



Winterreise and Der Zauberberg, a
multi-layered approach to Nature

Matthias Drescher

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By: Matthias Drescher

(Transcription of the speech)

Dear Giacomo, dear Thorsten, thank you so much for arranging this very attractive symposium. When you sent the invitation, Mathias Wendt, Giovanni Banfi and I had just decided to prepare a little concert event. It will focus on two major works of art: on the one hand, on a famous series of songs, the so called *Winterreise*, by Franz Schubert, which is based on the poems of a young poet called Wilhelm Müller. The other subject will be the novel *Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)* by Thomas Mann and how this novel has been influenced by the *Winterreise* of Schubert and Müller. The book, *Der Zauberberg*, is one of the most famous German novels. It was published in 1924, 100 years ago, while the poems of the *Winterreise* were published in 1824, precisely 200 years ago. So, the timing seems very good - and in fact, your invitation itself sounds a bit as if you wanted to celebrate the book.

Obviously, this is not the case, but nevertheless, the overlap between our subjects is such, that we felt encouraged to present some of our ideas. To make it simple, we decided that I would speak alone, so that Giovanni and Mathias Wendt don't bear a responsibility.

I hope that you don't mind if I don't focus on mountains, but more generally on nature. And, as I have to emphasize here, I only mean Nature in Western Art, not in China, for instance. Anyhow, Nature is a unifying experience for us all and it has been used as a kind of language by the three artists of our project. All three of them were fluent

in it, so to say, and they all three have added their specific accent. Nevertheless, they are very different, with very different talents: a poet, a composer and a novel writer.

The poet was first. Wilhelm Müller was a young intellectual at the time of German romanticism. He published a series of 24 poems in 1824, as I said. He used images of nature, of travelling in a winterly landscape, to describe the loneliness and the sadness of the traveller. His (the traveller's) heart was broken by love, and possibly, if you look more closely, by political repression.

Nowadays, romantic representations of nature are very familiar to us. We are used to them, especially to the dreamy and the spectacular ones, like a sunset on the beach, for instance. In fact, when such images are produced today, we regard them as a little cheap and even as kitsch.

But in Müller's time, this way of expressing one's sensitivity was still quite new. In German literature, it had appeared in the second half of the 18th century. Actually, one of the first great books which celebrates nature in order to describe the deep feelings of the writer was the novel *Werther* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. It was published in 1774, that means 250 years ago - another nice anniversary. Although this sounds like a long time ago, we could as well be surprised. Why have German poets only started so late to use Nature in an emotional manner? Hasn't it been around since ever and are we not all exposed to it, so that it is a perfect platform to transmit our feelings?

In fact, Nature has been a subject of great poetry very early on - just think of Homer, Vergil or Walther von der Vogelweide, the early German poet. So, what's new? Don't worry, I know that this is an enormous subject, and that it is much too big for this occasion. What I do want to emphasize at this point is the change and the development. Wilhelm Müller may have had similar feelings as the young Goethe and he probably was influenced by him, but it stops there. Before Goethe, we do not see that sensitivity yet, at least not with German authors. And although there are beautiful images of Nature in ancient poetry, like with Walter von der Vogelweide, there have been long epochs which did not use them for their soft feelings. Therefore, Müller's natural imagery was relatively new and, at the same time, it was somehow fleeting and temporary. It was soon outdated, as we can see by our own reaction when someone uses it today. This is what I want to stress at this point.

Anyway, Franz Schubert was a contemporary of Wilhelm Müller and he was of almost the same age. Therefore, he did not have any difficulty in accepting Müller's language – all of the contrary. He felt strongly inspired and he has followed Müller's text closely. Although he must have agreed with its political complaint, his (and Müller's) main point in common is the expression of loneliness. This is what Schubert's music is about in an overwhelming manner. It is so overwhelming that in fact it lets us forget our slight distance to the simple poetry of Müller and it elevates the whole to a great expression of human feelings.

Müller and Schubert were both specialized artists and they both worked independently to express their per-

sonal sentiments. They did not know each other and yet they created one coherent masterpiece of art, in a two-layered approach. What helped them was their common German language, but also their similar sensitivity for nature. It gave them a common ground on which they could express their anxieties. It seems that it needed this common ground with another artist to let Schubert write his best music which touches everybody.

As you may notice, I am insisting on two things: First, that the sensitivity to Nature as shown in the poems of Müller was a relatively new phenomenon and that his way to express it was temporary and transitory. Second, that the emotional truth of the *Winterreise* is due to Schubert's deep understanding of Müller's imagery.

Together, this means that the *Winterreise*, as a masterpiece of artistic co-operation, is the result of a very rare event. It is due to the coincidence in time and in sensitivity of two artists whose talents complement each other. We should be particularly happy about it and we can hardly hope for another, similar coincidence.

Nevertheless, there is another piece of art which has been strongly influenced by Müller, so to say, and that is *Der Zauberberg*, *The Magic Mountain*. It is not a symbiosis within one same generation, like between Müller and Schubert, but a far distance impact. Ian Bostridge, the famous singer, a tenor, has described this impact, and in our little concert, Mathias Wendt will compare some extracts of the novel with specific songs of the *Winterreise*.

The influence is remarkable, especially if we take into account how much everything had changed in one

Davos.

Kurha



Switzerland Davos - Kurhaus & Promenade, Tomaszewski postcard, 1908

us.

Promenade.



century. Let me stress one aspect: The *Winterreise* describes a scenery which was realistic at its time. A lonely man walking past barking dogs in a freezing cold – that's how travelling could look like in these days. To us, the settings of the poems, like the stagecoach and the post horn, seem romantic in themselves. But initially, they were a part of the real life of Müller and Schubert, and this real life was used to illustrate their feelings.

In one century, this reality had almost disappeared. Life had become fast and technical, urbanized and so on. Hans Castorp, the main character of *The Magic Mountain*, travelled to Davos (where the story takes place) in a comfortable train ride. Nevertheless, the book was meant as a *Winterreise*, a winter voyage, par excellence. So, it very obviously connected to Schubert's famous piece, especially in the morbid atmosphere of Davos, which at the time was the place to cure tuberculosis.

One would expect that the book will show this connection to the *Winterreise* even more directly, and in fact, it does: there is a long chapter called *Snow*, which lets the hero get lost in the deep snow of Davos and in his own hallucinations. It shows the similarities as well as a fundamental difference between the two works of art. The traveller of the *Winterreise* is suffering an existential crisis and his voyage takes place in a realistic surrounding. It is so tough that it even lets him hallucinate for a while. Nevertheless, it remains an immediate experience, both physical and emotional, and Schubert and Müller transmit their feelings as directly as it is imaginable, without any loss.

Hans Castorp, instead, is a sensitive and spoiled young man. His experi-

ence in Davos is existential too, but in a soft manner and it illustrates ironically how Thomas Mann perceives the world. The story seems realistic, just like in the *Winterreise*, but its message is not direct. The readers are not carried away by their feelings, but they discover, appreciate and are amused by the wisdom of the writer. Even the adventure in the snow is full of irony. Although the surrounding is harsh, the readers don't suffer. In fact, they don't pay much attention to the nature as it is described, but they try to understand the meaning of the text.

Very simply said, *Winterreise* is an emotional experience, while *Der Zauberberg* is intellectual. For Müller and Schubert, Nature had still been an immediate and unquestionable fact of life. Thomas Mann, instead, has experienced the repackaged version. Therefore, his book is not very forceful when it comes to Nature, but it rather uses it as a building block of a world panorama. We could say that a piece of art, that means the *Winterreise*, has taken over the role which in Müller's poetry was the one of Nature alone. For Thomas Mann, this art is an inspiration, a guide and an imagery, almost like the wintery nature had inspired Müller and Schubert.

That lets me come back to what I emphasized before: although our relation to Nature appears almost eternal, its treatment in Art has always been changing. Until recently, this was due exclusively to the human mind, because Nature itself remained almost unchanged. What did change was the way humans would see it.

Then, shortly after Wilhelm Müller and Franz Schubert, this stability was lost. Western societies started to have a strong impact on Nature. Not in a slow manner, like it had always hap-

pened, but very fast. Industry, big cities, factories, train traffic etc – all that somehow reduced Nature in size and it increased its distance to people. Suddenly, the development of the human mind had provoked a feedback loop, in which humans had an impact on Nature and, subsequently, became themselves influenced by this impact.

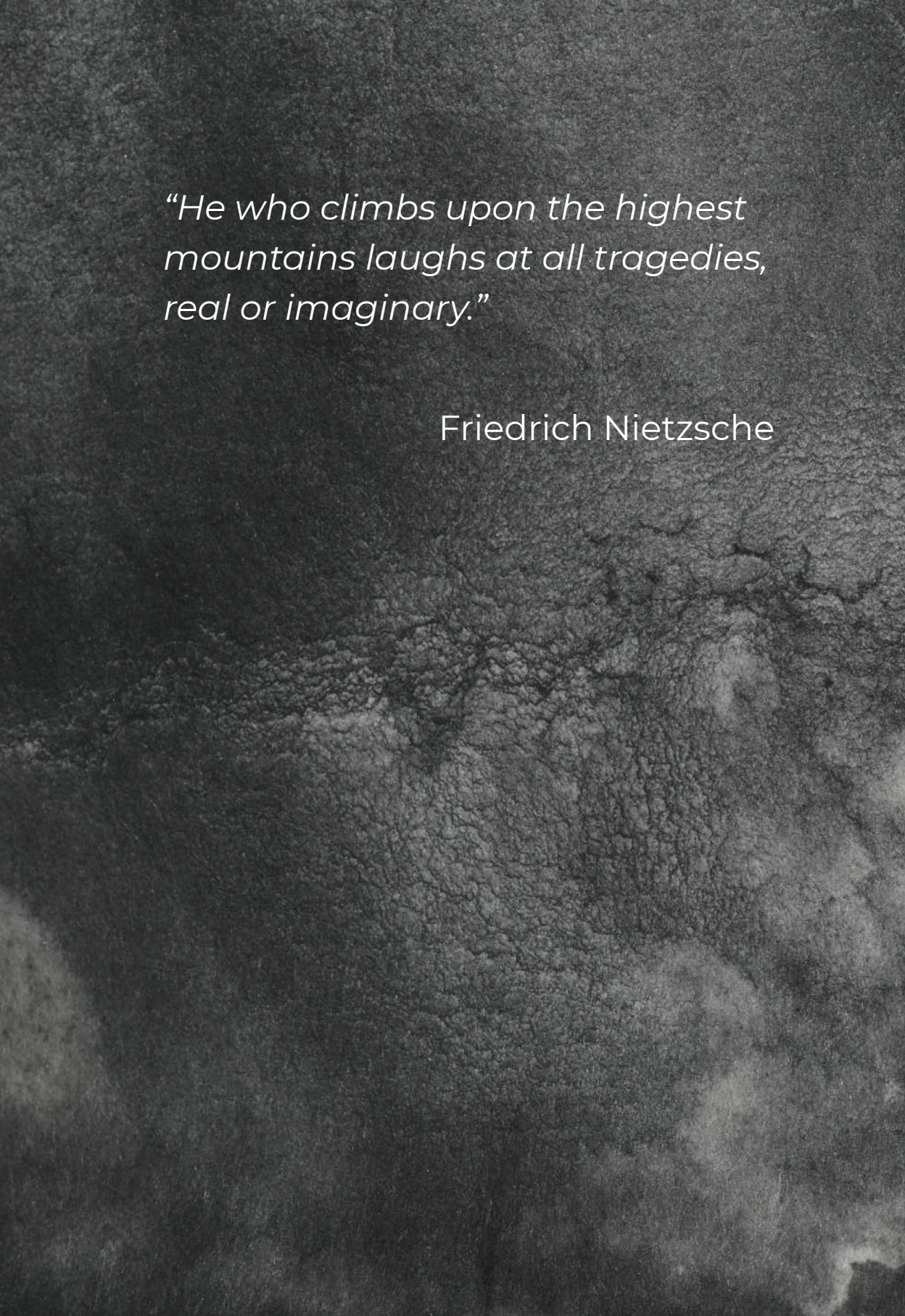
As usual, artists were among the first to react. For them, the sudden change and the distance were a strong challenge. Just consider the discussions in Paris between academic painters and impressionists. After a while, nobody could keep up the traditional, immediate reaction to Nature, because they were not exposed to it anymore - not in the old way. And when they did as if nothing had happened, their art was considered as academic and as kitsch.

In this dramatic development, a hundred years are a long time. Thomas Mann had not experienced what the *Winterreise* describes, nor did he want to reflect that kind of experience. Instead, he produced a vast panorama of modern life, and for that panorama, he sort of processed the *Winterreise*. He must have been deeply impressed by its intensity and its existential depth. Nevertheless, he does not try to create the same intensity, but he lets the reader reflect about it. He prefers to transmit deep thoughts rather than deep feelings. Certainly, that was his personal choice and also a matter of talent. He was not a poet, but a novel writer and he does not speak for other artists. In fact, Art has not stopped to provoke profound feelings, there is no doubt about that.

Nevertheless, and coming to a conclusion, I think that the comparison of *Winterreise* and *Der Zauberberg* shows an important turning point. It shows that the ancient role of Na-

ture will not be the same again. We knew that we cannot enter the same river twice. Still, what happened here is more than that. It is fundamental and it has come very suddenly. I believe that we are not yet fully aware of all its implications. There are many of them, but I would like to stress one. It works in two directions, the first is the following: The less we are exposed to Nature how it used to be, the less can we grasp how it inspired the ancient artists. As simple as that. It means that we are being cut off from an important element of our art tradition. This is not easy to digest and art historians will hold against it. They have always been good at sophisticated interpretations. But in fact, the only consolation which really helps, may come from the development itself. As I said, there are two directions. Nature is being cut back, that is inevitable and we have to cope with it. But for the same reason, ancient art is gaining a surprising new role. As we know, much of its strength was provoked by the impact of Nature. Consequently, great art is a perfect testimony of this impact. It may not go into details, but it is conserving and transmitting the essence of it, namely the feelings of the artist. And although we will not fully understand them, we will be touched by these feelings and we will continue to respond to them - just like Thomas Mann has responded to the emotional depth of the *Winterreise*.

Thank you for your attention.



*"He who climbs upon the highest
mountains laughs at all tragedies,
real or imaginary."*

Friedrich Nietzsche

