for education suggests is conducive to individuation, even if he arguably may not reach it by the end of the novel.

Overtly, Settembrini’s influence plays an important role in Castorp’s development. He is the novel’s greatest advocate of humanism, of enlightenment reason and progress; and early on, he takes a didactic interest in Castorp. He becomes concerned with Castorp’s education and tries to steer him in the direction of enlightenment reason – one might say, he directs his education towards the Apollonian. Despite his immediate impression of Settembrini upon meeting him being “What a windbag” (Mann 60), Castorp allows Settembrini to assume a didactic role. Yet, Mann complicates this character who proves to be, indeed, a bit of a “windbag,” and not just a model only of all that is good, of rationalism, of humanism. Settembrini, too, has a rather dubious side: for example, when he sees a young girl passing, he “switched with a smile to a philanderer’s tune. “Tut, tut, tut,” he clicked his tongue. “Ah, ah, ah! La, la, la! Sweet young thing, won’t you be mine? Ah, behold ‘her flashing eye in the slippery light,’ he quoted – God only knew from what – and turned to blow a kiss at the embarrassed girl’s back” (60). Thus, it seems that, through Settembrini, Mann brings into relief the hypocrisies the ‘enlightened’ representative of Western civilization. It appears as though Mann does not have faith, as Settembrini does, in the tradition of Western enlightenment reason. Mann does not present integration into the values of civilized Western enlightenment as the end-goal of Castorp’s development, nor does he present it as the best or the only direction Castorp nor, indeed, Europe, should be heading towards. Yet, for all

Settembrini's occasional hypocrisies, he remains a likeable character and he is not always portrayed in an ironic light. For example, when Settembrini engages in the duel with Naphta, he is the one to shoot in the air, while Naphta shoots himself. In this case, Settembrini is arguably un-ironically presented as an individual with integrity, who does embody the values of a rational, enlightened, Western civilization. And, indeed, throughout the novel, Castorp cannot help but listen to Settembrini's lectures and is, still, impressed by his tutelage. Thus, it is clear that Settembrini's character is not just a caricature of the Western humanist; rather, Mann arguably also makes a point of highlighting his real qualities – and by extension, the qualities of Western humanism and enlightenment. Thus Castorp's prevailing friendship with Settembrini and his desire to learn from him point to the "Apollonian" inclination of his character.

Besides this Apollonian aspect, Castorp also demonstrates, like Orpheus, an impulse towards the Dionysian way towards "nonseparation, indeed union with the gods, through the darker and irrational powers of the body and soul, in close conjunction with the "chthonic" elements of the earth" (Strauss 7). Indeed, Castorp's position in between enlightenment reason and progress, the "principle of individuation" and autonomy, on the one hand, and desire for release via more darkly irrational impulses on the other, suggests that, like Strauss's Orpheus, Castorp, too, is a "reconciler of opposites: he is the fusion of the radiant solar enlightenment of Apollo and the somber subterranean knowledge of Dionysus" (18). An understanding of Castorp as "reconciler of opposites" is important as it emphasizes the inherent tension of his position in-between. Castorp's self-development process is characterized by his desire to mediate polarities. Yet, arguably, his ultimate dismemberment at the end of the novel is a direct consequence of his inability to successfully become integrate himself in an in-between position.

Castorp's desire for Dionysian release may be noticed in several aspects of the novel. The first is his fascination with the Eastern other, epitomized by his infatuation with Clavdia Chauchat. Her appeal to Castorp is her representation of otherness which threatens to lead to the "spiritual death" of Germany. Indeed, Settembrini warns Castorp against the detrimental influence of the East on the civilized West:

Do not ape the words you hear floating in the air around you, young man, but speak a language appropriate to your civilized European life. A great deal of Asia hangs in the air here. It is not for nothing that the place teems with Mongolian Muscovites . . . Do not model yourself on them, do not let them infect you with their ideas, but instead compare your own nature, your *higher* nature to theirs, and as a son of the West, of the divine West, hold sacred those things that by both nature and heritage are sacred to you. (Mann 239)

Yet, for all Settembrini's warnings, the forbidden nature of "Asia," of the Eastern other, makes it all the more alluring for Castorp. Clavdia's slanted eyes, exotic allure, and Russian descent, all suggest that she represents the "eastern other" who is depicted as closer to nature, and perhaps even less civilized (as indicated for example by Hans immediately noting Clavdia's constant slamming of doors upon entering a room).

While Martin Swales' essay "Humanität and Politics" is directed at an undergraduate readership, it still aptly contextualizes Castorp's position "in between" the tradition of Western civilization and the allure of the East. Swales writes:

In a whole number of ways, then, Castorp is poised between clashing opposites, and in this he acquires a certain symbolical stature as a young German, caught between West and East, between an ethos of orderliness, discipline, and practical effort on the one hand and a surrender to imaginative possibilities that obliterate all allegiance to outward reality on the other. (Swales 55)

Clavdia represents this very "surrender to imaginative possibilities." Of course, Clavdia herself reminds Castorp of Hippe, the boy who was the object of his passion when he was a child:

It was Pribislav, it was him all over. I would never have thought that I'd see him so clearly again. And he looked so strangely like her – that woman up here. Is that why I've been so intrigued by her? Or maybe that's why I was suddenly so interested in *him* (Mann 121).

Thus, it becomes clear that Castorp's desire for Hippe is the same as his desire for Clavdia, and Castorp's enchantment with "pedagogically forbidden territory" (306) arguably is what manifests itself in this desire. Furthermore, it may be argued that the attraction of the Berghof sanatorium, for Castorp, consists of this same desire. And this desire arguably represents what Strauss claims the Dionysian way designates: "essentially, nonseparation, indeed, union with the gods, through the darker and irrational powers of the body and soul, in close conjunction with the "chthonic" elements of the earth" (Strauss 7). Thus, what draws Castorp to the heart of the "underworld" of the Berghof – Castorp's "Eurydice," proves to be his own desire for release via darker, more irrational impulses. His desire for Clavdia arguably mirrors his search for a "dark but "pure" center" (Strauss 10), and is most clearly illustrated in the "Snow" chapter. Indeed, Stock notes this same connection between Castorp's desire for Clavdia and the crucial "Snow" chapter:

Just as he earlier became aware – and we with him – that he had come to the mountain in order to find again the 'toi' of his nature (its Kirghiz eyes a sign of its otherness and a promise of sexual joy free of the constraints of civilization), we are now led to see that he came too out of the impulse to seek the truth of his own – of human – nature in an encounter with that Other, nature itself in its naked destructive power. (Stock 512)

The desire that resurfaces upon Castorp's arrival at the Berghof sanatorium moves from an "aristocratic" ideal of love which generally drives the plot of the traditional *bildungsroman*. Indeed, it becomes possible to interpret this desire as desire for Dionysian excess, irrationality - a form of mystical union with the foreign, distant other which leads to the death of the individual personality. Nietzsche describes this very drive in *The Birth of Tragedy*, claiming that: ". . . by the mystical triumphant cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost heart of things" (99). In Mann's version of the *bildungsroman*, the driving force is not that of *eros* – of unifying and integrating love. Rather, in this microcosm of Europe characterized by irrationality and disease, *Thanatos* is the driving force

of the Berghof, and the increasing sense of neurosis may be seen as the result of Europe's hidden intellectual frisson.

Like Orpheus, Castorp's position as "reconciler of opposites" – mediating between the Apollonian and Dionysian - is arguably what leads to the central moment of his "dismemberment" in the "Snow" chapter. In this chapter, Castorp's exaggerated interest in matters relating to mortality, and his desire for that which Clavdia and Hippe represent – this "dark but "pure" center" – all culminate in a dream which brings him to an understanding of life which is not separate but intimately related to death. However, what leads to his eventual literal and metaphorical 'dismemberment' is not this understanding he gains, but rather, his 'dismemberment' is the result of his inability to hold onto the wisdom he acquires in his Snow dream.

IV. The “Snow” Chapter: Castorp’s Fragmentation

*Nun bin ich manche Stunde
Entfernt von jenem Ort,
Und immer hör' ich's rauschen:
Du fändest Ruhe dort!*
– Wilhelm Müller, “Der Lindenbaum”⁴

Thus far, this paper’s discussion of Castorp’s trajectory of descent, the driving force of desire, and his Orphic position has led to this most important section, in which Castorp’s desire for unity culminates in his ultimate figurative dismemberment. The “Snow” chapter foreshadows the moment of Castorp’s real – psychological and physical – fragmentation upon his entry into the violence of the First World War and, importantly, it illuminates Castorp’s call to home – the flatlands, his German cultural identity – as a call to death. Thus, for Castorp, “home” becomes, death itself, and this final reversal of the realms of life and death arguably reveals the novel’s satirical critique of Germany’s trajectory up until the First World War.

The “Snow” chapter begins with the narrator’s description of the winter season at the Berghof. This particular season is marked by an increase in snow compared to other years. Arguably, the extreme weather Castorp experiences suggests that he is now faced with what might be called the “heart” of the metaphorical underworld of the Berghof. The repetition of the image of snowy landscapes in this chapter is especially revealing. Castorp appears to be enchanted by the snowy weather: “But if there was something roguish and fantastic about the immediate vicinity through which you laboriously made your way, the towering statues of snow-clad Alps, gazing down from the distance, awakened in you feelings of the sublime and holy” (Mann 462). This

⁴ Quoted and translated by Charles E. Passage as: “Now I am many an hour / Distant from that place, / And I keep hearing the rustling: / Thou *wouldst find* peace there!” (Passage 250).

quote illustrates Castorp's feelings of awe at nature's imposing greatness. Nevertheless, there is something threatening about this snowy landscape. It, no less, carries an atmosphere of eerie stillness and unnatural silence; there is something death-like about it:

And yet there could be no purer sleep than here in this icy cold, a dreamless sleep untouched by any conscious sense of organic life's burdens; breathing this empty, vaporless air was no more difficult for the body than non-breathing for the dead (463).

The emphasis on the snow being "untouched by any conscious sense..." is particularly interesting if Castorp's venture into the snowy landscape is considered as a metaphor for his simultaneous journey inwards, into his own subconscious. Perceived images in this environment are unstable and changing. The environment around him is unstable, even suggesting a kind of transience: "Freed of clouds, a huge, primitive segment of mountain, lacking top and bottom, would suddenly appear. But if you took your eye off it for a minute, it had vanished again" (463). In the same way, the contents of unconscious thought are not accessible and unstable at best. Yet Castorp's interest in observing this environment and, indeed, immersing himself in it is suggestive of his own process of self-development and journey inwards.

Similarly, more than standing for his psychological journey inwards, Castorp's fascination with the snow is perhaps also a manifestation of the same desire which his passion for Clavdia and Hippe represents. Castorp's fixation on these two Eastern, other characters, and his enthrallment for the snow arguably appear to all be manifestations of Castorp's desire for release via darker, more irrational impulses – a kind of Dionysian absolution of the individual self into primal unity. Indeed, the "peculiar, delicate greenish-blue light, icy clear and yet dusky" (469) reminds Castorp of "the light and color of a certain pair of eyes, slanting eyes that spoke of destiny . . . of eyes seen long ago and ineluctably rediscovered, of Hippe's and Clavdia Chauchat's eyes" (469). The snow whose beauty first captivates Castorp turns into "a chaos of white darkness, a beast" (463); and

“yet Hans Castorp loved life in the snow. He found it similar in many ways to life at the shore: a primal monotony was common to both landscapes” (463). The appeal of this environment for Castorp, like that of the sea, is its primal, chaotic, unbridled nature. And Castorp, in his self-development process as a civilized bourgeois young German, wishes to enter into this uncharted territory, just as how his in his intellectual development, he has been acquainting himself with new ideas. Here, Castorp’s habit of “playing king” - which started out as a contemplative activity taking place on his balcony, looking out at the valley below him – takes on a new dimension, one in which Castorp “plays king” while also “enjoy(ing) a freer, more active, more intense experience of the snowy mountain wilderness, for which he felt a great affinity” (464). This more active approach takes place when Castorp learns to ski; arguably, it is the means through which Castorp arrives at the apotheosis of his self-development process.

Given that Castorp’s ending is not one of wholeness but rather of violent destruction upon his return to the flatlands, Castorp’s learning to ski acquires an even greater significance in the novel. It is through skiing – representing a kind of mastery over the primal chaos of the natural world – that Castorp ascends to the heights of the mountain. To this extent, Castorp’s venture bears a striking resemblance to Blanchot’s version of the myth of Orphic descent. In Blanchot’s interpretation, Orpheus is not only driven to Hades out of love for Eurydice. For Blanchot, Orpheus’ descent represents his desire to retrieve and possess that which is absolutely unknown and unreachable. Eurydice is “the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend” (Blanchot 170). Castorp, as a kind of Orpheus-figure, also “descends” into the primal chaos, the “deathly silence” (Mann 466) of the heights of the mountain – the apotheosis of this metaphorical “underworld” of the sanatorium. And like Orpheus, Castorp develops a desire,

a “taste for extending the thrilling contact with deadly nature until it threatened with its full embrace” (467).

Castorp’s snow dream is, I argue, the central moment of the novel which leads to his eventual figurative (and literal) dismemberment by the end of the narrative. Having acquired the skill of skiing, enamoured by the “primal silence to which Hans Castorp listened as he stood there, leaning on one pole, his head tilted to the side, his mouth open” (467), Castorp ventures off farther and farther into the heights of the mountain. Despite it being rather late in the day, and despite being ill-equipped for the occasion, Castorp defies his better sense and continues his ascent. As a result, Castorp finds himself in the middle of a snowstorm. Battling fatigue, it becomes impossible for Castorp to descend the mountain safely. He becomes delirious; he sleeps. In like manner, Castorp’s battle against fatigue is replayed at the very end of the novel, when the threat of the snowstorm is embodied in the physical and psychological dangers of the First World War.

The dream he has at this point arguably constitutes the end-goal of his intellectual and physical venturing into unknown territory. Yet, despite representing, in a way, the height of his psychological and intellectual development, Castorp’s dream does not prevent his ultimate demise. Indeed, it arguably actually contributes to his eventual dismemberment at the end of the novel. Irvin Stock argues that Castorp’s return to the flatlands to enlist into the war demonstrates his final allegiance with humanity itself, and that this final allegiance marks the culmination of his development process. However, in contrast to Stock, I argue that Mann’s satirical reversal of the realms of life and death offers a much more powerful critique of the war’s reification of death. If Castorp’s allegiance changes in favour of humanity, then the tragedy of his fate suggests that allegiance to humanity becomes allegiance to death in the context of the First World War’s battlefields.

Like the Orphic tendencies within the novel as a whole, the dream itself is very rich in allusions and symbolic imagery. In it, Castorp finds himself sitting on the steps of an ancient Greek temple, looking down at a picture of civilized, happy, beautiful youth. Yet, when directed by one of the youths he sees, he shifts his gaze to the ruins of the temple behind him and, passing through a row of columns, he sees two statues in a maternal embrace: an older matron and a younger woman. Passing further still, Castorp sees the horrific scene of two old women dismembering and devouring a small child, cursing him in his hometown dialect. According to Alexander Nehamas, Castorp's dream is directly inspired by the final image of Nietzsche's *the Birth of Tragedy* (Nehamas 73).⁵ However, what is of most interest to the present discussion is Castorp's immediate reaction to the dream upon waking.

Though he awakes, Castorp remains in a dream-like state as he ponders his vision:

“I thought so – it was only a dream,” he babbled to himself. “A very enchanting, very dreadful dream. At some level, I knew all along that I was making it up myself – the park, the trees, the sweet moist air, and all the rest, lovely or hideous – knew it ahead of time almost. But how can a person know something like that, make it up, to exhilarate and terrify himself?” (Mann 485)

That he would have “almost” known it ahead of time suggests something of an intent behind his seemingly irrational defiance in continuing to ascend the mountain against reason. Indeed, Castorp seems to be motivated by a desire to “exhilarate and terrify himself” by pushing forward into unknown territory. The challenging nature of the mountain's environment – the storm, the cold – exhausts him physically, and arguably this pushing past the limits of physical endurance reflects

⁵ It is worthwhile to note that Nehamas claims that Nietzsche's influence in Mann's novel “has mostly been found only within . . . specific contexts in the novel and not in its general or structural features” (Nehamas 73). This fact suggests that, while Mann does indeed engage with aspects of Nietzsche's thought, he remains critical of his philosophy. Indeed, Mann's eventual overt critique of the development of Nietzschean philosophy in his later essay which has already been remarked upon makes this fact even more interesting with regards to his treatment of Nietzschean thought in *the Magic Mountain*.

his desire to reach unknown intellectual territory, which, like the height of the mountain, also “exhilarate(s) and terrif(ies)” him.

Castorp’s initial reaction to the dream appears, for a moment, to be an experience of cosmic unity: “We don’t form our dreams out of just our own souls. We dream anonymously and communally, though each in his own way. The great soul, out of which we are just a little piece, dreams through us so to speak . . .” (485). Indeed, unity seems to characterize the essence of what Castorp initially learns from the Snow dream. One significant way in which this unity is expressed is Castorp’s new understanding of life and death. Rather than viewing the two as separate opposites, the snow dream enables Castorp to understand them as intimately connected – indeed, inseparable – from each other:

But he who knows the body, who knows life, also knows death. Except that’s not the whole thing – but merely a beginning, pedagogically speaking. You have to hold it up to the other half, to its opposite. Because our interest in death and illness is nothing but a way of expressing an interest in life – just look at how the humanistic faculty of medicine always addresses life and its illness so courteously in Latin. (486)

Castorp’s exaggerated interest in matters related to mortality in the novel does suggest that indeed, prior to his dream, he had previously understood life and death as separate. And his ever-extended stay at the Berghof, coupled with, for example, the interest he takes in moribund patients earlier on during his stay, suggests that his desire to remain at the sanatorium was motivated by his interest in death which, from an early age, had been a part of Castorp’s character. Importantly, of course, Castorp’s interest in death acquires even greater significance when considered alongside Eksteins’ vision of the reification of death, leading to the violence of the twentieth century’s World Wars and, indeed, to the cultural atomization of Weimar Germany. Yet, through his dream, Castorp comes to see “nothing but a way of expressing an interest in life” in this “interest in death and

illness.” Thus, in this half-awake state he is in after his dream on the mountain, Castorp seems to experience a moment of clarity which gives him a more nuanced perspective.

Besides achieving a more holistic view of the polarity between life and death, Castorp becomes able to understand his own position – and in his own position, that of humanity – as one of liminality:

Death kicks over its traces in the midst of life, and this would not be life if it did not, and in the middle is where the *homo Dei*'s state is found – in the middle between kicking over the traces and reason, just as his condition is somewhere between mystical community and windy individualism (486-487).

‘Life’s problem child’ thus seems to resolve the inner conflict he has been facing up until this point in the novel: he finds that the attempt to belong to one realm or its antithesis is in vain; and his real position – indeed, the real position of mankind – is in between, in constant contradiction. At this point, it seems, Castorp reaches a level of maturity in that, rather than being ‘taught’ by either Naphta or Settembrini, he forms his own understanding, and reaches his own conclusion which differs from both. Moreover, he is able to approach the question of man’s “condition” being one of “mystical community” or “windy individualism” (487) with more nuance, as well. Up until this point, Castorp has been torn between the life of the bourgeois, twentieth-century German; the Western, civilized, rational individual, and a desire for the exotic, irrational, Eastern other with whom he can achieve a kind of mystical community. However, mounting tension through the novel between these polarities – reason and irrationality; “mystical community” and individualism; life and death – seems to reach an apotheosis in the Snow dream not least because the episode seems to step away, if only for a moment, from the Walpurgis carnivalesque, and the death-inflected chaos noted by scholars like Eksteins. For a moment, his dream offers the promise of finally able to synthesize the oppositions into a kind of balance and harmony, recognizing his own position as somewhere in the middle. However, this epiphany proves to be short-lived.

The final important ‘lesson’ Castorp appears to learn after his dream is the necessity of balance – more specifically, that for all the coexistence of death and life, a harmony between the two must be struck. This balance, Castorp discovers, cannot be achieved if death is accorded excessive interest:

There, I have rhymed it all together, I have dreamed a poem of humankind. I will remember it. I will be good. I will grant death no dominion over my thoughts. For in that is found goodness and brotherly love. Death is a great power. You take off your hat and tiptoe past his presence. (487)

Death must be acknowledged for the “great power” that it is, but it must not overshadow life; and only through love, not reason, can this state of harmony be reached:

. . . death is freedom and kicking over the traces, chaos and lust. Lust, my dream says, not love. Death and love – there is no rhyming them, that is a preposterous rhyme . . . Love stands opposed to death – it alone, not reason, is stronger than death. Only love, and not reason, yields kind thoughts. . . . *For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts.* And with that I shall awaken. (487)

In this moment of insight, Castorp connects death to the lack of love yet exaggerated presence of lust among its residents, as well as to the chaotic freedom with which they carry themselves, no less than the satiric aspect of the text that Mann keeps just in abeyance. Still, as a result of this epiphany, Castorp appears to consciously decide to turn against death, marking a turning point in his narrative trajectory. In this moment, it seems Castorp chooses life, and love, over death, and understands what is at stake in the conflict between the two.

Indeed, scholars such as A. S. Byatt have argued, similar to Irvin Stock, that Castorp’s vision in the snow dream signals his moment of true development. In her introduction to Everyman’s Library’s edition of Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, A. S. Byatt claims that Castorp’s dream teaches him that:

They are interdependent, health and horror. Castorp is the object, like Everyman, of a tug-of-war between the two philosophers, the life-loving, reasonable Settembrini and the

destructive, voluptuous and malicious Naphta. In the snow he sees that neither is right. What matters is his heart-beat, and love. (Byatt xii)

She further reads the chapter titled “Research” as a confirmation that Castorp’s desire to learn results in his ability to achieve a sense of harmony:

. . . Hans Castorp, inside the mountain, looks at the primal tissues of life and death—and the way in which the organic comes out of the inorganic, death and decay are interwoven with life, procreation and energy. . . Castorp is educated (xii).

There is something compelling about Byatt’s argument, no less considering the fact that the reader probably *wants* to find a sense of achievement in Castorp’s development. However, although Byatt writes about the significance of the Snow dream, she fails to mention the very important fact that Castorp *fails* to hold onto the vision of unity he sees. Castorp *fails* to remember his epiphany; he forgets that, as Byatt puts it, “in the snow he sees that neither is right. What matters is his heart-beat, and love” (Byatt xii).

Martin Swales, too, claims that Castorp’s vision in the Snow chapter indicates not his fragmentation, but rather how

From this vision Castorp concludes that all warring opposites, all the antagonistic values which have been so much part of his ‘Berghof’ experience hitherto, do not prove the fragmentariness and dislocation of man: rather, all these opposites are the function of – and hence are encompassed by – what is ultimately a coherent human wholeness. (Swales 57)

Yet although Swales claims that, in a way, the fragmentation of Castorp’s experience is a defining characteristic of what it means to be human, and in this way, it represents “ultimately a coherent human wholeness” (Swales 57), arguably this interpretation takes the tragedy of Castorp’s death too lightly whilst supporting the highly satirical last lines of Mann’s actual ending. This is to say, although it seems plausible that Castorp’s fragmentation may be interpreted as representative of the human experience, it hardly lends itself to an interpretation of human wholeness. Rather, I

argue that Castorp's own fragmentation stands for the decline of a society which, like Castorp, finds the realm of life to be transformed into a realm of death.

V. Conclusion: Castorp's Return

“Farewell Hans – whether you live or stay where you are! Your chances are not good. The wicked dance in which you are caught up will last many a little sinful year yet, and we would not wager much that you will come out whole . . . And out of this worldwide festival of death, this ugly rutting fever that inflames the rainy evening sky all round – will love someday rise out of this, too?”

– Thomas Mann, “The Thunderbolt,” *The Magic Mountain*

“The German experience lies at the heart of the modern experience.”

– Modris Eksteins, “Berlin,” *Rites of Spring*

For all the clarity of his momentary insight, Castorp proves to be unable to hold onto his vision. Upon waking, Castorp returns to the sanatorium, and by the evening, “His dream was already beginning to fade. And by bedtime he was no longer exactly sure what his thoughts had been” (489). Importantly, what had appeared to be a turning point in Castorp's development is revealed to have been only a glimpse into the promise of growth and maturity he could have achieved via the snow episode. The fact that Castorp forgets the dream and the sequence of thoughts he has following it thus suggests the impossibility of his individuation, of his becoming whole. Thus Castorp's inability to retain the vision of harmony he experiences on the mountain arguably signals the separation of the individual from civilization, and the breaking of good “tradition” as Europe tilts towards the apotheosis of war. He returns to the flatlands; Castorp becomes that singing decapitated Orphic head, an image of the ravaging effects of the war on German society.

I argue that the moment in which Castorp forgets his resolve to choose life and love over death signals his symbolic dismemberment, and the trope of dismemberment becomes a key to understanding Castorp in the novel's ambiguous ending. This moment immediately following the snow dream may be understood as the beginning of his own fragmentation. However, the ending of the novel concretizes his previously symbolic fragmentation: upon his return to the flatlands, Castorp is literally 'torn apart' by the First World War. In the reader's last image of Castorp, he emerges out of a mass of young soldiers: "Youngsters with their backpacks and bayoneted rifles, with their filthy coats and boots . . . One might imagine such a lad spurring a horse on or swimming in a bay . . . And instead, there they all lie, noses in the fiery filth" (705). Out of this image of chaotic violence, death and decay, the narrator recognizes Castorp:

He is soaked through, his face is flushed, like all the others. He runs with feet weighed down by mud, his bayoneted rifle clutched in his hand and hanging at his side . . . What's this? He's singing? The way a man sings to himself in moments of dazed, thoughtless excitement, without even knowing . . . (705)

This last glimpse of Castorp in the midst of the horrors of the war lends itself to an understanding of Castorp's ending as fragmentation. The violence is emphasized through countless images of the war: "They hurl themselves down before projectiles howling toward them . . . they have not been hit. Then they are hit, they fall, flailing their arms, shot in the head, the heart, the gut. They lie with their faces in the mire and do not stir." (704). The emphasis on the parts of the soldiers' bodies in this image, in particular, highlights their destruction. The entirety of their bodies are targeted and torn apart by the instruments of war, leaving them broken in the mire. It is within this context, , within the surely bathetic scene Mann constructs, that the reader last sees Castorp. Indeed, the narration suggests that he, too, will more than likely become one of these broken bodies before very long:

Farewell Hans – whether you live or stay where you are! Your chances are not good. The wicked dance in which you were caught up will last many a sinful year yet, and we would not wager much that you will come out whole. To be honest, we are not really bothered about leaving the question open. Adventures in the flesh and spirit, which enhanced and heightened your ordinariness, allowed you to survive in the spirit what you will probably not survive in the flesh . . . (706)

The emphasis on the distinction between surviving in the spirit and surviving in the flesh arguably solidifies the notion that, in the novel's last scene, Castorp's fragmentation is carried out to its extreme. Unable to hold onto the understanding of man's position in the middle, and unable to remember his choice of life and love over death, the Snow dream leads to a kind of spiritual dismemberment. Thus, his seemingly irrational and impulsive return to the chaos of the flatlands is revealed to be, in fact, the logical conclusion of his narrative trajectory: Orpheus-like, but also, now in national terms as Germany itself is undergoing in its warring, his spiritual dismemberment becomes concretized, literally tearing Castorp apart.

The Orpheus myth can further illuminate the implications of Castorp's fragmentation as the end goal of Mann's satirical bildungsroman. After his return to the realm of the living, Orpheus is torn apart by the Maenads; yet, his head continues to float down the Hebrus River, singing and prophesying (Strauss 6). In light of the Orpheus myth, Castorp's return informs can lead to an understanding of the Magic Mountain as a national allegory. Castorp's return may be seen as his decision to return from the chaos of the "underworld" to the realm of order and civilization. And like Orpheus, who is torn apart by the Maenads, the agents of Dionysian release, the violence of Castorp's demise may be seen as the vengeance of a society which, through the war, seeks ecstatic unity with death.

Castorp's attraction to matters relating to mortality – indeed, the poetics of Mann's treatment of Castorp's aestheticization of death – may be seen as an image of German discourse during the interwar period. As such, like Eksteins' *Rites of Spring*, Mann's novel seems to suggest

that early twentieth-century Germany's quest for authenticity leads not to the creation of new life; rather, its aestheticization of death leads to a spiritual death, and is represented by Castorp's return to the flatlands only to find that it has, in fact, become a realm of death itself. And indeed, it is important that the reader's last glance at Castorp he is seen stumbling into the chaotic violence of the war with the tune of Schubert's "*Lindenbaum*" on his lips. In "Hans Castorp's Musical Incantation," Charles E. Passage analyzes the theme of music in Mann's novel and claims that "At any rate, Hans Castorp takes his yearning for home as the yearning for the ultimate home in death" (250). This final metamorphosis of the realm of life – "home" – into a realm of death suggests that, indeed, the 'song' of Orpheus in modernity becomes a song of the call to home; yet "home," for modern Germany, becomes death itself. Thus, the promise of unity and wholeness Castorp sees at the top of the mountain in the "Snow" chapter proves to be a vision which is the last gasp of aesthetic unity before his ultimate fragmentation. Indeed, his striding across no man's land recalls the vision of light in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land:"

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
 They called me the hyacinth girl."
 —Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
*Öd' und leer das Meer.*⁶

⁶ The German verses framing the "Hyacinth girl" section of Eliot's poem are from Wagner's *Tristan Und Isolde* and, as has been already touched upon with reference to Linda and Michael Hutcheon's "Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde,'" the *Liebestod* is an important feature of the work. Indeed, Castorp's own imminent death may thus be seen as a kind of "love-death" between the individual and the nation in the context of early twentieth-century Germany as it strides towards the apotheosis of the war.

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