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politische Philosophie  
Thomas Mann's  
Political Philosophy*

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Parwana Emamzadah Roth /  
Michael G. Festl

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Claudia Franziska Brühwiler

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**Redaktion | Rédaction | Redazione | Editorial Office**

- Dr. Parwana Emamzadah Roth, Université de Genève, Faculté des Lettres, Département de Philosophie, 5 rue de Candolle, CH-1211 Genève, [parwana.emamzadah@unige.ch](mailto:parwana.emamzadah@unige.ch)
- Prof. Dr. Michael G. Festl, Universität St. Gallen, Fachbereich Philosophie, Unterer Graben 21, CH-9000 St. Gallen, [michael.festl@unisg.ch](mailto:michael.festl@unisg.ch)

**Gastherausgeberin | Éditeur invité | Editore ospite | Guest editor**

Claudia Franziska Brühwiler

**Rezensionen | Comptes rendus | Recensioni | Book Reviews**

- Paolo Natali, Université de Genève, [paolo.natali@unige.ch](mailto:paolo.natali@unige.ch)
- Jelscha Schmid, Universität Heidelberg, [jelscha.schmid@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:jelscha.schmid@uni-heidelberg.de); Manuel Fasko, Universität Basel, [manuel.fasko@unibas.ch](mailto:manuel.fasko@unibas.ch)

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# Exploring Clinical Metaphors in the Literary Works of Thomas Mann

Daniela Giannetti

The current research on Thomas Mann as a medical writer often fails to fully integrate his exceptional clinical knowledge into literary analysis, potentially offering a deeper understanding of Mann's texts. This essay explores the theme of illness in the author's early and later works, aiming to demonstrate how Mann's changing relationship with illness is crucial in understanding the different stages of the author's artistic and political development.

## Introduction

In an essay written in 1925, Virginia Woolf complained that literature, mainly focusing on 'love, battle and jealousy', had ignored illness as a privileged access to artistic creativity.<sup>1</sup> Actually, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, authors such as Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka had already created a prominent place for it in their writings. In particular, Thomas Mann mastered the portrayal of illness in literary fiction, demonstrating surprisingly accurate clinical knowledge. His descriptions of symptoms even foreshadowed later medical discoveries.<sup>2</sup> Often psychosomatically ill himself, Mann referred to medicine as a 'subdivision of the humanities' and considered it a neighboring sphere of his art<sup>3</sup>. His direct experience also affected the way certain diseases are described. For example, the account of the 1911-cholera epidemic in Venice was undoubtedly influenced by his visit to the Brioni island, where the German microbiologist Robert Koch had set up a laboratory for the then-just emerging scientific study of hygiene. The portrayal of tuberculosis patients in *The Magic Mountain* is reminiscent of a four-week visit (from May 15 to June 13, 1912) to his wife Katia, who was treated in a Swiss sanatorium for six months. In Mann's work, illness is more than just a medical condition. It can be seen as a spiritual force that elevates the artist above the healthy mediocrity of the common man while also leading to a descent into the inner world of chaos. Furthermore, in Mann's complex narratives, illness is not merely an individual matter but is profoundly intertwined with the social environment, serving as a symbol for a fractured societal and political body in search of a new moral synthesis. Despite several con-

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1 Later published as a book. Virginia Woolf: *On Being Ill* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930).

2 Thomas Sprecher: Comments on Thomas Mann and medicine, in: *Praxis* 90 (2002) 1235–1239.

3 Quoted in Michael B. Cohen: Pathology and the Humanities, in: *Human Pathology* 39 (2008) 1–2.

tributions focusing on Mann as a medical writer, much of the existing research in this area does not integrate Mann's 'almost preternatural' clinical knowledge into literary analysis in a way that could enhance our comprehension of Mann's texts. One of the central themes in Mann's novels is the relationship between the artist and illness and how this connects to the upheavals of his time. In this essay, I will attempt to show how this evolving relationship reflects different stages of Mann's artistic and political development.

## 1. *Buddenbrooks* (1901)

Mann's interest in human illness, or what he termed 'connoisseurship [...] of disease', spans from early short stories to his last novella, *The Black Swann* (1953)<sup>4</sup>. In his debut major novel, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), the motif of disease is widespread<sup>5</sup>. At the start of the book – which documents no fewer than ten deaths on its pages – we encounter the patriarch Johann Buddenbrook, the son of the family firm's founder. His son, also called Johann III (Jean), raises four children: Thomas, Christian, Toni (Antoinette), and Klara. "Each new generation is less respectable, less morally sound, and less healthy – physically and emotionally – than the preceding one."<sup>6</sup> As the novel progresses to the third and fourth generations, disease becomes a symbol of family downfall and societal decay. Christian, unable to settle into work, suffers from migraines, essential tremors, and what appears to be a progressive spastic hemiparesis. Christian's artistic aspirations are unfulfilled, lacking the necessary determination and discipline. He ultimately ends up institutionalized in an asylum. Thomas, who takes over the family business, is consumed by his duties and responsibilities. Like Christian, Thomas deals with internal conflicts, but he focuses more on the mental aspect than the physical. The Senator realizes that there is not much difference between himself and his despised brother. When Christian accuses him of not caring enough about his health, he responds: "I may be perhaps worse off than you are. [...] – I have become what I am, [...] because I did not want to become what you are. If I have inwardly shrunk from you, it has been because I needed to guard myself – your being, and your existence are a danger to me."<sup>7</sup> Thomas Buddenbrook struggles with his inner turmoil, trying to suppress his feelings until Schopenhauer's philosophy brings him a revelation:

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4 The main character of the story is a 50-year-old woman who mistakes ovarian cancer for a return of her menstrual cycle, symbolizing the fertility of youth as well as the possibility of falling in love again.

5 Written when Mann was just 26 years old, the novel earned the author the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929.

6 Howard Fisher: What Made Hanno Buddenbrook Sick?, in: *New England Journal of Medicine* 350 (2004) 419–420, 419.

7 Thomas Mann: *Buddenbrooks* (London: Vintage, 1952) 656–657.

And behold, it was as though the darkness were rent from before his eyes, as if the whole wall of the night parted wide and disclosed an immeasurable, boundless of light. 'I shall live' said Thomas Buddenbrook almost aloud [...] What was Death? The answer came, not in poor, large sounding words: he felt it in him, he possessed it. Death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamed of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably painful wondering, the correction of a grave mistake, the loosening of chain, the opening of doors.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas discovers in the Schopenhauer chapter “the preaching of that annihilation of self, to which his whole being tends.”<sup>9</sup> His demise does not take long to come. In one of the most striking scenes of the novel, he dies shortly after a teeth extraction. Mann demonstrates an unexpected depth of clinical knowledge when describing toothache as a symptom of unstable angina and impending myocardial infarction. It is no coincidence that nowadays “misleading mandible pain as odontogenic instead of cardiac origin may be termed as *Buddenbrook syndrome*.”<sup>10</sup> The toothache that causes Thomas’s death is also a symbol of the misplaced hope that his only child, Hanno, will continue the family business. Sadly, Hanno also experiences dental problems, with inflamed gums and abscesses requiring multiple extractions. His wounds take weeks to heal due to recurrent infections, a condition nowadays diagnosed as hyper-IgE syndrome, “characterized by recurrent staphylococcal skin abscesses, pneumonia with pneumatocele formation, and extreme elevations of serum IgE. Skeletal features include joint hyperextensibility and multiple fractures.”<sup>11</sup> Hanno is portrayed as a delicate and frail boy. His dental troubles have a ripple effect on his overall health, leading to various symptoms such as “attacks of gastric fever, accompanied by fitful heart action [...] spell of giddiness [...] and the *pavor nocturnus*.”<sup>12</sup> He shows no interest in the family business and responds negatively when asked if he enjoys attending school. Like his exotic mother, he has a deep affinity for music and a natural talent for playing the piano. However, his passion for music exacerbates his fragility, ultimately leading to his untimely demise from typhoid fever. The symptomatic precision with which the progression of the infection is described is striking: “Cases of typhoid fever take the following course [...]”<sup>13</sup> All stages and

<sup>8</sup> T. Mann: *Buddenbrooks*, op. cit., 741–742.

<sup>9</sup> Paolo Isotta: *Il ventriloquo di Dio*. Thomas Mann: *la musica nell’opera letteraria*, in: *Belfagor* 39 (1984) 114–118, 16 (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Ulrike Maria Müller, Madlen Uhlemann, Sabrina Wolff, Marcus Sandri, Gerhard C. Schuler: “*Buddenbrook syndrome*” – Toothache and its serious consequences, in: *Case Reports in Internal Medicine* 2 (2015) 1–4, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Bodo Grimbacher, M.D., Steven M. Holland, M.D., John I. Gallin, M.D., Frank Greenberg, M. D., Suvimol C. Hill, M.D., Harry L. Malech, M.D., Judith A. Miller, R.N., Anne C. O’Connell, and Jennifer M. Puck: *Hyper-IgE Syndrome with Recurrent Infections – An Autosomal Dominant Multisystem Disorder*, in: *New England Journal of Medicine* 340 (1999) 692–702, 692.

<sup>12</sup> T. Mann: *Buddenbrooks*, op. cit., 588.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

manifestations are meticulously considered, from initial weariness to the appearance of fever, and from the loss of consciousness to delirium episodes. Mann then reveals the deeper meaning of the disease, which all of Dr. Langhals's empirical remedies will fail to cure. Hanno dies because he does not respond to the 'call of life':

When the fever is at its height, life calls to the patient: calls out of him as he wanders in his distant dream, and summons him in no uncertain voice. The harsh, imperious call reaches the spirit on that remote path that leads into the shadows, the coolness, and peace. He hears the call of life [...] But if he shudders when he hears life's voice, if the memory of that vanished scene and the sound of that lusty summons make him shake his head, make him put out his hand to ward off as he flies forward in the way of escape that has opened to him – then it is clear that the patient will die.<sup>14</sup>

Hanno's death marks the end of the family line. It epitomizes the contrast between the healthy normality of the bourgeois mental attitude and the affliction associated with the pursuit of artistic creativity.

As one of the greatest novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Buddenbrooks* has been read from various perspectives, ranging from its portrayal of the crisis of the bourgeois protestant ethos, which Max Weber believed contributed to the rise of capitalism, to its depiction of fears associated with the German nationalization process in an age of empire.<sup>15</sup> Reed acknowledges that "the family's genetic history is intertwined with and influenced by social history,"<sup>16</sup> although social or political issues were not the primary focus of the author at the time, at least not in the same way they were in his later works. When exploring the motif of disease in the novel, one is struck by the precise observation of a clinical reality transforming into a metaphor for inner conflicts and societal transition. Moreover, *Buddenbrooks* provides an initial glimpse into the profound connection between illness and the burden of time in Mann's work. Illness can unleash its full transformative power only in a specific historical context, which is typically the situation of an era approaching its end.

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14 T. Mann: *Buddenbrooks*, op. cit., 849.

15 For more information about these interpretations, see Harvey Goldman: *Thomas Mann and Max Weber. Calling and the Shaping of the Self* (University of California Press, 1988) and T. Kontie: *Exotic Heimat: Province, Nation, and Empire in Thomas Mann's 'Buddenbrooks'*, in: *German Studies Review* 29 (2006) 495–514.

16 T.J. Reed: *Mann and History*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2002) 1–22, 2.

## 2. From *Death in Venice* (1912) to *The Magic Mountain* (1924)

If *Buddenbrooks* records Mann's precise observation of a repertoire of pathologies culminating in the description of typhoid, in *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain* disease is presented as an epidemic phenomenon. Focusing on the influenza pandemic at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Outka highlights how viruses' unsettling effects 'on the physical body and the body politic' shaped the literature of the period by defining the contours of modernism, as characterized by purposeful disruption, transgression, and loss of control.<sup>17</sup> Although there is no explicit mention of viruses in Mann's work since the cholera and tuberculosis he describes in his masterpieces have a bacterial origin, both viral and bacterial infectious pathologies share the common element of contagion. This notion has a clear metaphorical meaning, extending from the individual to the socio-political context. However, as noted by Sontag, cholera and tuberculosis (TB) are surrounded by a completely different mythology.<sup>18</sup> Cholera is similar to past infections like the plague, in which each person is seen as a member of a suffering community. By contrast, the Romantic tradition understood TB as a disease that isolates individuals from the community, striking its victims one by one. This difference helps to understand the divergent fate of von Aschenbach and Castorp.

The entire structure of *Death in Venice* is imbued with Mann's realistic portrayal of the cholera epidemic. Aschenbach dies of the 'most Asiatic' form of cholera, also known as *cholera apoplectica*: "For several years now, Indian cholera had been showing a greater and greater tendency to spread and wander. Originating in the hot morasses of the Ganges Delta, the disease had risen with the mephitic breath of that lush and useless primordial jungle<sup>19</sup>." The epidemic had spread eastward to China and westward to Russia. It had reached Europe not by land but by sea, transported by merchants' ships, appearing simultaneously in several Mediterranean ports. "Venice had discovered the dreadful vibrios in the blackened, emaciated corpses of a dockworker and a female grocer. These cases were covered up."<sup>20</sup> But the food supply had been contaminated, and the premature summer heat had increased the pathogenic virulence of the morbus.

Recovery was rare; eighty per cent of the stricken died and in the most horrible way, for the onslaught was extremely savage, with the illness often appearing in its most malignant form, known as the 'dry' type. The diseased body could not even expel the masses of water secreted by the blood vessels. Within just hours, the patient shriveled up, hoarsely lamenting and convulsively choking on his pitch like blood.

17 Elisabeth Outka: *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

18 Susan Sontag: *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1978).

19 Thomas Mann: *Death in Venice* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 354

20 *Ibid.*, 354

The victim was fortunate however if, as sometimes occurred, a slight malaise was followed by a deep coma, from which he seldom if ever awoke<sup>21</sup>.

According to Rutten, Mann's account of the cholera outbreak offers exceptional insight from a medico-historical perspective, accurately diagnosing the city and its authorities and describing the epidemic and responses in detail.<sup>22</sup> This makes it one of the most reliable contemporary sources on the 1911 cholera epidemic in Venice. As a matter of fact, there is no record of the cholera epidemic in the municipal bulletins of that year.

Cholera is used as a metaphor for homosexual passion, portrayed as a corruptive and degrading force. Aschenbach attempts to 'preserve his dignity' by trying to keep his erotic impulses pure and Platonic. However, impure elements increasingly contaminate them, leading to dark Dionysian chaos. Similarly to *The Magic Mountain*, Eros is portrayed as a disease that also affects the beloved. Although Tadzio embodies the ideal of perfect beauty, his teeth, like Hanno's, are unhealthy. The intense attraction to Tadzio is heightened by his presumed anemia, much like Castorp's fascination with Clavdia is amplified by the woman's emaciated pallor. As Sontag remarked, in *Death in Venice* passion ultimately leads to the downfall of all that defines Gustav von Aschenbach – his intellect, restraints, and meticulousness. By the end of the story, he is merely another victim of cholera, succumbing to the disease that has afflicted many in Venice at that time. Conversely, in *The Magic Mountain*, when Hans Castorp is diagnosed with tuberculosis, it is seen as a positive development. His illness will set him apart and elevate him to a new level.<sup>23</sup>

Aschenbach's innermost disease merges with the social sickness of the city: "[He] kept stubbornly focusing on and investigating the shady events inside Venice, the adventure of the surrounding world, the adventure that darkly merged with his, nourishing his passion with vague, lawless hopes."<sup>24</sup> Venice is a 'place of artifice, deceit and corruption' where authorities stick to their 'obstinate policy of concealment and denial' with the connivance of the Hotel Des Bains personnel and city's shopkeepers. Aschenbach welcomes the disease for it reveals a disorder in the social structure: "For the established order and well being of normal life run counter not only to crime but also to passion which welcomes, and vaguely hopes to benefit from, any loosening of the bourgeois fabric, any confusion and affliction in the world."<sup>25</sup> When *Death in Venice* was written in

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21 Ibid., 355.

22 Thomas Rütten: Cholera in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, in: *Gesnerus* 66 (2009) 256–287.

23 S. Sontag: *Illness as Metaphor*, op. cit.

24 T. Mann: *Death in Venice*, op. cit, 347.

25 Ibid., 343.

1911, the Western world was on the brink of World War I, and the story portrays the Venetian city as a symbol of impending disintegration.

Initially intended as a ‘humorous companion-piece’ to *Death in Venice*, *The Magic Mountain* shares its theme of fascination with death and the triumph of chaos over a life devoted to order. The central medical theme of Mann’s masterpiece is tuberculosis. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, tuberculosis was a leading cause of death in Europe and the United States, killing millions of people. It was known as the ‘white plague’ and was identified as an infectious disease in 1882 by Koch when he isolated the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The same year, the Italian surgeon Carlo Forlanini described the artificial pneumothorax procedure for treating pulmonary tuberculosis. After TB was determined to be contagious, infected people were encouraged to enter sanatoria, where patients were exposed to high altitude, fresh air, and good nutrition. Even under the best conditions, half of those who entered died within five years. Before the discovery of streptomycin in 1944, the only treatment for TB was surgical intervention, including the pneumothorax technique.<sup>26</sup>

Mann chooses the morbid atmosphere of the Berghof as an ideal setting to develop both the self-educational journey of an ‘ordinary common man’ and a diagnosis of a sick pre-war European society. The vivid portrayal of tuberculosis displays meticulous research, describing with realistic accuracy the pathogenesis of the disease and its symptoms. The diagnostic techniques and treatment options are discussed, with Mann delving beyond the biomedical aspects to embrace symbolic meanings. For instance, the thermometer revealing a slight alteration of Hans Castorp’s temperature measures emotional and psychological other than physical states, offering Mann the possibility of investigating the subjective nature of time, which is one of the novel’s key themes. “Time crept by- seven minutes seemed endless.”<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, X-rays are described as a medical tool that makes visible the invisible interiority of living beings.<sup>28</sup> Like many other patients, Hans and his beloved Clavdia exchange their pulmonary X-rays as a souvenir of each other. In the course of the novel Castorp learns how to accept the inevitability of death when he looks at his own hand through a fluoroscope.

He [the physician] was kind enough as to allow his patient to view his own hand through the fluoroscope. And Hans Castorp saw exactly what he should have expected to see, but which no man was ever intended to see, and which he himself had never presumed he would have been able to see: he saw his own grave. Under that

<sup>26</sup> See Peter Warren: *The Evolution of the Sanatorium: The First Half-Century, 1854–1904*, in: *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 23 (2006) 457–476 and Andreas H Diacon, Florian von Groote-Bidlingmaier, Peter R Donald: *From magic mountain to table mountain*, in: *Swiss Medical Weekly* 142 (2012) 1–9.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Mann: *The Magic Mountain* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996), 200.

<sup>28</sup> In 1895, the German engineer Wilhelm Röntgen figured out how to produce and detect electromagnetic energy in a particular wavelength range that came to be known as X-rays.

light, he saw the process of corruption anticipated, saw the flesh in which he moved decomposed, expunged, dissolved into airy nothingness- and inside was the delicately turned skeleton of his right hand and around the last joint of the ring finger, dangling black and loose, the signet ring his grandfather had bequeathed him: a hard thing, this ore with which man adorns a body predestinated to melt away beneath it, so that it can be free again and move on to yet other flesh that may bear it for a while. With the eyes of his Tienappel forebear – penetrating, clairvoyant eyes – he beheld a familiar part of his body, and for the first time in his life he understood that he would die.<sup>29</sup>

The ailing cousin Joachim Ziemßen explains the pneumothorax treatment to Castorp shortly after his arrival. Mann also portrays in detail the surgical procedure that deliberately collapsed lungs to rest them. The fictional character Anton Ferge has an unfortunate tendency to develop profound hypotensive episodes, presumably syncopal in nature, whenever the needle penetrates his pleural membrane. He describes the violation of his body as a kind of surgical rape. A macabre irony surrounds the story of another patient, Frau Zimmerman – named ‘Lady Overblown’ – who had been given her original pneumothorax by Dr. Behrens. Her condition improved, but a trip to Zurich led to a fatal mistake by an inexperienced physician.

Since there was no effective cure for tuberculosis until the discovery of streptomycin, patients were inevitably subjected to a variety of incompetent or hazardous procedures, prolonging the agony but not halting the disease.<sup>30</sup> It is apparent that Dr. Behrens and Dr. Krokowski, who rule the sanatorium as ‘judges of the dead’, have no control over the fate of their patients. Dr. Behrens can only determine the length of time a person has left to live: three more months, six more months. His cheerful demeanor is deceptive. He believes all is required of him is discovering hidden ailments through X-rays and providing for their removal through surgery when possible. Krokowski – a kind of proto-psychoanalyst – is Behrens’ assistant. Whereas Behrens views disease as something entirely organic, Krokowski regards it as something inorganic, considering all disease as the result of repressed love. Krokowski is primarily concerned with analyzing the mental life of his patients rather than being interested in their recovery. In *The Magic Mountain* no one is ever cured. Settembrini, completely disillusioned, is still sick when he moves to a village outside the Berghof. He understands there is no correlation between a patient’s health and the length of time they spend there, whether it be months or years. Clavdia Chauchat escapes from the sanatorium, still inwardly consumed. Joachim Ziemssen, the sons of *Tous les deux*, the Austrian horseman, Fritz Rotbein, Leila Gerngross, Dr. Blumenkohl, Karen Karstedt, and many others die.

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29 T. Mann: *Magic Mountain*, op. cit., 260.

30 Jeffrey Meyers: *Thomas Mann Artist Heroes* (Northwestern University Press, 2014), 85.

Mann's novel is not just a remarkable display of clinical authenticity but also a 'self-conscious commentary on the myth of TB'.<sup>31</sup> At the turn of the century, "tuberculosis was an 'interesting,' refined, edifying disease. Many of the period's best artists died of it, usually at a young age. Consumption appeared to be a necessary consequence of the creative process, the price of fame; one was literally 'consumed' by the ardor of creative expression."<sup>32</sup> Actually, the patients confined at the Berghof do not always 'suffer' for their disease. TB induces euphoria, reinforces the appetite and sexual desires. Mann describes in satirical detail the abundant meals, including a double breakfast, that punctuate residents' days. In the frivolous atmosphere of the sanatorium patients engage in flirtation and sex. Joachim even goes so far as to say that "death and illness, strictly speaking, are not serious things; they are rather like idle loitering; seriousness, if we want to be precise, there is only in the flatlands"<sup>33</sup>. Sexual disinhibition is expected in the Berghof: as explained by Dr. Krokowski, it is a manifestation of disease. The characters of the two pedagogical teachers Settembrini and Naphta also share the myth of TB as their intellectual abilities and creative energies are inextricably connected to their illness, although their self-reflection on disease is diametrically opposed: Settembrini, who wants to eradicate all human suffering, believes that the idea that disease refines one's spirituality is nonsense; Naphta argues that it has a spiritual aspect that leads to knowledge.

It would be too simplistic to consider *The Magic Mountain* as the literary apex of the 19<sup>th</sup> century celebration of the myth of TB, in the tradition of the Romanticism of which Mann was an heir. Reminiscent of Nietzsche, Mann believes that "unpleasant and disgusting though they may be, death and disease lead to a special understanding of life and that knowledge is always bound up with the 'other world' of night and death."<sup>34</sup> Disease experience is the core of the hero's journey to knowledge, of his quest to understand the meaning of life and death. Following Castorp's hours of nocturnal study, Mann exposes a vast amount of scientific knowledge pertaining to early 20<sup>th</sup> century physics, biology, human embryology, and anatomy.<sup>35</sup> The central question, which recurs explicitly three times

31 S. Sontag: *Illness as Metaphor*, op. cit., 35.

32 Peter Humphreys: *The Magic Mountain – A Time Capsule of Tuberculosis Treatment in the Early Twentieth Century*, in: *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 6 (1989) 147–163, 156.

33 T. Mann: *Magic Mountain* op. cit., 63.

34 W. Gesler, Hans Castorp's journey-to-knowledge of disease and health in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in: *Health & Place* 6 (2000), 125–134. Talking about Nietzsche, Mann wrote: "he seems to instruct us that there is no deeper knowledge without experience of disease, and that all height-ened healthiness must be achieved by the route of illness." See *Thomas Mann: Freud and the Future in Death in Venice, Tonio Kroger, and Other Writings* (London: A & C Black, 1999) 282.

35 Some works that already formed the subtext of the *Humaniora* conversation, such as the booklet *Warum wir sterben* (Why we die, Stuttgart 1914) by Alexander Lipschütz and the volume *Handbuch der Physiologie* (Handbook of Physiology, Leipzig 1879–1881) by Ludimar Hermann, are used again. The most important is certainly the *Allgemeine Biologie* (General Biology, Jena 1906) by Oscar Hertwig, a popular biology textbook at the time, which Mann read in the summer of 1920.

in the chapter *Research*, is in fact “*What was life?*.” It resonates with Thomas Buddenbrook’s query: “*What was Death?*” The first part of the chapter brings life back to a kind of ‘self-consciousness’, present even in elemental organisms; the second reflects on the hiatus separating organic from inorganic matter; the third speaks about the heat emanating from life, about its being somewhere between matter and spirit. Then Castorp focuses on the concrete manifestations of the living matter, questioning the relationship between organism and individual cells, organized as complex individuals, casts a glance at the anatomy and embryonic development of the human being, establishes parallels between the laws of engineering to which he is adept and those governing nature. He then returns to the question of life as a “a special immunity of living protoplasm,” a ‘mystical’ explanation for phenomena that are in fact inexplicable, such as sleep or a stomach that does not digest itself. He reasons about fever and the mystery that at the time was the genetic memory, and then reflects on the atom and its peculiar conformation as “an energy-laden cosmic system” in which the macrocosm of the galaxies is mirrored<sup>36</sup>. The exploration of the mechanics of living processes through pathology leads inexorably to organic dissolution: “So much for pathology, the study of disease, with an emphasis on bodily pain, which at the same time was an emphasis on the body, an emphasis on its pleasures – disease was life’s lascivious form. And for its part, what was life? Was it perhaps an infectious disease of matter.”<sup>37</sup>

Mann implements a ‘narrative staging’ of scientific knowledge to illustrate how Castorp seeks to understand his sexual attraction to Clavdia. Castorp directly associates life, from its simplest forms, to voluptuousness, and confronts himself with the discrepancy between the humanistic discourse of art and intellect, in which life and flesh become ‘form, noble image, beauty’, and the associations that they instead arouse in his inner self, where life is ‘the quintessence of sensuality and lust.’ This recurring theme in Mann’s work is developed here with a sense of compassionate irony. Like his character, Mann is captivated by science. However, he is fully aware that his curiosity is not simply a generic quest for abstract knowledge, but rather stems from the depths of sexual instinct.<sup>38</sup> Scientific readings nurture Castorp’s imagination. At the end of the chapter, the hero, who falls asleep while reading his books, encounters the image of life – as a woman’s sensuous embrace – in a dream.

Castorp’s understanding of life, love, and death comes to him through dream-like intuitions in two other significant moments of the novel. The first one occurs during the Walpurgis night, when he professes his love to Clavdia, although it is Clavdia who establishes that “the body, love, death are simply

36 T. Mann: *Magic Mountain* op. cit., 337.

37 T. Mann: *Magic Mountain* op. cit., 335–339

38 Massimo Bonifazio: “Non si leggeva poco...”. Considerazioni su Hans Castorp lettore, in: *Bollettino dell’Associazione italiana di germanistica* 4 (2011) 83–95.

one and the same.”<sup>39</sup> The second is in the chapter entitled *Snow*. Lost in a violent blizzard, Castorp experiences a dream in which the initial idyllic image, on the seashore, of ‘a beautiful young humanity’ is contrasted with a ghastly feast of blood. The dream brings a final revelation:

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. But that is only an adumbration of one great, urging concern which, in fullest sympathy, I shall now call by its name: life’s problem child, man, his true state and condition. [...] I will keep faith with death in my heart, but I will clearly remember that if faithfulness to death and what is past rules our thoughts and deeds, that leads only to wickedness, dark lust and hatred of humankind. For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts.<sup>40</sup>

The lesson that Castorp learns in the snow is that disease can be conquered mentally and spiritually, if not physically, through ‘goodness and love’. His final decision to embrace life, not allowing death to dominate his thoughts, is the decision of his creator (Hans almost forgets the dream as soon as he returns to the Berghof). Mann, who often recalled his ‘sympathy for death,’ intends to share with the reader the awareness now achieved that sublimation of primitive erotic impulses can ‘lead to the human’. Castorp’s trajectory reflects the spiritual struggles Mann experienced during this period, marked by the traumatic war experience. Although he began the book in 1912, before the war, he finished it several years after it was over, in 1924. Thus, although the story takes place from 1907 to 1914, the characters illustrate Mann’s intellectual development before and after the war. The chapter *Snow* – considered by critics of central importance in the novel’s structure – marks the author’s commitment to a new humanism.<sup>41</sup> Its profound significance becomes clear when contrasted with the novel’s final pages. At this point, the reader must leave the suspended time and space of the mountain and descend with Castorp to the flatlands. Confronting the time of history, on the Flanders battlefields, he encounters a definitive horror and evil that can no longer be redeemed through myth, science, or art.

The defining historical transition in *The Magic Mountain* is World War I. It is widely acknowledged that in his wartime writings, *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, Mann upheld the German order as the safeguard of *Kultur* against *Zivilisation*. However, his political stance gradually evolved during and after World War I, as Germany endured a severe economic crisis, and its society witnessed an increasing polarization between extreme right and left ideologies.

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<sup>39</sup> T. Mann: *Magic Mountain* op. cit. 407.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 586–588.

<sup>41</sup> See Luca Crescenzi: *Melanconia occidentale. «La montagna magica» di Thomas Mann* (Roma: Carocci, 2011).

When he was invited to lecture in the autumn of 1921 in Lübeck, his birthplace, he elaborated on a comparison between Goethe and Tolstoy, which became an extended revision of his wartime propositions. Goethe and Tolstoy were primarily 'healthy' authors with a positive outlook on human existence, inspired by ideals of progress and peace. Mann's immersion in their writings was a deliberate attempt to move beyond the Schopenhauerian pessimism and Wagnerian obsession with love and death that he had previously regarded as the pinnacle of *Kultur*. In October 1922, he surprised his acquaintances by firmly pledging his loyalty to the recently established Weimar Republic.<sup>42</sup> The publication of *The Magic Mountain* marked Mann's embrace of a worldview of civilization that would permeate his writings for the rest of his life. The individual who once considered himself 'nonpolitical' now saw culture and politics as intertwined. Mann also cautioned his audience that the state represented 'the highest degree of humanity'.<sup>43</sup> The choice to embrace a new line of thought was driven by his desire to ensure continuity of allegiance to his values in a new era: "I may well have changed my thoughts, but not my mind"; and a little further on he spoke of the need to "assert an abiding mind amid changed times."<sup>44</sup>

### 3. *Doctor Faustus* (1947)

A quarter of a century, a time of exile and a new war elapse between *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*. Deprived of his German citizenship in 1936, Mann moved to the United States two years later, first to Princeton and then to Los Angeles (from 1941 to 1952). During this period, he became one of the most strenuous defenders of democracy through his speeches and radio broadcasts, 'German Listeners!' However, he kept returning to the questions that motivated his previous work, from the artist's role to the societal crisis. Illness is still at the center of his narrative, shaping an entire era, not merely individuals.

*Doctor Faustus* has been regarded as Mann's most complex novel, where the multiple-layered structure of his narrative comes to full circle. Saturated with German culture from the Faustian myth to Lutheran reform, with explicit references to the figures of Nietzsche and Schönberg, the novel has been interpreted as a critique of the bourgeois society, an allegory of the Third Reich, a tragic

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<sup>42</sup> Wessel Krul: Conservatism, Republicanism, and Romanticism: Thomas Mann's "Conversion" to Democracy in 1922, in: *Discourses of decline* Edited by Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Arthur Weststeyn, Studies in the History of Political Thought 17 (Leiden: Brill 2022) 216–233.

<sup>43</sup> He began his manifesto with a tribute to Gerhart Hauptmann on his sixtieth birthday and considered Friedrich Ebert, the current president of the Republic and a Social-Democrat, as a man of goodwill who understood the unity of state and culture.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Mann: On the German Republic, 1922, English translation: Thomas Mann, Order of the Day (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1942). See Michael Beddow: *The Magic Mountain*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 137–150.

meditation on the role of suffering and isolation in the artist's life<sup>45</sup>. Mann himself supports these interpretations. In *Germany and the Germans*, he remarked:

And the devil, Luther's devil, Faust's devil, strikes me as a very German figure, and the pact with him, the Satanic covenant, to win all treasures and power on earth for a time at the cost of the soul's salvation, strikes me as exceedingly typical of German Nature. A lonely thinker and searcher, a theologian and philosopher in his cell who, in this desire for world enjoyment and world domination, barter his soul to the Devil, – isn't this the right moment to see Germany in this picture, the moment in which Germany is literally being carried off by the Devil?<sup>46</sup>

The central medical theme in *Doctor Faustus* is syphilis. Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. From the very beginning, syphilis has been a stigmatized, disgraceful disease; each country whose population was affected by the infection blamed the neighboring (and sometimes enemy) countries for the outbreak<sup>47</sup>. It was first described in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and its original name, 'Great Pox' or 'Evil Pox', was provided by the poem *Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus* by Girolamo Fracastoro (1530), a poet and medical personality in Verona. Regardless of the Columbian and the Pre-Columbian theories, the origins of syphilis remain obscure<sup>48</sup>. In 1913, Joseph Waldron Moore and Hideyo Noguchi isolated the *Spirochaeta pallida*, establishing syphilis as the cause of a condition then called "General Paralysis of the Insane." Different stages of the disease can be distinguished, according to the symptoms and the time since the initial infection. Neurosyphilis represents the tertiary stage when the infection involves the neurological system. Neurologic manifestations of syphilis may develop within months of the initial infection or, alternatively, take decades to appear. Early neurosyphilis may involve meningitis, cranial nerve defects, meningovascular disease, or stroke. Late neurosyphilis involves the brain and spinal cord and may result in general paresis, dementia, or *tabes dorsalis*. Arsenic, in combination with bismuth or mercury, was used for treatment with limited efficacy before the discovery of penicillin in the 1940s.<sup>49</sup>

Although the medical precision with which pathologies are described remains unchanged, in *Doctor Faustus* the symbolic meaning of disease undergoes a profound transformation. Selecting a sexually transmitted disease represents a

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<sup>45</sup> See T. J. Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Susan von Rohr Scaff, *Doctor Faustus in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168–184.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Mann: *Germany and the Germans*, Library of Congress (1945) 51.

<sup>47</sup> M. Tampa, I. Sarbu, C. Matei, V. Benea, and SR. Georgescu: Brief History of Syphilis, in *Journal of Medicine and Life* 15(2014) 4–10.

<sup>48</sup> See Joseph R. Berger and Dawson Dean: Neurosyphilis, in: *Handbook of Clinical Neurology* 121 (2014) 1461–1472.

<sup>49</sup> M.E. Clement, N.L. Okeke. CB Hicks: Treatment of syphilis: a systematic review, in: *Journal of American Medical Association* 12 (2014) 1905–1917.

stark departure from the previous focus on cholera or tuberculosis. Aschenbach chose to succumb to the epidemic, Castorp chose to stay at the Berghof even though he realizes he is not sick. Adrian *voluntarily* contracts syphilis in a series of encounters with the prostitute Esmeralda. This element suggests that the genesis of *Doctor Faustus* is different from *The Magic Mountain's* one. As stated by Mann himself in 1949:

If other earlier works of mine had taken on, at least by extension, a monumental character, they had taken it on unexpectedly and without forethought [...]. At that stage of my life, I was in a different situation. This time I knew what I wanted and what task I had imposed on myself: nothing less than to write the novel of my epoch disguised in the story of a very precarious and sinful artist's life.<sup>50</sup>

Syphilis breaks into Adrian's body through the gate of sex ending up to hit the brain, the spiritual center of the organism. The progression of the disease is explained in the dialogue between the Devil and Adrian: "[T]hey [physicians] had duly limited the first, especially cutaneous general infiltration and so had given a powerful upward stimulus to the metastasis [...] the uppermost meta venereal process is accelerated by such general treatment. It is, to be sure, likewise expedited often enough by not treating the fresh stages."<sup>51</sup> In the course of the novel, the narrator Serenus Zeitblom compassionately reveals to the reader Adrian's deteriorating condition<sup>52</sup>. Adrian has suffered from migraine attacks since the age of fourteen. Migraine attacks intensify as well as alternating "catarrh of the stomach, bronchial tubes, and throat."<sup>53</sup> In the later stage, Adrian "very quickly began to loosen under the weight" and developed "an unbearably idyllic, vegetal existence lacking all memory; he literally no longer had the least notion of how to compose, not the vaguest memory of how one went about it"<sup>54</sup>. He developed "a growing tendency to carry his head tilted to one shoulder." Also, his oculomotor system was affected by the disease: "a wide-eyed gaze had a kind of rigidity about it [...], a kind of standstill [...] which was caused by the pupils, which were not perfectly round, but somewhat irregularly lengthened, and always stayed the same size, as if they were not subject to the influence of any change in light<sup>55</sup>." Moreover, he showed abnormalities in his speech: "he often misspoke

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Mann: *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1961).

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Mann: *Doctor Faustus. The Life of the German Composer, Adrian Leverkühn, As Told by a Friend* (New York: Adolf Knopf 1997), 250.

<sup>52</sup> See François Boller and Nicoletta Caputi: Thomas Mann's depiction of neurosyphilis and other diseases, in: *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 27 (2017) 1–9; Nicoletta Caputi, Daniel Birnbaum, François Boller: Thomas Mann and Neurology in *Frontiers of Neuroscience* (Basel: Karger, 2018) 76–84.

<sup>53</sup> T. Mann: *Doctor Faustus*, op cit., 656

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 655

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 697–698

himself and in the attempt to correct such lapse [...] made yet another, until in time he no longer paid any attention to such mistakes and simply passed over them.”<sup>56</sup> In short, syphilis has reduced Adrian to a vegetative condition.

Adrian is not the only character in the novel to succumb to cerebral death. His beloved five-years-old nephew Nepomuch, who calls himself Echo, falls ill with meningitis and dies fortnight. His death is described with horrifying accuracy: “A minor symptom was perhaps the most dreadful of all: the squinting of the heaven blue eyes, caused by the paralysis of the eye muscles accompanying the rigidity of the neck [...]”<sup>57</sup> The portrayal of Echo’s and Hanno’s deaths differs radically. Disease is now considered a cruel and ‘incomprehensible’ affliction, rather than a gateway to the pleasures of art and intellectual life.

*Doctor Faustus* leads to a reevaluation of the illness motif. Mann seems to support the earlier connection between illness and the spirit: “Disease makes a certain critical contrast to the world, to life’s mean, . . . makes its man take refuge with the free spirit, with books, in cogitation.”<sup>58</sup> But now it is the devil who advocates the dialectical process between disease and health, which is supposed to serve the evolution of life.<sup>59</sup> The most significant change in Mann’s values between the writing of the two novels is seen in the alteration of both the social and medical aspects of disease. “The sanatorium, with its atmosphere of frivolous morbidity, its social life breathing the air of disease, lies far behind. In *Doctor Faustus* we are dealing with a different disease which develops in the merciless solitude of the sufferer.”<sup>60</sup> In *The Magic Mountain* man is portrayed as the master of the opposing forces of life and death, health and disease. In *Doctor Faustus* he is no longer at the center of the universe and is now subject to the overwhelming force of the demon. The tragic end of Leverkühn’s human and artistic life coincides with the defeat of Nazi Germany. *Doctor Faustus* is a story that uniquely captures Germany’s downfall following the rise of national socialism, while allowing Mann as a writer to bring to full circle his personal development. The pact with the devil represents an allegory of the German native land, a product of the ultimate decay of a historical epoch. Mann openly expressed his fears of a German victory and the nationalist racism adopted by the Nazis. In *Doctor Faustus*, his alter ego Zeitblom wrote: “my wishes and hopes are compelled to resist the victory of German arms, because my friend’s work would be buried beneath it.”<sup>61</sup> Mann’s thoughts are also clear in Zeitblom’s

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56 Ibid., 714

57 Ibid., 686.

58 Ibid., 337.

59 In a letter to Alberto Mondadori dated 1950, Mann wrote: “In *The Magic Mountain*, disease is not represented as a state of grace, but almost as a vice. In *Faustus* it is a means provided by the devil to induce creativity in an artist inhibited by knowledge”. Thomas Mann: *The letters of Thomas Mann, 1889–1955* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

60 W.H. Rey: *Return to Health? “Disease” in Mann’s Doctor Faustus*, in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 65 (1950) 21–26, 21.

61 T. Mann: *Doctor Faustus*, op. cit., 46.

words at the end of the novel: “Oh Germany, thou at undone! And I am mindful of your hopes”<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

In a letter directed to Mrs. Van Doren dated 1951, Mann wrote: “I did develop into a hard worker when it became necessary to supply the scholarly foundation for a work of fiction. [ . . . ] Thus I became in turn an expert in medicine and biology, a firm Orientalist, Egyptologist, mythologist and historian of religions, a specialist in medieval culture and poetry, and so on.”<sup>63</sup> Although in a later letter, he self-ironized about his ‘dazzling pseudo-universality’ affirming that it was in reality ‘only skin-deep’ knowledge, it nevertheless remains true that Mann’s account of disease is remarkably consistent with available medical sources. In this essay, I aimed to show how Mann’s relationship with illness develops over time. In early works, illness is seen as a spiritualizing force that urges man, and above all, the artist of genius, to overcome common health limitations and raise himself to a new level of expression inaccessible to healthy mediocrity. In *The Magic Mountain*, the relationship between art and illness is fully articulated, leading the author to a quest for a new humanism. In *Doctor Faustus*, illness marks the annihilation of the artist’s freedom. Mann strongly believed in the artist’s commitment to deal with the moral issues of his time, and his major works paint a portrait of the individual and society. Illness is also the vehicle through which the breakdown of the social structure manifests itself. In *Buddenbrooks*, it appears in a family framework; in *Death in Venice*, it is expanded to a city; in *The Magic Mountain*, it extends to the European continent; and in *Doctor Faustus*, it encompasses the Western world as a whole.

Professor Daniela Giannetti, University of Bologna, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Strada Maggiore 45, 40125 Bologna; daniela.giannetti@unibo.it, ORCID 0000-0002-1705-6903

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 559.

<sup>63</sup> T. Mann: The letters of Thomas Mann, 1889–1955 op. cit.



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