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I read *The Magic Mountain* in Lowe-Porter's translation, as part of the project of translating Barthes's *Comment vivre ensemble*, the lecture course he began a week after the inaugural lecture, which in English is titled *How to Live Together*. My copy of the novel is a bit battered now – the cover is creased. One long crease runs up the front of it like a life-line, past the bright cluster of buildings foregrounded at the base of a mountain, through the black fir forest above them, scaling the greyer, more distant peak beyond it and then up and out into the white sky and off the uppermost edge of the book. *The Magic Mountain*, with its structured sanatorium-living, is a key text for Barthes in the lecture course, one of a small selection of tutor texts – or *textes d'appui* as he calls them. Supporting texts: the texts that brace us, the ones we lean on, testing them to see if they'll support our weight; the texts we always seem to be in conversation with, whether directly or indirectly; the texts that enable us to say or write anything at all. Every discourse, says Barthes, is generated and sustained by its own more or less idiosyncratic, imperfectly remembered selection. This is not so much a comment as a principle. 'There is an age at which we teach what we know,' he'd said in the inaugural lecture. 'Then comes another age at which we teach what we do not know; this is called research.' In this digressive, excursive teaching ('research, not a lecture,' he'll stress at the end of the first session), the practice was never to be

solitude, as Barthes puts it, with regular interruptions. What kinds of structures, spatial or temporal, would enable this? Where to look for suggestion and detail, for models and counter-models that could be simulated, or already find their part-equivalents, in life? As materials to think with, Barthes compiles this unlikely corpus – an unexpected collection of writings and novels: *The Magic Mountain*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the texts of the Desert Fathers, Zola's novel set in an apartment building, André Gide's account of the real-life sequestered woman of *Portrait of a Woman*. The inquiry will proceed sketchily, says Barthes. Each lecture will offer just a few lines of approach, open a few possible dossiers. I'll only be marking out the contours of these zones of interest. Like the squares on a chequerboard, he says, which perhaps one day I'll fill in. Marking out the spaces, setting the places. A place for animals. Also for bureaucracy, for flowers and for food. I see it like a table: seating you next to you and you next to you, anticipating the conversations between topics, the arguments. The invitation to his audience was to collaborate actively in the inquiry. To fill in the suggested squares themselves, or to propose new ones. And they did: they spoke with Barthes between the sessions, or left notes, and wrote letters, asking questions, making corrections, providing alternative references, redirecting the path of the research toward their own different concerns, which might be one way of describing to myself what I think I am doing here.