Narrating Demons, Transformative Texts

O'Hara, Daniel T.

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Of Love and Death in Modern Culture

Rereading *Doctor Faustus* with Freud in Mind

For Paul A. Bove

From the depths of dark solitude. From
The eternal abode in my holiness,
Hidden set apart in my stern counsels
Reserv’d for the days of futurity,
I have sought with a joy without pain
For a solid without fluctuation
Why will you die O Eternals?
Why live in unquenchable burnings?
—William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, Ch. II, St. 4

THE FIRST TIME I discussed Thomas Mann’s 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn As Told by a Friend* was in the early 1980s.1 The occasion was an annual special session at the Modern Language Convention entitled “Defining Modernism.” My memory of the details of panel membership is a bit vaguer than I would like, but I believe that I, along with Paul Bove and Jonathan Arac, *boundary 2* colleagues, were panelists, as was Professor Stanley Corngold, a Germanist and an expert on Mann and Kafka from Princeton. I was interested in *Doctor Faustus* because I wanted to understand why and how irony transforms itself into parody, a general literary phenomenon
in the last century, which some more famous critics then were beginning
to say marked the defining difference between modernism and postmod-
ernist.\(^2\)

I believed that I could clearly see this revisionary process at work in
the novel, in part thanks to R. P. Blackmur’s chapter on it in *Eleven Essays
in the European Novel*, a text Paul Bove originally suggested to me.\(^3\) Mann
referred to this revisionary process under the heading of “erotic irony” in
his *Story of a Novel: The Genius of Doctor Faustus*, which is made out of
sections from his diary about the composition of the novel. Also the then
just-translated 1918 text by Mann, *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*,
with an entire chapter devoted to “erotic irony,” also supported this view.\(^4\)
Mann first deployed this term here in the earlier text *Reflections* and then
developed, revised, and put it into masterful play in *Faustus*, commenting
on it as well in those selective diary entries compiled and revised after-
wards in *Story of a Novel*. This over-determined circling around the
topic caught my eye. Specifically, I saw in erotic irony the weight of the
powerful drive that transformed a measured self-irony into an infinite-
seeming self-parody.\(^5\) In short, I thought I could use “erotic irony” to give
a convincing account of why twentieth-century literary culture, as rep-
resented so effectively by Mann’s mid-century masterpiece, turned ever
more relentlessly, self-destructively, even demonically against itself. This
was the substance of my talk, entitled “The Self-Destructive Imagination
in *Doctor Faustus*."

The arguments of the other session presentations are now a blur, of
course, but the question period, at least its beginning, is etched in my
mind like an Albrecht Dürer engraving of Death. For after we spoke, the
first question came from a surprise guest, Edward W. Said, who given
the time-frame must have been at work on *Faustus* for his book of a few
years hence, *Musical Elaborations*.\(^6\) In any event, The Worldly Critic Him-
sel now rose to ask what he called “a simple, even a naive question” of us
all. “Why, when discussing *Doctor Faustus*, a novel Adorno helps make
centrally about Schoenberg’s twelve-tone musical system,” Said inquired,
“did none of you even mention music?” Imagine not a note about con-
trapuntal glissando from any of us would-be critical emperors of irony,
parody, modernism and postmodernism, or whatever, who now stood
exposed, before an overflow crowd, for the bunch of naked asses we then
rightly appeared to be. Not one of us, I also remember all too well, could
offer any satisfactory answer.
Thus, my current discussion is my belated answer to Said, twenty-seven years after the fact. By the way, in case you are wondering, I will discuss music, but only briefly, at the end of the chapter. Even today, I still do not think the novel is really about modern music, despite half of the latest German edition’s 741 pages being devoted to it. Instead, it is about loving genius and its tragic cost.

With that, since this novel may not be that familiar, I provide the description of *Doctor Faustus* on the back of the latest English translation.

Thomas Mann’s last great novel, first published in 1947 and now newly rendered into English by acclaimed translator John E. Woods, is a modern reworking of the Faust legend, in which Germany sells its soul to the Devil. Mann’s protagonist, the composer Adrian Leverkuhn, is the flower of German culture, a brilliant, isolated, overreaching figure, his radical new music a breakneck game played by art at the very edge of impossibility. In return, for twenty-four years of unparalleled musical accomplishment, he bargains away his soul—and the ability to love his fellow man. Leverkuhn’s life story is a brilliant allegory of the rise of the Third Reich, of Germany’s renunciation of its own humanity and its embrace of ambition and nihilism. It is also Mann’s most profound meditation on the German genius—both national and individual—and the terrible responsibilities of the truly great artist.

What a simple story—and so sensational—in its old-fashioned way! But somewhat inaccurate. Like many commentators, even Said in *Musical Elaborations*, there is no mention of how the story is told—“As Told by a Friend.” And as told by Serenus Zeitblom (Serene Time-Bloom or Time-Bloom, as I prefer), the philologist and self-described pedagogue, the parallels between the rise of the Third Reich and the career of Leverkuhn remain just that, parallels with important differences between them.

First of all, Zeitblom fears throughout the novel that his friend’s works, condemned by the Nazis, will never see the light of day no matter which side wins World War II. This is the period during most of which the novel is fictionally and actually composed. Wagner is more their speed than Leverkuhn, and Cole Porter more the Allies’ cup of tea. Second, we never see Germany make a bargain with the Devil, not even “symbolically” by accepting Hitler. What we do see, through his own words in a letter, is Adrian make such a deal. Leverkuhn’s productive life ends with
his madness, in 1930, three years before Hitler and his goons take over Germany. I do agree that ambition and nihilism play their roles, but even more so does the tangled web of love and genius. Lastly, however, just to mention the big point this blurb gets wrong, *Doctor Faustus* is not an allegory, brilliant or otherwise; it is a strangely inverted tragic novel, the last of the modernist novels and the first of the postmodernist kind. I will explain why I say this shortly, but first my necessary explanation of “erotic irony.”

Unlike *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* and *Doctor Faustus, Death in Venice* (1911) never uses the words “erotic irony,” but it presents it at work beautifully. Gustave Aschenbach, on holiday in Venice, falls in love with a fourteen-year-old Polish boy Tadzio for his incredible beauty. This beauty is the mirroring bodily image, Aschenbach feels, of the spirit and force, the ideal of beauty, that drive his aspiration to genius and its creation in words. What nature has accidentally done, Aschenbach would do at his own beck and call. The problem is that shortly after being made officially “von Aschenbach” and so a noble on his fiftieth birthday, he has hit a deep and protracted dry spell. This transgressive, even mad love for the boy, however, inspires the accomplished and esteemed middle-aged writer to raptures unknown before. Aschenbach even produces a paean to beauty a page and a half long! In it he recalls Socrates and Phaedrus, describing how the older, ugly philosopher woos the beautiful youth to his philosophy of the eternal forms (“Strangely fruitful intercourse, between one body and another mind!” [414]), Ashenbach concludes his prose-poem. In its middle, he perfectly describes what Mann means by “erotic irony.”

Thought that can merge wholly into feeling, feeling that can merge wholly into thought—these are the artist’s highest joy. And our solitary felt in himself at this moment power to command and wield a thought that thrilled with emotion, an emotion as precise and concentrated as thought: namely, that nature herself shivers with ecstasy when the mind bows down in homage before beauty. (413)

Of course, as with youths like Alcibiades, who want more of Socrates than inspired imaginations (an ironic reversal, after all, on the usual way such love works), or like Heloise and Abelard who both end up wanting more than pedagogical routine and have to settle in the end for much
less, Aschenbach ends up badly. He ends up stalking Tadzio, staying on much too long in a cholera-plagued Venice to do so, hoping against hope for a general breakdown of order so that the looks and smiles he and Tadzio belatedly share could become something more. Made-up like a much younger man and so looking as clownish as his lust, Aschenbach dies staring out to sea where Tadzio is standing on a shrinking sandbar mysteriously pointing farther out.

Erotic irony is, then, the sacrifice the lover makes in homage to the beloved as the inspiring medium for eternal beauty's actualization that the lover's mind would create in its work, in this case, in literary art. In the mirror of physical beauty the artist sees the image of his creative ideal ready to be released into existence as a unified and unifying imagination living in and as the work of art, in which thought and feeling, mind and body, are organically one—a classic modernist aesthetic formulation already in 1911! The awful, even terrible cost of such erotic irony, for all concerned, is usually not dwelt upon.

My thesis about *Doctor Faustus* is that it is a novel in which its narrator plays the lover, and its subject, the musical genius Leverkuhn, plays the beloved. This is especially so now that he is dead, with the latter's strangely beautiful avant-garde music, like a Dionysian nature or fracturing world-system, bearing sublime witness to the narrator's acts of loving genius begun during Leverkuhn's life and now completed in composing this fictional life. What many have identified as the Tonio Kroeger effect, the love of the more intelligent and imaginative man for the banal and normal beloved thus suffers a significant variation, an ironic inversion, with the self-declared ordinary and normal man, Zeitblom, bitterly captivated with the alleged musical genius Leverkuhn, who as a person appears to be virtually inhuman. Usually nowadays, of course, we think of this erotic pattern as “smart women, stupid choices.”

It is here that for further clarification I must turn to Freud, to Mann's Freud anyway, as Mann celebrates him in his 1936 speech in Vienna on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. With the old man sitting there, Mann concludes “Freud and the Future” with this incredible prophecy, made especially so now given how far Freud's reputation (and humanism's) has fallen in our own times:

> [W]e shall one day recognize in Freud’s life-work the cornerstone for the building of a new anthropology and therewith of a new structure, to
which many stones are being brought today, which shall be the future
dwelling of a wiser and freer humanity. This . . . psychologist will . . . be
honored as the path-finder towards a humanism of the future, which
we dimly divine and which will have experienced much that the earlier
humanism knew not of. It will be a humanism standing in a different
relation to the powers of the lower world, the unconscious, the id: a
relation bolder, freer, blither, productive of a riper art than any possible
in our neurotic, fear-ridden, hate-ridden world. . . . Call this, if you
choose, a poet’s utopia; but the thought is after all not unthinkable that
the resolution of our great fear and our great hate, their conversion into
a different relation to the unconscious which shall be more the artist’s,
more ironic and yet not necessarily irreverent, may one day be due to the
healing effect of [psychoanalysis]. (426)

Well, even if we only look at the next few years, we have to wonder how
wrong a prophecy can be!

What Mann thinks is Freud’s key discovery is what he calls “Infantilism”
(424), by which he means how the ego, from childhood on, identifies
with established roles of family, class, profession, nation, or culture, and
so, in this way only, the modern ego is like the ego of antiquity—“open
behind” (424) to the past, to the primordial, the legendary, the fabulous,
the mythic, in the life of a people or one’s own life, which gets repeated
forward into the present and future, usually unwittingly for us, but in the
case of the great heroes and heroines of the past, quite wittingly. Just as
the child plays the game of imitating mommy or daddy, so too the adult
would imitate the great figures of the cultural past. Mann’s examples are
primarily ones such as Cleopatra, Caesar, and other classical figures; but
he also claims that this identification is possible anytime, and mentions
his own conscious following in Goethe’s footsteps. Presumably, he would
see this *imitatio dei* pattern at work even with Freud, who after all was
ecstatic at winning the 1930 Goethe Prize for Literature. Clearly, too, in
*Faustus* Mann is also following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, the would-be
music-loving and -creating philologist-philosopher. By the way, one way
of understanding Mann’s comment in *Story of a Novel* (54) that Zeitblom
and Luverkuhn possess the same identity, beyond the obvious case of their
being the author’s characters, is that they split the Nietzschean paradigm
in two. The cultural formulas of two Goethean souls in one breast, the
Hegelian unhappy consciousness, are here given a Dionysian boost.
The poet’s new humanistic utopia that Mann envisions as being a consequence of the triumph of Freud’s therapeutic vision is one in which anyone can wittingly participate in this reanimation of myth and be like Christ on the cross, who at his crisis hour cries out “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthami”—not as an act of final despair but as a climactic confirmation of living “life . . . as quotation” (425), since, as Mann glosses Christ’s outcry, “Jesus was [not expressing] despair and disillusionment; but on the contrary a lofty messianic sense of self, for Jesus is quoting from the prophecies of the messiah and so the quotation really meant: ‘Yes, it is I!’ Precisely thus did Cleopatra quote when she took the asp to her breast to die; and again the quotation meant: ‘Yes, it is I’” (425). A poet’s utopia indeed! Or at least a decadent modern aesthete’s, a life of allegory beyond even Keats’s imagining?

Freud must have been taken aback by Mann’s lecture celebrating his achievement, his life-work, in this way. While Mann mentions some of Freud’s works with praise, especially, not surprisingly, *Totem and Taboo*, his characterization of Freud’s future legacy sounds less like what Mann calls “the science of the unconscious” (428) and more like what Jung claimed to have discovered, the virtually occult collective unconscious, that global archive of mythic archetypes, and the ways human beings identify with its figures, consciously or not. It is Jung, of course, a Nazi sympathizer, for whom the unconscious in this sense encourages what Paul Bove sees as the disastrous tangle of utopianism, messianism, and visionary allegory all of a humanistic bent.12

There is much in “Freud and the Future” that deserves critical analysis, but that is for another occasion. What I want to stress here is that Mann concludes his lecture by assimilating the Jewish Freud to the German romantic tradition via the figure of Faust:

Freud once called his theory of dreams “a bit of scientific new-found land won from superstition and mysticism.” The word “won” expresses [the colonizing spirit of the scientific pioneer] and [the] spirit of his work. “Where id was, shall be ego,” he epigrammatically says. And he calls analysis a cultural labour comparable to the draining of the Zuider Zee. Almost in the end the traits of the venerable man merge into the lineaments of the grey-haired Faust, whose

Spirit urges him
To shut the imperious sea from the shore away,
Set narrower bounds to the broad water’s waste.

Then open I to many millions space
Where they may life, not-safe-secure, but free
And active. And such a busy swarming I would see
Standing amid free folk on a free soil.
The free folk [Mann concludes] are the people of a future freed from fear
and hate, and ripe for peace. (428)

The topical echoes in 1936 of the infamous Nazi demands for Lebensraum (living-space) mingle uncomfortably with what is already an uncomfortable performance. Not only does Mann assimilate Freud to the German romantic tradition, in which science is in the service of the folk and associates easily with occult and even demonic phantasmagoria; he also identifies Freud and his discovery, psychoanalysis, as part and parcel of the Western colonialist adventure. Of course, it is all for the good, as rather sentimentally, utopianly, humanistically envisioned here. And Freud certainly famously declared himself to be more a conquistador than a scientist, a judgment we mostly share now; and too in Moses and Monotheism, which appears three years later, what Freud himself referred to as his scientific “novel,” he practices an equally strange and paradoxical form of cultural revisionism. Freud would “prove” that Moses, founder of the Jewish people as we still know them, really had to be an Egyptian. Just so as not to overlook any obvious echoes in the concluding passage cited above, the quotation from Freud that Mann cites about the theory of dreams being a scientific “new found land” cannot help making those familiar with the English literary tradition think of John Donne’s “The Canonization,” which uses the analogy of the discovery of America as the lover’s celebratory exclamation made in excited response to the sudden revelation of the beloved’s exquisite beauty. Since Mann read and reread Shakespeare and the other English Renaissance poets during the composition of his Faustus, it is no wonder there is this echo, too.

In light of erotic irony in this elaborated sense, what, then, is all that music doing in Doctor Faustus? I think it is best seen as the creative imagination of Adrian Leverkuhn’s beloved genius by the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, who loves him that much. Its greatness, expressed in the finest detail of contemporaneous critical theory, is the philologist’s work, his
gift, however ambiguous and ambivalent it at times appears. We all recall, I think, what Freud said about gifts! Given the obscurity of Leverkuhn’s music, the opposition of the Nazi regime to it, the radically uncertain future it faces, not to mention its studied animus to all things popular or easy to take—all of which the narrator notes repeatedly as World War II reaches its climactically destructive end—we must remember that the only testimony to its genius we ever hear is Zeitblom’s lovesick praise. Seeing the music in the novel in this way is why I did not think it necessary to mention it way back when. It just seemed so obviously so. I only wish that twenty-five years ago, on that MLA panel, I had not been made tongue-tied by Said’s initial critical intervention.

In saying this, I do not intend to dismiss the incredible detail of the musical theories, or the historical discussions of music and its major figures, or the powerfully imaginative if often impressionistic responses of the narrator to his hero’s masterpieces. As any lover knows, and my earlier discussion of “Death in Venice” confirms, it is the highly crafted details of the gift of our love that trace the lineaments of our desire. And for purposes of looking at the role of such visions of music that the narrator ascribes to his hero, we do not need to become even amateur experts in the subject. We can simply recall many examples from the history of the novel of similar expressions, from Don Quixote on; or at the entire starry panoply of cosmic order in The Divine Comedy. All, all are the blazons of love.

Serenus Zeitblom’s love for Adrian Leverkuhn is not an entirely happy love, to say the least. Adrian possesses that kind of genius easily bored. As a beginning student, once shown the basics, he can then foresee all the possible elaborations of a subject. That is, once he knows the principles, he grows bored with the details of getting the results. They are for others to learn from. A top student nevertheless, Adrian is not popular with his teachers. He is not a good student in their eyes, precisely because he does not work things out unless he is forced to do so. Given his anticipatory intellectual superiority, he is also highly disdainful, with a laugh that cuts other people down to size, making them self-conscious of their own comparative smallness. Moreover, Adrian apparently cannot recall their names despite long familiarity. Long before the deal with the Devil, who makes him swear off any feelings of love, Serenus at the end of the first chapter admits apropos of Adrian, “All around him lay coldness,” a dreadful and demonically prophetic coldness. But the narrator goes even
further in his disappointed, unrequited lover’s admission, an admission he repeats pretty much in these terms throughout the novel: “I might compare his [self-imposed] isolation [amidst others] to an abyss into which the feelings others expressed for him vanished soundlessly without a trace” (8). And with growing bitter vehemence, as our narrator tells his story he openly includes himself in the camp of the others.

Of course, Serenus is no genius. A philologist who teaches classical languages and culture in the high school, with occasional sojourns as a part-timer in a local college, Zeitblom describes himself as a Catholic humanist, old-fashioned, bourgeois, happily and long married, who is writing now at the end of the Second World War in early retirement due to his quiet but firm disagreements with the Nazi regime. His sons are in active service to their nation, his wife dutifully cares for him, and his hand trembles as much for his self-consciously ironic—or is it self-parodic—suspicion of his incapacity—intellectual, emotional, rhetorical—as for every remembered crisis and catastrophe of the life he is telling or the increasing reports of bombs falling nearby and major German cities in flames. This montage technique, in which the time of the narrator and the time of the story, along with the time of the future reader, who is addressed as such repeatedly, join in Doctor Faustus with the modernists’ appropriation of Wagner’s musical technique of the motif for the text’s structure of symbols and images. In doing so, Mann produces some remarkable temporal parallels between the individual life and the historical moment.

Here is how Serenus memorably characterizes himself and his project:

His was an artist’s life; and because it was granted to me, an ordinary man, to view it from so close-up, all the feelings of my soul for human life and fate have coalesced around this exceptional form of human existence. For me, thanks to my friendship with Adrian, the artist’s life functions as the paradigm for how fate shapes all our lives, as the classic example of how we are deeply moved by what we call becoming, development, destiny—and it probably is so in reality, too. For although his whole life long the artist may remain nearer, if not to say, more faithful to his childhood than the man of practical reality, although one can say that, unlike the latter, he abides in the dreamlike, purely human, and playful state of the child, nevertheless the artist’s journey from those pristine early years to the late, unforeseen stages of his development is endlessly longer, wilder,
stranger—and more disturbing for those who watch—than that of the everyday person, for whom the thought he, too, was once a child is cause for not half so many tears. (27–28)

As this passage unfolds, though it is never used, I keep hearing the word for culture, Bildung, chiming silently. When I check the passage in German, I find that it is not used. Clearly, though, it is insistently suggested by the use of its variants: “Werden, Entwicklung . . . Schicksals-Gestaltung” (42): “Becoming, Development, Shape of Destiny or Fateful Design.” This method of suggestive allusive implication is how the novel works as much as it does via the techniques of montage and leitmotif. The heard music of the narration is intended to inspire the unheard music in our minds.

Beyond this, the passage reminds us of Goethe and Dichtung and Wahrheit, the quintessential romantic statement of the artist’s life, which has inspired so many works of autobiography and biography, literal and fictional. The idea of development, Entwicklung, is the hallmark of how creative genius gets treated. It is also the way, since Hegel, that first elite and then popular histories of science, philosophy, art, and culture are done. More than this, however, it is also how living organisms have been distinguished from the inorganic realm. And this post-Enlightenment idea of progressive, even dialectical development (despite detours) is also what post-structuralism and deconstruction, following Nietzsche’s example, sought to blow up.

And there are many good reasons to do so. Development assumes as its paradigm the individual and generalizes from it to larger units; even in the case of evolution, the focus, until recently, has been on the radiant example, the singular mutation, not the statistical whole. Development, in the case of genius, also entails the sacrifice of others, willing or not, to promote its growth, especially from youth to maturity. As we will see later in the novel, this is a moment when to inspire and facilitate what Zeitblom calls “the breakthrough” into full strength, much is permitted, even encouraged, by way of what used to be called sin but now is more likely to be called transgression. And this idea of development on the macro-level also has precluded paying close critical attention to how power actually works—using the myth of necessary development to rationalize its usurpation of the state, the party, whatever, with the slaughter, sometimes of millions, as the all-too-usual price that just had to be paid. Finally, in
this passage, the narrator would appear to be explicitly making the connection between his life of Luverkuhn and that of Germany. This connection, in its geo-political, even world-historical, dimensions, as well as in others—musical, artistic, sexual—is discussed at length in Chapter XXX, about which much shortly. But right now, I want to look at the cautionary tale the reader receives early on, in Chapter III. Not only should this chapter make us question (but not definitively determine) the narrator’s reliability—we have received lots of potential warnings about it, beginning on page 1, most of them coming from the narrator himself; it should also make us question any attempt to make connections in which one side of an opposition would subsume the other in a higher, dialectical synthesis. For such attempts are shown to be matters of myth and faith, of deceptive and self-deceptive illusion—aesthetic play too readily taken for truth. If I am reading *Doctor Faustus* right, it would repeal all of that Western tradition of loving genius without presenting all its tragic consequences.

The third chapter of *Doctor Faustus* is where we hear about Adrian’s first contact with the odd combination of modern science and the occult, specifically necromancy, which, as Serenus tells it, haunts his life. Adrian’s father, Jonathan, a good wholesome German farmer (Zeitblom’s father, by the way, is a pharmacist in the local town) loves to “speculate the elements” (16). That is, he loves to conduct experiments that demonstrate, by tempting Nature to reveal her secrets, how the distinction between the truly living and the demonically animated dead blurs into shining in-distinction via such a compounding of ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes. The sheer weight of phenomena forces one to give up all such binary oppositions in uneasy despair (the narrator’s response), in rueful faith (Father Leverkuhn’s response), or madly sounding knowing laughter (Adrian’s response), rather than resulting in any happy Hegelian synthesis.

The chapter details ten experiments that Jonathan Leverkuhn loves to perform for the enlightenment and entertainment of himself and his family, especially the boys Adrian and Serenus. They involve demonstrations of protective mimicry (moths, butterflies, leaves) in which one organism will ape the appearance of another, down to its flaws, so as to be also judged unpalatable or poisonous by enemies, to blend in with its surroundings, and so on. But also there are experiments with Chaldini’s sand figures, in which the scraping of a violin bow at the end of the metal disk on which sand is cast will cause the sand to assume the wave figures of the notes played. There are also observations of shells from the deepest
oceans with what appear to be hieroglyphic inscriptions on them, but for what purpose? They live in nearly total darkness and have no chance of being “read” in any way imaginable. There are also experiments with ice and other types of crystals that mimic uncannily all the features of living organisms and create whole miniature living-looking cities from the floors of their tanks, as with a tap of a magic wand at the sides. Serenus’s long comment on these things is worth quoting in full:

Were these [inorganic] phantasmagoria an imitation of plant life, or were they the pattern of it?—that was [Jonathan's] question. Neither, he presumably replied to himself; they were parallel formations. Nature in her creative dreaming, dreamt the same thing both here and there, and if one spoke of imitation, then certainly it had to be reciprocal. Should one take the children of the soil as models because they possessed the depth of organic reality, whereas the ice flowers were merely external phenomena? But as phenomena, they were the result of an interplay of matter no less complex than that found in plants. If I understood our friendly host correctly, what concerned him was the unity of animate and so-called inanimate nature, the idea that we sin against the latter if the boundary we draw between the two spheres is too rigid, when in reality it is porous, since there is no elementary capability that is reserved exclusively for living creatures or that the biologist could not likewise study on inanimate models. (21)

I take seriously this idea of “parallel formations”—which in the German text are “Parallelbildungen” (33). In this composite formulation bildung appears, which does mean formation, but also, as we know, “culture,” the word I heard in a previous passage as if it were anticipating this one. The evocative albeit equivocal irony of this coinage in Faustus stands as fair warning over an interpreter’s reading. Nonetheless, I will take the plunge.

This passage presents a different way of seeing the world and how it has been built up. We see here for what they are the apparently mirror images, which do not solicit, even as they too often have nevertheless inspired, humanity’s repeated attempts to mistakenly make connections, usually by subsuming one set of images to another as if their models. At every level of the novel—that of theme, point of view, plot, technique, structure—Doctor Faustus should be seen as one of Father Leverkuhn’s experiments for demonstrating parallel formations in this sense and in this way of
warning. That is, it should be seen in the spirit of an irony about what is being presented that transcends parody and self-parody; or, if you will, a parody to end all parody, an irony to transcend irony, an absolute parody and irony, which turns into a modern form of tragic wisdom. It puts into play the artist’s life, politics, philosophy, even music—its theories, history, major figures, and modern developments—so as to present parallel formations, repeating the cautionary lesson of this chapter, over and over again, which the critical reader will carefully observe and respect without resolving the parallelisms into a total order in which one formation or set of formations trumps the others. Is this deconstruction avant le lettre? Perhaps, but it is also related to what Adorno’s dissertation taught Mann about Kierkegaard, as The Story of a Novel says (76).

The major example of not heeding such wisdom born of what I will call, for simplicity’s sake, absolute irony is also presented in this chapter via the experiment of “the devouring drop,” which can stand as an emblem of the radical and total assimilation of one formation by another:

And just how confusing the interaction is between the two realms we learned from the “devouring drop,” to which more than once Father Leverkuhn fed a meal before our very eyes. A drop of whatever it was—paraffin, or some volatile oil, I don’t recall specifically, though I believe it was chloroform—a drop, I say, is not an animal, not even a primitive one, not even an amoeba; one does not assume that it has an appetite, seeks nourishment, knows to retain what is digestible and refuse what is not. But that is precisely what our drop did. It was swimming by itself in a glass of water into which Jonathan had introduced it, probably with a pipette. And what he now did was this: With a pair of pincers he picked up a tiny glass rod, actually a thread of glass coated with shellac, and placed it in the vicinity of the drop. That was all that he did, the drop did the rest. It formed a little convexity on its surface, a sort of mount of conception, through which it then ingested the rod lengthwise. Meanwhile it extended itself, took on a pear shape so as to encompass its prey entirely and not leave either end sticking out; and as it gradually reassumed its spherical shape, more ovoid at first, it began, I give you my word, to dine on the shellac that coated the glass rod and to distribute it throughout its own body. When it had finished and had resumed its globular form, it pushed the utensil, now neatly licked clean, back across to the periphery and out into the surrounding water. (22)
If we take the bait here by reading “the devouring drop” as the essence of being, inorganic and organic, and so beyond good and evil, thereby justifying every transgression by genius, group, nation, or humanity as a whole (vis-à-vis nature), we will have performed the simulacrum of appetite (in all senses) that this passage serves up to us for our critical illumination. Mann in *Doctor Faustus* presents the temptation of modernist aesthetic totality even as he both warns against it and creates a radically equivocal polysemous text that, despite its apparently bumbling narrator’s best belated efforts suffers in the end neither premature closure, nor any other kind. *Doctor Faustus* is the transgressive gift of tragic love, in an unreserved imaginative economy, to end all resolving harmonies. This modern wisdom text keeps on giving because, like great love (or absolute irony), it is too difficult to tell from despair.

Paul Bove has definitively shown in his “Misprisions of Utopia: Messianism, Apocalypse, and Allegory” that critical interpretation, as its origins in biblical hermeneutics would suggest, would turn the textual materials of any and every historical moment into a self-congratulatory apocalyptic allegory in which a messiah figure brings ultimate redemption but at the price of universal catastrophe. As we see here with “the devouring drop” scene and will see even more so at the novel’s conclusion, the narrator, a philologist after all, finds the temptation to fall into this traditional pattern all but irresistible. Fortunately, by Mann’s deft handling of reflexive irony, *Doctor Faustus* contains much material for allegorizing and at least one grand allegory, of course, the pact with the devil, but presents it and any other possible allegory critically as a temptation to be overcome.13

Chapter XXX of *Doctor Faustus*, about two-thirds of the way into the novel, is where Serenus Zeitblom attempts to make the connections between Adrian’s artist’s life and the demonically sexual nature of genius, the modern history of Germany, and the tragic idea of the necessarily transgressive form of development, what the narrator calls “the fatal gift of genius” (318), of every type. The word that he chooses is a good one in German: “the breakthrough.” Here is the word and its basic meanings, in itself and as it participates in common idioms, the details of which I omit for convenience’s sake: “Durchbruchs: falling through (no art); emerging appearance; coming through; breaking through; revelation; bursting, perforation; to assert or show itself; [Natur] to reveal itself; breakthrough, break open; breach; opening; rise, resurgence.”14 I think this word just about covers it all.
The narrator in Chapter XXX opens with the start of World War I and the general thrilling sense of terrible elation that runs through the German population. He continues by justifying this feeling with the idea that to achieve world-historical status as a nation, a distinctive people must manage a breakthrough into strength and identity, however tragic the cost, even the cost of war. It is so necessary or at least thought to be so necessary (317). Assuming a role on the world stage, the breakthrough is crucial for development; he argues similarly for the modern phase of German art and music. The term used throughout, virtually obsessively, is “the breakthrough.” In fact, the term is used so many times that it becomes impossible to count its occurrences.

The phrase that is meant to unite all these senses of “the breakthrough” is translated in the latest English version as “the psychology of the new breakthrough” (323). The German original says only “die Psychologie des Durchbruchs” (447), italicizing the word “breakthrough” for emphasis. The original English translation, by the way, is here more faithful to the German than it usually is.\(^{15}\) So crucial is “the breakthrough” for the narrator, who we must remember is a philologist by training and temperament and so invested in the careful scrutiny and use of words, that when Adrian objects to being concerned with the position of German music in the world, one way or the other, Zeitblom gets angry, for as he sees it, Adrian’s work, which is largely still to come, could only be intended for a cosmopolitan audience, indeed for a sophisticated and highly diverse audience, and not for a narrow elite of some provincial would-be avant-garde, such as the intellectuals around him now and throughout the 1920s. Here is how Serenus put an end to this argument:

[A]esthetics is all things, whether their effect is engaging or off-putting, just as . . . the ‘grace’ has the broadest possible meaning. Aesthetic deliverance or confinement, that is destiny, that is what determines one’s happiness or unhappiness, whether one is comfortably at home on this earth or lives in hopeless, if proud isolation. And one need not be a philologist to know that what is ugly is despised. The longing to breakthrough, to break free from confines, being sealed inside what is ugly—you may go right ahead and tell me I am threshing straw, but I feel, have always felt, and will plead again against all crude appearances that this is German kat exochen, deeply German, the very definition of Germanness, a psychological state threatened by the poison of loneliness, by eccen-
tricity, provincial standoffishness, neurotic involution, unspoken Satan-ism. . . (326)

“I broke off” (326) Zeitblom now says, clearly aware that he has crossed the line. As we already know from Chapter XXV, he has received the letter from Adrian in the antique dialectic telling of his bargain with the Devil. To ensure his breakthrough into twenty-four years of sheer musical genius, he has agreed to surrender his soul at death and never to love another during life. However, if he should do so, they will die as do the two people whom he appears finally to love. Now, with this startling “unspoken Satanism” faux pas, Adrian looks at Zeitblom, the color draining from his face, with a look and then a smile, which are truly terrible: “The look he directed at me was the look, that familiar look that made me unhappy—and it mattered little whether it was aimed at me or someone else—mute, veiled, so coldly aloof as to be almost offensive, and it was followed by the smile, with lips closed, nostrils twitching in scorn, and by his turning away” (326). Zeitblom is crushed then and still as he narrates the incident, speculating that his getting sick at the front so soon after arrival there was his unconscious way of getting back to Adrian, who is himself too sick with migraines to fight or give any service to genius.

What Zeitblom would do via the word “breakthrough” (and the similar “switch-words” as Freud calls them in the dream-work) is to connect all the dimensions of individual and cultural history in the novel into a single, coherent whole readable in terms of the aesthetics of recognition and fame, which in our time has become a matter of a rather cheapened celebrity. While his narrative differs in important ways from the back-cover blurb quoted earlier, for example, in its insistence that Adrian’s work does not represent the Nazi regime and its aims, it does overlook the childhood lesson of parallel formations. Doctor Faustus performs this lesson repeatedly even as its self-confessed bumbling narrator apparently forgets it. The novel thus holds open all the lines of apparent development (and their ironic reversals) that its narrator (but not its author) would connect up and close off so as to form into a total work or masterpiece, even as he confesses his incompetence at writing. This is more than the modesty topos. It is the power of the romantic conventions governing the composition of the modern artist’s life. In this ironic manner, Doctor Faustus is a modernist novel, harkening strongly back to romantic traditions, in the process of becoming a postmodernist one.
The novel’s conclusion confirms this view. Leverkuhn creates his last great work, *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*, a tragic oratorio, as a revocation of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” in his Ninth Symphony. Inspired by the terrible death from spinal meningitis of his beloved nephew Nepo (nick-named Echo), this work takes on the significance of entailing the revocation of the bourgeois epoch from its inception in the Renaissance to the present of the novel, when soon after its composition in 1930, Adrian, in confessing his sins to his friends and family before a private performance, goes hideously mad right before their eyes. “Revocation” in German, by the way, is in its verbal form zurückziehen: “to pull or draw back; or draw away; to withdraw, to retire.” It is closely associated, in common idioms, with the notorious Hegelian term for dialectical synthesis, aufheben, but principally in the sense of “repeal,” not resolution.

The idea of revocation cannot help inspiring in this student of English literature the memory of a famous instance from romantic poetry in which the hero of a minor epic must revoke the curse he pronounced upon his nemesis. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the title figure revokes his condemnation of Jupiter, despite long suffering and the likelihood that repression will return at some future moment once he liberates himself. This renunciation, this revocation, this literal calling back of his curse releases Prometheus, but it is supplemented with a warning that his hope of great things for all may be ruined once more by Jupiter breaking out of his earthly abyss. At that point, Prometheus is to construct out of the ruins of hope a hope beyond hopelessness—a formulation we shall shortly see reappear when we discuss the very end of *Doctor Faustus*. Of course, the trope of the revocation itself can be traced to other sources than Shelley. Mann’s immediate source, as his *Story of a Novel* also reports, is Adorno’s thesis on Kierkegaard (76).

If the novel ended here, it would be a late great example of apocalyptic modernism, a gesture declaring a plague on everyone’s house, including especially one’s own. Joyce’s “The Dead” memorably ends this way, after holding out half a hope that its male protagonist can be transformed by his pity for his wife suffering from the memory of the young man who appears to have died for her. Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming” and *The Tower* volume are chock-full of apparently nihilistic visions. Such ironically apocalyptic modernism haunts even works, like *The Waste Land*, *Women in Love*, *A Passage to India*, or *To the Lighthouse*, that end in ironic ambiguity, something that many of Mann’s commentators see happening in the case of *Doctor Faustus*. We shall see.
Before heading for the finish line, however, and finally discussing music and so satisfying Said’s ghost, I want to sum up where we are so far. My argument is that Mann subtly reverses his usual pattern of erotic irony. Rather than creating a situation where the decadent representative of “the mind bows down in homage before beauty” with the latter being represented by the non-intellectual, Mann has the erotic irony operate between two intellectuals, both from the provinces, who achieve professional success, one of whom is said to be a genius, the other of whom, his lifelong friend, is a self-described “ordinary” man and tells the life of his artist-friend as a complex act of homage and a gift of love. Just as the ecstatic frisson in the usual case results from the sacrifice of intellectual pride and stature to a beautiful figure of otherwise less worth, so here, whatever his limitations and possible sins, Serenus sacrifices himself to Adrian, whose genius is suspect and whose humanity is seriously compromised even before his demonic bargain. One of the real-life parallel formations for this variation on Mann’s erotic irony is clearly that of decadent love. Lionel Johnson and Oscar Wilde, as heterosexual and homosexual late-nineteenth-century exemplars, both chose beloveds well below their intellectual and imagination standings. But Mann, as we know now from his Diaries, chose similarly, with younger men, although how far any relationship got remains a subject of dispute.

In Doctor Faustus Adrian turns to Rudoph Schwerdtfeger, a bisexual friend for whom he composes a violin piece, who betrays him in the end, and whom Adrian, it appears, has deliberately led into a fatal relationship. Adrian in his final madness confesses to doing so, and Serenus all along has believed this to be so. There are, of course, class, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions to erotic irony. The pattern of the older, well-established mentor and the new, young protégé, which goes back to the Greeks, shines through here. Various motivations for this pattern have been given, especially in psychoanalysis—neurotic guilt, self-loathing, narcissism, sadomasochism, and so on. I prefer to note its operative force in the novel rather than speculate on its motive. For all the drama of the novel is focused here, on this relationship, with that of Adrian’s representative artist’s life and Germany’s fateful destiny under the Nazis as background, albeit momentous background. Like an opera to end all operas?

And so we conclude with music after all. I quote fully the relevant passage:
My poor great friend! And when perusing this [last] work from his musical remains, from his own downfall, which prophetically anticipates the downfall and ruin of so much else, how often have I thought of the painful words he spoke to me at the death of the child, of his statement that it ought not to be, that goodness, joy, hope, ought not to be, that it should be taken back, that one must take it back! “Ah, it ought not be!”—how those words stand almost like an instruction, a musical direction, set above the choral and instrumental movements of *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus* and contained within every measure and cadence of this “Ode to Sorrow”! There is no doubt that he wrote it with an eye to Beethoven's Ninth, as its counterpart in the most melancholy sense of the word. But it is not merely that more than once it performs a formal negation of the Ninth, takes its back into the negative, but in so doing it is also a negation of the religious—by which I cannot mean its denial. A work dealing with the Tempter, with apostasy, with damnation—how can it be anything but a religious work? What I mean is an inversion, an austere and proud upending of meaning, such as I at least find, for example, in the friendly appeal by Dr. Faustus to the companions of his final hour that they should go to bed, sleep in peace, and be not troubled. Given the framework of the cantata, one can scarcely help viewing this as the conscious and deliberate reversal of the “Watch with me!” of Gethsemane. And again, his last drink with his friends . . . has all the marks of ritual, is presented as another Last Supper. Linked with this, however, is the reversal of the notion of temptation, in that Faust refuses the idea of salvation as itself a temptation—not only out of formal loyalty to the pact and because it is “too late,” but also because with all his soul he despises the positive optimism of the world to which he is to be saved, the lie of its goodness. (514)

What Serenus says next, before his final paragraph of reading this composition, I want to underscore that while we and the author can see its appropriateness to him, especially in light of what he will soon say, it appears that he knows not what he says, as is fitting for the lover when speaking about his beloved:

This [rejection of cheap optimism] becomes even clearer and is still more forcefully elaborated in the scene with the good old ‘physician and gossip’ who invited Faust to him in a pious attempt at conversion and whose role
is quite purposefully drawn as that of a tempter. This is an unmistakable reference to Jesus' temptation by Satan, just as an ‘Apagé!’ [Be gone!] is unmistakably found in the proudly despairing ‘No!’ spoken against false and flabby bourgeois piety. (514–15)

The final paragraph of the penultimate chapter is justifiably famous and deserves to be quoted in full:

But yet another final, truly final reversal of meaning must be recalled here, must be pondered with the heart, a reversal that comes at the end of this work of endless lament and that, surpassing all reason, softly touches the emotions with that spoken unspokenness given to music alone, I mean the cantata’s last orchestral movement, in which the chorus loses itself and which sounds like the lament of God for the lost state of His world, like the Creator’s sorrowful “I did not will this.” Here, toward the end, I find that the uttermost accents of sorrow are achieved, that final despair is given expression, and—but I shall not say it, for it would mean a violation of the work’s refusal to make any concessions, of its pain, which is beyond all remedy, were one to say that, to its very last note, it offers any other sort of consolation than what lies in expression itself, in utterance—that is to say, in the fact that the creature has been given a voice for its pain. No, to the very end, this dark tone poem permits no consolation, reconciliation, transfiguration. But what if the artistic paradox, which says that expression, the expression of lament, is born out of the construct as a whole, corresponds to the religious paradox, which says that out of the profoundest irredeemable despair, if only as the softest of questions, hope may germinate? This would be hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair—not its betrayal, but the miracle that goes beyond faith. Just listen to the ending, listen with me: One instrumental group after the other steps back, and what remains as the work fades away is the high G of a cello, the final word, the final sound, floating off, slowly vanishing in a pianissimo fermata. Then nothing more. Silence and night. But the tone, which is no more, for which, as it hangs there vibrating in the silence, only the soul still listens, and which was the dying note of sorrow—is no longer that, its meaning changes, it stands as a light in the night. (515)

So our question is, how should we read this final turn of the screw, this
hope beyond hopelessness? Is it what the remarks about flabby bourgeois piety and optimism promised might come? Or is it the final gift of love by the narrator, that philologist, amateur player of the viola d'amour, and lifelong if sometimes lacking friend, who creates here his palely shining music of our night?

In conclusion, I have to confess that I am unhappy with the term “absolute irony,” for it seems to collapse back into modernism a text halfway out of it, on its way to postmodernism, so to speak. It also draws it back even further, into the view of German romantic irony characterized and criticized by Hegel as “infinite absolute negativity;” something that Kierkegaard in his master’s thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, elaborated and practiced, ironically enough, at considerable length so as to incorporate both ends of the philosophical tradition that he faced at the time, Socrates and Hegel himself. Then, too, as I describe its action, absolute irony sounds like a precursor to deconstruction—the systematic disruption of all system formation by interrupting permanently the establishment of a dialectical logic of binary oppositions leading progressively to synthesis, whether final or provisional. So how should I see *Doctor Faustus* working via its ironic—(self-) parodic?—practice of parallel formations? I would like to be able to think about it, with a good conscience, in terms of physics, of physical systems, even entanglement, perhaps. But I am no expert in physics and so what I am about to say, which is very rough and preliminary, especially as a conclusion, may be nothing more than the familiar case of the humanist being a dilettante in science. If so, please forgive me my Faustian strain showing.

Erotic irony occurs, you recall, when the lover pays homage to the beauty of the beloved by sacrificing mind, reason, good sense, good judgment, and so on, a result nature is said to ecstatically enjoy. Let us think of this not in imaginative, aesthetic, or, certainly, moral terms but in terms of “energetics”—that is, in terms of how physical systems work. When a positively or negatively charged particle, say, an electron, leaps from one higher energy state to another, lower state, a burst of detectable energy is given off. The law of the conservation of energy requires this and requires that the amounts involved are parallel, balanced out, in both the equations and reality alike. So the greater the charges involved, the higher the initial energy state of the particle, and the lower and so the further the leap, the greater the resultant pop of power. Given the weight of literary and cultural history in *Doctor Faustus*, it may not be too far-fetched to
think of its “absolute irony,” put so powerfully into play with that history, then, on this analogy of “energetics,” as if this textual gift of love were a virtual atomic bomb of love. But maybe *Doctor Faustus* is just one candle in the night, cursing the darkness, after all?

As you ponder these different alternatives, interrupting permanently but, I would hope, never simply arresting the dialectic of development and *Bildung*, I have two words for you, which probably work best, for all the ghosts in earshot, if they are now sung—contrapuntal glissando no doubt optional: “parallel formations”!¹⁸