A COMPANION TO
THOMAS MANN'S
THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN

EDITED BY
STEPHEN D. DOWDEN

CAMDEN HOUSE
11: Pilgrimage

EVERYTHING THAT SURROUNDS MY MEETING with him has the color of shame.

December, 1947. I was fourteen, steeped in vehement admirations and impatience for the reality to which I would travel once released from that long prison sentence, my childhood.

End almost in sight. Already in my junior year, I’d finish high school while still fifteen. And then, and then . . . all would unfold. Meanwhile I was waiting, I was doing time (still fourteen!), recently transferred from the desert of southern Arizona to the coastland of Southern California. Another new setting, with fresh possibilities of escape — I welcomed that. My peripatetic widowed mother’s remarriage, in 1945, to a handsome, bemedalled and beshrapnelled Army Air Forces ace who’d been sent to the healing desert to cap a year-long hospitalization (he’d been shot down five days after D Day) appeared to have grounded her. The following year our newly assembled family — mother, stepfather, kid sister, dog, notionally salaried Irish nanny left over from the old days, plus the resident alien, myself — had vacated the stucco bungalow on a dirt road on the outskirts of Tucson where we’d been joined by Captain Sontag for a cozy shuttered cottage with rosebush hedges and three birch trees at the entrance of the San Fernando Valley, where I was currently pretending to sit still for a facsimile of family life and the remainder of my unconvincing childhood. On weekends my now out-of-uniform but still militarily perky stepfather marshalled sirloins and butter-brushed corn tightly wrapped in tinfoil on the patio barbecue; I ate and ate — how could I not, as I watched my morose, bony mother fiddling with her food? His animation was as threatening as her apathy. They couldn’t start playing family now — too late! I was off and running, even if I looked every inch the baby-faced, overgrown elder daughter effusively munching her fourth ear of corn; I was already gone. (In French one can announce, while lingering unconsciously, Je suis moralement partie.) There was just this last bit of childhood to get past. For the duration, that wartime locution that gave me my first
model of condescending to present time in favor of the better future, for the duration it was permissible to appear to enjoy their recreations, avoid conflict, gobble their food. The truth was, I dreaded conflict. And I was always hungry.

I felt I was slumming, in my own life. My task was to ward off the drivel (I felt I was drowning in drivel) — the jovial clatter of classmates and teachers, the maddening bromides I heard at home. And the weekly comedy shows festooned with canned laughter, the treacly Hit Parade, the hysterical narrations of baseball games and prize fights — radio, whose racket filled the living room on weekday evenings and much of Saturday and Sunday, was an endless torment. I ground my teeth, I twirled my hair, I gnawed at my nails, I was polite. Though untempted by the new, tribal delights of suburban childhood that had quickly absorbed my sister, I didn’t think of myself as a misfit, for I assumed my casing of affability was being accepted at face value. (Here the fact that I was a girl seeps through.) What other people thought of me remained a dim consideration, since other people seemed to me astonishingly unseeing as well as uncurious, while I longed to learn everything: the exasperating difference between me and everyone I’d ever met — so far. I was certain there was a multitude like me, elsewhere. And it never occurred to me that I could be stopped.

If I didn’t mope or sulk, it was not just because I thought complaining wouldn’t do any good. It was because the flip side of my discontent—what, indeed, throughout my childhood had made me so discontented—was rapture. Rapture I couldn’t share. And whose volume was increasing steadily: since this last move I was having near-nightly bouts of jubilation. For in the eight houses and apartments of my life before this one I had never had a bedroom to myself. Now I had it, and without asking. A door of my own. Now I could read for hours by flashlight after being sent to bed and told to turn off the light, not inside a tent of bedclothes but outside the covers.

I’d been a demon reader from earliest childhood (to read was to drive a knife into their lives), and therefore a promiscuous one: fairy tales and comics (my comics collection was vast), Compton’s Encyclopedia, the Bobbsey Twins and other Stratemeyer series, books about astronomy, chemistry, China, biographies of scientists, all of Richard Halliburton’s travel books, and a fair number of mostly Victorian-era classics. Then, drifting to the rear of a stationery and greeting-card store in the village that was downtown Tucson in the mid-nineteen-forties, I toppled into the deep well of the Modern Library. Here were standards, and here, at the back of each book, was my first list. I had only to acquire and read (ninety-five cents for the small ones, a dollar twenty-five for the Giants) —

my sense of possibility unfolding, with each book, like a carpenter’s rule. And within a month of arriving in Los Angeles I tracked down a real bookstore, the first of my bookstore-besotted life; the Pickwick, on Hollywood Boulevard, where I went every few days after school to read on my feet through some more of world literature — buying when I could, stealing when I dared. Each of my occasional thefts cost me weeks of self-revelment and dread of future humiliation, but what could I do, given my puny allowance? Odd that I never thought of going to a library. I had to acquire them, see them in rows along a wall of my tiny bedroom. My household deities. My spaceships.

Afternoons I went hunting for treasure: I’d always disliked going home directly from school. But in Tucson, visits to the stationery store excepted, the most cheering postponement I’d come up with was a walk out along the Old Spanish Trail toward the Tanque Verde foothills, where I could examine close up the fiercest saguaros and prickly pears, scrutinize the ground for arrowheads and snakes, pocket pretty rocks, imagine being lost or a sole survivor, wish I were an Indian. Or the Lone Ranger. Here in California there was a different space to roam and I had become a different Lone Ranger. Most days after school I boarded the trolley on Chandler Avenue to hasten into, not away from, town. Within a few blocks of the enchanted crossroads of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue lay my little agora of one- and two-story buildings: the Pickwick; a record store whose proprietors let me spend hours each week in the listening booths, gorging myself on theirwares; an international newsstand where militant browsing yielded me Patriotic Review, Kenya Review, Sewance Review, Politics, Accent, Tiger’s Eye, Horizon; and a storefront through whose open door one afternoon I unselﬁconsciously trailed two people who were beautiful in a way I’d never seen, thinking I was entering a gym, which turned out to be the rehearsal quarters of the dance company of Lester Horton and Bella Lewitzky. O golden age! It not only was, I knew it was. Soon I was sipping at a hundred straws. In my room I wrote imitation stories and kept real journals; made lists of words to fatten my vocabulary, made lists of all kinds; played conductor to my records; read myself sore-eyed each night.

And soon I had friends, too, and not very much older than myself — to my surprise. Friends with whom I could speak of some of what absorbed and enraptured me. I didn’t expect them to have read as much as I had; it was enough that they were willing to read the books I lent them. And in music, even better, I was the novice — what bliss! It was my desire to be taught, even more thwarted than my desire to share, that made me my first friends: two seniors at whom I flung myself soon after entering this new school as a sophomore, whose taste in music was far superior to
mine. Not only were they each proficient on an instrument — Elaine played the flute, Mel the piano — but they had done all their growing up here, in Southern California, with its infusion of refugee virtuosi, employed in the full symphony orchestras maintained by the major film studios, who could be heard at night playing the canonical and the contemporary chamber repertory to small gatherings scattered across a hundred miles. Elaine and Mel were part of that audience, with tastes elevated and made eccentrically rigorous by the distinct bias of high musical culture in Los Angeles in the nineteen-forties — there was chamber music, and then there was everything else. (Opera was so low on the scale of musical goodness it was not worth mentioning.)

Each friend was a best friend — I knew no other way. Besides my music mentors, who started at U.C.L.A. the following autumn, there was a fellow-sophomore, my romantic comrade for the remaining two years of high school, who was to accompany me to the college I had already elected at thirteen as my destiny — the College of the University of Chicago. Peter, fatherless and a refugee (he was part Hungarian, part French), had had a life even more marked by displacements than my own. His father had been arrested by the Gestapo, and Peter and his mother escaped Paris to the South of France and from there, via Lisbon, to New York in 1941; after a spell in a Connecticut boarding school, he was now reunited here with the very single, tanned, red-haired Henya (whom I acknowledged to be as young-looking, if not as beautiful, as my own mother). Our friendship started in the school cafeteria with an exchange of boastful anecdotes about our gloriously dead fathers. Peter was the one with whom I argued about socialism and Henry Wallace, and with whom I held hands and went through Open City, Symphonic Pastorale, The Children of Paradise, Mädchen in Uniform, The Baker's Wife, Brief Encounter, and Beauty and the Beast at the Laurel, the theatre we'd discovered that showed foreign movies. We went bicycling in the canyons and in Griffith Park and rolled about, embracing, in the weeds — Peter's great loves, as I remember, were his mother, me, and his racing bicycle. He was dark-haired, skinny, nervous, tall. I, though always the youngest, was invariably the tallest girl in the class and taller than most of the boys and, for all my outlandish independence of judgment on matters Olympian, on the matter of height had the most abjectly conventional view. A boyfriend had to be not just a best friend but taller, and only Peter qualified.

The other best friend I made, also a sophomore, though at another high school, and also to enter the University of Chicago with me, was Merrill. Cool and chunky and blond, he had all the trappings of "cute," a "dish," a "dreamboat," but I, with my unerring eye for loners (under all disguises), had promptly seen that he was smart, too. Really smart.

Therefore capable of separateness. He had a low sweet voice and a shy smile and eyes that smiled sometimes without his mouth — Merrill was the only one of my friends I doted on. I loved to look at him. I wanted to merge with him or for him to merge with me, but I had to respect the insuperable barrier: he was several inches shorter than I was. The other barriers were harder to think about. He could be secretive, calculating (even literally so: numbers figured often in his conversation), and sometimes, to me, insufficiently moved by what I found moving. I was impressed by how practical he was, and how calm he remained when I got flustered. I couldn't tell what he really felt about the quite plausible family — mother, real father, younger brother (who was something of a math prodigy), even grandparents — with which he came equipped. Merrill didn't like to talk about feelings, while I was seething with the desire to express mine, preferably by focusing feeling away from myself onto something I admired or felt indignant about.

We loved in tandem. Music first — he'd had years of piano. (His brother played the violin, which made me equally envious, though it was for piano lessons that I'd implored my mother — rather, stopped imploping my mother — years before.) He introduced me to getting into concerts free by ushering (at the Hollywood Bowl in the summer), and I made him a regular at the Monday chamber-music series "Evenings on the Roof," to which I'd been brought by Elaine and Mel. We were building our nearly identical, ideal record collections (on 78s, happily unaware that this was the last year before L.P.s), and joined forces often in the cool, dark listening booths of the Highland Record Store. Sometimes he came to my house, even if my parents were there. Or I went to his house; the name of his frumpy, hospitable mother — I remember finding this embarrassing — was Honey.

Our privacy was in cars. Merrill had a real driver's license, while mine was the "junior" license one could hold from fourteen to sixteen in California then, entitling me to drive my parents' cars only. Since parents' cars were the only ones available to us, the difference was moot. In his parents' blue Chevys or my mother's green Pontiac we perched at night on the rim of Mulholland Drive, the great plain of twinkling lights below like an endless airport, oblivious of the mating couples in cars parked around us, pursuing our own pleasures. We pitched themes at each other in our inexact treble voices — "O.K., listen. Now, what's this?" We quizzed each other's memory of Köchel listings, knowing by heart long stretches of the six hundred and twenty-six. We debated the merits of the Busch and the Budapest Quartets (I'd become an intolerant partisan of the Budapest); discussed whether it would be immoral, after what I'd heard from Elaine and Mel about Gieseking's Nazi past, to buy his Debussy recordings; tried
to convince ourselves that we had liked the pieces played on the prepared piano by John Cage at last Monday’s “Evenings on the Roof” concert; and talked about how many years to give Stravinsky.

This last was one of our recurrent problems. Toward John Cage’s squawks and thumps we were deferential — we knew we were supposed to appreciate ugly music; and we listened devoutly to the Toch, the Krenek, the Hindemith, the Webern, the Schoenberg, whatever: we had enormous appetites and strong stomachs. But it was Stravinsky’s music we sincerely loved. And since Stravinsky seemed grotesquely old (we had actually seen him on two Mondays in the small auditorium of the Wilshire Ebell, when Ingolf Dahl was conducting something of his), our fears for his life had given rise to a compelling fantasy à deux about dying for our idol. The question, a question we discussed often, was: what were the terms of the sacrifice we so relished contemplating? How many more years of life for Stravinsky would justify our dying now, on the spot?

Twenty years? Obviously. But that was easy and, we agreed, too good to hope for. Twenty years granted to the ancient homely person we saw Stravinsky to be — that was simply an unimaginably large number of years to the fourteen-year-old I was and the sixteen-year-old Merrill was in 1947. (How lovely that I.S. lived even longer than this.) To insist on getting Stravinsky twenty more years in exchange for our lives hardly seemed to show our fervor.

Fifteen more years? Of course.

Ten? You bet.

Five? We began to waver. But not to agree seemed like a failure of respect, of love. What was my life or Merrill’s — not just our paltry California-high-school students’ lives but the useful, achievement-strewn lives we thought were awaiting us — compared to making it possible for the world to enjoy five years more of Stravinsky’s creations? Five years, O.K.

Four? I sighed. Merrill, let’s go on.

Three? To die for only three additional years?

Usually we settled on four — a minimum of four. Yes, to give Stravinsky four more years either one of us was prepared right then and there to die.

Reading and Listening to Music: the triumphs of being not myself. That nearly everything I admired was produced by people who were dead (or very old) or from elsewhere, ideally Europe, seemed inevitable to me.

I accumulated gods. What Stravinsky was for music Thomas Mann became for literature. At my Aladdin’s cave, at the Pickwick, on November 11, 1947 — taking the book down from the shelf just now, I find the date written on the flyleaf in the italic script I was then practicing — I bought The Magic Mountain.

I began it that night, and for the first few nights had trouble breathing as I read. For this was not just another book I would love but a transforming book, a source of discoveries and recognitions. All of Europe fell into my head — though on condition that I start mourning for it. And tuberculosis, the faintly shameful disease (so my mother had intimated) of which my hard-to-imagine real father had died so long ago and exotically elsewhere, but which seemed, once we moved to Tucson, to be a commonplace misfortune — tuberculosis was revealed as the very epitome of pathetic and spiritual interest! The mountain-high community of invalids with afflicted lungs was a version — an exalted version — of that picturesque, climate-conscious resort town in the desert with its thirty-odd hospitals and sanatoriums to which my mother had been obliged to relocate because of an asthma-disabled child: me. There on the mountain, characters were ideas and ideas were passions, exactly as I’d always felt. But the ideas themselves stretched me, enrolled me in turn: Settembrini’s humanitarian élan but also Naphta’s gloom and scorn. And mild, good-natured, chaste Hans Castorp, Mann’s orphaned protagonist, was a hero after my own unprotected heart, not least because he was an orphan and because of the chastity of my own imagination. I loved the tenderness, however diluted by condescension, with which Mann portrays him as a bit simple, overearnest, docile, mediocre (what I considered myself to be, judged by real standards). Tenderness. What if Hans Castorp was a Goody Two-Shoes (appalling accusation my mother had once let fly at me)? That was what made him not like but unlike the others. I recognized his vocation for piety; his portable solitude, lived politely among others; his life of onerous routines (that guardians deem good for you) interspersed with free, passionate conversations — a glorious transposition of my own current agenda.

For a month the book was where I lived. I read it through almost at a run, my excitement winning out over my wish to go slowly and savor. I did have to slow down for pages 334 to 343, when Hans Castorp and Claudia Chauchat finally speak of love, but in French, which I’d never studied: unwilling to skip anything, I bought a French-English dictionary and looked up their conversation word by word. After finishing the last page, I was so reluctant to be separated from the book that I started back at the beginning and, to hold myself to the pace the book merited, reread it aloud, a chapter each night.

The next step was to lend it to a friend, to feel someone else’s pleasure in the book — to love it with someone else, and be able to talk about it. In early December I lent The Magic Mountain to Merrill. And Merrill,
who would read immediately whatever I pressed on him, loved it, too.

Good.

Then Merrill said, "Why don't we go see him?" And that's when my joy turned to shame.

Of course I knew he lived here. Southern California in the nineteen-thirties was electric with celebrity presences for all tastes, and my friends and I were aware not only of Stravinsky and Schoenberg but of Mann, of Brecht (I'd recently seen Galileo, with Charles Laughton, in a Beverly Hills theatre), and also of Isherwood and Huxley. But it was as inconceivable that I could be in contact with any of them as that I could strike up a conversation with Ingrid Bergman or Gary Cooper, who also lived in the vicinity. Actually, it was even less possible. The stars stepped out of their limos onto the klieg-lighted sidewalk of Hollywood Boulevard for the movie-palace première, braving the surge of besieging fans penned in by police sawhorses; I saw newsreels of these apparitions. The gods of high culture had disembarked from Europe to dwell, almost incognito, among the lemon trees and beach boys and neo-Bauhaus architecture and fantasy hamburgers; they weren't, I was sure, supposed to have something like fans, who would seek to intrude on their privacy. Of course, Mann, unlike the other exiles, was also a public presence. To have been as officially honored in America as Thomas Mann was in the late nineteen-thirties and early nineteen-forties was probably more anomalous than to have been the most famous writer in the world. A guest at the White House, introduced by the Vice-President when he gave a speech at the Library of Congress, for years indefatigable on the lecture circuit, Mann had the stature of an oracle in Roosevelt's bien-pensant America, proclaiming the absolute evil of Hitler's Germany and the coming victory of the democracies. Emigration had not dampened his taste, or his talent, for being a representative figure. If there was such a thing as a good Germany, it was now to be found in this country (proof of America's goodness), embodied in his person; if there was a Great Writer, not at all an American notion of what a writer is, it was he.

But when I was borne aloft by The Magic Mountain, I wasn't thinking that he was also, literally, "here." To say that at this time I lived in Southern California and Thomas Mann lived in Southern California—that was a different sense of "lived," of "in." Wherever he was, it was where I was-not. Europe. Or the world beyond childhood, the world of seriousness. No, not even that. For me, he was a book. Books, rather—I was now deep in Stories of Three Decades. When I was nine, which I did consider childhood, I'd lived for months of grief and suspense in Les Misérables. (It was the chapter in which Fantine is obliged to sell her hair that had made

the conscious socialist of me.) As far as I was concerned, Thomas Mann—being, simply, immortal—was as dead as Victor Hugo.

Why would I want to meet him? I had his books.

I didn't want to meet him. Merrill was at my house, it was Sunday, my parents were out, and we were in their bedroom sprawled on their white satin bedspread. Despite my pleas, he'd brought in a telephone book and was looking under "M."

"You see? He's in the telephone book."

"I don't want to see!"

"Look!" He made me look. Horrified, I saw: 1550 San Remo Drive, Pacific Palisades.

"This is ridiculous. Come on—stop it!" I clambered off the bed. I couldn't believe Merrill was doing this, but he was.

"I'm going to call." The phone was on the night table on my mother's side of the bed.

"Merrill, please!"

He picked up the receiver. I bolted through the house, out the always unlocked front door, across the lawn, beyond the curb to the far side of the Pontiac, parked with the key in the ignition (where else would you keep the car keys?), to stand in the middle of the street and press my hands to my ears, as if from there I could have heard Merrill making the mortifying, unthinkable telephone call.

What a coward I am, I thought, hardly for the first or the last time in my life; but I took a few moments, hyperventilating, trying to regain control of myself, before I uncovered my ears and retraced my steps. Slowly.

The front door opened right into the small living room, done up with Early American "pieces," as my mother called them, that she was now collecting. Silence. I crossed the room into the dining area, then turned into the short hall that went past my own room and the door of my parents' bathroom into their bedroom.

The receiver was on the hook. Merrill was sitting on the bed's edge, grinning.

"Listen, that's not funny," I said. "I thought you were really going to do it."

He waved his hand. "I did."

"Did what?"

"I did it." He was still smiling.

"Called?"

"He's expecting us for tea next Sunday at four."

"You didn't actually call!"

"Why not?" he said. "It went fine."
“And you spoke to him?” I was close to tears. “How could you?”
“No,” he said, “it was his wife who answered.”
I extracted a mental picture of Katia Mann from the photographs I’d seen of Mann with his family. Did she, too, exist? Perhaps, as long as Merrill hadn’t actually spoken to Thomas Mann, it wasn’t so bad. “But what did you say?”
“I said we were two high-school students who had read Thomas Mann’s books and would like to meet him.”
No, this was even worse than I imagined — but what had I imagined?
“That’s so . . . so dumb!”
“What’s dumb about it? It sounded good.”
“Oh, Merrill . . .” I couldn’t even protest anymore. “What did she say?”
“She said, ‘Just a minute, I’ll get my daughter,’” Merrill continued, “and then the daughter got on, and I repeated — ”
“Go slower,” I interrupted. “His wife left the phone. Then there was a pause. Then you heard another voice . . .”
“Yeah, another woman’s voice — they both had accents — saying, ‘This is Miss Mann, what do you want?’”
“Is that what she said? It sounds as if she was angry.”
“No, no, she didn’t sound angry. Maybe she said, ‘Miss Mann speaking. I don’t remember, but, honest, she didn’t sound angry. Then she said, ‘What do you want? No, wait, it was ‘What is it that you want?’”
“Then what?”
“And then I said . . . you know, that we were two high-school students who had read Thomas Mann’s books and wanted to meet him — ”
“But I don’t want to meet him!” I wailed.
“And she said,” he pushed on stubbornly, “‘Just a minute, I will ask my father.’ Maybe it was ‘Just a moment, I will ask my father.’ She wasn’t gone very long . . . and then she came back to the phone and said — these were her words exactly — ‘My father is expecting you for tea next Sunday at four.”
“And then?”
“She asked if I knew the address.”
“And then?”
“That was all. Oh . . . and she said goodbye.”
I contemplated this finality for a moment before saying, once more, ”Oh, Merrill, how could you?”
“I told you I would,” he said.

Getting through the week, awash in shame and dread. It seemed a vast impertinence that I should be forced to meet Thomas Mann. And grotesque that he should waste his time meeting me.

Of course I could refuse to go. But I was afraid this brash Caliban I’d mistaken for an Ariel would call on the magician without me. Whatever the usual deference I had from Merrill, it seemed he now considered himself my equal in Thomas Mann worship. I couldn’t let Merrill inflict himself unmediated on my idol. At least, if I went along I might limit the damage, head off the more callow of Merrill’s remarks. I had the impression (and this is the part of my recollection that is most touching to me) that Thomas Mann could be injured by Merrill’s stupidity or mine . . . that stupidity was always injurious, and that as I revered Mann it was my duty to protect him from this injury.

Merrill and I met twice during the week after school. I had stopped reproving him. I was less angry; increasingly, I was just miserable. I was trapped. Since I would have to go, I needed to feel close to him, make common cause, so we would not disgrace ourselves.

Sunday came. It was Merrill who collected me in the Chevy, at one exactly, in front of my house at the curb (I hadn’t told my mother or anyone else of this invitation to tea in Pacific Palisades), and by two o’clock we were on broad, empty San Remo Drive, with a view of the ocean and Catalina Island in the distance, parked some two hundred feet up from (and out of sight of) the house at 1550.

We had already agreed on how we would start. I would talk first, about The Magic Mountain, then Merrill would ask the question about what Thomas Mann was writing at present. The rest we were going to work out now, in the two hours we’d allotted to rehearse. But after a few minutes, unable to entertain any idea of how he might respond to what we were considering saying, we ran out of inspiration. What does a god say? Impossible to imagine.

So we compared two recordings of “Death and the Maiden” and then veered to a favorite notion of Merrill’s about the way Schnabel played the “Hammerklavier,” a notion which I found wonderfully clever. Merrill seemed hardly to be anxious at all. He appeared to think that we had a perfect right to bother Thomas Mann. He thought that we were interesting — two precocious kids, minor-league prodigies (we knew neither of us was a real prodigy, which was someone like the young Menuhin; we were prodigies of appetite, of respect, not of accomplishment); that we could be interesting to Thomas Mann. I did not. I thought we were . . . pure potentiality. By real standards, I thought, we hardly existed.

The sun was strong and the street deserted. In two hours only a few cars passed. Then, at five minutes to four, Merrill released the brake and
we coasted silently down the hill and reparked in front of 1550. We got out, stretched, made encouraging mock-groaning sounds to each other, closed the car doors as softly as we could, went up the pathway, and rang the bell. Cute chimes. Oh.

A very old woman with white hair in a bun opened the door, didn’t seem surprised to see us, invited us in, asked us to wait a minute in the dim entryway — there was a living room off to the right — and went down a long corridor and out of sight.

“Kati Mann,” I whispered.

“I wonder if we’ll see Erika,” Merrill whispered back.

Absolute silence in the house. She was returning now. “Come with me, please. My husband will receive you in his study.”

We followed, almost to the end of the narrow dark passageway, just before the staircase. There was a door on the left, which she opened. We followed her in, turning left once more before we were really inside. In Thomas Mann’s study.

I saw the room — it seemed large and had a big window with a big view — before I realized it was he, sitting behind a massive, ornate, dark table. Kati Mann presented us. Here are the two students, she said to him, while referring to him as Dr. Thomas Mann; he nodded and said some words of welcome. He was wearing a bow tie and a beige suit, as in the frontispiece of Essays of Three Decades — and that was the first shock, that he so resembled the formally posed photograph. The resemblance seemed uncanny, a marvel. It wasn’t, I think now, just because this was the first time I’d met someone whose appearance I had already formed a strong idea of through photographs. I’d never met anyone who didn’t affect being relaxed. His resemblance to the photograph seemed like a feat, as if he were posing now. But the full-figure picture had not made me imagine him as frail; it had not made me see the sparseness of the mustache, the whiteness of the skin, the mottled hands, the unpleasantly visible veins, the smallness and amber color of the eyes behind his glasses. He sat very erectly and seemed to be very, very old. He was in fact seventy-two.

I heard the door behind us close. Thomas Mann indicated that we were to sit in the two stiff-backed chairs in front of the table. He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

And we were on our way.

HE TALKED without prompting. I remember his gravity, his accent, the slowness of his speech; I had never heard anyone speak so slowly.

I said how much I loved The Magic Mountain.

He said it was a very European book, that it portrayed the conflicts at the heart of European civilization.

I said I understood that.

What had he been writing, Merrill asked.

“I have recently completed a novel which is partly based on the life of Nietzsche,” he said, with huge disquieting pauses between each word.

“My protagonist, however, is not a philosopher. He is a great composer.”

“I know how important music is for you,” I ventured, hoping to fuel the conversation for a good stretch.

“Both the heights and the depths of the German soul are reflected in its music,” he said.

“Wagner,” I said, worried that I was risking disaster, since I’d never heard an opera by Wagner, though I’d read Thomas Mann’s essay on him.

“Yes,” he said, picking up, hefting, closing (with his thumb marking the place), then laying down, open again, a book that was on his worktable. “As you see, at this very moment I am consulting Volume IV of Ernest Newman’s excellent biography of Wagner.” I craned my neck to let the words of the title and the author’s name actually hit my eyeballs. I’d seen the Newman biography at the Pickwick.

“But the music of my composer is not like Wagner’s music. It is related to the twelve-tone system, or row, of Schoenberg.”

Merrill said we were both very interested in Schoenberg. He made no response to this. Intercepting a perplexed look on Merrill’s face, I widened my eyes encouragingly.

“Will your novel appear soon?” Merrill asked.

“My faithful translator is at work on it now,” he said.

“H. T. Lowe-Porter,” I murmured — the first time I’d actually said this entrancing name, with its opaque initials and showy hyphen.

“For the translator this is, perhaps, my most difficult book,” he said.

“Never, I think, has Mrs. Lowe-Porter been confronted with such a challenging task.”

“Oh,” I said, having not imagined H. T. L.-P. to be anything in particular but surprised to learn that the name belonged to a woman.

“A deep knowledge of German is required, and much ingenuity, for some of my characters converse in dialect. And the Devil — for, yes, the Devil himself is a character in my book — speaks in the German of the sixteenth century,” Thomas Mann said, slowly, slowly. A thin-lipped smile. “I am afraid this will mean little to my American readers.”

I longed to say something reassuring, but didn’t dare.

Was he speaking so slowly, I wondered, because that was the way he talked? Or because he thought he had to speak slowly — assuming (be-
cause we were Americans? because we were children?) that otherwise we wouldn’t understand what he was saying?

“I regard this as the most daring book I have written.” He nodded at us. “My wildest book.”

“We look forward very much to reading it,” I said. I was still hoping he’d talk about The Magic Mountain.

“But it is as well the book of my old age,” he went on. A long, long pause. “My Parsifal,” he said. “And, of course, my Faust.”

He seemed distracted for a moment, as if recalling something. He lit another cigarette and turned slightly in his chair. Then he laid the cigarette in an ashtray and rubbed his mustache with his index finger; I remember I thought his mustache (I didn’t know anyone with a mustache) looked like a little hat over his mouth. I wondered if this meant the conversation was over.

But, no, he went on. I remember “the fate of Germany” . . . “the demonic” and “the abyss” . . . and “the Faustian bargain with the Devil.” Hitler occurred several times. (Did he bring up the Wagner-Hitler problem? I think not.) We did our best to show him that his words were not wholly lost on us.

At first I had seen only him, awe at his physical presence blinding me to the room’s contents. Now I was starting to see more. For instance, what was on the rather cluttered table: pens, inkstand, books, papers, and a nest of small photographs in silver frames, which I saw from the back. Of the many pictures on the walls, I recognized only a signed photograph of F.D.R. with someone else — I seem to remember a man in uniform — in the picture. And books, books, books in the floor-to-ceiling shelves that covered two of the walls. To be in the same room with Thomas Mann was thrilling, enormous, astounding. But I was also hearing the siren call of the first private library I had ever seen.

While Merrill carried the ball, showing that he was not entirely ignorant of the Faust legend, I was trying, without making the divagations of my glance too obvious, to case the library. As I expected, almost all the books were German, many in sets, leather-bound; the puzzle was that I could not decipher most of the titles (I didn’t know of the existence of Fraktur). The few American books, all recent-looking, were easy to identify in their bright, waxy jackets.

Now he was talking about Goethe . . .

As if we had indeed rehearsed what we would say, Merrill and I had found a nice, unstrained rhythm of putting questions whenever Thomas Mann’s glacial flow of words seemed to be drying up, and of showing our respectful appreciation of whatever he was saying. Merrill was being the Merrill I was so fond of: calm, charming, not stupid at all. I felt ashamed

that I’d assumed he would disgrace himself, and therefore me, in front of Thomas Mann. Merrill was doing fine. I was, I thought, doing so-so. The surprise was Thomas Mann, that he wasn’t harder to understand.

I wouldn’t have minded if he had talked like a book. I wanted him to talk like a book. What I was obscurely starting to mind was that (as I couldn’t have put it then) he talked like a book review.

Now he was talking about the artist and society, and he was using phrases I remembered from interviews with him I had read in The Saturday Review of Literature, a magazine I felt I’d outgrown since discovering the fancy prose and convoluted arguments of Partisan Review, which I had just started buying at the newsstand on Las Palmas. But, I reasoned, if I found what he said now a little familiar it was because I had read his books. He couldn’t know he had in me such a fervent reader. Why should he say anything he hadn’t already said? I refused to be disappointed.

I considered telling him that I loved The Magic Mountain so much that I had read it twice, but that seemed silly. I also feared he might ask me about some book of his which I had not read, though so far he hadn’t asked a single question. “The Magic Mountain has meant so much to me,” I finally ventured, feeling that it was now or never.

“It sometimes happens,” he said, “that I am asked which I consider to be my greatest novel.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yes,” said Merrill.

“I would say, and have so replied recently in interviews . . .” He paused. I held my breath. “The Magic Mountain.” I exhaled.

THE DOOR OPENED. Relief had come: the German wife, slow-gaited, bearing a tray with cookies, small cakes, and tea, which she bent over to set down on a low table in front of the sofa against one wall. Thomas Mann stood up, came around the table, and waved us toward the sofa; I saw he was very thin. I longed to sit down again, and did, next to Merrill, where we’d been told to sit, as soon as Thomas Mann occupied a wing chair nearby. Katia Mann was pouring tea from a heavy silver service into three delicate cups. As Thomas Mann put his saucer on his knee and raised the cup to his mouth (we followed, in unison), she said a few words in German to him in a low voice. He shook his head. His reply was in English — something like “It doesn’t matter” or “Not now.” She sighed audibly, and left the room.

Ah, he said, now we will eat. Unsmiling, he motioned to us to help ourselves to the cakes.

At one end of the low table that held the tray was a small Egyptian statuette, which sits in my memory as a funerary votive figure. It reminded
me that Thomas Mann had written a book called *Joseph in Egypt*, which in the course of a cursory browsing at the Pickwick I’d not found enticing. I resolved to give it another try.

No one spoke. I was aware of the intense, dedicated quiet of the house, a quiet I had never experienced anywhere indoors; and of the slowness and self-consciousness of each of my gestures. I sipped my tea, tried to control the crumbs from the cake, and exchanged a furtive glance with Merrill. Maybe it was over now.

Putting down his cup and saucer, then touching the corner of his mouth with the edge of his thick white napkin, Thomas Mann said that he was always pleased to meet American young people, who showed the vigor and health and fundamentally optimistic temper of this great country. My spirits sank. What I had dreaded — he was turning the conversation to us.

He asked us about our studies. Our studies! That was a further embarrassment. I was sure he hadn’t the faintest idea what a high school in Southern California was like. Did he know about Drivers’ Education (compulsory)? Typing courses? Wouldn’t he be surprised by the wrinkled condoms you spotted as you were darting across the lawn for first period (the campus was a favorite nighttime trysting spot) — my own surprise having revealed, the very first week I entered, my being two years younger than my classmates, because I’d witlessly asked someone why there were those little balloons under the trees? And by the “tea” being sold by a pair of parachutes (as the Chicanos kids were called) stationed along the left wall of the assembly building every morning recess? Could he imagine George, who, some of us knew, had a gun and got money from gas-station attendants? Ella and Nella, the dwarf sisters, who led the Bible Club boycott that resulted in the withdrawal of our biology textbook? Did he know Latin was gone, and Shakespeare, too, and that for months of tenth-grade English the visibly befuddled teacher handed out copies of the *Reader’s Digest* at the beginning of each period — we were to select one article and write a summary of it — then sat out the hour in silence at her desk, nodding and knitting? Could he imagine what a world away from the Gymnasium in his native Lübeck, where fourteen-year-old Tonio Kröger wooed Hans Hansen by trying to get him to read Schiller’s *Don Carlos*, was North Hollywood High School, alma mater of Farley Granger and Alan Ladd? He couldn’t, and I hoped he would never find out. He had enough to be sad about — Hitler, the destruction of Germany, exile. It was better that he not know how really far he was from Europe.

He was talking about “the value of literature” and “the necessity of protecting civilization against the forces of barbarity,” and I said, yes, yes . . . my conviction that it was absurd for us to be there — what, all week, I’d expected to feel — at least taking over. Earlier, we could only say something stupid. Actually having tea, the social ritual that gave a name to the whole proceeding, created new opportunities for disgrace. My worry that I would do something clumsy was driving out of my head whatever I might have ventured to say.

I remember beginning to wonder when it would not be awkward to leave. I guessed that Merrill, for all the impression he gave of being at ease, would be glad to go, too.

And Thomas Mann continued to talk, slowly, about literature. I remember my dismay better than what he said. I was trying to keep myself from eating too many cookies, but in a moment of absent-mindedness I did reach over and take one more than I had meant to. He nodded. Have another, he said. It was horrible. How I wished I could just be left alone in his study to look at his books.

He asked us who our favorite authors were, and when I hesitated (I had so many, and I knew I should mention only a few) he went on — and this I remember exactly: “I presume you like Hemingway. He is, such is my impression, the most representative American author.”

Merrill mumbled that he had never read Hemingway. Neither had I; but I was too taken aback to reply. How puzzling that Thomas Mann should be interested in Hemingway, who in my vague idea of him was a very popular author of novels that had been made into romantic movies (I loved Ingrid Bergman, I loved Humphrey Bogart) and wrote about fishing and boxing (I hated sports). He’d never sounded to me like a writer I ought to read. Or one my Thomas Mann would take seriously. But then I understood it wasn’t that Thomas Mann liked Hemingway but that we were supposed to like him.

Well, Thomas Mann said, what authors do you like?

Merrill said he liked Romain Rolland, meaning *Jean-Christophe*. And Joyce, meaning *Portrait of the Artist*. I said I liked Kafka, meaning *Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony*, and Tolstoy, meaning the late religious writings as much as the novels; and, thinking I must cite an American because he seemed to expect that, threw in Jack London, meaning *Martin Eden*.

He said that we must be very serious young people. More embarrassment. What I remember best is how embarrassing it was.

I was still worrying about Hemingway. Should I read Hemingway?

He seemed to find it perfectly normal that two local high-school students should know who Nietzsche and Schoenberg were . . . and up to now I’d simply rejoiced in this first foretaste of the world where such familiarity was taken for granted. But now he seemed also to want us to be two young Americans (as he imagined them); to be, as he was (as, I had
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no idea why, he thought Hemingway was), representative. I knew that was absurd. The whole point was that we didn’t represent anything at all. We didn’t even represent ourselves — certainly not very well.

Here I was in the very throne room of the world in which I aspired to live, even as the humblest citizen. (The thought of saying that I wanted to be a writer would no more have occurred to me than to tell him I breathed. I was there if I had to be there as admirer, not as aspirant to his caste.) The man I met had only sententious formulas to deliver, though he was the man who wrote Thomas Mann’s books. And I uttered nothing but tongue-tied simplicities, though I was full of complex feeling. We neither of us were at our best.

Strange that I don’t recall how it ended. Did Katia Mann appear and tell us that time was up? Did Thomas Mann say he must return to his work, receive our thanks for granting this audience, and take us to the study door? I don’t remember the goodbyes — how we were released. Our sitting on the sofa having tea and cakes cross-fades in my memory to being out on San Remo Drive again, getting into the car. After the dark study, the waning sun seemed bright: it was just past five-thirty.

Merrill started the car. Like two teen-age boys driving away after their first visit to a brothel, we evaluated our performance. Merrill thought it was a triumph. I was ashamed, depressed, though I agreed that we hadn’t made total fools of ourselves.

“Damn, we should have brought the book,” Merrill said, as we neared my neighborhood, breaking a long silence. “For him to sign.”

I gritted my teeth and said nothing.

“That was great,” said Merrill, as I got out of the car in front of my house.

I doubt we spoke of it again.

TEN MONTHS LATER, within days of the appearance of the much-heralded Doctor Faustus (Book-of-the-Month Club selection, first printing over a hundred thousand copies), Merrill and I were at the Pickwick, giddily eying the piles of identical books stacked on a metal table in the front of the store. I bought mine and Merrill his; we read it together.

Acclaimed as it was, his book didn’t do as well as Thomas Mann expected. The reviewers expressed respectful reservations, his American presence began to deflate slightly. The Roosevelt era was really over and the Cold War had started. He began to think of returning to Europe.

I was now within a few months of my big move, the beginning of real life. After January graduation, I started a term at the University of California at Berkeley, luckless George started doing his one-to-five at San Quen-
tin, and in the fall of 1949 I put Cal behind me and entered the University of Chicago, accompanied by Merrill and by Peter (both of whom had graduated in June), and studied philosophy, and then, and then... I went on to my life, which did turn out to be, mostly, just what the child of fourteen had imagined with such certitude.

And Thomas Mann, who had been doing time here, made his move. He and his Katia (who had become American citizens in 1944) were to leave Southern California, returning to the somewhat leveled magic mountain of Europe in 1952. There had been fifteen years in America. He had lived here. But he didn’t really live here.

Years later, when I had become a writer, when I knew many other writers, I would learn to be more tolerant of the gap between the person and the work. Yet even now the encounter still feels illicit, improper. In my experience deep memory is, more often than not, the memory of embarrassment.

I still feel the exhilaration, the gratitude for having been liberated from childhood’s asphyxiations. Admiration set me free. And embarrassment, which is the price of acutely experienced admiration. Then I felt like an adult, forced to live in the body of a child. Since, I feel like a child, privileged to live in the body of an adult. The zealot of seriousness in me, because it was already full-grown in the child, continues to think of reality as yet-to-be. Still sees a big space ahead, a far horizon. Is this the real world? I still ask myself that, forty years later... as small children ask repeatedly, in the course of a long tiring journey, “Are we there yet?” Childhood’s sense of plenitude was denied me. In compensation, there remains, always, the horizon of plenitude to which I am borne forward by the delights of admiration.

I never told anyone of the meeting. Over the years I have kept it a secret, as if it were something shameful. As if it happened between two other people, two phantoms, two provisional beings on their way elsewhere: an embarrassed, fervid, literature-intoxicated child and a god in exile who lived in a house in Pacific Palisades.