

Melancholy and Loss in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*.

Maureen Watkins, Birkbeck

Abstract: In this paper I examine the theme of melancholy in relation to Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*. I argue that in connection with the very overt subject of physical illness in the novel, specifically the condition of tuberculosis, there is also the theme of melancholy which is evident in the novel's subject matter, characters and structure. Relating my discussion to the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva, I argue that the pervading sense of melancholy in *Der Zauberberg* can be attributed to a sense of loss at a number of levels, including not only concrete losses such as the death or desertion of a loved one, but also abstract losses, such as the loss of hope experienced by the terminally ill. I examine how the loss incurred by the deprivation of meaning in life experienced by the seriously ill can be compounded by further losses experienced through institutional life, such as the loss of dignity, self-respect and a sense of identity, leading in some cases to thoughts of, or actual suicide. In addition I note how the structure of the novel echoes the feeling of disorientation and timelessness experienced by those in a melancholic state, and how a sense of loss continues when the main protagonist, through whose eyes we view the events of the narrative, disappears and most probably dies at end of the novel.

This paper relates to a wider exploration of 'Impotence, Mental Illness and Suicide' in relation to Mann's novel, as a chapter of my thesis which relates to 'Thomas Mann and the Body', and focuses particularly on issues of the taboo. My work addresses taboo acts and conditions, and the theme of melancholy relates both to the stigmatised condition of mental illness, and the taboo act of suicide.

Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924) is set in the years preceding the First World War, from 1907-1914, in a tuberculosis clinic in the Swiss Alps, and spans seven years of the life of the main protagonist, Hans Castorp, while he is resident there.¹ The inmates of the Berghof sanatorium are diseased or dying, or caring for the sick, and therefore lead a melancholy existence in the constant shadow of death and disease, which is exacerbated by the tedious and stultifying routine of institutional life. The resultant sense of malaise is endemic at all levels of the sanatorium, affecting patients,

¹ I use the following editions of the text in German and English: Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2007), referred to hereafter as *DZ*, and Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. by H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Vintage, 1999), hereafter referred to as *MM*.

visitors and staff. Closely interwoven with the overt subject matter of physical disease in *Der Zauberberg*, therefore, is the theme of psychological illness, which is manifested in some of the characters as melancholy, or depression, and which in some cases leads to suicidal tendencies or actual suicide.² I argue that the all-pervasive sense of melancholy in *Der Zauberberg* can be attributed to the experience of loss at a number of levels, whether these are concrete losses, such as the death or desertion of a loved one, or more abstract ones, such as the loss of hope experienced by the terminally ill.

Psychoanalytic theory places a sense of loss at the root of melancholy: Freud argues that melancholy is closely associated with mourning in that both are connected to ‘object-loss’.³ However, Freud notes that while in mourning the individual is aware of what he or she has lost, with melancholy the loss is not always identifiable, as the lost object may be ‘withdrawn from consciousness’.⁴ This could be a once-held ambition that has been thwarted or suppressed, but nevertheless leaves a sense of emptiness. In *Der Zauberberg* both real mourning and a more generalised sense of loss are evident, and the two often coexist. For instance, the overriding task of the Berghof’s resident chief doctor, Hofrat Behrens, is to cure his patients and return

² For the purposes of this article I have used ‘depression’ and ‘melancholy’ interchangeably. ‘Depression’ is a more common term now for what was once referred to as ‘melancholy’, and generally has a more negative tone: depression does not convey the romantic association that can sometimes be signified by the term melancholy. In *Der Zauberberg*, however, Thomas Mann tends to debunk the romantic myths associated with both tuberculosis and melancholy, detaching the latter from its connection with an artistic or spiritual nature, or ethereal beauty, and locating it instead in quite ordinary and often very unattractive individuals, such as the character Wehsal, who I examine in this article on p. 52. Mann also explores the condition of hysteria which is another form of mental illness closely associated with institutional life, but space does not permit me to discuss this further here.

³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey et al., 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XIV, pp. 237-60 (p. 245).

⁴ Freud, p. 245.

them to life in the ‘flatland’.⁵ However, Behrens also displays symptoms of tuberculosis himself, and is prone to bouts of melancholy. Although the bacterial cause of tuberculosis had been discovered in 1882 by Robert Koch, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tuberculosis was nevertheless not widely treatable, and Behrens’ inability to cure himself and others continually undermines his professional role as a physician. Moreover, Behrens is firmly attached to the Berghof by his continuing grief over the loss of his wife who is buried nearby; she also succumbed to tuberculosis, despite Behrens’ attempts to cure her. Thus Behrens has suffered multiple losses: the loss associated with his bereavement; the deterioration of his health; and the loss of faith in his vocation as a healer.

Deaths from tuberculosis regularly occur at the sanatorium, so the mourning associated with bereavement is common. For instance, the mother known as *Tous-les-deux* aimlessly roams the grounds of the Berghof, distraught at the loss of one son and the imminent death of the other. Hans Castorp, too, eventually experiences the loss to tuberculosis of his cousin, Joachim, whom he initially came to visit, grew to love, and from whom he became almost inseparable during his prolonged stay. Moreover, even those inmates who are not grieving for dead friends or relatives are likely to be suffering a sense of loss at their enforced isolation from the living ones they have left behind for their new existence at the sanatorium. While there is a superficial jovial camaraderie during mealtimes at the Berghof, reinforced by the inmates’ common experience of disease, there are nevertheless also ‘die Stillen und Finstern, die in den Pausen den Kopf in die Hände stützten und starrten’ (*DZ*, 108) (‘the silent, gloomy ones [...] who in the pauses between courses leaned their heads on their hands and

⁵ In *Der Zauberberg* the expression ‘the flatland’ is used to refer to the world outside the sanatorium and away from the mountain on which it is situated.

stared before them' [MM, 76]), indicating the general listlessness associated with a melancholic state.

Moreover, sanatorium life involves interminable hours when the patients follow the 'cure' in the isolation of their rooms or balconies, where they must inevitably confront their fears concerning their personal illness and its prognosis. The patients of the Berghof are therefore, almost in their entirety, suffering a generalised sense of loss, owing to the deprivation of meaning in life engendered by their tuberculosis diagnosis, often considered a death sentence. Melancholy and loss then become self-perpetuating: as Julia Kristeva notes, melancholy leads to a loss of 'interest in words, actions, and even life itself'.⁶ The sense of pointlessness is clearly evident in an exchange between three of the patients, Hermione Kleefeld, Rasmussen and Gänser:

[Hermione Kleefeld] seufzte aus ihrer halben Lunge, indem sie kopfschüttelnd ihre vom Dummheit umschleierten Augen zur Decke richtete. "Lustig, Rasmussen!" sagte sie hierauf und schlug ihrem Kameraden auf die abfallende Schulter. "Machen Sie Witze!" "Ich weiß nur wenige" erwiderte Rasmussen und ließ die Hände wie Flossen in Brusthöhe hängen; "die aber wollen mir nicht vonstatten gehn, ich bin immer so müde." "Es möchte kein Hund" sagten Gänser hinter den Zähnen, "so oder ähnlich noch viel länger leben." Und sie lachten achselzuchend (DZ, 306).

[Hermione Kleefeld] shook her head, fetched a sigh from her one lung, and rolled up to the ceiling her dull and stolid eyes. "Cheer up, Rasmussen", she said, and slapped her comrade on the drooping shoulder. "Make a few jokes!" "I don't know many", he responded, letting his hands flap finlike before his breast, "and those I do I can't tell, I'm so tired all the time." "Not even a dog", Gänser said through his teeth, "would want to live longer – if he had to live like this." They laughed and shrugged their shoulders (MM , 218).

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

The tiredness; the sigh; the dull expression; the drooping shoulder; the indifferent shrug; and the cheerless laughter represent characteristic symptoms of a melancholic condition.

The melancholy accompanying serious illness is further compounded by other losses experienced at the sanatorium. Some residents form romantic attachments there and can experience a keen sense of loss when these liaisons break down. Losing a lover can provoke a melancholic state comparable to that of mourning. Hans Castorp falls in love with fellow-patient, Clawdia Chauchat, with whom he eventually spends a single night of passion, after which she leaves the sanatorium. Following this loss Hans Castorp listlessly awaits her return, but when she does so it is with another man, the enigmatic and powerful, but also sick and dying, Pieter Peeperkorn. This unexpected thwarting of Hans Castorp's hopes renews and intensifies his initial loss. Moreover, following Clawdia Chauchat's final departure, after Peeperkorn's death, Hans Castorp sinks further into depression as he realises that there is no hope of her returning. Hans Castorp has already at an early age experienced lost loves, losing his mother, father and grandfather to illness; and as an adolescent he experienced the loss of his first romantic love when his infatuation with fellow schoolboy Pribislav Hippe ended with Hippe's departure from the school. In her study of depression and melancholia Kristeva pertinently expresses how each subsequent loss reinforces a former one:

Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one.⁷

Significantly Clawdia Chauchat is a revenant – a visual reminder of Pribislav Hippe - and thus Hans Castorp's earlier loss is renewed. Similarly, it is possible that Hans

⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 5.

Castorp's memory of the initial loss of Hippe deepens his sadness at the loss of Clawdia Chauchat, as it brings with it the sense of the inevitability of failed relationships. This is a recurring theme in Thomas Mann: in *Tonio Kröger* (1903), for example, Mann stresses Tonio's anguish at falling in love with the blond, blue-eyed Inge who reminds him of his childhood friend Hans Hansen, as Tonio knows from previous experience that his new love will cost him 'viel Schmerz, Drangsal und Demütigung' ('much pain, distress and humiliation').⁸

According to Freud, melancholy can result not only from the loss of a loved person, but also from the loss of 'an abstraction that has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on'.⁹ This is very evident in the character of Joachim, whose dedication to serving his country in the army is thwarted by the seriousness of his tuberculosis. Joachim's diseased body forces him to exist as a passive invalid at the sanatorium, rather than pursue the active and purposeful soldier's life that he craves. Consequently, Joachim obsessively replaces the discipline and structure of army life with a zealous adherence to the curative regime of the Berghof. In doing so, however, Joachim suffers a further loss as he resists his evident attraction to a fellow inmate, Marusja, assuming that to succumb to his attraction would distract him from a speedy recovery and return to his regiment. Joachim is thus physically and psychologically trapped, unable to fulfil either his sexual desire or his chosen vocation, and he becomes withdrawn and antisocial. A state of melancholy caused by loss can therefore provoke other related losses, such as the loss of a sense of worth, dignity and self-respect.

⁸ See Thomas Mann, 'Tonio Kröger', in *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1972), pp. 213-266 (p. 221), and *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 137-194 (p. 147).

⁹ Freud, p. 243.

For Freud, loss can include ‘all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed’ and this is the case with the wretched character, Wehsal, whose very name suggests an aching and oppressive misery.¹⁰ Wehsal is obsessed by his unrequited desire for Clawdia Chauchat and is full of self-loathing. According to Freud, in contrast to true mourning, in the melancholic person there is an evident ‘impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale’.¹¹ Moreover, Freud identifies ‘a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings’.¹² Significantly Wehsal continually complains about his feelings of rejection, and constantly bemoans his unattractiveness, uttering self-deprecating remarks such as: ‘Bin ich denn kein Mann? Ist ein widerwärtiger Mann kein Mann?’ (DZ, 848) (‘Am I not a man? Even if I am repulsive? [MM, 616]). Wehsal also experiences regular bouts of uncontrollable weeping, which signify the inadequacy of language to express the melancholic state: as Kristeva points out, depression is a ‘noncommunicable grief’.¹³ Tears therefore, for Kristeva, are ‘metaphors of non-speech, of a “semiotics” that linguistic communication does not account for’.¹⁴ Moreover, tears are a manifestation of Kristeva’s notion of ‘the abject’, the disintegration of the body’s margins which, as Elizabeth Wright points out, ‘signals the precarious grasp the subject has over its identity and its borders’.¹⁵

Thus melancholy is associated with a loss of identity that is compounded by illness. Disease undermines the integrity of the body: the organs are destroyed, and in

¹⁰ Freud, p. 251. The German noun ‘Weh’ means ‘grief’ or ‘pain’.

¹¹ Freud, p. 246.

¹² Ibid, p. 244.

¹³ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, trans. by Léon S. Roudiez, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 160-86 (p. 174).

¹⁵ See *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 198. For Kristeva’s theories of abjection see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

the clinical setting the body becomes a site of intrusion and experimentation. For Kristeva, serious illness is one of the main factors contributing to melancholy: she notes that a depressive state can be triggered by ‘a fatal illness, some accident or handicap that abruptly wrests me away from what seemed to me the normal category of normal people’.¹⁶ The sense of isolation from normality is exaggerated by institutional life, where individuals are no longer defined by their place in society as members of a family, a town, a nation or a place of work, for instance. Rather they are classified by what they have in common, in this case their disease. Consequently a hierarchy of illness arises, in which the more severely ill command more respect, leading some inmates to exaggerate their symptoms, and provoking accusations of hypochondria and malingering. This charge is levelled at Hans Castorp by his mentor, Settembrini, who urges him to leave the sanatorium and avoid becoming institutionalised. Settembrini views the Berghof as a place ‘[wo] Tote nichtig und sinnlos wohnen’ (*DZ*, 83) (‘peopled by the vacant and idle dead’ [*MM*, 57]).

When travelling to the mountains Hans Castorp had already begun to distance himself from the flatland, abandoning his book on ocean steamships, despite its relevance to his chosen profession, and sampling the sense of freedom engendered by the journey, which was setting an increasing expanse of time and space between him and the duties of his life below. Hans Castorp is therefore readily seduced by the undemanding routine of life at the Berghof: soon after his arrival he becomes ill himself, but despite the mildness of his illness he quickly withdraws from any connection with life outside the sanatorium, as indicated by his ceasing to read the newspapers. Hans Castorp continues to exist at the Berghof in an aimless and melancholic state for seven years, unable to re-engage with life in the outside world

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 3-4.

and unwilling to take up his promising career as an engineer. Melancholy thus becomes associated with laziness and a loss of moral fibre, and hence a reprehensible condition. Kristeva points out how at certain points in history melancholy has been associated with religious doubt or even sinfulness. For instance, invoking Dante's *Inferno*, she notes that 'the melancholic shadows constitute "the sect of the wicked displeasing both to God and His enemies."'”¹⁷ The often persistent Christian notion that melancholy suggests impiety or an ingratitude for life can provoke feelings of shame and guilt which can further exacerbate the condition.

Furthermore, in *Der Zauberberg* melancholy is perceived as contagious, and is recognised by the Berghof's authorities as a potential threat to morale. When Hans Castorp is at his most bored and depressed, Behrens expresses his concern that he will infect other inmates, with 'das Gift der Reichsverdrossenheit' (*DZ*, 860) ('the toxin of your disaffection' [*MM*, 625]). Hans Castorp himself begins to recognise that melancholy has become a widespread malignancy in the institution.

Er sah durchaus Unheimliches, Bösartiges, und er wußte was er sah:
Das Leben ohne Zeit, das sorg - und hoffnungslose Leben, das Leben
als stagnierende betriebsame Liederlichkeit, das tote Leben (*DZ*, 863).

He saw on every side the uncanny and the malign, and he knew what
it was he saw: life without time, life without care or hope, life as
depravity, assiduous stagnation; life as dead (*MM*, 627).

The sense of timelessness to which Hans Castorp refers indicates the loss of orientation in the world, both temporally and spatially, that is experienced in the depressed state. For instance, a lack of direction is evident in the character of Clawdia Chauchat who aimlessly travels between sanatoriums, regularly drawn back to the Berghof in a circular fashion, as if searching for something lost, and unable to move

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 8.

forwards. Kristeva identifies a 'denial of sequentiality' in the melancholic person.¹⁸

She argues:

Melancholy people [...] live within a skewed time sense. It does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past towards a goal. Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy, a *moment* blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective.¹⁹

Significantly, upon his arrival at the sanatorium Hans Castorp forgets how old he is. Similarly, in an episode in which he becomes lost in the snow, Castorp realises that he has been moving in a circle, and that his confused perception has greatly altered his sense of both the time that has passed and the distance he has covered. After sheltering from a snowstorm beside a mountain hut he imagines that at least an hour and a half must have elapsed when, in fact, it has been only fifteen minutes.

A distorted sense of time is evident throughout *Der Zauberberg* and is reflected in the structure of the novel. Hans Castorp's first three weeks on the mountain occupy the first four chapters of the novel, while the rest of his seven-year stay is contained in the remaining three. This echoes the way in which the constant routine at the Berghof has the contradictory effect of both expanding time, and condensing it. Moreover, the residents are distanced from outside events, which might otherwise lend structure to their personal narratives. Michael Beddow has related the pervading sense of melancholy in *Der Zauberberg* to a general malaise associated with the epoch about which Mann is writing, in which society itself appears to have lost direction. Quoting Mann's own words, Beddow comments:

And if the general ethos of their age 'secretly reveals itself as devoid of hope, prospects or purpose' and offers 'no satisfactory answer to

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 20

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 60.

the question of what it is all for', the result will be 'a certain disabling effect' on all but the most robustly vital of individuals.²⁰

In relation to the characters in *Der Zauberberg* this 'disabling effect' can be seen as both a physical and psychological one.

For some of the Berghof's inmates, suicide is seen as the only way out of the impasse of the half-life they experience on the mountain. This sentiment is articulated by Herr Albin who regularly threatens to end his life. Faced with a terminal prognosis he complains:

Ich bin im dritten Jahr hier...ich habe es satt und spiele nicht mehr mit, - können Sie mir das verargern? Unheilbar, meine Damen, - sehen Sie mich an, wie ich hier sitze, bin ich unheilbar, - der Hofrat selbst macht kaum noch ehren – und schandenhalber ein Hehl daraus. Gönnen Sie mir das bißchen Ungebundenheit, das für mich aus dieser Tatsache resultiert! (DZ, 114).

I am in my third year up here – I'm sick of it, fed up, I can't play the game any more – do you blame me for that? Incurable, ladies, as I sit here before you, an incurable case; the Hofrat himself is hardly at pains any longer to pretend I am not. Grant me at least the freedom which is all I can get out of the situation (MM, 79).

Herr Albin thus expresses the loss of hope and lack of control over one's own destiny felt by the incurably ill, and perceives suicide as a release from the pointlessness of a life that inevitably ends in physical dissolution. Herr Albin does not follow through with his threats, but Pieter Peeperkorn, on the other hand, does take his own life. Before his arrival at the sanatorium, Peeperkorn's *raison d'être* had been to love and live life to the full, but this is curtailed by the aging process and serious illness. During his time at the Berghof, Peeperkorn continues to exhibit a certain *joie de vivre* and periods of elation, but these very quickly turn to melancholy, fuelled by his

²⁰ Michael Beddow, 'The Magic Mountain', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, ed. by Richie Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 137-50 (p. 141).

alcoholism. Moreover, Peeperkorn's elated episodes could be a form of mania, and therefore yet another aspect of his depression.²¹ For Peeperkorn suicide is the only acceptable solution to the loss of dignity he feels at the deterioration of his body.

In *Der Zauberberg*, therefore, melancholy is presented as closely linked to physical debility, and can be traced to a number of manifestations of a sense of loss which compound and reinforce one another. In some cases melancholy can be temporary: a mourned love-object may at some stage be replaced; however, for those condemned as terminally ill, the denial of life and of a future, and consequently the loss of hope, engenders an all-pervasive melancholy that is as infectious as disease itself. The palpable sense of melancholy which is evident throughout *Der Zauberberg* is transmitted through the novel's subject matter, its characters and even its structure. Furthermore, the reader accompanies Hans Castorp on his journey to the Berghof and shares his thoughts, experiences and emotions during his seven-year stay there, but at the end of the novel Hans Castorp disappears somewhere in the trenches of the First World War and most likely dies on the battlefield, thus continuing the cycle of loss.

²¹ Freud notes that 'the most remarkable characteristic of melancholia [...] is its tendency to change round into mania – a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms.' ('Mourning and Melancholia', p. 253). Interestingly Freud relates this manic condition to the elated state of alcoholic intoxication as both are the result of a temporary 'triumph' over the cause of the depression. Freud states that 'in mania, the ego must have got over the loss of the object (or its mourning over the loss, or perhaps the object itself), and thereupon the whole quota of anticathexis which the painful suffering of melancholia had drawn to itself from the ego and 'bound' will have become available. Moreover, the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexis.' (See 'Mourning and Melancholia', pp. 253-55).