

Balthus's Mountain Guide Revisited

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IN THIS BRIEF NOTE I will reveal the identity of the actual model for the figure of the mountain guide in Balthus's large painting *The Mountain* (1937) (Figure 1). Many years ago I rashly related this figure to one by an obscure eighteenth-century Swiss painter whose work Balthus had copied, to which it bears only a superficial resemblance; probably I was seduced by the fact that both men are shown smoking pipes.¹ Balthus himself regarded *The Mountain* as a *tableau clef*.² He displayed in the painting, his largest to that date, a rich brew of references—veiled ones with regard to figures taken from his own life, transparent ones with regard to figures borrowed from the painters he admired. In the picture's subtitle—it was exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1939 with the label "Summer: the first of four panels depicting the seasons"—Balthus paid homage to Poussin's famous allegorical landscape cycle of the Four Seasons (1660–64).³ The overall composition of the painting was, however, based on Courbet's *Young Women from the Village* (1852; inv. 40.1754) in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Mountain presents an imaginary plateau at the top of the Niederhorn, a mountain in the Bernese Oberland of Switzerland. Having taken a cable lift to the top of the mountain in the summer of 1980, I can confirm that Balthus's landscape is composed of real, though transformed, elements, as well as invented ones. All the mountains can be identified, from the Sigriswiler Rothorn on the left to the Burgfeld Stand on the right, across the deep valley of the Justistal, the actual width of which has been suppressed. At the foot of the Niederhorn, out of view and a day's hike away, lies Beatenberg, the quaint Swiss village above Lake Thun where Balthus spent several of the summers and autumns of his youth, between 1922 and 1927.

As I have written elsewhere in greater detail, in the pose of the sturdy sleeping *Wandervogel* (Figure 2) Balthus continued his reference to Poussin by evoking

the figure of Narcissus from the latter's *Echo and Narcissus* (ca. 1627).⁴ Balthus had copied this exquisite small painting in the Louvre in 1925.⁵ The actual model for the sleeping figure in *The Mountain*, however, was seventeen-year-old Sheila Pickering (1918–1978), an exuberant English friend who lived in Paris and had delighted Balthus with her mischievous adventures. Sheila, who later married the English journalist Sam White, had posed earlier for Balthus; the result, *Sheila, Princess of Cats* (1935; private collection, New York), is a companion work to the artist's *Self-Portrait as King of Cats* (1935; private collection, Switzerland).

While the *Wandervogel* sleeps after the strenuous climb to the peak, her tall blonde companion is already up and about, stretching against the deep blue sky (Figure 3). The model for the blonde Amazon, whose arms reach so dramatically above her head that they echo the peaks of the mountains, was a twenty-five-year-old Swiss woman, Antoinette de Watteville (1912–1997), from an old and prominent Bern family. Antoinette and one of her brothers, Robert, had been Balthus's friends since the late 1920s. He stayed in their family mansion when visiting Bern, and he courted Antoinette for some seven years. Unknown and without prospects, Balthus had little to offer as a suitor to Antoinette, who disdained to become the wife a "poor artist." As it happened, however, she broke her engagement to a diplomat and finally consented to become the artist's wife in April 1937.

The posture of the pensive mountain guide (Figure 4) recalls that of the kneeling figure in Courbet's *Stone Breakers* (1850; destroyed). The actual model for the guide, however, according to a recently discovered letter from Balthus, was the handsome young peasant Fritz Grossniklaus (1905–1928).⁶ Balthus had known Fritz during the summers of his youth in Beatenberg. Three years older than Balthus, Fritz was one of the five children of the baker of Beatenberg, also named Fritz Grossniklaus (1875–1945). Each summer the younger Fritz took his cows up to the meadows of the Niederhorn. In the only surviving photograph of Fritz,

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Figure 1. Balthus (1908–2001). *The Mountain*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 98 x 144 in. (249 x 366 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Nate B. Spingold and Nathan Cummings, Rogers Fund and The Alfred N. Punnett Endowment Fund, by exchange, and Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1982 (1982.530)

from about 1921, he is shown with one of his cows (Figure 5). Fritz died of peritonitis in 1928, at the age of twenty-three. In *The Mountain*, Fritz is thus shown nine years after his actual death. However, his sixteen-year-old features in the photograph—the broad chin, almond-shaped eyes, finely drawn eyebrows, and curve of dark hair over the forehead—resemble those of his reincarnation as a thirty-two-year-old man in *The Mountain*. When Balthus painted the picture in 1937, he did not know that Fritz had died. He learned this only later, as he explains in the same letter: “many years ago in Bern (when it was not yet so degraded by sex-shops), I was told by Marili, whom I met in the street, of the death of her brother Fritz, who is depicted in the painting *La Montagne*.”⁷

Balthus had spent several months of 1927 in Beatenberg, from April until the end of June, painting wall decorations for the small Protestant village church. During that spring Balthus had already chosen one of

Fritz’s relatives—his distant cousin, fourteen-year-old Egon Grossniklaus (1913–1996)—as the model for the main figure of the church decoration, the coquettish Good Shepherd. The irreverence of Balthus’s colorful wall paintings had led to their removal during the church’s restoration in the autumn of 1934. Balthus was deeply hurt over this decision by the Beatenberg parish church council, and he never returned to Beatenberg.

Thus, when painting *The Mountain* in 1937, Balthus had not seen the familiar landscape for ten years. So that he could refresh his memory of it, he asked Antoinette, who at that time was in Switzerland, to send him pictures or postcards of the view from the Niederhorn.⁸ Likewise, when painting Fritz Grossniklaus, who was indigenous to the landscape, he must have done so from no-longer-extant studies or drawings that he had made of him in 1927, during the artist’s last stay in Beatenberg. The addition of ten

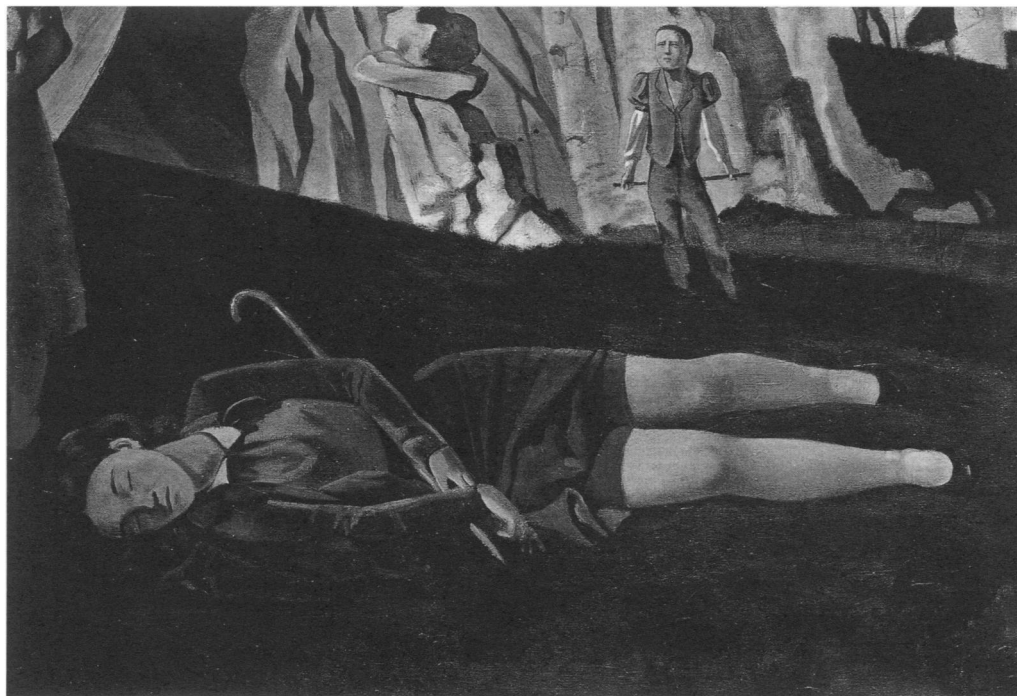


Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1

years to the young model's age seems to have required no leap of imagination on the painter's part.

The Mountain alludes to, among other things, the artist's marriage to Antoinette de Watteville. Her final capitulation must have suggested to Balthus that he had become acceptable both as a man and as an artist—especially since she married him only after his first exhibition in Paris in 1934 had catapulted him, if not to fame, then to notoriety, and he had been chosen by members of Parisian society to paint their portraits. Interwoven with these multilayered, personal allusions in *The Mountain* may also be an allegory from the writings of Pierre Jean Jouve (1887–1976), a close friend, which had probably struck a chord with Balthus's own situation as an artist at that particular time. Jouve's *La scène capitale* had appeared in 1935, two years before Balthus painted *The Mountain*. The book contains two novellas: *La victime*, a work dedicated to Balthus—with a title Balthus reused for one of his paintings—and *Dans les années profondes*. The second novella takes place in an Alpine region of the Engadine and contains literary images the magical clarity of which corresponds to the sharpness that forms can assume in high mountain regions, not unlike the forms in Balthus's painting. The novella tells of the love of the young poet Léonide for Hélène, a beautiful married woman. She finally yields to him but dies during their lovemaking. Only when the poet



Figure 3. Detail of Figure 1

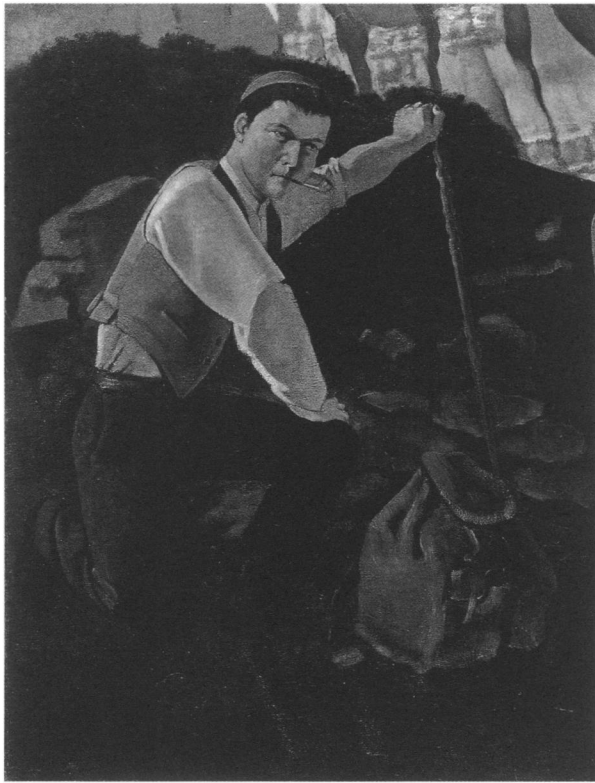


Figure 4. Detail of Figure 1

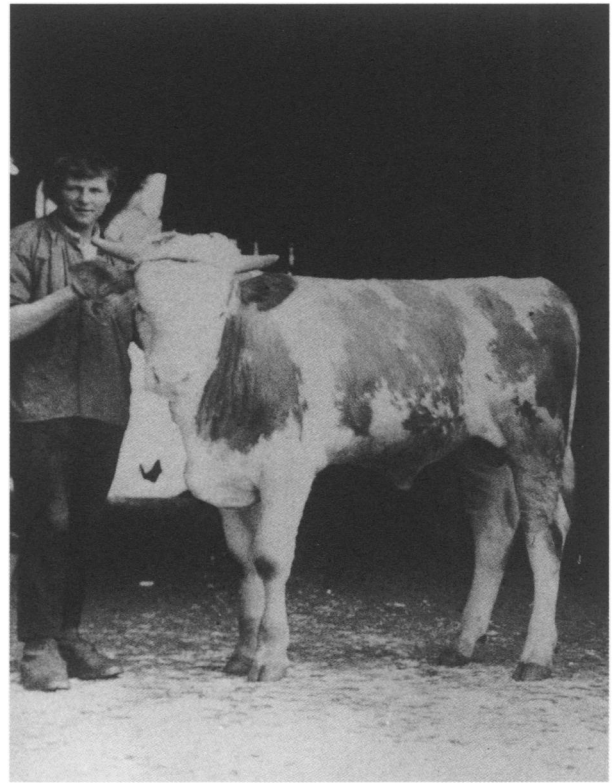


Figure 5. Fritz Grossniklaus in Beatenberg, ca. 1921 (photo: courtesy of Antoine Weber, Neuchâtel)



Figure 6. Detail of Figure 5

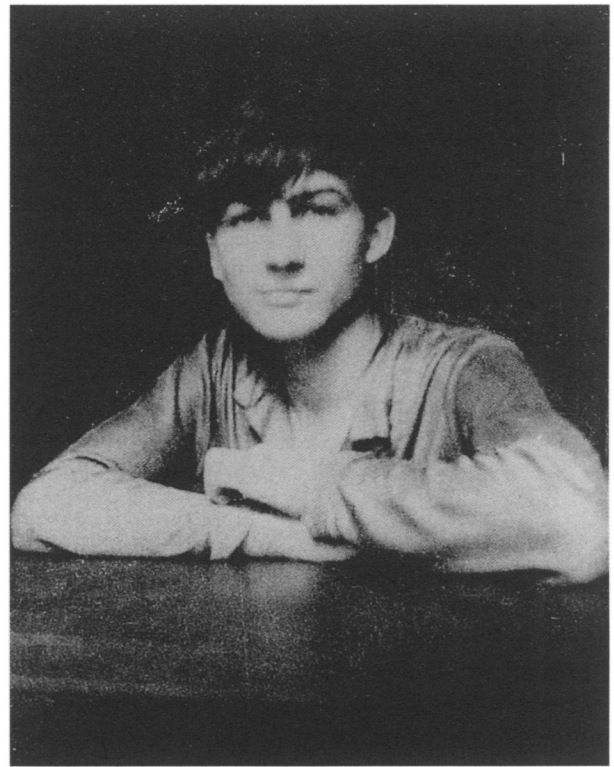


Figure 7. The young Balthus, ca. 1922 (photo: Alfio de Bella, Rome)

re-creates her in his poetry does he realize his potential as an artist. Balthus's two female figures, one sleeping in the shade, the other triumphant in the light, may allude to Jouve's heroine who dies and is reborn in art.

It is tempting, therefore, to see in the figure of the mountain guide who is watching over these two women an alter ego of the artist—of Balthus himself. If one compares the face, in close-up, of the sixteen-year-old Fritz of about 1921 (Figure 6) with that of the fourteen-year-old Balthus in a photograph of about 1922 (Figure 7), their features—coarser in Fritz, more refined in Balthus—do show a possible resemblance. This very resemblance is probably what initially guided Balthus's choice of this model in *The Mountain*.

NOTES

1. See Sabine Rewald, *Balthus*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New York, 1984), p. 23. In that catalogue I misidentified the mountain guide's face as that of Christian Heumann in *Kanton Freiburg* (ibid., p. 22, fig. 22), from the Swiss Peasant cycle (1787–97) of Joseph Reinhardt (1749–1829). In 1932, Balthus had copied ten paintings from Reinhardt's cycle in the Bernisches Historisches Museum, comprising some 125 images, including *Kanton Freiburg* (ibid., p. 22, fig. 23). Since then I have perpetuated this incorrect identification in articles and on the Museum's wall labels.
2. Balthus to James Thrall Soby, June 20, 1956: "*La Montagne* . . . always remained in my mind as a so-called *tableau clef* of my work." James Thrall Soby Papers, 1.7.2, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
3. See *Balthus Paintings and Drawings*, exh. cat., Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York (New York, 1939), no. 1. Balthus never painted the other three seasons in this planned series.
4. See Sabine Rewald, "Balthus's Magic Mountain," *Burlington Magazine* 139 (September 1997), pp. 622–28.
5. Balthus dedicated his copy, which is now lost, to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke by inscribing "À René" upon a rock; this tribute was in response to Rilke's "Narcisse" (1925), a poem in French dedicated to the young Balthus. See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1958), p. 7.
6. Balthus to Antoine Weber of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, May 7, 1998. Weber is a distant nephew of Fritz Grossniklaus. In March 2001, Weber sent me documentation of the entire Grossniklaus family, as well as a photograph of Egon Grossniklaus, who had posed for Balthus's figure of the Good Shepherd in 1927. Weber also kindly included a copy of Balthus's 1998 letter to him. At my prodding, Weber contacted numerous members of the large Grossniklaus family and, after many months of searching, was able to obtain the photograph of Fritz from one of the latter's nephews, Fritz Wüthrich, the son of Fritz's sister Rosa. This was not an easy task, since few photographs were taken at that time in peasant families.
7. Balthus to Weber, May 7, 1998.
8. As told by Balthus to Antoine Weber, and as recounted in Weber's letter to the author dated April 1, 2001.