Chapter Six

The Interplay of Circular and Spiral Form in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*

In "Voyage with Don Quixote," Thomas Mann describes his reading of Cervantes' book during a sea voyage to America, interspersing comments on the novel with his impressions of the trip; the essay cannot help but remind one a bit of the way in which Cervantes himself interwove his various literary digressions with his observations on his hero's trip. Did Mann intentionally equate himself with Don Quixote? Mann's comments on Cervantes' novel are not, however, always complimentary. Reading the book in Tieck's translation, he was, of course, subject to a romantic interpretation, and he saw Cervantes as "the 'ingenio lego' who is not conscious of either his art or his fundamental convictions."¹ Mann writes, "It is precisely because they [E.T.A. Hoffmann and Cervantes] were artists in and beyond art that they came so dangerously near to the ironic dissolution of form."² Furthermore, he preferred the 1605 *Don Quixote* to the second part, seeing in the first part a naïvité and unpretentiousness without any conscious plan. "The second part has no longer the happy freshness and carelessness of the first," he writes, "which grew into a book of a whole people and of all humanity" "par hasard et par génie."³ When form does appear, then, in Cervantes' work, Mann judges it to be too scrupulous or self-conscious to count.

The conclusion of *Don Quixote* also disturbed Thomas Mann. He is dissatisfied with the conversion of the hero to sanity at the end and is shocked by the callousness of Don Quixote's friends after his death, failing to see as Leo Spitzer⁴ suggests that Cervantes' "prosaicness" in these scenes was doubtless a deliberate attempt to satirize the sentimentality and elaborate literary devices writers of fic-
tion employed in his day. As Cervantes so often demonstrated, his main purpose in *Don Quixote* was to destroy those writers of romance who denied reality.

Several times throughout the essay, Mann describes his own artistic stratagems in his Joseph books, always to Cervantes' disadvantage. Thus he sees the humor he himself creates (for example, in the scene where Joseph, sitting by the well, compares his real body with the ideal body with which the centuries have endowed him) as superior to what he judges to be often amorphous buffoonery in Cervantes' novel.⁵

It is clear, then, that Mann in his own work would wish to follow a different artistic course from that which he had observed in the reading of *Don Quixote*. It also must be clear, however, from earlier portions of this critical work that Cervantes' book was far less unstructured and formless than Mann judged it to be in the Tieck translation. Like Flaubert, Mann admired Cervantes' naturalness and lack of self-conscious artistry. At the same time, these qualities disturbed his Germanic sense of symmetry and form. Mann, the ironic German, did not appreciate the irony in his own employment of an art form whose structural foundations had been laid by a novelist Mann judged to compose with no conscious plan.

Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* is often cited as an example of what critics call the "philosophical novel,"⁶ the dialectic between Naphta and Settembrini giving partial support to this opinion, as does the book's contribution to metaphysics and to various views on the relation of appearance and reality. Mann's entire philosophy of process is an important underlying factor in the book, and, in order to give this philosophy body, he uses frequently various circular patterns within his story. In fact, the circle is the main objective correlative of his philosophy of time. Mann himself was aware of these facets of his work, for he wrote, "It passes beyond realism by means of symbolism, and makes realism a vehicle for intellectual and ideal elements."⁷
Erich Heller has pointed out that the circular motion of time has determined the form of Mann's work. Everything in the book moves in circles. Up and down, to and fro, have no real significance because as parts of circles they are easily confused or reversed. Everything returns to its starting point in one way or another. But it is not the closed circle of repetition, Nietzsche's "ewige Wiederkehr," that Mann celebrates (despite his earlier admiration for Nietzsche), for by 1924 the closed circle had become for Thomas Mann the equivalent of "measureless monotony" or routine (p. 547). In the ocean of time, one must chart a direction, but first one must abandon watch and compass in order to do so. Such abandonment is equivalent to the process of breaking out of a circular into a spiral reality. The hands of the watch, the routine of the Berghof, the needle of the compass—all describe closed circles, but true human activity is described in spiral form. Thus the early dualism established by the rudimentary conflict between Clavdia and Settembrini (between body and mind) gives way in chapter six to the more complex dualism between Naphta and Settembrini (between this world and the next), to be subsumed in the elaborate figure of Mynheer Peeperkorn, representing both Christ and Dionysius, in effect all the earlier points of view wrapped in one. Each episode transcends the previous one. At the same time Hans Castorp's own spiraling development, instead of following these exterior occurrences on the mountain, springs from three interior events, three germinal scenes (in the sections called "Snow," "The Fullness of Harmony," and "The Thunderbolt") that mark his progress in life and its resolution. The two spirals are, of course, not independent of one another; instead Mann establishes a contrapuntal effect.

The first circle of experience in which Hans is involved covers five chapters of the book, concluding with the Walpurgis Night scene. Within these first five chapters, we find also a myriad of lesser circles and spirals that are freely used by Mann as exponents of his philosophy of reality.
Hans's arrival at Davos-Dorf is the result of the spiral progress of the train into the higher regions of the Swiss Alps: "The train wound in curves along the narrow pass" (p. 4). The closed circle of experience that Hans is tentatively leaving is, however, symbolized by the christening basin (and plate) found in the title of chapter two. The christening basin forms, of course, a perfect circle of gilded metal, resting solid "on a round base" (p. 22). Furthermore, we learn that it had been in use "for a round hundred years" (p. 21) ("seit rund hundert Jahren"). Already the names of seven successive owners have been engraved on the back of the plate. Each time a new child has been held over the gilded bowl, the same words exactly have been spoken by the minister and the water has flowed over each child's head in "precisely the same way" (p. 23). Presumably one day Hans's name would be added to the list on the back of the plate, and his child would in turn be held over the basin in "precisely the same way." The reality described by this objective correlative is a frozen reality. Hans's grandfather has little use for the new, although Hans himself is often troubled, when observing the bowl, by a sense of both change and duration. His thoughts presage his own fate, which is, of course, to break out of the magic circle of the seven owners of this antique bowl. The fact that the one hundred years of its use are "round" suggests that they end exactly where they began. Hans's arrival, then, at the Berghof by means of a train that wound in spiral fashion up the mountains augurs for Hans a new beginning, a new direction, and perhaps even new growth. Even thirty-four, the number of his room at the Berghof, symbolically breaks in two the number seven (which for Mann represented a completed cycle), associated with the christening basin and plate. It is a well-known fact that Mann was fascinated by numbers and their possible mystical or symbolic significances.

In chapter three a different kind of circle is invoked, one that springs from the cyclical repetition inherent in myth. As Frederick J. Hoffman wrote: "The repetitive value of
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myth, as it appears and reappears in various guises and disguises, constitutes its true historical importance. The succession of such mythical occurrences causes a suspension of historical time, in favor of a time governed by racial, unconscious rhythms."\(^\text{11}\) Hans Mayer made the same point in different words: "For mankind there is no end. At the heels of a dying epoch, follows a new beginning."\(^\text{12}\) Thus we find ourselves in the third section of chapter three in the circles of a Dantean hell, ruled over by Satana (or Settembrini) and judged by a modern Minos and Rhadamanthus (Hofrat Behrens and Dr. Krokowski). Ascent and descent become suddenly reversed as Herr Settembrini informs Hans that his trip up five thousand feet was "only seeming" (p. 58). The past described in this section is unlike the closed circle of tradition found in chapter two, for Mann shows us that myth and legend are capable of modification as the wheel of fate turns. Hans in repeating the experience of Dante in "descending" to hell finds a new Virgil (Settembrini) to act as guide. This modern Virgil recites Latin verse with an Italian pronunciation, but summons Hans in words taken from his predecessor: "Let us go together, our way is the same: the 'path on the right that shall lead to the halls of the mightiest Dis'" (p. 62).

The particular Satana (also Settembrini) discovered in these "lower" regions is a humanistic one, drawn from Carducci, a Satan of rebellion against blind authority represented by the modern judges Minos and Rhadamanthus. "There is a good deal up here that is positively mediaeval" (p. 61), Settembrini further informs Hans. In fact, Hofrat Behrens, who is subject to melancholia, and Dr. Krokowski, always clad in black, have established a kind of medieval Chamber of Horrors at the Berghof, according to Hans's new friend, who also insists that the directress, Frau Adriatic, must first have seen the light of day in the thirteenth century.

The circular reality proposed in this section of the book is abstract or theoretical, not expressed by means of an ob-
jective correlative like the christening basin. Nevertheless, as we know from his Joseph books, Mann was strongly drawn to the idea of cyclical return, of generation upon generation working through the same experiences and returning always to the same point, sometimes, of course, with a difference. One of the basic principles behind the Joseph books was the revolving sphere of Sumerian-Babylonian mythology. In his essay "Voyage with Don Quixote," Mann had remarked that as a teller of tales he had reached the stage of myth: "I would humanize it, would seek, in my unlimited contempt for the soulfully and wilfully barbaric, a rapprochment between humanity and myth." Thus Dante himself in his descent to hell merely followed creatively many legendary predecessors, and Mann's Satana springs from antecedents without number (for example, the devils of Ivan Karamazov, Faust, and Milton). For Mann a recognition of the historical and mythical past living within us all was a creative recognition, leading to a sense of role as well as to the urge to reconstruct this role on one's own terms, thus preventing experience from becoming a closed circle. At the end of chapter three, Settembrini (Satana, Virgil), sensing Hans's initial infatuation with the ailing Frau Chauchat and fearing just such a closed circle of experience for his "Dante," urges Hans to leave the Berghof, but without success. Hans glances into the next room and his eyes fall on the full face of Clavdia Chauchat, once more triggering a half-formed memory of his schoolboy friend, Pribislav Hippe.

As a result chapter four is permeated with the imagery of the closed circle. To begin with, Hans's sense of time fades, confronted by the closed circle of routine that takes its place and that is followed punctiliously day after day at the Berghof. Complete uniformity is achieved as the hours "scurry by like dead leaves" (p. 105). The endless repetitions of the Mexican lady, "Tous-les-deux," provide another kind of deadly closed circle. Furthermore, Hans has now become fully cognizant of Clavdia's similarity to Pribislav Hippe, and he relives with her his schoolboy in-
fatuation. “How remarkably like her he looked,” he thinks, “like this girl up here!” (p. 123). And to pick one more closed circle at random, we find the sun and the moon, one rising, the other setting, “from day to night and back again to day” (p. 154) in the scene that Hans remembers from his past when he rowed upon a lake in Holstein.

“A continuous present, an identity, an everlastingness” (p. 183) are described in chapter five in the first section entitled “Soup Everlasting.” Another section is entitled “The Dance of Death,” the circular dance suggesting the real motivation behind Hans’s and Joachim’s new and sudden interest in the moribund, for it is perhaps an attempt by means of empty repetition of form (the visits, the flowers, and the condolences) to conquer the death that they, too, must ultimately face. As Hans says at the beginning of the enterprise, “It will do me good” (p. 295).

In the final section of chapter five, “Walpurgis-Night,” we complete the first large circle of Hans’s experience on the magic mountain, for the ascent of the Brocken implied in the title carries us back to Hans’s ascent of the “magic mountain” in chapter one. The carnival season, the festival, for Mann is fraught with significance, for through such points inserted into the normal and monotonous round of existence, transcendence (or Steigerung) can be achieved. “A feast is an anniversary,” Mann wrote, “a renewal of the past in the present.” Only by returning to a specific point (for example, this festival marking the beginning of summer) can one assess and master one’s life because such points provide us with contrasts and comparisons, and, like the risers of a staircase, with perspective. Mann refers to them as always alchemistic (p. 725). But at this festival, Hans achieves no such Steigerung because he manages merely to repeat fruitlessly with Clavdia the school scene in which he had asked Pribislav Hippe for a pencil, without learning from it or seeing it in perspective. Mann’s use of the Leitmotiv in this scene, the pencil and Clavdia’s “Kirghiz eyes,” is, as Erich Heller points out, a “literary symptom of a metaphysical belief towards which he in-
clined."\textsuperscript{16} For through the \textit{Leitmotiv}, Mann creates a sense of reenactment or return in time. The pencil here suggests the circular nature of reality, and Hans's love for Clavdia will be as unyielding of results as his love for Pribislav had been.\textsuperscript{17} Faust, too, on his famous Walpurgis-Night had danced with a young witch. The summer promised by Hans's infatuation with Clavdia becomes, therefore, a blighted one, and the departure of Clavdia from the Berghof means that Satana's pupil must seek elsewhere for his answers.

II

Another circle of experience begins shortly thereafter for Hans Castorp with the coming of Herr Naphta to the village. His arrival coincides, of course, with another festival, the summer solstice or Midsummer Night, the beginning of another round. Mann writes, "But the motion by which one measures time is circular, is in a closed circle; and might almost equally be described as rest" (p. 344), suggesting that the experience of Hans at present is also a closed circle, and it continues to be as he listens tirelessly to the endless, fruitless, and repetitive debates of Naphta and Settembrini that lead to no resolution.

However, toward the end of chapter six we find Hans lost in a snowstorm and returning again and again "tipsy" and "giddy" to the same hay hut. "You went in a circle, gave yourself endless trouble under the delusion that you were accomplishing something, and all the time you were simply describing some great silly arc that would turn back to where it had its beginning, like the riddling year itself" (p. 487). The double significance of this statement is clear when we consider Hans's present predicament as well as the nature of human reality. Circular reality is further underlined as Hans once more remembers giving "the ailing Clavdia Chauchat back son crayon—his, Pribislav Hippe's, pencil" (p. 489).

Nevertheless, his near brush with death in the snow turns out for Hans to be his first successful escape from the
closed circles in which he has been imprisoned into a new round of spiral reality. After his dream he knows that, as in the snow, he has ‘‘wandered lost with Settembrini and Naphta’’ (p. 495). Because of this symbolic experience of ‘‘descent’’ into the grave (his dream of witches dismembering a child), despite the heights on which he has wandered, Hans is reborn and now recognizes that the position of Homo Dei lies neither in the ‘‘mystic community’’ of Naphta nor in the ‘‘windy individualism’’ of Settembrini, but somewhere in the middle. ‘‘Only love, not reason, gives sweet thoughts’’ (p. 496), yet love ‘‘always in silent recognition of the blood-sacrifice’’ (p. 496). As R. Hinton Thomas points out, Hans experiences in the chapter ‘‘Snow’’ ‘‘the deeper essence of time, quality as against quantity.’’

It is Joachim, less fortunate than Hans, who, in the final section of this chapter, fulfills the prophecy of the opening page, of time as a ‘‘closed circle.’’ We learn that Joachim must ‘‘give up his soldier’s career and return to the horizontal’’ (p. 502); and one day the same train brings him back that had brought Hans, the same time of year, the first days of August. ‘‘It has just begun’’ (p. 502). Years had passed, ‘‘very eventful yet ‘the sum of nothing’’’ (p. 502).

Likewise we learn that Clavdia is returning, and Settembrini taunts Hans with: ‘‘Your Beatrice is returning? Your guide through all nine circles of Paradise? I must hope that you will not scorn the friendly hand of your Virgil’’ (p. 519). Both Virgil and Beatrice have led Hans to fruitless repetitions.

But it is Joachim’s life that in its single-minded devotion to the military describes the perfect closed circle of experience. His last thoughts as he lies dying concern writing an application for an extension of his leave, and the Hofrat sums up his life with the cryptic ‘‘Honour was the death of him’’ (p. 539). Did Mann, intimating still another closed circle, have in mind Brentano’s hero Kasper? As a final tribute to the ‘‘ewige Wiederkehr’’: ‘‘It had been decided to take Joachim home’’ (p. 539).
In the new circle that begins with the return of Clavdia, accompanied by the Dutchman, Mynheer Peeperkorn, Hans has the opportunity to put into practice the lessons he has learned from his dream in the snow in chapter six. As a result Mynheer Peeperkorn and Hans become "brothers," Hans having passed the period of probation. "Let us give free rein to brotherly feeling" (p. 611), Peeperkorn proposes. And after Peeperkorn's suicide, Hans and Clavdia become brother and sister (like Alyosha and Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*) as he moves to kiss her on the forehead, a kiss he had been unable to bestow in Peeperkorn's presence. "For the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts" (p. 497).

Peeperkorn himself, of course, in his majestic hypocrisy and hubris ("he regarded himself as the instrument of God's marriage" p. 624), is a grotesque synthesis of all opposites. He thereby neutralizes all experience, for not even his admirers can hear him as he orates by the thunderous waterfall, thunder drowning out thunder. This figure represents the ultimate in meaningless circularity. His final signature before his suicide is to wave his beaker "half-circle before the assembled guests" (p. 621). Although Mann uses the word *dynamic* to describe him, it is a dynamism directed to empty forms and fetishes, that is, to no real end, a wasted power.

It is in the section of chapter seven called "The Fullness of Harmony," however, that Mann's answers to Hans's interminable questions about life may be found. It is a reinforcement and a rounding out of the insight granted to Hans in the "Snow" section and serves as the culminating point in the book, offering a positive philosophy of love in answer to life's problems. When Hans becomes manager of the gramophone, we are provided with a fascinating new objective correlative for Mann's concept of reality. The grooves of the gramophone record (or the moving needle
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of the machine) describe a spiral pattern, inward to the vortex, the still center, thus combining the principles of Castorp's two mentors, both essence and existence. We are consequently involved with a process of circular reality whereby the needle continually returns to the same point, but a point removed by a fraction of an inch in its course toward the still center. As we have said, it is this spiral form that for Mann denotes progress away from the closed circles of experience described in the flatlands and in the monotony of the Haus Berghof. The spiral allows for what Mann calls *Steigerung*, or "heightening." It was a principle that Mann probably had from Goethe, who saw it as an intensification. *Steigerung* was not for Goethe a sense of ascending process but "the mechanism of concentration and refinement."\(^{21}\) It is in this sense that Hans achieves the "fullness of harmony," both the intensity and the ability to give form to his dream of perfection.

In essence what we find in this section, "The Fullness of Harmony," are five different records, each one providing Hans with new perspectives by repeating various cycles of his own life on the mountain. The passage from *Aida* replays the experience of Clavdia and Hans, buried alive on the mountain as Radames and Aida had been buried beneath the temple. It is a Freudian principle that repetition of experience through art may help one to mastery of experience. "The Afternoon of a Faun" retells Hans's early days in the sanatorium as "goat-legged" he pursued both Clavdia and research into biology, anatomy, and physiology. *Carmen* revives the story of Joachim and Marusja as does the Prayer from Gounod's *Faust*, while at the same time the Prayer mirrors the brother-sister relationship that has developed between Hans and Clavdia. The fifth record, a song by Schubert, however, provides the ultimate answer for Hans and for Mann. The linden tree stands at the center of process "am Brunnen von dem Tore," the spring and the gate representing life and its challenge. The hero of the song rejects the delusion of peace and rest offered by the tree's sheltering branches.
Instead he elects the tension of life, the wind blowing straight in his face, death as a part of a life process, for life feeds on life.

Die kalten Winde bliesen
Mir grad’ in’s Angesicht
Der Hut flog mir von Köpfen
Ich wendete mich nicht.  

(The cold winds blew
Straight in my face
My hat flew from my head
I did not turn.)

Form and civilization, Mann writes, "always in silent recognition of the blood-sacrifice" (p. 496). "Ah, it was worth dying for the enchanted lied!" (p. 653).

Mann deplores the faked repetition, the trumpery of Joachim’s return in the séance scene—those who would tamper with the phenomenon of the circle, using pretense and deception to make a mockery of natural process. Although Mann was often drawn to experiment with the séance itself, he appears in this section, "Highly Questionable," to be thoroughly disillusioned with its mimicry. Joachim sits with "hollow, shadowy cheeks, warrior’s beard and full, curling lips" (p. 680); and Hans is able only to whisper, "Forgive me!" (p. 681), as his eyes overflow with tears.

The third and final experience of Steigerung that Hans undergoes comes only at the end when he completes the large circle of his seven years on the magic mountain and descends to the flatland, but not as the Hans Castorp who had arrived with his book on ocean steamships in the first pages of the novel. It has taken the thunderbolt (the title of the final section) of World War I to crack open the closed circle of these seven years of his life and to change them to spiral form. He returns down below in a new role, one denoting penance and a sense of community or social cognizance, as we see him on the battlefield "limping on his earthbound feet" (p. 715), and humming Schubert’s song:
And loving words I've carven
Upon its branches fair—"

According to Mann, "World War I forced us out of the metaphysical and individual stage into the social."\textsuperscript{23}

In the last paragraph, the "dream of love," discovered both in the snow scene and in the "Fullness of Harmony" section, is restated in Mann's farewell address to his hero; it is the third playing of the central theme of the book. For out of the "rainwashed evening sky" (p. 716), out of disease, suffering, and death, comes their opposite, the "fiery glow" of Love. Freud had preceded Mann in showing how Thanatos and Eros play against one another in our lives. "There is as it were an oscillating rhythm in the life of organisms: the one group of instincts [Thanatos] presses forward to reach the final goal of life as quickly as possible, the other [Eros] flies back at a certain point on the way only to traverse the same stretch once more from a given spot and thus to prolong the duration of the journey."\textsuperscript{24} We discover here in summary the conflicting forces that have beset Hans Castorp in the hermetic atmosphere of the magic mountain. "For man himself is a mystery, and all humanity rests upon reverence before the mystery that is man" (p. 729).

3. Ibid., p. 436.
4. Leo Spitzer, "Thomas Mann y la muerte de Don Quijote.'
8. Erich Heller, \textit{The Ironic German}, p. 239.
10. Harry Slochower writes of the importance of seven as a symbol in \textit{The Magic Mountain}, the number seven representing the completion of a


15. Ibid., p. 425.


17. See Church, p. 149.


20. See chapter four on *The Brothers Karamazov*, section two.


