

**The Magician's Modern Avatars:  
A Study of the Artist Figure  
in  
the Works  
of  
Marcel Proust,  
Thomas Mann  
and  
Franz Kafka**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Adapting the figure of the Renaissance magician, I argue that it is a fitting metaphor for the modern artist/writer. Both the magus and the writer perform an act of mediation between two ontological levels and constitute, as a result, unique gates of access to “the beyond.” That is why they can both be associated with the kind of deception specific to charlatanism and why they represent a different kind of morality that renders acts of voyeurism and profanation necessary. Yet, experiencing the Other and translating it either into a “cure,” as does the magician, or into a text, as does the writer, does not come without a heavy price, in the form of suffering and ostracism. Can writing become a cure for the untenable position of the writer-as-magus? To what extent can writing be its own *pharmakon*? My thesis explores the “answer” proposed by Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, by Thomas Mann in his early works and by Franz Kafka in a number of his texts.

Keywords: Proust, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Benjamin, Deleuze, Blanchot, artist figure, magic, translation, writing, irony, suffering.

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# Introduction

Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même.

Baudelaire, "L'Art philosophique"  
(*Curiosités esthétiques*)

European literature at the turn of the century displays a growing preoccupation with the question of art:<sup>1</sup> its nature, its validity and its significance in the modern world. As a result, what characterizes modernity with respect to art is, among other things, radical innovation in matters of "form," whose importance now equals or even supersedes that of "content," as well as heightened self-consciousness on the part of the artist. This would lead increasingly to the production of self-referential, even solipsistic works of art, coupled with a growing doubt as to the legitimacy of art itself, as to its ability to access the Truth and to convey anything beyond the element of play<sup>2</sup>- the play of color, of language or of tone.

No longer a privileged domain where meaning, similar to a Platonic Idea, would sooner or later become manifest to the patient or gifted practitioner, art has

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<sup>1</sup> The term "art" is used here to designate a general concept under whose umbrella are included the plastic, graphic and literary arts, as well as music, drama, etc. Later on "art" will refer strictly to literature.

<sup>2</sup> See Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences" 111-125.

become a battlefield, where all insight into the human condition, all knowledge and all truth is not only fragmentary and subjective, hence relative, but whose value is to be judged by how much resistance, suffering and sacrifice it has cost the artist. No wonder that Thomas Mann, doubtless under the influence of Nietzsche and Goethe, both of whom sing the praises of strenuousness, compared the artist to a soldier striving on the brink of exhaustion.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the modern artist ceases to occupy an extra-referential, godlike position, similar to that of the omniscient narrator of nineteenth-century Realism. Even when the artist/writer becomes in turn a narrator, playing the double role of *actor* and *auctor* in a first-person narrative,<sup>4</sup> s/he is first and foremost a mediator who establishes a link between experience, an experience as yet unfiltered

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<sup>3</sup> “Are not the relationships that join art and war together completely allegorical? It has at least always seemed to me that it is not the worst artist who recognizes himself in the image of the soldier. That present-day victorious warring principle - organization - is after all the first principle, the essence of art. The interplay of enthusiasm and order; systematic representation; creating strategic bases, continuing to build, and surging forward with “lines of communication;” [...] courage, resoluteness in enduring drudgery, and defeats in battle against the tough opposition of the cause; contempt for that which is called “security” in burgherly life (“security” is the favorite term and the loudest claim of the burgher) [...]; mercilessness towards oneself, moral radicalism, self-denial to the limit, martyrdom, full engagement of all of the primary forces of body and soul, without which it seems laughable to attempt anything; as an expression of training and honor finally a feeling for ornamentation and pomp: all of this is at once militarylike (sic) and artistic. With good reason art has been called a war, a grueling battle...” (“Reflections during the War;” quoted in *Death in Venice*, Norton Ed. 101-2)

<sup>4</sup> Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are two obvious examples, but one can also find a few instances in the short stories of Thomas Mann (e.g. “The Dilettante”) and Kafka (“A Report to an Academy,” “Up in the Gallery”).

through consciousness (in the Heideggerian sense of *Erlebnis*, as opposed to *Erfahrung*<sup>5</sup>), and language. “*Une oeuvre d’homme,*” says Camus, “*n’est rien d’autre que ce long cheminement pour retrouver par les détours de l’art les deux ou trois images simples et grandes sur lesquelles le coeur , une première fois, s’est ouvert*” (*L’envers et l’endroit*, quoted in Rousset, “Introduction” vi). The artist/writer is someone who translates into language, into a “language” of her or his own which s/he draws out of the interstices and gaps of language, the secret of the chance encounter that lies at the beginning and at the end of the road which is her or his own apprenticeship to art.

Thus, writing comes into being at the limit of language. In fact, writing is that limit, that *locus* of perpetual transformation within language which operates the de(con)struction of *la langue de la tribu* through the creation of a new syntax:

[*La littérature*] *trace précisément une sorte de langue étrangère, qui n’est pas une autre langue, ni un patois retrouvé, mais un devenir-autre de la langue, une minoration de cette langue majeure, un délire qui l’emporte, une ligne de sorcière qui s’échappe du système dominant.* (Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* 15-6).

That is why the artist/writer must be a stranger in her/his own language, because only a stranger lacks the superficial familiarity - a familiarity born out of banal, everyday use of one’s mother tongue - which stifles the kind of sensitivity able to uncover the “strange” in one’s own language, able to detect the Other behind a

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<sup>5</sup> See “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought* 78-81.



familiar or a forgotten metaphor. What the artist/writer does, then, is not to impose a linguistic form upon a lived event and attempt to render that form as “artistic” as possible - that would be an example of sensationalist art, art that is inauthentic, because its *telos* lies outside of itself, namely in its readers. Furthermore, such a logocentric approach would lead to the kind of rigid, “dead” art decried by Nietzsche (and Thomas Mann) under the term “Apollinian.”

On the contrary, the true artist/writer attempts ultimately to carry over, or transmute into language the effect, in the guise of disruption and aporia, that her/his secret, which renders her/him different from everyone else, has on her/his inner forum, on her/his life. In other words, just as her/his perception of truth, her/his insight into the human condition is forged and re-forged, in a continual process of becoming, by and through that key encounter which repeats itself with certain variations throughout her/his life, in the same way language is disrupted, dragged “*hors de ses sillons coutumiers*” (Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* 9), is deterritorialized and disemboweled, in order to shape another “language,” a “minor language” (to use yet another Deleuzian term) that grows rhizomatically in the cracks of the old language’s ruins.<sup>6</sup> Hence the great importance of a writer’s style. According to Proust,

style for the writer, no less than color for the painter, is a question not of

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the “rhizome model” as opposed to the “tree model,” see Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, “Introduction: Rhizome” 3-25.

technique, but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain forever the *secret* of every individual. (Emphasis mine; *Time Regained* 93 1-2)

Thus, for Proust (and modernity in general), “style” functions as a way of gauging the degree of closeness between a writer’s most personal, subjective experience and language. The more innovative and idiosyncratic the style, the better the work conveys the nature of the experience, and the more radical the transformation to which language, “ordinary language,” is subjected. In fact, the authenticity of a literary work is not to be judged according to the Platonic Truth it contains, like a fruit wrapped around its kernel; rather, the degree of a work’s truthfulness corresponds to the extent to which the text uncovers the intimate workings of language itself. Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, in concordance with Walter Benjamin’s theory of language,<sup>7</sup> the intrinsically linguistic, hence specular nature of writing: “[T]out grand texte philosophique” - *et tout grand texte littéraire*, we might add - “*est le gag qui exhibe le langage même comme un gigantesque trou de mémoire, comme un incurable défaut de parole*” (10). Not only does writing, whether philosophical or literary, “exhibit language as such,” but it exposes the Otherness of language, the absence within linguistic presence in the form of “a giant lapse [literally: “hole”] of memory” and “an incurable lack of speech.”

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<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” *Reflections* 314-33.

Taking this viewpoint into account, we can draw out three important ideas: first of all, a writer's relationship to her/his "art" represents a relationship to the Other, to the "truth," as well as to the unknown behind the "truth." This is less of a paradox than it may first appear if we take into consideration Heidegger's concept of truth, as he defines it in relation to art. Using the Greek notion of *aletheia*, or unconcealedness, as a point of departure, Heidegger conceives truth in a work of art as an unveiling of Being. Since "truth in action" is something of the order of revelation, a "truthful" work of art necessarily operates a disclosure of the unfamiliar that lies behind what appear to be even the most ordinary of things. Consequently, "true art," in the sense of the transformations that occur at the very margins of art, obeys the Shklovskian precept of rendering reality "strange again." Here is how Heidegger formulates this thought:

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. At bottom the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness [Gr. *aletheia*], is dominated throughout by a denial. Yet this denial is not a defect or a fault, as though truth were an unalloyed unconcealedness that has rid itself of everything concealed. If truth could accomplish this, it would no longer be itself. *This denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the nature of truth as unconcealedness. Truth, in its nature, is untruth.*<sup>8</sup> (54)

The writer, then, is someone who activates the unknown, "the double

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<sup>8</sup> "Zum Wesen der Wahrheit als der Unverborgenheit gehört dieses Verweigern in der Weise des zwiefachen Verbergens. Die Wahrheit ist in ihrem Wesen Unwahrheit." (Holzwege 43)

concealment” permeating truth, by enacting a ritual - hence the importance of repetition in a text, in the guise of a remembrance, a leitmotif, or a midrashic-type of commentary, etc.. Viewed in this light, the writer represents a link, a singular point of access to the Other, a mediator who performs an acting out of action itself, a working of something out of work, a wording out of word. Writing attempts to word things that have no currency in language, which is why we say that the writer creates a “different” language in and through her/his works.

Second, a text is “a gag,” Agamben says, revealing that which is forgotten (*un trou de mémoire*) and lacking (*un incurable défaut de parole*) in language. The term “gag”<sup>9</sup> is an inspired choice, since it suggests a number of interesting points: on one hand, that the text is an obstruction to utterance, that it is its own obstruction. We are once again reminded of the specular nature of language. On the other hand, “gag” also suggests that writing is of the order of charlatanry, a hypothesis which is reinforced by the writer’s unique “point of access” mentioned earlier. As a result, the text becomes a site of transgression, bearing testimony to a profanation of language and of an image, as well as to a divulging of “the secret” via an act of voyeurism. This leads to the conclusion that the morality of the artist/writer is necessarily of an altogether different nature from what is commonly

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<sup>9</sup> **Gag** 1. Something forced into or put over the mouth to prevent the utterance of sound. 2. A practical joke; a hoax. 3. A comic effect or remark. (*American Heritage Dictionary* 537)

understood as morality.

And third, the “*incurable* lack of speech” within language mentioned by Agamben introduces the concept of illness and suggests that writing is a strange sort of therapy, strange because its “cure” is not the eradication of a “foreign organism,” but rather the exposure of this intrusion, the unveiling of “an Otherness” as such. With good reason Gilles Deleuze calls literature “*une entreprise de santé*” (*Critique et clinique* 14). He does not imply that the writer benefits from good health, mental or physical. On the contrary, the interdependent relationship between art and illness has been noted more than once, and rightly so, since no one can manipulate Being and Otherness without paying a price. “*L'écrivain,*” says Deleuze, “*jouit d'une irrésistible petite santé qui vient de ce qu'il a vu et entendu des choses trop grandes pour lui, trop fortes pour lui, irrespirables, dont le passage l'épuise, en lui donnant pourtant des devenirs qu'une grosse santé dominante rendrait impossibles. De ce qu'il a vu et entendu, l'écrivain revient les yeux rouges, les tympans percés*”(14).

At this point we have garnered several key terms that apply in part to the intrinsic nature of language, and all of which describe the task of the artist. They are: mediation, circularity, or rather spirality (since the circular movement of return to and reprisal of the original “experience” is never just mechanical repetition), divulgation, voyeurism, deception, suffering, healing. Viewed as such, the writer bears a striking resemblance to the figure of the Renaissance magician.

Magic as a serious epistemological endeavor fell out of favor centuries ago.

In fact, modernity is predicated upon an antagonistic relationship between a quantitative and a qualitative model of description (Couliano 210-223),<sup>10</sup> between the Cartesian method of inquiry based on logic and strict quantitative verification, and the Renaissance approach to knowledge, which coupled qualitative interpretation, or meaning, with concrete findings. Whereas during the Renaissance what we nowadays call “science” and “magic” were virtually indistinguishable from one another, the Reformation carried out a split between the two fields, as a consequence of which magic was stripped of its validity and ousted from its mainstream position in the quest for truth. The fact that today the only use of the discourse of magic which does not invite ridicule is metaphorical rather than denotative, testifies to the undeniable triumph of post-Renaissance science and of the Reformist world view.

But is this really a triumph? The end of the age of magic was accompanied by the denial of a phantasmatic interpretation of the world and of humanity’s position in the universe (Couliano 210-18). While this development has been viewed in a positive light, as a necessary step leading to the achievements of the Enlightenment, it is undeniable that the loss of magic represents also a restriction on the human mind and an impoverishment of our imaginative faculties. Ioan Couliano has pointed out the important and sometimes critical consequences

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<sup>10</sup> I am also indebted to Prof. Călin Mihăilescu for information concerning magic in the Renaissance.

modernity has had to face as a result of this shift:

On the theoretical level, the pervasive censorship of the imaginary results in the advent of exact science and technology.

On the practical level, it results in the advent of modern institutions.

On the psychosocial level, it results in all our chronic neuroses, which are due to the entirely unilateral orientation of Reformation culture and its rejection of the *imaginary* on grounds of principle. (Emphasis his; 222)

Yet by “loss of magic” I do not mean to imply that the principles or practices of magic have completely disappeared. On the contrary, magic continued to flourish after the Reformation and has survived up to this day, however, not “out in the open” and not as a “respectable” discipline. It has been driven either underground, under the form of obscurantism and superstition,<sup>11</sup> or into the figurative, in the guise of metaphor. This is also the way in which I would like to use magic.

As a practical way of managing the sacred and the secret, magic is inherent in any act of knowledge and in any speech act. The magic ritual is a kind of acting out of action itself, a wording out of the word. Magic is not acting “something,” but acting the excluded, i.e., “nothing.” In a similar manner, writing establishes a link to the Other, as it represents the exclusive means of expressing an experience and

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<sup>11</sup> There have been periodic attempts to re-integrate magic into mainstream culture. Although examples are plentiful, it suffices to mention a few which date as far back as Antiquity and which have resurfaced, with certain variations, throughout the ages, including our own: the preoccupation with l'élán *vital* (vitalism) and with the “world of spirits” (spiritism), reading human destiny with the help of the stars (astrology) or of the palm (chiromancy), the use (re-initiated by Ficino) of herbs, crystals and even scents for health benefits - all of which have their equivalents in today's so-called New Age practices. As humanity grows disenchanting with technology, we witness an increase in the appeal of magic.

a thought which cannot be expressed otherwise. A unique gate of access to knowledge and the accompanying susceptibility to imposture that such an exclusive position implies is, in fact, one of the principles of magic imported by literature.

Another such principle is that of depersonalization: the magician must relinquish part of his identity in order to identify with the rite, yet if the identification is absolute, he will be overwhelmed by that which s/he attempts to manipulate. Hence he must avoid both total loss of control and total impermeability to the Other.

For example, according to Giordano Bruno, the magician forges the *vinculum vinculorum*, the supreme bond which is *eros*, by allowing himself to be intoxicated with love to a degree high enough in order to kindle a similar passion in the object of his manipulation, but not so high as to let himself be completely manipulated by it. Since magic operates both through similarity (sympathetic magic) and through the attraction of opposites, both the magician's passion and his detachment work toward the same goal: attracting and ensnaring. Here is how Couliano describes the task of the Bruneian magus:

[O]n the one hand, he must carefully avoid letting himself be seduced and so must eradicate in himself any remnants of love, including self-love; on the other hand, he is not immune to passions. On the contrary, he is even supposed to kindle in his phantasmatic mechanism formidable passions, provided they be sterile and that he be detached from them. *For there is no way to bewitch other than by experimenting in himself with what he wishes to produce in his victim.* (Emphasis mine; 102)

This is precisely the kind of precarious, untenable position occupied by many



of Thomas Mann's writer-characters (e.g. Gustav Aschenbach, Tonio Kröger), a position to which Mann ascribes an unresolved, but extremely fertile tension between Apollinian restraint and Dionysian frenzy. Similar to the magician, the writer must also relinquish a part of her/his identity. What Kafka<sup>12</sup> and Benjamin<sup>13</sup> teach us is that a story is always told from a third-person perspective and that narration involves the intrusion of the Other in the guise of a neutral "S/He." Blanchot calls it "a neutral voice that tells the story from that siteless site where the story keeps silent" ("The Narrative Voice or the Impersonal 'He'," *The Sirens' Song* 219).

In the same vein, Blanchot employs the mysterious "siren song" out of *The Odyssey* as a complex metaphor to illustrate the aporia of writing. Blanchot suggests that the song's powerful and dangerous appeal arises out of its inherent Otherness,<sup>14</sup> and that it is this Otherness which triggers the metamorphosis of Odysseus into

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<sup>12</sup> See the "He" - cycle of texts throughout his *Diaries 1910-13*.

<sup>13</sup> See "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations* 83-110.

<sup>14</sup> "What was the nature of the Sirens' song? What was its flaw? In what way did this flaw endow it with the extraordinary power it possessed? Some have said that it was an inhuman song - a natural sound (is there such a thing as an unnatural sound?) but on the borderline of nature, at any rate foreign to man; almost inaudible, it evoked pleasurable dreams of an endless descent which, in normal circumstances, can never be realised. Others suggested that it had a more mysterious charm; that it simply imitated the song of a normal human being; but since the Sirens, even if they sang like human beings, were only beasts (very beautiful beasts, admittedly, and possessing feminine charm), their song was so unearthly that it forced those who heard it to realise the inhumanness of all human singing." ("The Sirens' Song" *The Sirens' Song* 59)

Homer, the translation of experience into narration: “an ode made episode” (“The Sirens’s Song” in *The Sirens’ Song* 61).

Kafka, on the other hand, treats the same Homeric passage in a much more radical manner. In his parable “The Silence of the Sirens” (*Parables and Paradoxes* 89-93), he replaces song with silence (*Schweigen*, i.e., absence of communication) and destroys any possibility of mediation between Odysseus and the half-bird, half-human creatures. As a result, the encounter between the Greek hero and the mythical beings never really takes place from an ontological point of view. Odysseus and the sirens exist in parallel worlds connected (but what kind of connection is this?) through an absence.

Although Kafka never once mentions writing in the text, it is very tempting and perhaps not entirely unfounded<sup>15</sup> to interpret the fragment as a parable about writing, more specifically about its failure. This raises a fundamental question: can writing still exist as a failure? Similarly, can magic still be considered magic if it is no longer “knowledge in action,” but only knowledge about the lack of knowledge in action, only the “acting out” of the “double concealment,” of the un-truth behind truth, mentioned by Heidegger?

Kafka’s view of writing is one of the more iconoclastic ones in modern

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<sup>15</sup> Kafka’s diaries bear repeated testimony to the all-important role that writing played in his life: “I am nothing but literature and I cannot and will not be anything else.” (*Diaries 1914-1923* 139)

literature and one that borders upon an impossibility. Other writers, such as Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust, have taken a different, perhaps less radical, but also anti-traditional approach, whereby the figure of the writer, if no longer similar to that of an all-powerful Realist narrator, is still comparable to that of an effective mediator - a magician. At this point, a more detailed analysis of the *Künstlerfigur* in the works of Proust, Mann and Kafka is in order.

Ever since Romanticism the character of the artist has made frequent and notable appearances in European literature. I have chosen these three turn-of-the-century authors because through their writings (and perhaps also through their own example) they have played a major role in shaping the modern consciousness of art.

## Chapter One:

### Marcel Proust: Translating Magic

*Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère.*

Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head;  
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter  
And profanation of the dead.

Nabokov, *Poems*

To say that art is an important theme in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* is an understatement. Art in its many forms, art as a philosophical conundrum is the theme that encompasses the whole work, or rather, it is the arch-motif whose numerous variations are sketched by the narrator with the firm delicacy of a master and the joyous insistence of someone whose life has in the end confirmed the secret adumbrated in his childhood: "my whole life... a Vocation" (*Time Regained* 936). Thus art is revealed for the (quint)essence, "the supreme truth" (*Time Regained* 939) of life that it is:

*Real life*, life at last laid bare and illuminated - the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived - *is literature*, and life thus defined is in a sense all the time immanent in ordinary men no less than in the artist. But most men do not see it because they do not seek to shed light upon it. (Emphasis mine; *Time Regained* 931)

No wonder that the novel abounds with artistic characters, which can, for the purposes of a brief overview, be roughly divided into three major groups: first of all, there are the so-called “real” artists, who are recognized as such both by society and - what is even more important - by the narrator. In this category we can place the trio of Bergotte, Elstir and Vinteuil, the actresses Berma and the older Rachel, the violinist Morel, as well as Octave, the socialite nephew of the Verdurins.

The second category consists of those remarkable individuals who are artistically inclined, but who, for one reason or another, did not fulfil the promise intimated by their inclinations. Although this group boasts only two members (Swann and Charlus), they are of crucial importance for the development of both the novel and the narrator. The reasons behind their prominence will be discussed at greater length later.

Thirdly, there are those to whom we would refer as the “minor players” in the great game of art. These figures, some of which are by no means minor characters from a structural point of view, can be subdivided further into two distinct strands. One such strand is composed of individuals who manifest an artistic gift in spheres other than those traditionally included under the umbrella of art. Françoise, for example, is an inspired cook: her *boeuf mode* manages to extract the highest praises even from a snob as inveterate and intransigent as M. de Norpois (*Within a Budding Grove* 493-4). Similarly, the Duchess of Guermantes and Odette

are artists of elegance.<sup>1</sup> Odette, especially, succeeds in extracting and expressing, by means of her wardrobe, the essence of civilization:

She was surrounded by her garments as by the delicate and spiritualised machinery of a whole civilization. (*Within a Budding Grove* 667)

The second cluster is formed by those characters who, although completely unable to produce anything of value in the way of art, or even to differentiate between genius and second-rate, are great patrons of the arts: they are the philistine art lovers, of whom Mme Verdurin is an excellent (and comical) example. According to Proust, such people represent an intermediary stage on the way to artistic genius and are not to be despised:

They are the first attempts of nature in her struggle to create the artist... And with their sterile velleities, the art-lovers are as touching to contemplate as those early machines which tries to leave the ground and could not, but which yet held within them, if not the secret, the still to be discovered means, at least the desire of flight. (*Time Regained* 928)

To penetrate the core, what Proust calls very significantly the *secret*, of art, one must be an artist oneself, or almost (e.g. Swann and Charlus). The ungifted art lovers, however, only skim the surface of the works they consume, which is why they substitute variety and quantity for depth in matters of artistic pleasure, in an

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the “failed artists” Charlus and Swann also cut very elegant figures. They show themselves to be skilled interpreters and manipulators of worldly signs (Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* 5), but they are unable to transcend this first level and to express their artistic gifts in a more lasting and profound manner. The fact that Octave, the society snob and artistic genius, is the only one to do so, constitutes a proleptic indication of the novel’s ending, namely of the protagonist’s metamorphosis into the narrator.

attempt to satisfy their “morbid hunger” (*Time Regained* 928). Since the essence perpetually eludes them, though, it is all in vain.

Even a brief overview, such as the one we have just drawn, reveals the prominence of the question of art in the novel. It is as if Proust sketched the artist in as many postures as he could possibly conceive, not only to exercise his hand, but also and primarily in order to construct the perfect setting for his centerpiece, whose completion coincides with the end of *Time Regained*. Thus, the extensive panoply of artistic figures is deployed for the sole benefit of the quasi-autobiographical protagonist/narrator, Marcel, whose complex apprenticeship to art constitutes the novel’s equally convoluted, non-linear “plot line” (Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* 4).

Marcel-alias-Proust is the artist of the novel, the arch-figure into which the errors and triumphs of all the other ones are blended. Or rather, one could say that the traits embodied by the different artistic characters and scattered throughout the novel are like the broken parts of an image, which it is Marcel’s task to put together again, piece by piece. This restoration becomes the painstaking work of a lifetime, the ultimate fascination, and with good reason. For when, more than three thousand pages later, the narrator has at last reconstituted the original effigy, he is confronted with his own image. It is an infinitely complex assemblage of multiple selves suspended in a colloidal state in which they are kept together, yet separate - a sort

of “body without organs” (Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* 149-66):<sup>2</sup>

The “subject” of the Search is finally no self, it is that *we* without content which portions out Swann, the narrator, and Charlus, distributes or selects them without totalizing them. (Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* 114)

Thus, Marcel’s work of restoration had, in fact, been one of reflection and recognition all along:

In reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity... (*Time Regained* 949)

Marcel is his own writer and his own reader, so that at the end of the novel, which sends us back to its beginning, protagonist and narrator reflect each other in a process of perpetual becoming that cannot be externally delineated or quantified and that contains its own unique infinity: a magical circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.

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<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 6 (“November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?”), we find the following description: “It’s not so much that it [i.e., the Body without Organs] pre-exists or comes ready-made, although in certain respects it is preexistent. At any rate, you make one, you can’t desire without making one. And it awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don’t. This is not reassuring, because you can botch it. Or it can be terrifying and lead you to your death. It is nondesire as well as desire. It is not at all a notion or a concept, but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can’t reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit...” (149-50). “The BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism...” (158). “To the strata as a whole [i.e., “the organism, significance, and subjectification”], the BwO opposes disarticulation (or *n* articulations)..., experimentation..., and nomadism...” (159).



Marcel, the protagonist, garners insights into art, whether positive (what to do) or negative (what not to do, what must be excised), from all the artist-mentors, yet we will see that it is the so-called “failed artists” and, to an even greater extent, a number of characters outside the artistic circle (i.e., “non-artists”) who contribute more to his elaboration of the fundamental laws of art, more specifically, of his art. Ultimately, though, the key lesson Marcel must learn - and does indeed learn - is that the only valuable, fecund truths are those we uncover ourselves in ourselves and by means of our own, particular powers of perception and analysis:<sup>3</sup>

What we have not had to decipher, to elucidate by our own efforts, what was clear before we looked at it was not ours. From ourselves comes only that which we drag forth from the obscurity which lies within us, that which to others is unknown. (*Time Regained* 914)<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, the genuine artists Marcel meets in his life contribute to a refinement of his artistic taste. In other words, they teach him to distinguish genuine art from the kind of “art” practiced by Sainte-Beuve and the Goncourts, whom *hauts bourgeois*, like Mme Verdurin, would place on the same level with, for example, Dostoevsky. Characters such as Bergotte, Elstir and Vinteuil teach the narrator not

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Proust adheres to the Romantic concept of the artist: “*Nach innen führt der geheimnisvolle Weg*” (“The mysterious road leads inward”), says Novalis in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (27).

<sup>4</sup> See also: “We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.” (*Within a Budding Grove* 924-5)

only that “true art” is not “refined” in the conventional sense of the word, namely, that it does not adhere to common standards of good taste and morality, but that, furthermore, it is the product of a life “influenced by everything evil or commonplace” (*Within a Budding Grove* 924), a life which, from an outside point of view, seems either dull and petty, or ravaged by excesses. Marcel makes the discovery that “what were perhaps the most extraordinary masterpieces of our day had emerged not from the *concours général*, from a model academic education à la Broglie, but from the frequentation of paddocks and fashionable bars” (*The Fugitive* 620).

Art is incompatible with a model life, which is why the gifted artist generally cuts a poor figure in society. This is true of all three of Marcel’s chief mentors: Elstir is ridiculed in the Goncourt Journal as “Monsieur Tiche” (*Time Regained* 740), a poorly disguised allusion to the nickname he acquired as one of Mme Verdurin’s “favorites” (“Monsieur Biche”). Bergotte, whom the narrator imagines as a “gentle Bard with snowy locks” (*Within a Budding Grove* 589) based on the writer’s precious, lyrical style, turns out to be “a youngish, uncouth, thickset and myopic little man, with a red nose curled like a snail shell and a goatee beard” (589). And Vinteuil’s “prudish respectability” (*Time Regained* 740) contrasts with the tragic-comical criticism to which the society of Combray subjects him because of his daughter’s lesbian affair with the actress Léa.

The genuine artist, however, may also appear in the guise of the superficial,

high-society snob, of whom Octave, the nephew of the Verdurins described by the narrator as “an artist of genius underneath his crude and frivolous exterior” (*The Fugitive* 618), is an excellent example. Significant similarities with Marcel, such as his artistic gift, his lifestyle and his affair with Andrée, suggest that he is one of Marcel’s more obvious alter-egos. Marcel provides a vindication of Octave’s (and implicitly of his own) vain and useless way of life, a vindication which he ends with a rhetorical question leading back to himself:

Who can say whether, seen from without, some man of talent, or even a man devoid of talent but a lover of the things of the mind, *myself for instance*, would not have appeared, to anyone who met him at Rivebelle, in the hotel at Balbec, or on the esplanade, *the most perfect and pretentious fool?* (Emphasis mine; *The Fugitive* 621)

Yet the lives of these artists of genius, seemingly errant and misled from the viewpoint of society or even of well-meaning family members, such as Marcel’s mother and grandmother, “represent a struggle and victory” (*Within a Budding Grove* 924). For, by extracting the essence out of the frivolous, painful or purely material elements of their existence and transmuting them into spirituality, these artists have succeeded in transcending the superficial level of signs, whether those of worldliness, love or sensuous impressions (Deleuze *Proust and Signs* 5-11) in order to reach the bedrock of truth - what Proust calls the essence of things.

Before engaging in an analysis of Marcel’s unique contribution to his artistic apprenticeship, we should first regard in greater detail the characters that have generated the different forces behind Marcel’s emergence as an artist. In other

words, who are Marcel's mentors and guides and what do they teach him? As I suggested earlier, to the artistic figures briefly outlined above, we should add a number of less obvious non-artists who embody laws that are traditionally believed to characterize endeavors other than art. Yet Proust distills these laws out of art itself in an alchemical process which leads him to the famous conclusion that art encompasses everything and everything is encompassed in art: "art [is] the most real of all things, the most austere school of life, the last true judgment" (*Time Regained* 914).

The first of Marcel's mentors that come to mind are also the most obvious for the simple reason that they are gifted, original artists themselves: it is the trio of Elstir, Bergotte and Vinteuil. From Elstir, the painter, Marcel learns the importance of the reversal of values which the artist must carry out in order to arrive at the sovereignty of vision that allows him to consider things according to a purely subjective scale. In other words, only a liberation of the true creative self by ceasing all adhesion to pre-established esthetic formulas and principles will allow the artist's specificity to materialize in the production of valuable works.

Similarly to a magician, Elstir operates a transformation of reality by conferring value on what, from a conventional point of view, appear to be artistically insignificant elements. After finally viewing the Elstirs owned by the Duchess of Guermantes, Marcel realizes that:

Just as, in one of the pictures that I had seen at Balbec, the hospital, as

beautiful beneath the lapis lazuli sky as the cathedral itself, seemed (more daring than Elstir the theorician, than Elstir the man of taste, the lover of things medieval) to be intoning: "There is no such thing as Gothic, there is no such thing as a masterpiece, a hospital with no style is just as good as the glorious porch," so I now heard: "The slightly vulgar lady whom a man of discernment wouldn't bother to look at as he passed her by, whom he would exclude from the poetical composition which nature has set before him - she is beautiful too; her dress is receiving the same light as the sail of that boat, all things are equally precious... their virtue is all in the painter's eye." (*The Guermantes Way* 436-7)

Elstir shows himself to be an adherent of Impressionism, which accomplishes the reversal of values mentioned earlier in two stages: first, there occurs what Vincent Descombes calls the "nihilistic stage" (257), whereby an object of a high artistic value, a priceless masterpiece (such as a cathedral) is reduced to the same level as a common object (for example, a school building): "Elstir had found the inspiration for two pictures of equal merit in a school building devoid of character and a cathedral which was itself a work of art" (*The Guermantes Way* 47). Then, in the "creative stage" (Descombes 257), the artist's subjectivity assigns value to things which provide him with a motif, with "food for thought," rather than with an esthetic experience. Following the example of Elstir, Marcel tries to find beauty in the most ordinary things, "in the profundities of 'still life,'" such as "the broken gestures of the knives, still lying across one another, the swollen convexity of a discarded napkin..." (*Within a Budding Grove* 929). By rendering discarded reality beautiful again, the artist accomplishes a work of recreation.

In fact, the representation of any object, whether waste, an ordinary thing,

or a precious work of art, is a kind of recreation, since what is depicted is not the thing itself, but the impression it leaves on the artist's consciousness. The (impressionist) artist does not reproduce a part of reality on canvas. To think that one can do so is illusory - and Proust severely criticizes realist art<sup>5</sup> -, because the only "reality" is an inner one. What the artist must achieve in the medium of paint is the reconstitution of the object on a phenomenological level, a sort of renaming: "...if God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew" (*Within a Budding Grove* 893).

The process that corresponds to a similar transformation in the field of literature, whose medium is not paint, but language, is, not surprisingly, translation. "The function and the task of a writer are those of a translator" (*Time Regained* 926), says Proust in a famous passage. But what exactly is to be transmuted from one "language" into another and what are the two "languages?"

Benjamin provides us with a first indication: "The task of the translator," he says, "consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention* - transl.] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" ("The

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<sup>5</sup> "The kind of literature which contents itself with "describing things," with giving of them merely a miserable abstract of lines and surfaces, is in fact, though it calls itself realist, the furthest removed from reality and has more than any other the effect of saddening and impoverishing us, since it abruptly severs all communication of our present self both with the past, the essence of which is preserved in things, and with the future, in which things incite us to enjoy the essence of the past a second time." (*Time Regained* 921)

Task of the Translator,” *Illuminations* 77). On one hand, then, we are to understand that it is not a “content” that must be carried over, but an “effect” that must be reproduced, because translation is of the order of metamorphosis, and not of identity and meaning. The writer’s “gift,” by which we designate the unique quality that differentiates her/him from other individuals, is not the ability to “fabricate,” to create fiction, but to translate into language, into a language intelligible to all, “the essential, the only true book” that already exists in her/him, as it exists in all of us (*Time Regained* 926) - in short, experience.

Once again Benjamin shows himself to be an acute reader and interpreter of Proust. In his essay, entitled “The Image of Proust,” we find the following brilliant insight: “Is it not the quintessence of experience to find out how very difficult it is to learn many things which apparently could be told in very few words? It is simply that such words are part of a language established along lines of caste and class and unintelligible to outsiders” (*Illuminations* 208).<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, then, conceives experience not as an accumulation of difference, as a sort of variation on a few universal themes that are accessible to all of us and that can be expressed in “very few words.” If that were so, we would all speak the same language (a “pure language” in the Benjaminian sense), and all thoughts could be communicated without “residue” - in short, it would be a case of an implicit understanding, as

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<sup>6</sup> My thanks to Professor Angela Cozea for pointing out the significance of this (and many other) Benjaminian passages.

between Hegelian monads invested with the same stock. Consequently, since expressions of subjectivity would be based on superficial differences, they would become stilted and ultimately redundant. As Proust puts it so much more eloquently:

If reality were indeed a sort of waste product of experience, more or less identical for each one of us,... no doubt a cinematograph film of these things would be sufficient and the "style," the "literature" that departed from the simple data they provide would be superfluous and artificial. (*Time Regained* 925)

On the contrary, for both Benjamin and Proust experience is as unique and opaque as a foreign language, as the language of a caste or class other than one's own. This sort of language is "unintelligible to outsiders" and cannot be penetrated. Either one is born to that "caste," either one is that individual, or not. To join the caste, or to become another individual is impossible, just as one can speak a foreign language with native fluency, but never actually be a native speaker, if only because of the surplus experience of another language.

Thus, experience for the artist is not quantitative, but qualitative: it is experiencing the impossibility of crossing the boundary separating her/his language from the "language of the caste;" it is experiencing a sort of perpetual immigration. "Each artist seems thus to be the native of an *unknown country, which he himself has forgotten*" (Emphasis mine; *The Captive* 258), says Proust.

The artist exists in a state of contiguity vis-à-vis the "caste" and vis-à-vis himself. The only possible relationship between contiguous systems is based not on



direct access, but on translation. We each have a “true, essential book” inside us that needs translation, we each have a secret of which we are only half-aware, or perhaps completely unaware, underneath “the whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we call life” (*Time Regained* 932).

Art serves the purpose of undoing the work of “vanity and passion and the intellect, and habit too,” (ibid.) in order uncover that secret and to reveal ourselves to ourselves and to the world: “It alone expresses for others and renders visible to ourselves that life of ours which cannot effectually observe itself and of which the observable manifestations need to be *translated* and, often, to be *read backwards* and laboriously *deciphered*” (Emphasis mine; ibid.). It is not an easy task, nor one for which s/he reaps the gratitude of society, because awareness of the truth destroys the self-satisfied comfort brought about by habit, vanity or passion. X-ray vision is difficult to bear for both patient and surgeon. “I was like a surgeon who beneath the smooth surface of a woman’s belly sees the internal disease which is devouring it. If I went to a dinner-party I did not see the guests: when I thought I was looking at them, I was in fact examining them with X-rays” (*Time Regained* 738), says the narrator. We are reminded of the Deleuzian view of art as medicine and of the artist attempting a cure himself and of others.

It follows that the position of the artist, like that of the magician, is on the fringe of society looking in and looking beyond. S/he is a voyeur whose ability for empathy and love is questionable - in short, a charlatan. For can an individual for

whom even those he has cherished most “have in the long run done no more than pose for him like models for a painter” (*Time Regained* 941) and who affirms that “the most exclusive love for a person is always a love for something else” (*Within a Budding Grove* 891), can s/he really feel love? Proust asks himself whether art is not the ultimate selfish manipulation, since he has used the sufferings and follies of people around him (e.g. his grandmother, Albertine) for his own selfish purpose. The ghoulish perpetuation of their existence in the shape of literary characters brings them nothing, for they died long before, almost as if, says Marcel, “they had died for me” (*Time Regained* 939). Similarly, can it be said that Marcel really cares for Saint-Loup, if he is able to compare his friend to a landscape, whose essence he has penetrated and in front of which he, Marcel, feels completely alone?<sup>7</sup>

Marcel places love above friendship, because love brings suffering and art, while friendship is of the same order as philosophy and observation, i.e., a matter of intellect and concordance. On the contrary, what he values in love “is the risk of an impossibility” (*ibid.*), namely love’s ability to break through the surface of our consciousness by means of suffering and to extract out of our innermost being something “more personal, more remote, more quintessential than any that might

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<sup>7</sup> “... at such moments, although in his company, I was alone, as I should have been in front of a landscape the harmony of which I could understand. He was no more than an object the properties of which, in my musings, I sought to explore. The discovery in him of this pre-existent, this immemorial being, this aristocrat who was precisely what Robert aspired not to be, gave me intense joy, but a joy of the mind, rather than the feelings.” (*Within a Budding Grove* 791)

be evoked by the pleasure we derive from the conversation of a great man or even from the admiring contemplation of his work” (*Within a Budding Grove* 892). Deleuze sums it up pithily: “What does violence to us is richer than all the fruits of our good will or of our conscious work” (*Proust and Signs* 29).

One can, however, only understand this if one is an artist. That is why to someone like Mme de Cambremer, the fact that Marcel exchanges the society of a man of genius like Elstir for the company of Albertine, who does not distinguish herself either through the quality of her intellect (what Mme de Cambremer knows), or that of her character (what the narrator must find out), is an inexplicable mistake. Yet from Marcel’s point of view, in spite of, or, better said, because of the suffering Albertine forces him to endure, the choice is warranted. “I had felt that she was wrong,” he says about Mme de Cambremer, “but I did not know what it was that she had failed to understand: the nature of the lessons through which one serves one’s apprenticeship as a man of letters. In this process the objective value of the arts counts for little; what we have to bring to light and make known to ourselves is our feelings, our passions, that is to say, the passions and feelings of all mankind. A woman whom we need and who makes us suffer elicits from us a whole gamut of feelings far more profound and more vital than a man of genius who interests us” (*Time Regained* 944).

But it is not only love and suffering that provide the artist with material for his work. Just as Elstir taught Marcel to create beauty out of trivial objects, so

Bergotte showed him the usefulness of trivial people, or, better said, the artistic value of transforming individuals who are insignificant in real life into the important Figures of a Book. The same “X-ray vision” that he used in the case of Saint-Loup and which he applied to the salon of Mme Verdurin, enabled Marcel to extract the precious essence of ludicrous and trivial people, such as the Cottards, the Bontemps, Brichot, etc. By uncovering the type that they embody, by defining the fundamental laws at work even in these frivolous beings, the narrator carried out an alchemical process: the sublimation of mediocrity into essence. Thus, an artist of talent is not the perceptive observer and witty *causeur*, who records a swarm of interesting details, such as the Goncourts, but the marginal voyeur and magus who is able to partly efface himself in order to better reflect the profound truth of what he sees, because for Proust “genius [consists] in reflecting power and not in the intrinsic quality of the scene reflected” (*Within a Budding Grove* 597). This is what Marcel’s precursor, Bergotte, was able to do: “The day on which the young Bergotte succeeded in showing to the world of his readers the tasteless household in which he had spent his childhood, and the not very amusing conversations between himself and his brothers, was the day in which he rose above the friends of his family, more intellectual and more distinguished than himself” (*ibid.*).

In another way, though, the narrator must overcome Bergotte (as he must, in fact, overcome all the important figures in his life, artistic or not). It is the pretentious Bloch who initiates young Marcel into the beauty of Bergotte’s style,

but more important than a lesson in style is the discovery Marcel makes on his own of the “ideal passage” of Bergotte (*Swann’s Way* 102). It is the first step on the road that would eventually lead him to the discovery of essences. The similarities Marcel discovers between his own ideas and those of Bergotte encourage him to persevere, yet even at this stage, the Bard remains his guide, the master against whom Marcel measures the value of his own literary attempts. But it is the day when Marcel no longer writes with him in mind, the day when he finds his own voice, that his apprenticeship with Bergotte ceases.

The dynamics between Bergotte and Marcel constitute an oblique resonance of Swann’s relationship with Vinteuil, more specifically with Vinteuil’s music. But, whereas Bergotte’s “lesson” aids the narrator in his quest for artistic truth, Vinteuil’s “little phrase” provides Swann with one more opportunity for esthetic idolatry and, more importantly, with an incitement towards love, which is the great detour Swann makes, the forest in which he gets lost as an artist. It is strange how someone can possess the literary gifts and the esthetic refinement and how he can experience the kind of suffering that in other, perhaps less favored individuals leads to an artistic career, and yet remain artistically sterile.<sup>8</sup> All the conditions are there,

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<sup>8</sup> Another victim of Marcel’s artistic development, who also serves as a warning sign against sterility, is Charlus. Charlus has both a fine esthetic faculty, manifested, for example, in his appreciation of Albertine’s costume *à la* Princesse de Cadignan (*Cities of the Plain* 1093), and a secret, i.e., the homosexual nature of his desire, which he shares with Proust. But he remains a dilettante: “How unfortunate it is that M. de Charlus is not a novelist or a poet! Not merely so that he could describe what he sees, but because the position in which

yet the result is not a writer, but an artist of life. Why does Swann fail?

The dichotomy between life and art is such that one can either live well or write well. An exemplary life rarely leads to art. In a way Swann was given too much: wittiness, charm, refinement, good breeding, wealth, the society of the best, most refined *salons*, as well as a certain nonchalance, a self-preserving resistance to suffering - Proust calls it caddishness -, all of which serve to make him happy. Swann has too much happiness. Even his unhappy love affair with Odette de Crécy cannot dint that bedrock of unaffectedness at the core of his being which allows him to “recover,” to marry Odette when he realizes that he no longer loves her (!) and to be unfaithful to her. What was denied to Swann was the struggle: “And thus the beauty of life, an expression somehow devoid of meaning, *a stage this side of art at which I had seen Swann come to rest*, was that also which, by a *slackening of creative ardour, idolatry of forms* which had inspired it, *a tendency to take the line of least resistance...*” (Emphasis mine; *Within a Budding Grove* 911).

Swann is one of Marcel’s many alter-egos and the numerous similarities between them accentuate their high degree of closeness: both love in the same way,

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a Charlus finds himself with regard to desire by causing scandals to spring up round him compels him to take life seriously, to load pleasure with a weight of emotion. He cannot get stuck in an ironical or superficial way of things because a current of pain is perpetually reawakened within him. ... A slap in the face or a box on the ear helps to educate not only children, but poets. If M. de Charlus had been a novelist, the house which Jupien had set up for him, by reducing so greatly the risks... would have been a misfortune for him. But in the sphere of art M. de Charlus was no more than a dilettante, who never thought of writing and had no gift for it.” (*Time Regained* 861)

both are socialites and they both share the same taste in art and literature (Vermeer, about whom Swann begins but never finishes a critical study, Bergotte, Ruskin). It is highly significant that Swann's favorite authors are the art critic, Ruskin, and Saint-Simon, the memorialist, both of whom express "truths of the intellect," rather than "truths of life." Saint-Simon is limited by his aristocratic snobbery and Ruskin is an idolater of artistic refinement; neither listen to instinct. Consequently, their purely esthetic appreciation of social settings condemn them to dilettantism.

Had Swann not been so refined in his artistic appreciation, had he not been an inveterate snob, had he perhaps even had to earn his living, he may have yet become an artist. In the end, though, it is his life which becomes a work of art and which serves Marcel both as a source of inspiration, as "raw material," and as a warning. That is why Swann must die in order for the transformation of the protagonist into the narrator to take place.

But there is yet another, deeper connection between Swann and the narrator, a link that goes further back in time, to the point of all beginnings:<sup>9</sup> it is the scene of the bedtime kiss withheld, an intense moment of pain for the young Marcel, which would find its compensation in a gratuitous act that would shape the purpose of his life. It is because of Swann's evening visit that Marcel must go to bed without his mother's goodnight kiss. Marcel experiences as a result his first, intense moment

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<sup>9</sup> My thanks again to Professor Angela Cozea for providing a poignant explanation of the scene's significance.

of deprivation and pain, suffering that would reappear with Albertine, as well as his first moment of great, accidental happiness. The latter is brought about by the unwarranted favor conferred upon him by his father, who, seeing him unhappy because of the withheld kiss, instructs his wife to comfort the child by spending the night in the child's room.

Thus, the "crowning mercy" manifested by the father is placed in stark contrast with the mother's and grandmother's attempt to strengthen Marcel's will (*Swann's Way* 40-41). That evening the narrator realizes something for which he would obtain a confirmation years later in the library of the Guermantes, namely that, far from representing a joyous victory, his parents' abdication of authority creates the first gap which allows his "secret" to surface and to unfold. His artistic apprenticeship begins:

...that night that was perhaps the sweetest and the saddest of my life, when I had alas!... won from my parents that first abdication of their authority from which, later, I was to date the decline of my health and my will, and my renunciation, each day disastrously confirmed, of a task that daily became more difficult - and rediscovered by me today, in the library of these same Guermantes, on this most wonderful of all days which had suddenly illuminated for me not only the old groping movements of my thought, but even the whole purpose of my life and perhaps of art itself (*Time Regained* 923).

It is partly because of Swann that the kiss is withheld and artistic creation is granted instead. Swann's gift of art finds a material manifestation in the engraving he gives Marcel, an engraving, after Benozzo Gozzoli, of Abraham "telling Sarah that she must tear herself away from Isaac" (*Swann's Way* 39). We are told in a note



that neither the engraving, nor the biblical scene exist, but that their invention was necessary in order to create a father figure that separates as he unites, similar to the narrator's father, who separates Marcel from his mother's moral code by making her join the child in his room for the night.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while artists such as Bergotte or Elstir provide the narrator with theoretical insights on art, it is figures like Swann and the father who occasion the "real life" episodes which give Marcel a much stronger impetus toward artistic creation than any intellectual exchanges on art.

In fact, through his surprising gesture, Marcel's father enacts a law which Marcel will discover to lie at the basis of his art, as well as of beauty,<sup>11</sup> and to be diametrically opposed to the principles of generosity and moral distinction embodied by his mother and grandmother. Marcel's father represents the law of arbitrariness:

Even at the moment when it manifested itself in this crowning mercy, my

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<sup>10</sup> "Benozzo Gozzoli (1420 ou 1422-1497), peintre florentin, l'un des auteurs des fresques du Campo Santo à Pise, détruites durant la dernière guerre. Plusieurs d'entre elles représentaient des épisodes de la vie d'Abraham, mais on n'y trouve pas la scène évoquée par Proust, qui ne figure pas non plus dans le texte de la Genèse, à moins qu'il ne s'agisse du départ d'Agar et de son fils Ismaël... La référence culturelle semble ici refondue pour les besoins de l'histoire familiale. L'emploi archaïsant du verbe 'se départir'... favorise une ambiguïté lexicale significative; l'expression 'se départir du côté de' amalgame les sens de 'se départir de' (soit 'se séparer de') et de 'partir du côté de' qui a un sens opposé, plus adapté à la scène puisque le père ordonne à la mère de rejoindre l'enfant. L'ambiguïté donne à entendre que le père sépare encore au moment où il réunit, et suscite l'image d'Abraham sacrificateur." (*Du côté de chez Swann, I, Notes et variantes* 1114-1115).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the fortuitous encounter between Charlus and Jupien: "As soon as I considered the encounter from this point of view, everything about it seemed to me instinct with beauty." (*Cities of the Plain* 651)

father's behavior towards me still retained that *arbitrary* and *unwarranted* quality which was so characteristic of him and which arose from the fact that his actions were generally dictated by chance expediencies rather than based on any formal plan. (Emphasis mine; *Swann's Way* 40)

Just as the biblical Abraham is called upon to perform the arbitrary sacrifice of his son, Isaac, so the father's instruction: "Go along with the child" (*Swann's Way* 39), similar to a divine command, initiates a break in the mother's "formal plan" and forces her to sacrifice her son to the "divine" force that will later reveal itself in the guise of art.

It is the kind of fortuitous "break" that the neurasthenic Aunt Léonie dreams of, caught, as she is, in the vise of her absolute will which roots her to her bed. Marcel sees an analogy of Léonie's plight in the repetitive movement of the water-lily caught in the current of the Vivonne.<sup>12</sup> The brief, periodical release from her compulsion which Léonie experiences on Saturdays, when the family lunches an hour earlier than usual, is the only element of novelty she is still able to endure. Yet she longs for the sort of accidental, gratuitous intervention Marcel experiences the night of the kiss, which would free her once and for all from her self-inflicted, yet

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<sup>12</sup> "Thrust towards the bank, its stalk would uncoil, lengthen, reach out, strain almost to breaking-point until the current again caught it... and brought the unhappy plant to what might fitly be called its starting-point, since it was fated not to rest there a moment before moving off once again. I would still find it there, on one walk after another, always in the same helpless state, suggesting certain victims of neurasthenia, among whom my grandfather would have included my Aunt Léonie...; caught in the treadmill of their own maladies and eccentricities, their futile endeavours to escape serve only to actuate its mechanism, to keep in motion the clockwork of their strange, ineluctable and baneful dietetics." (*Swann's Way* 184)

inescapable prison:

This was not say, however, that she did not long, at times, for some greater change, that she did not experience some of those exceptional movements when one thirsts for something other than what is, and when those who, through lack of energy or imagination, are unable to generate any motive power in themselves, cry out, as the clock strikes or the postman knocks, for something new, even if it is worse [...] when the will, which has with such difficulty won the right to indulge without let or hindrance in its own desires and woes, would gladly fling the reins into the hands of imperious circumstance. (*Swann's Way* 136-7)

The sovereignty that Léonie's will exercises over her life forces her into a state of hyper-consciousness, similar to that of Dostoievsky's "underground man." Every moment is equally important because every moment is punctuated by a ritual which reinforces her hold on life: *l'heure de la pepsine, l'heure de la prière*, "her morning toilet, her lunch, her afternoon nap" (*Swann's Way* 128). But in spite, or rather because of the equal and heightened significance her will conveys upon each element with the despotic authority of a monarch, Léonie's life as an invalid is one of trivialities transformed into "matters of state." She can no longer distinguish between crucial and inconsequential events: everything is important (to her), where in fact everything is trivial (in the eyes of the others). Because in Léonie the faculty commonly referred to as "a sense of reality," which is the opposite of obsessive control, has atrophied in favor of hyper-awareness, she has become her own absolute ruler. The narrator does well to compare her to the Sun King: both are caught in a closed, rigid system that perpetuates itself indefinitely without hope for novelty or release. What Léonie needs and longs for, yet at the same time fears

more than anything is a revolution, about which she can only dream, both literally and figuratively speaking.<sup>13</sup>

Yet in sleep lies part of the solution. How can Léonie free her “self,” caught as it is in a state of immanence, in a perpetual “now” that bars all change? How can she escape the “treadmill of her own maladies and eccentricities” that forces her to return to the same spot, like the current does to the water lily? By “cutting the stalk,” metaphorically speaking, and letting herself drift with the current of time. For change is brought by the experience of time alone, as the *bal travesti* of the last chapter shows so well. The experience of time, though, is also that of timelessness which is time’s negative flow: eternity, immanence, “a fragment of time in the pure state” (*Time Regained* 905). It, too, occurs in the last chapter. Have we returned to our starting point, like Léonie?

No, because the motion between the two states is not two-, but three-dimensional, not a circle, but a spiral, like a DNA strand, generating what Proust calls “the discovery of true life” (915), namely, writing. The process is the result of two successive stages: first of all, a centrifugal movement destroys the unity of the

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<sup>13</sup> See the scene of voyeurism between Marcel and Léonie, when Marcel observes his aunt’s nightmare: “She could not see me from the position in which she was lying...; but all at once she seemed to return to a sense of reality, and to grasp the falsehood of the visions that had terrified her; a smile of joy... feebly illumined her face, and with the habit she had formed of speaking to herself half-aloud when she thought herself alone, she murmured: ‘God be praised! we have nothing to worry us here but the kitchen-maid’s baby. And I’ve been dreaming that my poor Octave had come back to life and was trying to make me take a walk every day!’ ” (*Swann’s Way* 118)

self. This is the role of sleep, by means of which the self loses its immobility, its being “rooted in one spot,” as time and space collapse around the sleeper. The moment of waking represents a rupture. “After such a sleep, one is a sort of lay figure. One is no longer a person” (*The Guermantes Way* 86), says Proust in a famous passage that begins like a fairy tale: “Not far thence is the secret garden, in which the kinds of sleep, so different one from another, induced by datura, by Indian hemp, by the multiple extracts of ether - the sleep of belladonna, of opium, of valerian - grow like unknown flowers whose petals remain closed until the day when the predestined stranger...” (84). We are reminded of the natural magic of Marsilio Ficino. Sleep is the experience with which the novel begins.

A similar discontinuity is brought about by forgetting. Both Proust and Benjamin tell us that we are absent at the most important moments of our lives, namely that we cannot distinguish them from among the myriad of all the other instants that comprise our existence. “None of us,” says Benjamin, “has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us - this and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not home” (“The Image of Proust,” *Illuminations* 212). For, according to Proust, in order to understand the significance of the reality perceived by the senses, we must apply our imagination, which is necessarily retrospective: “we can only imagine what is absent” (*Time Regained* 905). Proust calls this a “harsh law” (905) and Benjamin

blames it for our aging.

Yet if we did not age, if we did not partake of a thousand minor deaths of the spirit, as life forces us to adapt to new circumstances, we would be either “rooted in one place,” like Léonie, which is a worse kind of death, or we would be divine. Forgetting, dissolution, a multiplicity of selves are characteristic of the human condition. The Proustian artist is someone who values this for the gaps such a movement creates in our consciousness, because it is in these interstices that what Benjamin calls “the undisturbed unfolding of the most banal, most fleeting, most sentimental, weakest hour” (*Illuminations* 203) takes place. Writing is a rite that calls for effacement before affirmation, forgetting before remembrance.

Like a magician, the Proustian artist must efface himself, must fall silent in order to allow “the gigantic murmur in which uninhibited language becomes image, imagination, speaking depth, the Word’s indistinct plenitude” (Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” *The Sirens’ Song* 102) to be heard. Then and only then will the sort of gratuitous act of “crowning mercy,” like the father’s intervention that night of the withheld kiss, take place. Only in this way can common objects, such as madeleines, starched napkins and uneven pavement stones, become talismans that open the door to the timeless realm of “pure time.” The flashes of involuntary memory are necessarily of an arbitrary nature, like bolts out of the blue: “And I realised that this must be the mark of their authenticity” (*Time Regained* 913). In this second, centripetal movement the self recovers its unity and permanence.

The position of the Proustian artist is that of a mediator between the reality of the senses and the world of essences. He represents a singular point of access in a field of transversalities (Deleuze *Proust and Signs* 137) that link all characters, events and parts of the Search. Thus, we are not surprised when the ultimate circular connection is established between the first and the last chapters of the novel. It is only by reaching the end of the apprenticeship and by dying with the protagonist that we witness Marcel's miraculous birth as a narrator and hear his voice for the first time. And that voice, both echo of a metempsychosis and first word of creation says: *Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. - A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. I, ch. I, p.1.

## Chapter Two:

### Thomas Mann: The Irony of Magic and the Magic of Irony

*Der ist bestimmt der Grösste, welcher der Nacht die Treue und Sehnsucht wahrt und dennoch die gewaltigsten Werke des Tages tut. (He who can remain faithful to the night and its longing and yet accomplish the mightiest works of the day, he is surely the greatest.)*

Th. Mann, *Über Richard Wagners Werk*

Similar to Proust, Thomas Mann's entire life and work circle around the question of art. All of his novels and a number of his short stories have an artist as a protagonist or at least as a main character. Since *Death in Venice* (1911) marks the end of Mann's first great creative phase, we would like to consider that particular novel as a boundary to our analysis, and limit our discussion to the *Künstlerfigur* illustrative of his early artistic development, exemplified by characters such as Hanno Buddenbrook of *The Buddenbrooks*, Tonio Kröger of the eponymous short story, Detlev Spinell and Gabriele Eckhof of *Tristan* and, of course, the well-known Gustav Aschenbach. One exception I would like to make with respect to chronology is the magician Cipolla in the short story "Mario and the Magician," which was written in 1929, eighteen years after the publication of *Death in Venice*. Two factors warrant the inclusion of Cipolla: first of all, although the theme of art-as-magic



occurs throughout Thomas Mann's literary and essayistic production, Cipolla is the only one of Mann's artist figures whose "art," expressed as an uncanny ability for hypnotism, is explicitly called "magic;" furthermore, Cipolla manifests a marked affinity to other "artistic charlatans," such as the dubious street musician of *Death in Venice*, and is thus part of Mann's (in)famous series of *Künstler* at odds with conventional morality.

As has often been pointed out, Mann's concept of art and the artist is dialectical: the artist is someone who experiences both decadence and innocence, both a longing for death and a longing for life, both rationality and daemonic frenzy. Except for a handful of female characters who are artistically inclined, but who have not "produced" a work of art, and thus are not artists *per se*, Mann's thinly veiled autobiographical artist is always male. Thus, he is both an adventurer and a *Bürger*, a master of his art and an impudent charlatan who thumbs his nose at his audience; he is both devil and educator.

But the conflict at the basis of all dialectics is that between life and awareness. It is what all of his early artist figures must all come to terms with, if they are to mature as masters of their craft. The antithesis between life and intellect, beauty and truth, the concept of decadence and Mann's view of the (self-)aware artist, as someone excluded from life by his consciousness, are a result of Nietzsche's crucial influence on Mann's artistic development (Nündel 14). From Wagner's music Mann garnered the erotic, sensual and sinful, death-oriented

component of his concept of art, as well as the formal element of the leitmotif. Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy of the dissolution of the will and of the death-wish constitutes yet another contribution. And, finally, perhaps it is to the Romantics that Mann owes his greatest debt, for the intellectualization of the concept of art, the singular view of illness as the pre-condition to art, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense, and the notion of Romantic irony. The latter is what will aid his artist figures in bearing the tension of the divisive position in which they find themselves.

As with Proust, Mann's early artists can be divided into the successful (Tonio Kröger, Aschenbach, in spite of his death, and, to a certain extent, Cipolla) and the failures (the Buddenbrooks, Detlev Spinell). More ambiguous are the two talented female characters: the frigid Gerda Arnoldsen, who plays the violin with genuine mastery, but cannot "produce" a healthy heir to the Buddenbrook fortune, and Gabriele Eckhof, who can, but whose frailty, linked to her talent as a pianist, sends her to her grave. They either succumb to the sheer vitality of life (Gabriele Eckhof), or they never embrace the moral and social responsibilities that life entails (Gerda Buddenbrook), yet, unlike Thomas Buddenbrook, they have at least cultivated their artistic gifts. Although artistically inclined, Thomas Buddenbrook's moral inheritance forces him to adhere to the dignified, yet rigid code of the *Bürger*, which stifles him as a (possible) artist.

That morality, dignity and art cannot coexist, is precisely what Thomas

Mann illustrates in *Death in Venice* through the experimental figure of Gustav Aschenbach. Mann also defines a different moral code for his *Künstler*:

I experimented in a story with the renunciation of the psychologism and relativism of the dying epoch; I had an artist say good-bye to “knowledge for its own sake,” renounce sympathy for the “abyss,” and turn to the will, to value judgment, to intolerance, to “resolution.” I gave all this a catastrophic, that is a skeptical-pessimistic ending. I cast doubt on the possibility of an artist’s gaining *dignity*. I had my hero, who tried it, discover and admit that it was not possible. [...] But to frustrate it, this “new will,”<sup>1</sup> to give the experiment a skeptical-pessimistic ending: precisely this seemed *moral* to me - as it seemed artistic to me. For my nature is such that doubt, yes, even despair, seems to me more moral, decent, and artistic than any kind of leader-optimism, let alone that politicizing optimism that would like to be saved at any cost by belief - by belief in what? In democracy! (*Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*; DVN 104)

Mann employs two principal avenues to illustrate the moral decline and inner dissolution of his protagonist: myth and psychology. In Chapter 2, we are given a biographical sketch of the artist’s life. By comparing him to the figure of St. Sebastian, Mann presents him as a martyr to art, as the “poet of all those who work on the edge of exhaustion” (DVN 10), whose attitude toward his craft he inherited from his Prussian ancestors: “discipline was his inheritance at birth” (DVN 8). Having sacrificed his best years, as well as his vitality to his art, Aschenbach is no stranger to early illness. The narrator gives us the following anecdotal information:

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<sup>1</sup> Mann refers to “the longing, seeking, striving of his times for ‘an inner tyrant,’ for ‘an absolute system of values,’ for constraint, for the moral return to certainty - it is a striving for culture, for dignity, for bearing, for form [...]” (“On Belief,” *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*; quoted in *Death in Venice* (Norton), referred to from now on as DVN, 104.

When he got sick in Vienna at the age of thirty-five, a canny observer remarked about him to his friends, "You see, Aschenbach has always lived like this" - and the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand into a fist - "never like this" - and he let his open hand dangle comfortably from the arm of the chair. (DVN 8)

The closed fist, which stands as a symbol for his lifelong repression of emotion and sexuality, is contrasted sharply with his open-armed "gesture of readiness, of welcome, and of relaxed acceptance" at the end of Chapter 3, with which he embraces the phantom of Tadzio and the spiritual adventure it represents. Dorrit Cohn has traced the increasing separation between the text's narrator and its protagonist ("The Second Author of Death in Venice," DVN 178-195). The discrepancy between the two voices gives rise to the sort of fine irony for which Thomas Mann is famous and which allows for both points of view, that of the morally responsible, commonsensical narrator-chronicler and that of the artist succumbing to the lure of beauty, to coexist in an uneasy relationship that leads neither to a synthesis, nor to a choice in favor of one voice (and way of life) to the detriment of the other.

Thus, while Aschenbach succumbs to the "stranger god," the narrator maintains until the very end the discipline, dignity and rigidity characteristic of the writer's initial position. Significantly, the epithets with which the narrator refers to Aschenbach become more and more condescending: thus the artist is in turn "the aging man," "the lonely one," "the afflicted," "the crazed one," "the besotted," "the confused one," until at last, he becomes "the degraded one." The narrator's

consistently rationalist and moralist position contrasts with Aschenbach's mythological interpretation of what we may regard from a clinical point of view as something of a psychological breakdown.

When confronted with the perfect classical beauty of Tadzio, Aschenbach appeals to an equally alluring classical text, Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*: "For beauty, my dear Phaedrus," so begins the first monologue of Aschenbach addressed to a symbolic Tadzio, "is both worthy of love and visible at the same time; beauty, mark me well, is the only form of spirit that our senses can both grasp and endure" (DVN 38).

Plato sees beauty in a religious light. Contrary to other absolutes in the realm of Forms, such as Goodness, Truth or Justice, Beauty alone is sensible. Thus, if their souls have not grown too corrupted by the world, individuals can be reminded of that realm through the material intermediary of objects of beauty, and make their souls grow wings. Since the value of beautiful earthly forms lies not in themselves, but in the higher reality to which they point, Beauty becomes a direct and vital link between this existence and a higher reality. Ideally, there should be no conflict between the love for beautiful objects and the devotion to the spiritual, since the two are in a relationship of interdependence. In practice, though, the sensuous appeal of Beauty may prove too strong for the weak or the uninitiated, who would then desire to possess earthly beauty alone. Similar to St. Augustine's *cupiditas*, by which the external signs of this world are enjoyed for their own sake rather than as

a manifestation of God's omni-benevolence, the love of beautiful forms alone represents a perversion of their purpose. They are to be a means, not an end, they must be sublimated into spirit.

It is what Aschenbach attempts to do when he writes in view of his beloved, Tadzio, as the boy plays on the beach. At first, the writer very deliberately views Tadzio as a work of art, as the incarnation of absolute Beauty in an individual form:

Fine, very fine, thought Aschenbach with that professional, cool air of appraisal artists sometimes use to cover their delight, their enthusiasm when they encounter a masterpiece. (DVN 25)

Yet, as he becomes more and more engrossed in the contemplation of the perfectly beautiful boy, the impact of sensuality intensifies. Aschenbach's gaze lovingly encompasses him from head to toe:

His honey-colored hair clung in circles to his temples and his neck; the sun made the down shine on his upper back; the subtle definition of the ribs and the symmetry of his chest stood out through the tight-fitting material covering his torso; his armpits were still as smooth as those of a statue, the hollows behind his knees shone likewise, and the blue veins showing through made his body seem to be made of translucent material...

His eyes embraced the noble figure there on the edge of the blue, and in a transport of delight he though his gaze was grasping beauty itself, the pure form of divine thought, the universal and pure perfection that lives in the spirit and which here, graceful and lovely, presented itself for worship in the form of a human likeness and exemplar. (DVN 37)

To which the more rigorous and moralist narrator adds the ironical comment:

Such was his intoxication. (DVN 37)

Aschenbach succeeds in sublimating the boy's beauty, in transforming it into *logos*, but not for very long. The result of this "strangely fertile intercourse between a

mind and a body” is a page-and-a-half of perfect prose, perfect because it has managed to express Dionysian eroticism and love with an exemplary Apollinian clarity. Although it is a masterpiece, its brevity is an indication of the very great tension implied by such a volatile synthesis. The artist, then, is constantly torn between the opposing forces which Nietzsche named after the two gods, Apollo and Dionysus:

When Aschenbach folded up his work and left the beach, he felt exhausted, even unhinged, as if his conscience were indicting him after a debauch. (DVN 39)

Aschenbach walks the tightrope of art slung over an abyss into which he must eventually fall, because his position is an impossible, untenable one. His two choices, beauty and form, both lead to the abyss: it is the lethal knowledge, or anagnorisis, given to him in the second Phaedrus-monologue, as he stands on the brink of death.<sup>2</sup> The fact that he exiled excess out of his life and writing brings about the spiritual crisis which renders him so susceptible to the first message of the “stranger god” in the shape of the foreign traveler whom he meets in Munich. As he sublimates Tadzio’s beauty into writing, Aschenbach realizes that art can only come into being through Eros, and not in spite of it.

Yet precisely this proves to be beyond human capacity. Mann makes it clear that higher forms of longing can by their very nature find no accomplishment in life,

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<sup>2</sup>For an analysis of Mann’s novella as a Greek tragedy, see Dorrit Cohn, “The Second Author of *Death in Venice*” DVN 178-195.

since “yearning links unlikes, but simultaneously destroys all hope of their union” (Georg Lukàcs quoted in T.J. Reed, “The Art of Ambivalence” DVN 167). Thus Aschenbach’s love finds fulfilment only in death, as he succumbs to the last and most dangerous of Dionysus’ representatives. Tadzio, in the guise of Hermes Psychopompos, leads the soul of the artist into the infinite:

It seemed to him, though, as if the pale and charming psychagogue [Tadzio] out there were smiling at him, beckoning to him; as if lifting his hand from his hip, he were pointing outwards, hovering before him in an immensity full of promise. And as so often before, he arose to follow him. (DVN 63)

He also appears as the culmination of a long series of fantastical messengers of the “stranger god,” Dionysus, who represents Aschenbach’s “calling,” namely the abyss. Significantly, all the messengers share traits that point toward death, dissolution and immorality. Even Tadzio’s beauty is only skin-deep: he shows a decadent, sickly pallor and the typically decadent bad teeth. Furthermore, the boy brings about Aschenbach’s inner death, as well as his physical one: the artist’s dream of the Dionysian orgy is his spiritual nadir, after which he consumes the overripe strawberries that infect him with the virus of cholera.

Tadzio, who is associated with many (classical) figures, from Hyazinth, to Ganymede, to Eros, to Narcissus, to Hermes, to Dionysus, ultimately metamorphoses into the beckoning face of death. His smile is narcissistic: he sees his beauty in the impression it produces in the aging writer, that is, he reflects himself in the face of Aschenbach, to whom, though, erotic fulfilment is denied.



The stronger his longing, the farther the object of his longing and the more unlikely the union.

Thomas Mann's doomed artist-figure, Aschenbach, who increasingly occupies the position of the outsider, is stripped of conventional morality and dignity. As he loses himself in the labyrinth of Venice, the city of decadence *par excellence*, spiritual and physiological chaos erupts in him. Yet during that brief interlude on the beach he succeeds in accomplishing the translation of his experience into art. His death is an indication of the difficulty of his endeavor, not of its failure.

Another "*Künstler*" (though his art is questionable), whose death sheds perhaps a more ambiguous light on the success of his endeavor, is the magician Cipolla. Was it insufficient mastery of his art (which led him to ignore the intensity of Mario's resentment towards him), or was it an excessive skill (which allowed him to bamboozle Mario in the first place), as well as a too close identification with his magic (harmful to his health) which killed Cipolla? Whether too little or too much, art in the form of magic seems to have brought about the magician's demise.

In *The Buddenbrooks*, too, art emerges as the destroyer of life. The artist Tonio Kröger is saved only by his "love of the ordinary," which justifies his writing. Gustav Aschenbach, having seemingly risen beyond suspicion in the disciplined service of art, is brought down by the revengeful forces of life, without which, though, his writing would have dwindled to the formally masterful, yet uninspired

(and hence dead) art of, say, a late Bergotte.

The secret of Aschenbach's art before his fatal encounter with Tadzio lies in the conquest of doubt and irony, in his aspiration to render possible a new kind of dignity. If as a young writer he had startled the world with his "cynicisms about the questionable character of art and artists" (DVN 113), the charm of such a marginal position vis-à-vis both art and society soon wore off. The style of his later works resulted from a determined rejection of all doubts concerning the validity of the moral law, the dismissal of all "sympathy with the abyss" (DVN 124), the denial of the moral flabbiness of *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* (DVN 126). Indeed, "the miracle of innocence reborn" (DVN 135) which "played a part in one of Aschenbach's earlier dialogues where it was treated not without some oracular emphasis" (ibid.), seems to have come to pass in his own literary life, bringing about the classical balance of the mature work. It is "a moral resolution beyond all inhibiting and disintegrating knowledge" (DVN 115), which is reflected in his deliberate mastery of language and has recommended some of his exemplary pages to the editors of prescribed texts for the education of the country's youth. Such deliberately exemplary language is a parody of the style in which *Death in Venice* itself is written, the very style Mann parodies in telling the tragic story of Aschenbach's succumbing to erotic magic.

On a more tragi-comical note, Cipolla is also a victim of his own erotic magic. "To arouse an emotion," says Ioan Couliano discussing Giordano Bruno's

*vinculum vinculorum*, "the manipulator must develop it in himself, whence it will not fail to be transmitted to the phantasmic mechanism of his victim" (*Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* 101). That is what Cipolla does when he manipulates his audience, and, since this sort of mediation is a highly strenuous activity, he drinks and smokes excessively during his act, and uses a whip in order to maintain control over his "subjects" and himself.

Thus, after having performed a number of astounding feats of hypnosis, Cipolla is able to accomplish the last, perhaps most impressive one of convincing Mario that it is his beloved Silvestra who is standing in front of him and who finally invites him to kiss her. It is because he, Cipolla, has a profound knowledge of love, or so he says:

I know what you are thinking: what does this Cipolla, with his little physical defect, know about love? Wrong, all wrong, he knows a lot. He has a wide and powerful understanding of its workings, and it pays to listen to his advice. (*Stories of Three Decades* 565)

But had that been true, the magician should also have had knowledge of the deep resentment that humiliation in love will cause, a resentment strong enough to lead to death. Mario, however, takes Cipolla by surprise and shoots him. If we rule out a suicidal act on the *cavaliere's* part, for which no textual indication is ever given, one possible explanation for his unawareness of Mario's intention to kill (which, granted, was not premeditated) lies in his, Cipolla's, extreme cynicism regarding humanity. The magician has none of the "love of the commonplace" that validates

Tonio Kröger's art. Both Cipolla and Aschenbach are overcome by the sort of emotion which Thomas Mann assigns to the side of "life" in the dichotomy between life and art.

Thus the true "magical act" on Mann's part is of a narrative nature: he transmutes a wealth of narrative, expressed in an abundance of characters and well-traced plotlines that lead to formally faultless novels and stories written in an exemplary style, into narrative wealth, into an ironic (but not cynical) play with traditional narrative forms and with language. The metamorphosis, however, is neither total nor unidirectional, in the sense that the subtle superposition and interplay of traditional forms and ideas, a process similar to Hesse's "glass bead game," is not conducted at the expense of character development or narrative coherence.

On the contrary, Mann layers emotionally compelling *récits* with intellectually appealing formal experimentation, which presupposes an ironic detachment from both art and life. While his early artist figures (and later ones as well) are overcome by the Apollinian-Dionysian dichotomy, Mann, the writer, accomplishes the magical feat not of "innocence reborn," but of keeping a foothold of innocence while engaging simultaneously in a parody of that very innocence; he succeeds in being imbued with *eros*, while at the same time transposing its fulfilment onto the plane of art.

This sort of mastery led Hermann Hesse to portray Mann in his novel *The*

*Glass Bead Game* in the guise of the transparently-named character of Thomas von der Trave (the river Trave flows through Mann's hometown, Lübeck) who is a highly accomplished *magister ludi*, or master of the game.

## Chapter Three:

### Franz Kafka: The Magician's Apprentice

To paint... not what one sees, because one can see nothing, not what one does not see, because one ought never to paint what one has not seen, but the *fact of not seeing*, so that the failure of the eye... is imparted to the canvas... is beautiful indeed.

Proust, *Jean Santeuil*

Is it her singing that enchants us or is it not rather the solemn stillness enclosing her frail little voice?

Kafka, "Josephine the Singer, of the Mouse Folk"

"I am nothing but literature and I cannot and will not be anything else" (Kafka, *Diaries 1910-13* 46). This diary entry, and many others like it, are an indication of how strongly Kafka felt about writing. It is surprising, then, to find that the theme never appears in his fiction, as it does with Thomas Mann and with Proust, where it is the arch-theme that supersedes everything else. Why does Kafka not write about literature? Why are all of his artist-figures, and they are not many, circus people, variété performers, or animals, who have human preoccupations - in short, freaks?

If art was such a central concern for Kafka, if not perhaps the concern of his life, why are his few *Künstlerfiguren* such marginalized, tormented figures, to whom both full satisfaction with their art, as well as the ability to communicate their

experience to others, is denied? The Kafka-myth which stresses alienation, absurdism and suffering, comes to mind. Like all myths, it is a simplification and already an interpretation of a figure whose greatest value lies perhaps in its ambiguity. Kafka warned against trusting myth.<sup>1</sup>

When Kafka introduces the theme of writing in his fiction, it is either in the guise of a terrible punishment, such as in the "Penal Colony," or as an autobiographical *récit*, whose purpose is to demonstrate the absence of guilt: it is Joseph's case in *The Castle*. As monstrous as the Commandant's machine is, at least the condemned soldier is not forced to undertake Joseph's harrowing self-search. Joseph must experience the entire gamut of psychological tortures, from which the soldier is spared because the machine breaks down, but which the Officer longs for, as a revelation of truth, yet is denied to him. It is highly significant that neither does Joseph write his life's story (it remains a plan), nor does the Harrow function as it should, suggesting that writing as the ultimate unveiling of oneself, fails in its task. The only character to whom literature brings consolation is the figure of Sancho Panza, around which Kafka constructs one of his parables, yet the act itself is never mentioned in the parable; we must guess it.<sup>2</sup> Thus, writing seems to be a thorny

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<sup>1</sup> See Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," *Prismen* 44-9.

<sup>2</sup> "Without making any boast of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by devouring a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from him his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that his demon thereupon set out in perfect freedom on the maddest exploits, which, however, for the lack of a preordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed

subject with Kafka, for which, in a letter to his friend Oskar Pollak, he provides the following “reason:”

Last night as I lay sleepless and let everything continually veer back and forth between my aching temples what I had almost forgotten [...] became clear to me: namely, on what frail ground or rather altogether non-existent ground I live, over a darkness from which the dark power emerges when it wills and, heedless of my stammering, destroys my life. Writing sustains me, but is it not more accurate to say that it sustains this kind of life? By this I don't mean, of course, that my life is better when I don't write. Rather it is much worse then and wholly unbearable and has to end in madness. But that, granted, only follows from the postulate that I am a writer, which is actually true even when I am not writing, and a non-writing writer is a monster inviting madness. But what about being a writer itself? Writing is a sweet and wonderful reward, but for what? In the night it became clear to me [...] that it is the reward for serving the devil. (*Letters* 333-4)

The theme of the artist-hero held very little interest for Kafka. Portraits of artists are relatively rare and only of subsidiary interest; in most cases we are dealing with pseudo-artists or *artistes*: Brunelda the monumental and ludicrous opera-singer in *Amerika*; Titorelli, the “court” artist (i.e., the artist of the Court bureaucracy) in *The Trial*, amiably satirized as a pedigreed confectioner of fraudulent portraits of judges on the one hand, and of identical heath landscapes with sunsets on the other. And then there is a scattering of entertainers, including also that memorable ape Rotpeter of “A Report to the Academy”, who has covered the evolutionary distance from ape to man in five years by a shrewd process of

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nobody. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and had of them a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days.” (“The Truth About Sancho Panza,” *Parables and Paradoxes* 179)



adaptation, and who now seems to while his time away by entertaining the "civilized" public, whose ranks he was permitted to join. And finally there are those quaintly detached air-borne *Lufthunde* (soaring dogs) in "Investigations of a Dog." It is evident from all this that Kafka creates these characters also for satirical purposes, to delineate the commercial artist and the star-performer.

The final collection of stories, "A Hunger Artist," published shortly after his death in 1924, deserves special attention, because three of the stories are concerned with performance artists. These four stories were written between 1920 and 1924 and arranged for publication in the following way: "First Sorrow;" "A Little Woman;" "A Hunger Artist;" and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," this last one being Kafka's final story.

One of the peculiarities of the entire set is that it is written in the final, more relaxed and coolly ironic manner which characterizes Kafka's mature style. The humour is sly, often playful, and very precise; the irony is detached, resigned, and in the case of "Josephine," serene; its grim underpinnings have been modulated into sadness, the kind of sadness that a certain kind of smile serves to heighten rather than obliterate.

The third story, best known among the four, is the anatomy of art as ascetism. The narrative here is a third person account, but its detachment is harsher and more cruel. In "Josephine," Kafka opted for a communal narrator who speaks in the first person, more frequently in the plural than in the singular, and who must

therefore be situated within her/his own context (as in all other such narratives by Kafka) and under no circumstances be identified with the author.

The first observation that can be made about these varied story-telling approaches is that the two artists - the trapeze artist of the first story and the Hunger Artist - who are closest, biographically, to Kafka, are treated with what appears to be the greatest possible distance (the third - person narration ); whereas the musical mouse is refracted through the critical and sympathetic mediator of first-person narrator and is, thus, even more removed from the reader, although this particular story contains observations about art that are more serious and positive than what we can obtain from the others. The subtleties of tone directing perspective and narrative are proof of the highest mastery of their author's refined technique. It is this capacity "to expand and at the same time to rarefy the parable that marks this set, and particularly the final story, as superb achievements within the framework of the new perspective of their author" (Strauss 196).

The two stories under consideration, then, are about performers rather than artists, as Kafka's earlier practice has led us to expect. Performance is, after all, display, theatre designed to give pleasure to a public as well as to the performer himself, especially if he is a histrion-- hence the side-show atmosphere common to all three (though the emphasis is quite different in "Josephine"). The artist as the darling of the public (even if he loses his popularity, as the Hunger Artist does) - that is the secret wish and temptation of every talented and vain individual; and it

is matched by the public's hunger for virtuoso performance. But in "Josephine" Kafka asks more pertinent questions about the profounder relationship of performer to public. "A Hunger Artist" is another odyssey of error, an exercise in ascetic futility. This artist is a virtuoso in masochism, a Romantic exhibitionist who turns his (genuine) alienation into a public display of martyrdom and tries to coerce the public into adulation for something that he finally admits deserves no praise whatsoever.

During the first phase of his career, when the practice of fasting exhibitions (*Schauhungern*) was still in vogue, the only complete satisfaction that might have been derived from fasting could only have been the hunger artist's own, inasmuch as the hunger artist was, so to speak, his only permanent spectator. But he remains malcontent, and this fact gives us our first clue to the artist's fraudulence:

No one could possibly watch the hunger artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the fast had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist himself could know that, he was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast. Yet for other reasons he was never satisfied; it was not perhaps mere fasting that had brought him to skeleton thinness that many people had regretfully to keep away from exhibitions, because the sight of him was too much for them, perhaps it was dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down. For he alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world. (*Penguin Complete Short Stories* 269-70)

So this hunger artistry is really a hunger strike against oneself, for the delectation of the world, a kind of athletic anorexia, and possibly in some way for the instruction of the world - which, of course, cannot be expected to see this

showman as anything more than a freak. The Hunger Artist subsequently becomes *declass *: the world wearies of that kind of exhibition, and the Hunger Artist leases himself to a circus as a sideshow attraction (his cage is in the vicinity of the stables, as it ironically turns out). Interest in his martyrdom dwindles (as in Kafka's parable about Prometheus: "The gods grew weary, the eagles (*sic*) grew weary, the wound closed wearily" *PCS* 362), paradoxically giving the Hunger Artist the opportunity to surpass his world record for fasting, but without having kept track of the time: "the world was cheating him of his reward"- that is the sum total of the Hunger Artist's judgment. It is petulant; and it is not Kafka's final word.

At the end of his life, the Hunger Artist whispers his final words to the attendant, explaining that he had to fast "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (*PCS* 267). This is surely the aphoristic kernel out of which the surrounding parable has evolved. This artist is afflicted with an inner obsession, a necessity which does not lead to freedom but to ever greater enslavement: the cage, the eyes of the public, the discontent. So this artist is only "half-authentic:" he is alienated from himself and from the world; he also has in him something of the schemer and the imposter who wants to coerce the world to appreciate his alienation and thus to provide a spurious liberation (that would be his "reward"). All that is doomed to failure from the beginning. So the Hunger Artist languishes as a man neither alive nor dead, a counterpart to the Hunter Gracchus, who has lived but

cannot die.

The final paragraph of the story has elicited much comment. The cage of the Hunger Artist is cleared and becomes the habitation of a young panther. “The food he liked was brought him without hesitation by the attendants; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk; and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded round the cage, and did not ever want to move away” (*PCS* 267). This is not, as some commentators would have us believe, the answer to the Hunger Artist's dilemma. That kind of raw animal vitality, *joie de vivre*, Dionysian abandon, is not available to human beings endowed with consciousness (Strauss 57).

Nor is the caged animal's apparent freedom anything but a mark of the fascination experienced by the outsider. The public is quite rightly drawn to this beast, because spectators instinctively find life more interesting than death. The panther points up the central ambiguity of the story: how to convert the artistic and spiritual (since this story is not only about the artist but also about the religious quester; for Kafka the two concepts are inseparable) drive to self-mortification into an *élan vital*. The two extremes do not meet in this story, as they do not meet in Kafka's other stories. But at least the Hunger Artist serves as a warning: he is

something of a false martyr and an inspired charlatan, an “obstacle;” and it is, incidentally, a shaft aimed at the Romantic notion of the artist as scapegoat or as cosmic sufferer. Private misery, yes, but not for the sake of the public’s misericordiality. The incongruity between private performance and public receptivity is the subject of the final story, “Josephine.”

“Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” inquires into the effect of art upon a troubled nation, and into the relationship of the artist to that community (Stern 351). The Narrator, here, speaks from within the community (the mouse folk), using primarily the first-person plural pronoun and he elaborates his private reflections in the first-person singular. The opening paragraph poses an initial riddle, as so many of Kafka’s stories do, but in this final tale the language is so gently shaded that the reader is hardly aware of the enigma proposed:

Our singer is called Josephine. Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song. There is no one but is carried away by her singing, a tribute all the greater as we are not in general a music loving race. Tranquil peace is the music we love best; our life is hard, we are no longer able, even on occasions when we have tried to shake off the cares of daily life, to rise to anything so high and remote from our usual routine as music. (*PCS* 360)

Here is the enigma: Josephine communicates the power of music to a people who do not like music, who would actually prefer peace of mind. This formulation: music (art) is for the people as tranquillity is to daily care - defines clearly enough the subject-matter of the story, and no allegorizing interpretation is necessary. The only thing that may possibly call for an explanation is the cast of the story. But here

it seems self-evident that the mouse folk are chosen because they represent a particular condition of existence: perpetually threatened, restlessly scurrying, and marked by a certain degree of weakness as well as shrewdness, if not outright impertinence. This is surely a legitimate way of looking at human beings in general, without feeling impelled to read this fable restrictively as an allegory of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Another problem: if the mouse folk is identified with persecuted minorities, then where are their oppressors in this story? We are reminded, here and there, that the mouse community lives in constant danger, and that is really adequate for establishing the existential situation within which this tale can be told. Thus, the story remains within the conventional framework of the animal fable, which tends to equate animal existence with human existence.

The first paragraph then proceeds to explain why the mouse people's attitude toward music cannot and need not be exalted: "But we do not much lament that; we do not get even so far; a certain practical cunning, which admittedly, and with a smile born of such cunning we are wont to console ourselves for all shortcomings, even supposing--only it does not happen--that we were to yearn once in a way for the kind of bliss which music may provide" (*PCS* 360).

The last sentence of the paragraph focuses on Josephine and contrasts her with the populace; and it foreshadows the ending of the story: "Josephine is the sole exception; she has a love for music and knows how to transmit it; she is the only one; when she dies, music - who knows for how long - will vanish from our lives"

(PCS 361). Semicolons bracket these brief declarations into a concise unity: Josephine is unique, she is the mediatrix, and music will disappear for a while after she is gone.

The story evolves from this first paragraph: Who and what is Josephine and why is she an effective singer; how does the community receive the mediation of her music; what, finally, is the power of this music, and what is its place in the experience of the community?

The Narrator makes it very clear from the outset that Josephine's music is, esthetically considered, nothing out of the ordinary: it is no more and no less than the "piping" (*Pfeifen*, "whistling") of the mouse folk, "a characteristic expression of our life." He tells us, moreover, that this unmusical mouse nation has a song tradition and that songs are still extant "which, it is true, no one can now sing. Thus we have an inkling of what singing is, and Josephine's art does not really correspond to it." (PCS 361). Accordingly, we are left with the riddle of Josephine's effectiveness.

We can take the text at its face value, as a present-day parable which attempts to tell us something about the truth, rather than tell us the truth. Music, in this case, is used as an image for something ungraspable and remote -- Kafka often treats it in exactly the same way (the violin-playing episode in *The Metamorphosis*; the "music dogs" in "Investigations of a Dog"). One may assign to this image the meaning of art-in-general, or language itself. Both of these possibilities work,



because they all mean the same thing: the ultimate source and the ultimate goal of Truth, Law, Language, Authority - in short, the ultimate reality of Spirit, which is One and Indestructible. In all of Kafka's work that ultimate reality is incomprehensible and beyond the power of semantic articulation. Hence all these other meanings work as partial and approximate constructions.

Thus, "music," "song," in this story are instances of a no-longer-grasped truth, which is merely transmitted inadequately and reflected distortedly into secular and historical experience. Thus it becomes clear that this "tradition," this "Kabbalah," of music has not been lost, but become "unfamiliar, indecipherable, and its faint vestiges remain in the ordinary song or speech of the populace, in their language, which happens to be *Pfeifen*" (Strauss 199; Stern 271).

Yet in this banal and "fallen" form of the language of the Spirit there resides its only link with Truth. Thus, the Narrator describes, but does not explain, the riddle of Josephine's *Pfeifen*, which is at the same time more and less than the ordinary expression of the mouse folk. It is nothing more, he says, than "a quite ordinary piping tone, which at most differs a little from the others through being delicate or weak. Yet if you sit down before her, it is not merely a piping; to comprehend her art it is necessary not only to hear but to see her." (PCS 361) It is a ritual and communal event, which requires a collective and individual sense of expectancy. At this point the Narrator passes beyond the limitation of mouse experience and introduces a parable:

To crack a nut is truly no feat, so no one would ever dare to collect an audience in order to entertain it with nut-cracking. But if all the same one does do that and succeeds in entertaining the public, then it cannot be a matter of simple nut-cracking. Or it is a matter of nut-cracking, but it turns out that we have overlooked the art of cracking nuts because we were skilled in it and that this newcomer to it first shows its real nature, even finding it useful in making his effects to be rather less expert in nut-cracking than most of us. (*PCS* 361-62)

Kafka's literary art is as ambiguous and paradoxical as this nut-cracking exhibition; he differs from Josephine in being perfectly conscious of the paradox, whereas Josephine, somewhat like the Hunger Artist, is intent upon using all her histrionic skills to compel the populace to recognize her performance as "musical:" "At any rate she denies any connection between her art and ordinary piping" (*PCS* 362). Similarly to the Hunger Artist, she insists on being adulated on her own terms. The Narrator, who takes a detached view of the Josephine phenomenon, describes himself as being half in opposition to her, that is, both sympathetic and critical.

Kafka suggests that the behaviour of the romantic-narcissistic artist, no matter how great the virtuosity, is histrionic and suggests charlatanism. But in the final reckoning it does not matter: the people do not entirely yield to it; they know better. They treat Josephine like a spoiled but beloved child and blissfully ignore her claims to special consideration and privilege. Josephine may pretend to be the "saviour" of the people, or pose as the benevolent parent of her "children;" she only succeeds in eliciting a knowing smile from her compatriots, who understand that her childishness is only the prolongation of that brief childhood that in the mouse

people all too quickly vanishes into the anxiety and sobriety of adulthood. What the narrator does know, and what the populace tacitly perceives, is that Josephine's song is a form of liberation through repose, thoughtful reflection, and a kind of unplanned inwardness. Her song provides an island of tranquillity in a whirlpool of anxiety: "...Her audience... sits in mouse-like stillness; as if we had become partakers in the peace we long for, from which our own piping at the very least holds us back, we make no sound. Is it her singing that enchants us or is it rather the solemn stillness enclosing her frail little voice?" (*PCS* 362)

Art for art's sake, no, art for the artist's sake, perhaps, but it is of no interest to the community. There seems to be no real communication between the two parties. It is no wonder that sooner or later Josephine will vanish, and the populace will miss her, but not too much. "She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her" (*PCS* 376). After all, Josephine provides the ritual occasion for silence, a place of refuge for the troubled soul of the individual. The Narrator speculates: "Was it not rather because Josephine's singing was already past losing in this way that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly?" Art makes possible the communion with the Indestructible; art offers the individual freedom to contemplate that inward Truth from which it removes the veils and masks, but which art cannot disclose directly (since the language of Truth is not the word, but the Word restored to its original Silence). The Narrator of the story, who is not an artist but an observer, a chronicler in a community without

history, perceives the effect of Josephine upon the mouse folk and can thus draw some conclusions about the "power of song," about which he had speculated at the beginning of his inquiry (Strauss 207).

But that is not his final word. The last paragraph of the story attains a particular, perhaps unintentional, poignancy, since in reading it we are aware of the fact that these are probably the final words Kafka committed to paper:

So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all, while Josephine, redeemed from the earthly sorrows which to her thinking lay in wait for all chosen spirits, will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgiven like all her brothers. (*PCS* 376)

It would appear from this final comment on Josephine that oblivion is the public destiny of the artist. Josephine had a function; she fulfilled it in her way; others before her and after her have done and will do the same. There is a kind of anonymity about it all.

Thus, Kafka accomplishes a de-sacralization of the Romantic "myth" of the exalted artist, in a movement that runs counter to the artistic credo of Proust and of Mann. Yet for him, too, art represents a summons from "beyond." In his short piece, "The Silence of the Sirens," which can be interpreted as a parable on art, Kafka provides us with a more dangerous concept of art as a lure of an inhuman nature. Maurice Blanchot was also inspired by the Homeric episode, and the result is a short text entitled "The Sirens' Song." The intertextual link between the two pieces is closer and more complex than one warranted solely by their common topic.

Blanchot's "Sirens' Song" can, in fact, be viewed as his indirect commentary on Kafka's "Silence of the Sirens:" Blanchot enacts allegorically that which Kafka deconstructs in the parable, namely the intimate, ambiguous mechanism of writing. The dynamics at work between the two texts are an illustration of the productive interaction, which often occurs in the form of a struggle, between literature and criticism.

Thus Kafka's fragmentariness, the endless sliding of "turns of phrases" and his irreverent, circumspect handling of myth and metaphor, which produce the effect of anxious uncertainty for which he has become famous, reveal their deeper significance. They show Kafka to be, among other things, an early deconstructionist whose search for a new status of literary discourse is based on the abandonment of a privileged, central truth in favor of new and playful combinations of traditional elements in the form of an often self-critical commentary which, similar to Deleuze's and Guattari's "rhizome" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 13-6), can be accessed at many different points.

This different kind of writing which dispenses with the certainty of a transcendental signified, whether in language or in the world (or beyond it, for that matter), comes with its own price and its own rewards. As we have already mentioned, Kafka's diaries and letters are a glowing, often tortuous and tortured testimony of his commitment to his art. Just as, according to Kafka, writing forms the very bedrock upon which his existence is founded and - putatively - founders,

we may also take it to be the subtext of our fragment, similar to the “siren song” which is present indirectly through its absence.

Stéphane Mosès has rightly pointed out the various oppositions upon which Kafka’s parable is built, conveying it a dialectical structure (49-55). Yet because the dialectical process is skewed, synthesis never ensues; rather, it is infinitely deferred. The text begins with a preamble. “Proof,” says the nameless narrator of the parable, “that inadequate, even childish measures, may serve to rescue one from peril.” It is what the remaining text must demonstrate, yet this demonstration is never finalized.

We must note from the very beginning the novel element that Kafka has introduced into the traditional passage of the *Odyssey*. Instead of Ulysses telling his story in the first person singular, at the court of the Phaiakians, thus conveying to it an immediacy and credibility which a third-person narrator could not (Koelb, “Sirens” 302), we are faced with an anonymous, faceless, yet not omniscient narrator, who is situated outside of the actual tale and who, as we are told later, relies upon what has been passed down to her/him by tradition. Thus, in the very first paragraph we read the following comment on the wax and chains with which Ulysses sought to protect himself from the Sirens:

[B]ut *it was known to all the world* that such things were of no help whatever (Emphasis mine; 88).

Tradition resurfaces again at the end, when we are told that:

A codicil to the foregoing has also been *handed down*. Ulysses, *it is said*, was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could

pierce his armor. (Emphasis mine; 91)

The position of the narrator in Kafka's parable is an uncertain one: s/he displays some authority, yet lacks full credibility because of her/his reliance on hearsay and the reluctance to state a firm opinion, either one way or the other. It can be viewed as a position of either cowardly irresponsibility, or extreme realism, depending on whether one interprets the narrator as an incompetent, or as someone honest enough not to dissimulate her/his lack of certainty behind an authoritatively proffered opinion. It is certain, however, that Kafka's narrator is no Homer, no myth-maker. If the story is kept "free of explanation" and its mystery is maintained, following Benjamin's recommendation, it is not out of a desire to mystify; rather it is because knowledge is not available directly anymore, but only in the form of rumor and its "mystified" cousin, tradition. Only Ulysses himself is allowed to possess direct knowledge, but, as has been pointed out, he is not the narrator. Furthermore, as we reach the end of the fragment, we are unsure whether Ulysses would be a reliable narrator after all: there is a strong possibility sustained by the text that he has completely "missed the point" of the whole episode. On the other hand, we must not forget that the narrator is our only source of knowledge and that it is he who undermines Ulysses' position. Whom to believe? What to believe? Theodor Adorno points out Kafka's attitude towards myth:

Kafka did not preach humility with regards to myth; rather, he recommended the conduct proven most effective against myth, namely cunning. For him the only, the weakest, the slightest possibility [of proving] that the world

may not be right after all, is agreeing with it. Like the youngest [child] in a fairy tale, one should become wholly inconspicuous, small, the defenseless victim, [one should] not insist on one's right according to the custom of the world, that of exchange, which relentlessly reproduces injustice.<sup>3</sup> ("Aufzeichnungen" 339; translation mine)

Similar to the Homeric Ulysses, who steals the statue of Athena out of the Palladium of Troy in order to replace it with a dangerous object, the Trojan horse, which then destroys both the Palladium and Troy, Kafka "steals" the "frozen" statue of the mythical Ulysses out of the traditional tale and replaces it with the infinitely more dangerous narrator, a "dark horse," if there ever was one, who has a similarly nefarious effect on this particular "holy site" of the *Odyssey*. Furthermore, the narrator's uncertainty with regards to the figure of Ulysses at the end of the parable - was he a simpleton or was he infinitely clever? - is like a "black hole" that draws the reader in and perhaps invites him covertly to occupy the position of Ulysses himself at the court of the Phaiakians, i.e. to become the "real" Ulysses and to cunningly take control of the "myth" at hand. This dynamic replacement and displacement of a system's traditionally stable center - in this case the figure of Ulysses - has been theorized by Derrida<sup>4</sup> and carried out by Kafka. But this is not

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<sup>3</sup>Nicht Demut hat Kafka gepredigt, sondern die erprobteste Verhaltensweise wider den Mythos empfohlen, die List. Ihm ist die einzige, schwächste, geringste Möglichkeit dessen, daß die Welt doch nicht recht behalte, die, ihr recht zu geben. Wie der Jüngste im Märchen soll man ganz unscheinbar, klein, zum wehrlosen Opfer sich machen, nicht auf dem eigenen Recht bestehen nach der Sitte der Welt, der des Tausches, welcher ohne Unterlaß das Unrecht reproduziert.

<sup>4</sup>See "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. op. cit.



the only innovative element in “The Silence of the Sirens.”

The second phrase of the parable brings yet another modification of the traditional source: no mention is made of the crew, except indirectly through the passive verb ‘had bound.’ Perhaps an even more oblique hint of the crew’s absence is in the guise of the wax with which Ulysses plugs his ears. Most importantly, though, it is this transference of the wax, aptly identified by Clayton Koelb as a “free-floating” signifier (“Sirens” 308), which constitutes the most important innovation. Now we learn why there is no eye-witness, or rather ear-witness who could tell the tale and sing the song of the Sirens, as Ulysses does in Homer’s epic poem: because he has plugged up his ears, there is a very strong possibility that, similar to his crew in the Homeric epic, Ulysses has not heard the siren song and thus cannot really speak of it. An obstacle in the form of amorphous wax has come between him and both direct experience, and perhaps subsequent understanding of it. It is the most drastic step towards the usurpation of textual authority (Koelb “Sirens” 309).

A further significant slippage from the Homeric source occurs in the figure of Ulysses, himself. “Master mariner and soldier,” such as Homer describes him, Ulysses, the polytropic man, the brilliant *strategos*, the very embodiment of ruse, is presented by Kafka as a naive simpleton:

He trusted absolutely to his handful of wax and his fathom of chain, and in innocent elation over his little stratagem [= *Mittelchen*] sailed out to meet the Sirens. (89)

Ulysses' supposed childishness reminds us of the "childish measures" which "may rescue one from peril" (89) mentioned in the preamble (as well as of the childishness of Josephine and of the Hunger Artist). Nevertheless, as the text seems to approach the semblance of a proof, it veers off in a different direction, and we are presented with yet another innovation. Since this reinterpreted figure of Ulysses has two weapons at his disposal, namely the traditional chains and the newly appropriated wax, so, too, can the Sirens destroy him in two ways: "Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song," says Kafka's narrator, "namely their silence" (89).

For the original Ulysses chains sufficed to guard him from peril, and the absence of wax in his ears, while a dangerous luxury, was nevertheless a well-calculated risk. Kafka's Ulysses has both means at his disposal, yet the narrator scorns them as petty (the German "Mittelchen" can have a pejorative connotation) and insufficient when faced with either the song or the more dangerous silence of the Sirens:

The song of the Sirens could pierce through everything, and the longing of those they seduced would have broken far stronger bonds than chains and masts. [...] And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never. (89)

Although in the first paragraph the siren song is deemed inescapable, the second paragraph brings yet another narrative transformation, which, while it does not openly contradict the previous statement, modifies it significantly: now escape from

the siren song, though unlikely, is at least conceivable; their silence, however, is fatal. The narrator asserts quite forcefully that escape from the latter is impossible.

Kafka uses the term “Schweigen,” rather than “Stille” and, while both translate into the English “silence,” “Schweigen” stresses the absence of sound more than “Stille” does. Kafka was a writer who chose his words with such painstaking care - his *Diaries* make that abundantly clear -, that we should regard his choice of terms in this case as intentional and highly significant: by writing “Schweigen” instead of “Stille” Kafka suggests perhaps that the Sirens’ most powerful weapon is negativity.

Yet through the technique, which has now become quite familiar to the perceptive reader - I am referring to the continual narrative transformation brought about by the opposition of a partial antithesis to a proposed thesis, so that no certain, unique conclusion can be drawn, no synthesis can be made - doubt is cast upon the power of the siren song. Immediately after the narrator’s categorical statement that escape from the silence of the Sirens is impossible, the reader is confronted with the following counter-statement:

Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one’s own strength, and the consequent exaltation that bears down everything before it, no earthly powers could have remained intact. (89)

The phrase suggests that Ulysses, too, is well-armed and that either party has the potential of annihilating the other. By raising the stakes on both sides and denying the certainty of victory to either one, Kafka has increased the suspense, and the

reader eagerly awaits the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens. But what exactly is this powerful new weapon of the Greek hero? It seems to be the satisfaction and egotistical euphoria one feels if one has withstood the Sirens “by one’s own strength.” At this point in the parable Ulysses’ portrait is none too flattering: he has been described as something of a naive child who still believes in the efficacy of his “Mittelchen.” Are we to deduce, then, that his innocence is actually smugness, and that he is a precursor of the bourgeois, self-protective Ulysses described by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*? Perhaps, in which case the narrator has already given away the ending, so to speak: Ulysses will annihilate the Sirens.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, Ulysses gets a glimpse of the ultimate experience as a result of a contract which stipulates going through an event in a technological manner. Since *tekhne* is both skill and art, a literal translation of technology could be “the skillful human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 2279). Music delivers truth in a non-semantic form, which means that, as with Josephine’s piping, one possible interpretation of the song of the Sirens could be as the embodiment of the ultimate harmony between humankind (in this case, man) and nature (the Sirens have traditionally been portrayed as bird-like creatures): the song becomes a sort of pure mimesis of this union, which must necessarily result in human annihilation. But in the view of Adorno and

Horkheimer, Ulysses takes a calculated risk and skillfully “counteracts the work of nature,” so to speak, with chains for himself and wax for his men, preserving his ship and his purpose, yet also getting a glimpse of the abyss.

On the other hand, in Kafka’s parable, what saves Ulysses is not his “technology,” which, the narrator tells us, is inefficient and useless, but his ignorant, unshakeable belief in its protection. Kafka has dispensed with the physical representations of *tekhne* and has gone straight to the heart of the matter: he unveils the ideology behind *tekhne*, the reasoning that allows the objectification and consequent exploitation of the world. And so Ulysses is saved not by the actual chains and wax, but by his belief in them:

And when Ulysses approached them the potent songstresses actually did not sing, whether because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or because the look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing.

But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. (90-1)

Thus the eagerly awaited encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens is at first glance as disappointing as it is ambiguous. We are not really certain whether Ulysses escaped because the Sirens under- or rather overestimated their enemy and used their most potent weapon, namely their silence, their negativity, against him, or whether it was his conceited feeling of triumph, his confidence in his “Mittelchen” (how very much like a human he is, and unlike a hero!) which made the inhuman creatures forget about their singing. Instead of it being an auditory

encounter, such as the one in the *Odyssey*, the confrontation between the two has been transformed into a visual one, and the Sirens have, so to speak, been deterritorialized in the geography of the senses.

It is a failed encounter in more than one way. Metaphorically speaking, it represents a misinterpretation on both sides, one that should have had fatal consequences. It seems, however, that Ulysses passed through the whole episode like Moses through the Red Sea, namely unharmed (Mosès, *Le silence des sirènes* 30). Furthermore, at this point we are led to believe that he also has no consciousness of the danger he has overcome. The Sirens seem to have been somewhat more affected by the encounter, since, ironically, Ulysses' determination made them momentarily forget their desire to allure.

[...] all that they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes. (91)

But why weren't they destroyed? The following paragraph provides the answer.

If the Sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Ulysses had escaped them. (91)

Now we become aware of a possible escape-clause provided earlier. True, smug triumph and blind exaltation are as dangerous as the siren song, but only to "earthly powers." Since the Sirens are sea-nymphs, semi-divine beings who apparently lack consciousness, they escape. Ironically, Ulysses escapes for the very same reason: the German term "Bewußtsein," which is what the Sirens do not have, may mean

both consciousness, knowledge and conviction. Thus, one could say that Ulysses was not conscious of the Sirens' silence because he ignored the textual innovations introduced into the story by the narrator and which, had he known of their existence, would have proved fatal.

For, although he is no longer cunning, Ulysses still believes himself to be in control of his world, as the Ancient Greek that he is, precisely because of his ignorance. Had the text stopped at this point, the rather cynical preamble at the beginning would have been proved: indeed, inadequate, even childish measures may rescue one from peril. Kafka, however, has added a codicil, in which we are confronted with the possibility that perhaps Ulysses had been conscious of the true situation all along and that he was clever after all, so clever, in fact, that he exceeded human bounds (he is compared to a fox and to a goddess), and used his simulated ignorance as a "shield" against the gods.

Perhaps he had really noticed, although here human understanding is beyond its depths, that the Sirens were silent, and opposed the afore-mentioned pretense to them and the gods merely as a sort of shield. (91)

Such inhuman guile is beyond the reach of even the goddess of fate, we are told. Thus the codicil sheds an entirely different light on Ulysses, and it seems that we are as far away from proving the preamble as we were at the beginning. The only conclusion we are able to draw is that Ulysses is either incredibly simple or incredibly wily. What, then, has been accomplished?

For one thing Kafka has de-sacralized the ancient Homeric episode, and

through its reinterpretation he has denied myth its “apodictic truth” (Mosès 56). He has used the traditional story as a pre-text (in both the literal and the figurative sense), he has dismembered it, proceeding very much like Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricoleur* (Derrida 130), and has crafted an entirely new tale out of old, traditional elements. The tale itself is a gloss that has ousted the traditional source to become the focus of the reader’s attention. It represents itself a kind of siren song, murmurings stifled by a deadly silence, circlings around truth and meaning which remain forever elusive and whose presence-in-absence lure the reader out of his or her familiar certainties and into uncharted, uncertain territory. *Hic sunt leones*.

While Kafka leaves the significance of the siren song intentionally ambiguous, Maurice Blanchot is much more explicit. He employs the encounter, both literal and metaphorical, between Ulysses and the sirens’ song to describe the act of writing. Unlike Kafka, whose fragment has the narrative structure of a tale and focuses on the plot, Blanchot begins with a probing description of the song itself.

The Sirens. Yes, they really sang, but not in a very satisfactory way. Their song merely suggested the direction from which the perfect song might come. Yet through their imperfect song - a song as yet unborn - they lured the navigator towards the space where singing really begins. (59)

The similarity with Kafka is evident: for Blanchot, too, the lure of the siren song resides in absence, the absence of perfection which renders the true song, the perfect one that cannot exist in this imperfect world, “as yet unborn.” Like Kafka’s



silent siren song, it is a withholding that draws the navigator, for whom Ulysses is the appropriate symbolic figure, toward the dangerous origin of singing itself, toward the ultimate fullness-as-nothingness, which is a “Schweigen” pregnant with all the melodies yet unsung, like the silence that must have preceded God’s first utterance :

It was the place in which to disappear since here, in this region from which everything derives, music was more thoroughly absent than from anywhere else in the world: it was a sea in which the living drown with stopped-up ears and into which the Sirens too must finally vanish to prove their goodwill. (59)

Through its ambiguity and its lack, the song is able to encompass everything and anything. It is described as flawed, as both “inhuman, [...] foreign to man; almost inaudible, evok[ing] dreams of pleasurable descent,” and as the devastating imitation of human song by inhuman beings (the Sirens); as both a “normal, intimate, simple everyday song” that has something “uncanny” about it, and as a familiar “song of the deep,” “sung unnaturally by [...] probably imaginary powers, [...] which, once heard, revealed the depths contained in every word” (59). Blanchot suggests that it is the Sirens’ singing which turns Ulysses (and anyone else who is fated to hear it) into a navigator, since the song is “a kind of navigation in its own right. For it [is] distance and suggest[s] the possibility of penetrating this distance, of turning song into the urge to sing, and this urge into the essence of desire” (59-60).

Maurice Blanchot, too, interprets the siren song as the lure of narration,

which, similar to an enigmatic spell, “awaken[s] hope and desire for a sublime elsewhere which, in fact [is] only a wilderness” (60). Yet, while Kafka illustrates the process of writing by means of reassembling the famous Homeric episode according to his desire, Blanchot does not deconstruct the original text, but reads a deeper significance into it, treating it as one complex metaphor, where desire plays a major role. Thus, for him Ulysses has remained the wily, cautious fox of the Homeric epic, whose crew keep him bound to the mast while he listens to the singing.

Like in Kafka’s fragment, Ulysses escapes because of his “technological” handling of the Sirens and their song; he has remained the “decadent Greek [...] who should never have figured among the heroes of the *Iliad*” (Blanchot “Siren Song” 60). Ulysses is saved in Blanchot’s text - although it would have been better to be lost in the sublime “wilderness” - by the metaphorical wax in his ears, in other words, by his cowardly lack of the imaginary.

Ulysses’ attitude - the disturbing deafness of he who is deaf because he hears - was sufficient to reduce the Sirens to despair which is normally the prerogative of men, and to turn them through such despair into normal, pretty girls, normal for once and worthy of their promise, so that they could vanish into the truth and the depth of their song. (52)

Thus the Sirens, says Blanchot, “were overcome by material power which always presumes to deal successfully with imaginary powers” (60) in the same way that Kafka’s Ulysses overcame them through his ridiculous, yet triumphant faith in his “Mittelchen,” or, if we are to believe the codicil, by dint of inhuman guile which

rests on a similar bedrock of faith in one's inner "Mittelchen." At this point, the Sirens' "defeat" seems more radical in Blanchot's version of the episode; at least in Kafka's parable the songstresses were not subjected to such radical alteration as they are in Blanchot's text, where they are turned into "normal, pretty girls."

Yet Blanchot goes a step further. While Ulysses may survive the physical encounter with the Sirens, the moment his experience becomes narration marks the moment of his transformation into the poet Homer.

The Sirens lured him to place he wanted to avoid and there, hidden between the pages of the *Odyssey* which had become their grave, they forced him - and many others too - to undertake the successful, unsuccessful journey which is that of narration - that song no longer directly perceived, but repeated and thus apparently harmless: an ode made episode. (61)

It seems that Blanchot, like Kafka, questions the possibility of immediate experience in and through writing. As a result of Ulysses' metamorphosis from actor into narrator, we are led to believe that, in fact, the Greek "hero" did not escape the Sirens and that his true encounter with them occurred not on his ship, but rather at a point outside of time, a point he had reached, metaphysically speaking, before his journey had even begun.

No wonder the Sirens' song proves to be so alluring. It rests on a veiled, vague semblance to both human song, the music of the spheres and silence ("Schweigen," not "Stille"), the kind of silence which precedes the birth of universes. It does not reconstruct desire for the sublime (the "ailleurs" of Baudelaire), nor does it summon it at will through representation. Rather, it allows

longing to arise indirectly in the space left intentionally open, i.e. empty of metaphor, between navigators, such as Ulysses, and the transcendental realm of absolute beauty and truth.

In a note to his article on Baudelaire<sup>5</sup>, Walter Benjamin defines beauty as based upon resemblance, something which “remains true to its essential nature only when veiled” (198). It is a good image for the siren song. He continues: “If one attempted to reproduce this *aporia* through language, one would define beauty as the object of experience in the state of resemblance” (199). Since Ulysses and the Sirens belong to different ontological orders, their coexistence is possible only through and within language. Thus, language is that which makes Ulysses’ survival possible both in Blanchot’s text and in Kafka’s parable; it is that which allows the siren song to come into being on the page as an “object of experience in the state of resemblance” to non-being.

Consequently, Blanchot transforms Ulysses’ journey into a linguistic one, one that ends with his metamorphosis into the poet Homer. The Sirens’ song reveals itself to be an avatar of narration, which, in turn, becomes an atemporal resistance (and a secret one at that) to the encounter with the songstresses. Here Blanchot draws a fine distinction between narration and the novel. Once the fourth dimension of time comes into play, he says, and the “preliminary journey occupies the

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<sup>5</sup>“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”; Note 13.

foreground” (61), narration becomes a novel. The novel is thus the description of the journey towards the magical island, while narration represents the actual moment of the encounter:

Narration is not the account of an event but the event itself, its imminence, the site where it will occur - it is a happening about to happen whose magnetic power may enable the narration to happen. (Blanchot, “Sirens’ Song” 62)

Where, then, does that leave the artist/writer? Although Kafka is much more skeptical vis-a-vis his artist figures, as well as Ulysses, whose traditional heroic quality he mocks, we can draw certain similarities between Kafka and Blanchot in their view of the writer. For both, s/he is one who courts disaster. However, while Blanchot’s Ulysses succumbs to the lure of the siren song and echoes it, engaged, as s/he is, in a game of hide-and-seek with death, outside of time and space, Kafka questions the possibility of an encounter, of true communication and of truth. In his deconstructionist parable, Ulysses and the sirens sail by each other without really “touching,” and misread the reflection in each other’s eyes. Yet, for both Blanchot and Kafka, the artist’s task is to express the inexpressible, the aporia of language. Thus, the writer is someone who will masterfully navigate turbulent linguistic waters in order to lay himself open to the sweet and terrible violence of the song, someone who achieves not fullness of being, but rather the kind of pregnant absence from which a world is born. Both Kafka and Blanchot seem to agree on this. “Not alertness, but self-forgetfulness is the writer’s first pre-

requisite,” writes Kafka in his *Diaries* (255). And Blanchot adds:

Art requires that he who practices it...should become other, not another, not transformed from the human being he was into an artist with artistic duties, satisfactions and interests, but into nobody, the empty, animated space where art's summons is heard. (“Where now? Who now?” 78)

For Blanchot, this summons may come either as a song, as it does for Ulysses, or it may appear in the form of an image, as is the case with Melville's Ahab. Blanchot contrasts the unheroic caution and guile of the former with the latter's fascination with the white whale, to whom the captain succumbs in such a spectacular manner. According to Blanchot, it is this momentous encounter with the white whale, a metaphorical encounter that takes place outside of conventional time and space, which allows Melville to write his novel. Because Ulysses is able to refrain from occupying the space between reality and the imaginary, a space into which the siren song draws him, he survives, “and the world, if less rich, is firmer and safer than before” (Blanchot, “Sirens' Song” 64). On the other hand, Ahab's imagination is overcome by the “lure of a single image”(64) in the guise of the white whale, and he perishes in the attempt to seize it. Coexistence with the Sirens' song or with the white whale is thus possible only in language.

An interesting parallel with Kafka can be drawn at this point. He, too, contrasts the artist who resists and survives the encounter with absolute beauty and truth with the one who perishes in the attempt. Ulysses in “The Silence of the Sirens” and the painter Titorelli in *The Trial*, who knows more about the law and

about courts than about art, are good examples of the first kind of self-preserving artist. Titorelli, who supposedly paints pictures inspired by the beauty of ancient legends that tell of acquittals, but who only exhibits monotonous, identical heathscapes, even admits that his art has had to suffer because of his involvement with the world of the courts. “Perhaps it strikes you that I talk almost like a jurist?” he asks K. rhetorically. “It’s my uninterrupted association with the gentlemen of the court that has made me grow like that. I have many advantages from it, of course, but I’m losing a great deal of my *élan* as an artist” (*The Trial* 189). On the contrary, the Hunger Artist can be thought to represent the other kind of encounter. Ironically, the powerful presence-through-absence of the siren song has been transformed into the devastating symbolic lack of the perfect food and the Hunger Artist perishes because of a failed encounter with the object of his fascination, with his “white whale.”

Here is how Maurice Blanchot describes the condition of the artist/writer:

To write is to submit language to fascination and through language, in language, to be in contact with an absolute world where the object becomes image, where image instead of referring to something acquires its features, becomes a reference to that which is featureless and, rather than a shape outlined on the void, becomes the shapeless presence of this void, a translucent, gaping opening onto that which exists when reality is no more, when reality is not yet. (“Essential Solitude” 109)

In the “Silence of the Sirens” Kafka has, through a series of substitutions, maneuvered the reader into facing that “shapeless presence of [a] void” mentioned above. His text not only refers to that “something.” That is what Blanchot does in

his “Sirens' Song,” which speaks about the process of writing so pertinently. Rather, Kafka's parable “acquires its features;” in other words, in spite of its commentary-like structure, the parable becomes the linguistic rent in the fabric of reality that is writing; Kafka’s piece is writing . In short, Kafka embodies that which Blanchot describes. In December of 1911 Kafka wrote in his diary the following statement on mediocre literature:

What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the light of day. (259)

Interpreting this observation to signify that Kafka's text is great literature and Blanchot's is only a mediocre example, is a great mistake. On the contrary, the latter is literary criticism at its best, one that approaches literature as closely as it is possible before becoming itself literature, while the former is literature driven to such a point of critical self-(re)interpretation that it approaches criticism as closely as it is possible before becoming itself criticism. The space left open between the two texts, that approach each other asymptotically without ever touching, is the gap through which the reader, if he or she listens closely, may perceive echoes of the siren song.

In conclusion, as with Proust, Kafka’s “magic” is bound intrinsically to the problematics of style. Yet, there where Proust uncovers connections which generate textual wealth, a profusion of images and repeated revelations of truth in the form of the “essences” and happiness, Kafka unveils the gaps in language (mirrored in the



terseness of his style) and the lack of truth or happiness characteristic of the human condition. Does Kafka's literature present us with any kind of hope? "Yes," says Kafka, "but not for us" (Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka* 47).

## Conclusion

The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: "Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one."

Borges, "Everything and Nothing"  
(*Labyrinths*)

"Reversal is the direction of learning which transforms existence into writing." This is the pithy, almost laconic way in which Benjamin describes the act that he considers to lie at the basis of writing, namely reflection upon things experienced. It is what the German verb *nachdenken* literally suggests, a thinking (*denken*) or contemplation after (*nach*) the fact. But reflection, from the Latin *reflectere*, or a flexing or bending back of thought,<sup>1</sup> also implies a movement of repetition. Reversal and repetition, or reversal within repetition is how the rhetorical figure of chiasmus is defined (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 183). Chiasmus, however, is a rigid concept which cannot do justice to the slipperiness and subversive power of literature. We can say, then, that writing manifests a basic chiasmic structure which it explodes thanks to intuitive leaps of an arbitrary nature that yield truths, essences, or insights - there are many other terms which would also apply here - belonging to a different ontological and epistemological order.

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<sup>1</sup> "reflect. ... 4. To bend back... [Middle English *reflecten*, from Old French *reflecter*, from Latin *reflectere*, to bend back: *re-*, back + *flectere*, to flex] (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1093)

Reversal and repetition leading to a jump “beyond” is also how magic operates. The pattern is present in the writings of all three authors in question. For Proust artistic genius is founded upon the gratuitous manifestations of involuntary memory, coupled with an ability for analogy, by means of which the artist perceives singular connections between objects, people and situations. The Proustian artist translates the unique nature of his experience by means of his style, which, according to Proust, is more than a technique: it is a matter of vision. It is material signs, acting as talismans, which trigger the mechanism of involuntary memory. In the view of Renaissance magicians (and not only for them), talismans were supposed to be invested with a mote of the essence of the higher force they were supposed to attract. Analogy is a principle active both in magic and in literature. Thus, the famous episode of the madeleine does not only connect the mature narrator to his childhood, but it shows what is no longer (Combray) and what never was (the essence of Combray). In the words of Benjamin, it provides Marcel with a “key to everything that happened before and after it” (“The Image of Proust,” *Illuminations* 202), namely with the revelation of the most important element in his artistic (and human) becoming, of his “secret.” The ecstasy of the madeleine reverses a natural process, the flow of time, bringing great happiness and healing. That is the magic of Proust.

Thomas Mann’s early *Künstlerfigur* is a more stoical magician, one whom the tension resulting out of the dichotomy between art and life threatens every

moment with dissolution. Similar to Proust, who calls for a renunciation of the body because he sees total submergence in the trivialities of life as a danger to art, Mann recognizes that a frail health and illness (symbolized by the leitmotif of his characters' bad teeth) are a consequence of artistic genius. Yet, unlike Proust, he does not glorify the artist's "decadence," his lack of will and of *Tatkraft* (enterprising spirit). On the contrary, while Proust opposes "the sincerity of the artist" to the moral code valued by society and redefines beauty as an arbitrary experience, Mann condemns the "immorality" of art and yearns for the "bliss of the commonplace." His early artist figures are "burghers with a bad conscience," who, in spite of their striving for inner balance and artistic perfection, have something dubious about them: they are both martyrs (symbolized by the figure of St. Sebastian) and charlatans ("gypsies in green wagons" and street performers). In Mann's view, the true artist is the one who can reconcile life and art, the Dionysian and Apollinian elements that shape the human condition, even if only for a brief moment. In fact, because of the impossibility of such a position, the artist must and will eventually succumb to his inner tensions, not, however, before transmuting his experience into art. The *Erkenntnis* brought by art, which is punctuated by the (repetitive) leitmotif, is no longer a fully joyous experience, as it is with Proust. Mann's early *Künstlerfigur* overcomes the impossibility of his position through irony, which makes him a more intellectual and detached sort of magician.

Strangely enough, it is Kafka who applies Proust's lesson in art: he does not

“paint what is” - Kafka is not a realist, although his texts manifest a number of realist elements; nor does he “paint what is not” - he is not phantasmagorical either, although his writing is often fantastic. Kafka depicts the “failure of the eye to see.” Is this the failure of the kind of magic that is art? Does magic end with Kafka? In Kafka’s view, art does not help render life more bearable, on the contrary, not one of Kafka’s artists is a joyous figure. The strange kind of happiness they experience grows out of their spiritual marginality, which Kafka suggests by their eccentric arts (fasting, performing in a circus, turning from an ape into a human, etc.). Yet, without art, life would be unbearable. Kafka’s artist figure has lost the ability to act as a mediator between life and art; s/he does not communicate “something,” for there is no longer anything to be communicated, s/he communicates “nothing,” namely the very aporia of language. Even the reconciliation provided by his last artist figure, the mouse singer Josephine, is one apart: either Josephine or the mouse folk, but not both and not together.

Is this the end of magic? Or does Kafka represent a new and different kind of magic, that unmask what Heidegger refers to as the “double denial” behind the unconcealedness that is truth? Is Kafka only a magician’s apprentice who lacks the knowledge and the ability of a master and for whom things have “gotten out of hand?” More often than not, innovation comes from apprentices, not masters. Perhaps what Kafka is doing is to unmask the charlatanism behind the master’s authority; like Frank Baum’s Scarecrow (a man of straw!), he draws the curtain

away and exposes the Wizard of Oz as a clever manipulator of levers and a producer of special effects.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger defines art as an origin. He continues: “To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap - this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means” (77-8). A primal leap, or “genuine beginning... already contains the end latent within itself... contains the undisclosed abundance of the unfamiliar and extraordinary, which means that it also contains strife with the familiar and ordinary” (76). To Heidegger’s doubts, whether art can still be an origin, or whether it will become a “routine cultural phenomenon” (78) over time, artists like Proust, Mann and Kafka oppose “the strife with the familiar and ordinary” of their art.

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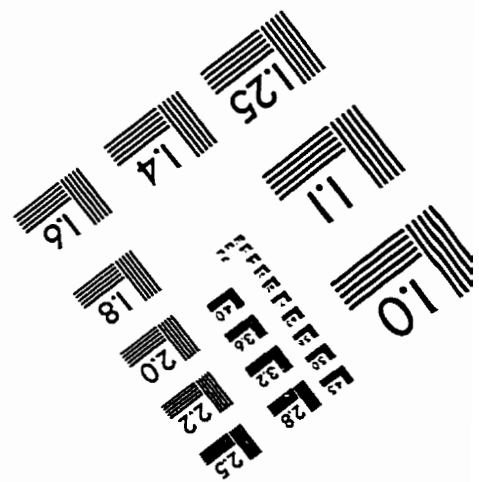
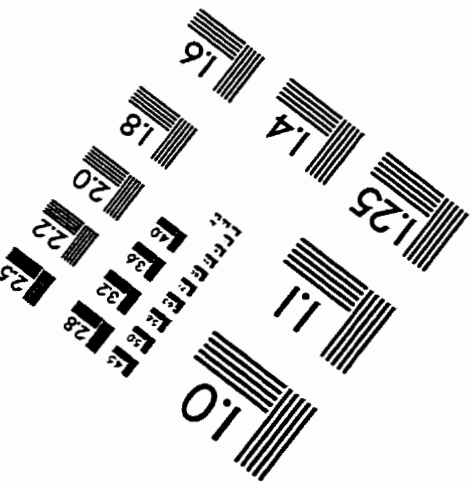
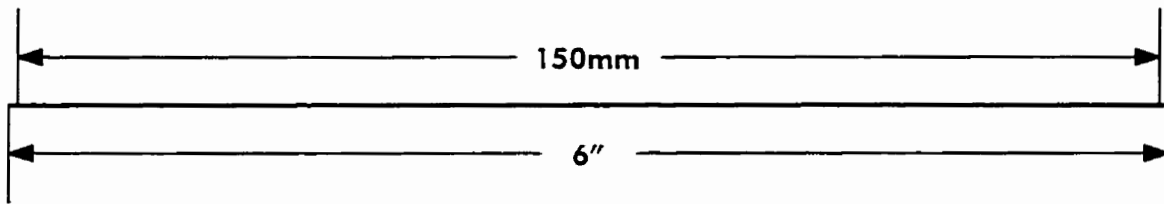
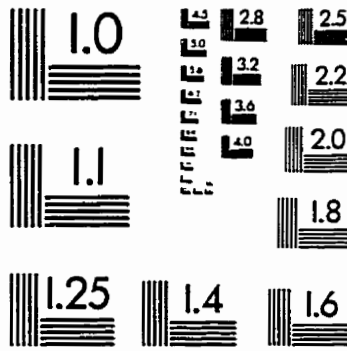
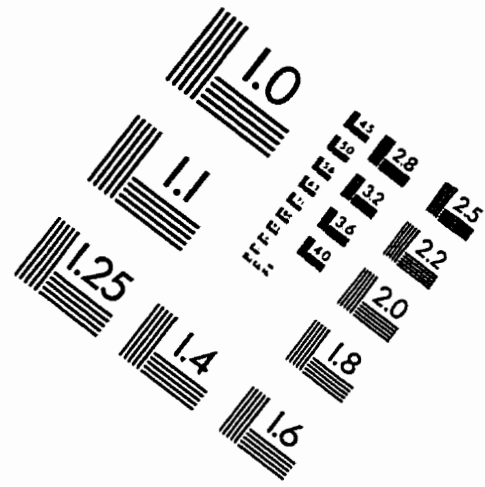
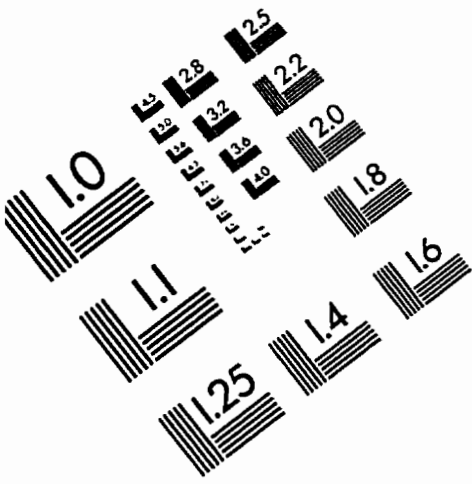
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