Thomas Mann, Monthly discussion groups—April

The Magic Mountain, chapter 7: from "A Stroll by the Shore" through "Mynheer Peeperkorn (conclusion)"

1. Whereas earlier in the novel, the narrator marked the passage of time by seasons (despite the variability of the weather), by holidays, by Dr. Behrens' projections of the duration of treatment—in "A Stroll by the Shore" the narrator instead declares his "foolish" intent "to narrate time."
    - Addressing the reader directly as the author, he explains how a novelist must manage two forms of time—the time that passes within the created fiction and the time required to narrate the fiction. He even goes further to contrast the management of time in his own art to the way in which music "measures and divides time, making it suddenly diverting and precious," and the way in which a work of visual art is "suddenly, brilliantly present." Why, at this point in the story, does Mann meditate on the aesthetics of time, then announce that he is writing a "time novel"?
    - Between Joachim's death and Madame Chauchat's return to the sanatorium with Peeperkorn, how much time has elapsed? Does Hans know? What has happened to his sense of time?
    - Why does Mann liken this period to "A Stroll by the Shore"? Does Hans's changing experience of time clarify the significance of the novel's title, "The Magic Mountain"?

2. At the beginning of the novel's final chapter, Mann brings a new, larger-than-life patient, Pieter (Mynheer) Peeperkorn, to the sanatorium. What makes Peeperkorn such a "personality," capable of dominating any room that he enters? What descriptive motifs does Mann employ to create Peeperkorn's aura of dominance?
    - How does this new figure in Hans's life contrast to Settembrini and Naphta, who have been vying to influence Hans, one of "life's problem children"? In each of these father figures, in addition to his cousin Joachim, Mann presents to Hans and the reader opposing definitions of "humanity" and of appropriate action in the world. How does Peeperkorn's "personality" and philosophy of life differ from Settembrini's, Naphta's, and Joachim's? What, to him, is the greatest sin? Why is Hans so taken with him?
    - At times the narrator describes Peeperkorn as "a dancing heathen priest" or as Silenus, the fat, intoxicated tutor of Dionysus, the god of wine (cf. the Silenus figure in "Death in Venice"). At other times, the narrator emphasizes the terror in his countenance, describing him as the "Man of Sorrows" from Isaiah, whom Christians read as a prefiguration of the Christ. Moreover, Peeperkorn compares himself (albeit ironically) to the suffering Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his arrest. How does Mann incorporate both these pagan and Christian elements into Peeperkorn's "personality" and philosophy of life?

- During the excursion to the waterfall, Peeperkorn insists that everyone enjoy the lavish picnic he has provided while sitting beside the torrent, whose din of rushing water prevents anyone from hearing his speech and toast. How is this party a fitting end for a man with his philosophy of life? Why does he commit suicide the night following this excursion?

3. What do we learn about the character of the mysterious Madame Chauchat in this section of the novel?
   - Why has she become Peeperkorn's "traveling companion"? Does she love him?
   - Why does she return to the sanatorium, bringing Peeperkorn, who is suffering from a tropical fever, not tuberculosis, with her?
   - How does she feel when Hans puts aside his jealousy and befriends Peeperkorn?
   - How are we to understand the bonds that are forged between Hans and Madame Chauchat in relation to Peeperkorn, then between Peeperkorn and Hans in relation to Madame Chauchat? How does Mann define the "love" on which these bonds are based?
   - Does Hans (or the reader, for that matter) ever comprehend the motivations of Madame Chauchat?

4. Peeperkorn is a fantastically wealthy Dutch coffee planter from Java. Even his name conjures up the history of the Dutch spice islands in the East Indies. We have discussed how Settembrini's and Naphta's debates bring into the novel the ferment of European intellectual life on the verge of World War I. How does Pieter Peeperkorn further contextualize the novel?
   - How did the colonial aspirations of European nations contribute to the outbreak of World War I?
   - How does Mann describe Peeperkorn's Malay servant? How is the reader to understand the stereotypical descriptions of his appearance, mannerisms, and devotion to his master? In creating this character does Mann exhibit the typical European "orientalism," or is Mann satirizing the "orientalism" of the other characters? *("Orientalism, a term popularized by Edward Said in 1978, describes a deeply rooted Eurocentric, stereotypical, and often prejudiced Western depiction of Eastern cultures—particularly the Middle East and Asia—as inferior, exotic, 'other,' or dangerous. It functions as an ideological tool to bolster Western superiority, serving colonialism"—Wikipedia.)*