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Abstract

This dissertation examines how German modernism seeks to respond to the problem of nihilism, particularly as it was formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche understood nihilism as the end of plausibility for objective truths grounded in transcendence, such as the belief in God, but also the belief in the absolute value of truth itself. People, he thought, could no longer take seriously the idea of an absolute truth and could therefore no longer use such a measure to establish meaning and value. The dissertation investigates the reception of these ideas by German writers after WWI. It is my contention that, in the period between WWI and the end of WWII, the project of overcoming nihilism becomes bound up with a particular understanding of aesthetic form and its applicability beyond the realm of art. An important strand of German modernist literature can therefore be understood as an attempt to provide a convincing response to nihilism by suggesting form as a new absolute principle, an idea that can likewise be traced back to Nietzsche. The dissertation attempts to theorize and follow the development of this new, highly modern understanding of form by examining its central place in the works of three writers: Ernst Jünger, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse. I argue that these authors explore a commonly held anxiety about devaluation and relativism in the spheres of ethics, morality and art in the aftermath of WWI. In response, they seek to anchor collective values in a project of form-giving. This understanding of form uncouples it from any determinate content or object, presenting it instead as a rigorous ordering principle that has the potential to provide structure, hierarchy and meaning in life and in art. I investigate how these projects unfold and the difficulties they face in trying to use aesthetic tools to address problems that are primarily ethical in nature. Drawing from theoretical and philosophical texts by Alain Badiou, Theodor Adorno, Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Bloch, Peter Bürger and Georg Lukács, I show why form

nevertheless presents itself as a potential alternative to an understanding of the absolute that is based in transcendence.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), the artist hero comes to a startling realization before his downfall into shame and an untimely death from cholera. Gustav von Aschenbach, famous for the "Würde" and "Strenge" of his literary compositions, has lived in sheltered confidence that his work is above the moral dangers that art often entails. The "Meisterlichkeit," "Klassizität" and "ein fast übermäßiges Erstarken seines Schönheitssinnes [...] jene adelige Reinheit, Einfachheit und Ebenmäßigkeit der Formgebung" evident in Aschenbach's work appear as proof of a virtuous life of creative productivity.¹ Towards the end of the novella, the character realizes that this was an illusion and that the moral corruption he succumbs to was there in his art as well. Reimagining a Platonic dialogue, the hero understands that "Form und Unbefangenheit [...] führen zum Rausch und zur Begierde, führen den Edlen zu grauenhaftem Gefühlsfrevler, den seine eigene schöne Strenge als infam verwirft, führen zum Abgrund, zum Abgrund auch sie."² The danger of art lies not in its proximity to immoral ideas, images or scandalous plots, as so many fin de siècle moralists assumed, but in its drive to formal rigor, which leads to its opposite when taken too far: iniquity and emotional intoxication. *Der Tod in Venedig*'s narrative of repressed, forbidden desire accompanied by a yearning for renewal is positioned within a drama of ideas regarding the nature of aesthetic form and its influence on life. Mann's novella helps illustrate the problem that the present study aims to address.

The model of form that Mann employs here is historically specific. For most of the history of western aesthetics, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, form (*morphē*) had been

¹ Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig, Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 2.1, *Frühe Erzählungen 1893-1912*, ed. T.J. Reed (Frankfurt Main: Fischer, 2004), 513-514. Unless otherwise noted, all Mann works cited are taken from this collected edition, cited as GKFA followed by volume number throughout.

² Mann, 589.

conceived as an attribute belonging to or representing externally something that was not form.³ This could be something materially present, such as substance, or matter (*hyle*); hence the term hylomorphism, which exemplifies this model. But form's other could also be something invisible that the form makes accessible; an idea, for example, or the more general "content."⁴ The notion that form's existence hinges on its attachment to something *else* starts to unravel in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when aesthetic theories begin increasingly to elevate form to a sort of sovereign status. In his letters on the aesthetic education of man, Friedrich Schiller claims a central role for beauty in ethical life and a central role for form in the construction of beauty. "In einem wahrhaft schönen Kunstwerk soll der Inhalt nichts, die Form aber alles tun: denn durch die Form allein wird auf das Ganze des Menschen, durch den Inhalt hingegen nur auf einzelne Kräfte gewirkt."⁵ Schiller argues that even "der ernsteste Stoff muß so behandelt werden, daß wir die Fähigkeit behalten, ihn unmittelbar mit dem leichtesten Spiele zu vertauschen" and that focusing on the "Inhalt" of an artwork destroys its wholeness, which "kann ebenso von einem Mangel an Form in dem Beurteiler zeugen."⁶ Decadent literature extends this idea to assert that form is the essential ingredient of art but something lacking from reality. Baudelaire famously claimed that the imagination of the artist "decomposes all creation, and with the raw materials accumulated [...] it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of

³ So, for example, Aristotle writes in *On the Soul*: "We describe one class of existing things as substance; and this we subdivide into three: (1) matter, which in itself is not an individual thing; (2) shape or form, in virtue of which individuality is directly attributed, and (3) the compound of the two. Matter is potentiality, while form is realization or actuality, and the word actuality is used in two senses, illustrated by the possession of knowledge and the exercise of it." Aristotle and W. S. Hett. *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1957), 67, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-soul>.

⁴ Klaus Städtke, "Form," *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in Sieben Bänden*, vol. 2, ed. Karlheinz Barck and Martin Fontius (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2001), 463.

⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen: Text, Materialien, Kommentar*, 22nd letter, ed. Wolfgang Dising (München: Carl Hanser, 1981), 79.

⁶ Schiller, 80.

newness.”⁷ In Baudelaire’s view, it is not the business of the arts to copy or represent anything external. An artist is justified to say “I consider it useless and tedious to represent what exists, because nothing that exists satisfies me.”⁸ The attention to form goes hand in hand with the elevation of art in general, but neither Schiller nor Baudelaire seek to undo the bond between form and content completely; form remains something that belongs to art.

This trend reaches an important turning point with Friedrich Nietzsche, who reconceives the distinction between form and content in a profoundly consequential way: “Man ist um den Preis Künstler, daß man das, was alle nicht-Künstler Form nennen, als Inhalt, als die Sache selbst empfindet.”⁹ With Nietzsche, form becomes the real point of art. The anxiety Mann expresses about the artist’s loss of control over the form-giving process, as if form can detach itself from both the artist and an object, only makes sense within the ecosystem of ideas that Nietzsche’s philosophy gave rise to. Nietzsche’s aesthetics had less to do with art than with questions of ethics and axiology. He was concerned with life and how to live it. The present study makes the case that the foregrounding of aesthetic form and the intensity of engagement with it by Nietzsche and after him occur to a great degree in response to perhaps the most challenging and disruptive idea that emerged from the nineteenth century: the so-called death of God and the resulting threat of nihilism. Nietzsche understood nihilism as the end of plausibility for objective truths grounded in transcendence, such as the belief in God, but also the belief in the absolute value of truth itself. People, he thought, could no longer take seriously the idea of an absolute truth and could therefore no longer use such a measure to establish meaning and value, especially

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1859,” *The Mirror of Art*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 234-235.

⁸ Baudelaire, 233.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 13, *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; De Gruyter, 1999), 533. Volumes in this edition listed as KSA followed by volume number throughout.

the value of existence itself. “Der Nihilismus erscheint jetzt, nicht weil die Unlust am Dasein größer wäre als früher, sondern weil man überhaupt gegen einen ‘Sinn’ im Übel, ja im Dasein mißtrauisch geworden ist.”¹⁰ There were no longer any plausible answers to the large questions, and therefore uncertainty about the purpose of anything. He termed this the devaluation of values: “Es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die Antwort auf das ‘Warum’? was bedeutet Nihilism? – daß die obersten Werte sich entwerten.”¹¹ Without such an answer, people become lost and no longer know what is truly valuable, which would lead them either to a passive sense that nothing matters, or to cling desperately on to values and beliefs that have lost the sense of absoluteness that normative authority requires: “Lieber will noch der Mensch das Nichts wollen, als nicht wollen.”¹² Nietzsche’s aesthetics, especially what he came to call “Dionysian” aesthetics, were an attempt to think beyond nihilism, to overcome this passive sense that if there are no objective truths, then nothing matters. Mann represents an important strand of post-Nietzschean, modernist literature and art that considers the possibility and pitfalls of a *formal* solution to the nihilist problem. The intertextual links to Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie* that are woven through the novella support this assumption.¹³

The present study therefore aims to bring together two lines of discourse that are crucial to understanding German literature in the modernist period: the discourse on nihilism and the

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Sommer 1886-Herbst 1887, KSA 12, 212.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887, KSA 12, 350.

¹² Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, 412. The term “normative authority” is borrowed from Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9-10, for example.

¹³ Mann’s indebtedness to Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie* for *Der Tod in Venedig* has been examined at length. See for example Lothar Köhn, *Ein Weites Feld: zur deutschen Literatur vom 18. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: LIT, 2013), 137-156. The exact way that Mann uses Nietzsche is open to debate. Philip Kitcher, for example, points out that Mann seemed to be more interested in the foreword to *Die Geburt der Tragödie* than the main text, which would influence how we understand his use of the work. Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice: The Cases of Gustav von Aschenbach* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 28-30. <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231162647.001.0001>

discourse on form. This might seem at first like an arbitrary relation. I aim to show that the opposite is the case. It is my contention that an important strand of modernism can be understood as an attempt to provide a convincing response to nihilism by mobilizing form, that is, by separating this concept—we might call it *Formbegriff* in German—from its attachment to a content, so that it may be deployed to fill an ethical void and restore authority within debates about values, hierarchies and order.¹⁴ This means thematizing form as a stand-alone principle, rather than a medium for something else, whether we call that something matter, content or material. It also means looking for answers to ethical and social problems within the realm of aesthetics. Throughout this project, I will refer to these as the “socio-political sphere” and the “aesthetic sphere,” so, for the sake of consistency, I want to begin employing this distinction now, which is more precise than a similar one between “art” and “life.”

In order to explore and illustrate this argument, I will consider three major authors: Ernst Jünger, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse. All three expressed throughout their careers the view that modern society was at a point of crisis: Moral, ethical and aesthetic values, principles and hierarchies, both religious and secular, that once provided a foundation of shared social and political goals had lost their plausibility and hence their authority. The origin of this crisis has long been a topic of sustained research and debate. Does it begin with the Enlightenment and the scientific worldview that comes to encroach on all areas of life in the nineteenth century?¹⁵ Or with German Idealism’s insistence that reason could be self-grounding, as per Friedrich Jacobi’s famous thesis?¹⁶ With the dual advent of Darwin’s theory of evolution and modern physics, as

¹⁴ Patrizia McBride examines a similar problematic in her book, which however has a very different focus centered on Robert Musil. See McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ This is, for example, one of Jon Stewart’s main theses. See Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century: Confrontations with Nothingness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 26-32.

¹⁶ “Reine Vernunft ist ein Vernehmen, das nur sich selbst vernimmt.” Friedrich Jacobi, “Jacobi an Fichte” in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Werke*, vol 2.1, eds. Klaus Hamacher and Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Mainer,

Gottfried Benn believed (he was not the only one to think so)?¹⁷ It has been suggested that perhaps this sense of crisis and collapse are inherent to modernity and that many of the fears and anxieties that dominated the period directly before and after WWI were based on misconceptions about the extent to which the past was a time of political stability and epistemic clarity. Marshall Berman, for example, writes that to be modern is to be part of the world in which, as Marx wrote, “all that is solid melts into air.”¹⁸ “People who find themselves in the midst of this maelstrom are apt to feel that they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones, to be going through it; this feeling has engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost. In fact, however, great and ever-increasing numbers of people have been going through it for close to five hundred years.”¹⁹ Still, the sense of crisis may increase when it is articulated in an especially convincing way. Germany in the early twentieth century received a new articulation of the modern “crisis” courtesy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Like many thinkers and writers of the early twentieth century, Mann, Jünger and Hesse were enthusiastic readers of Nietzsche and had absorbed his thinking on nihilism; hence, they also understood the difficulty of asserting new values, structures and hierarchies because the event of nihilism had thrown the very mechanism by which these could be achieved into doubt. Nihilism meant that there was no longer a plausible, grounding absolute by which to judge what was valuable and meaningful in the higher sense. Nietzsche, as I will discuss shortly, argued that people did not simply need new higher values, but a new way of comprehending what a higher

2004), 201. Jacobi calls idealism “nihilism” in the same work. Jacobi, 215. Cf. Simon Critchley, *Very Little--Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 4-5.

¹⁷ Gottfried Benn, “Nach dem Nihilismus,” *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3, *Prosa 1* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 396-397.

¹⁸ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 15

¹⁹ Berman, 15-16.

value was and new methods for asserting this; otherwise, any new values would lack plausibility. The generation after Nietzsche saw this as an increasingly urgent task, especially after WWI.

The war had a destabilizing effect on the social fabric, especially in Germany, and had shaken belief in previously accepted collective truths. Each of my authors devotes large and considered works to addressing the perceived ethical vacuum of the post-Wilhelmine period and they produce works in which the nihilism-form coupling is central. The exact manner in which this idea finds expression differs, and it will become clear that each of the major authors in this study occupies a different standpoint vis a vis the same notion of form's new-found authority, from enthusiastic approval to qualified disavowal. It is therefore all the more instructive that they conceive of the problem in very similar terms. This project intends to show that there are deep affinities between how these authors understand the role of form. However, because there is no comparative study of them that focuses on nihilism or on form, these similarities have been overlooked.

The past two decades have seen a resurgence of interest in form both as a tool and an object of literary analysis. My project can be situated adjacently to a number of recent studies that have focused on form concepts, both in literature and in other fields, though my focus will be limited to the German tradition.²⁰ In many instances, this approach is drawn almost magnetically towards to first half of the twentieth century and specifically to modernism. This is certainly the case with *Die Souveränität der Literatur*, a 2008 collection of essays edited by Uwe Hebekus and Ingo Stöckmann that seeks to draw connections between form and politics,

²⁰ Recent studies focussed on form include: Eva Axer et. al., *Aus Dem Leben Der Form: Studien Zum Nachleben Von Goethes Morphologie in Der Theoriebildung Des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021) and Malika Maskarinec's *The Forces of Form in German Modernism*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018). Like the present study, Maskarinec takes as her starting point the changes to the definition of what form is, although she locates the turn in the Enlightenment. See Maskarinec, 6.

highlighting ways that uniquely modernist conceptions of form could be instrumentalized for political ends. Hebekus also has his own, extensive study on form, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter. The authors of the individual chapters in *Die Souveränität der Literatur* of course bring their own perspectives to the topic and focus on a wide range of writers belonging to the *Klassische Moderne* (including Mann and Jünger, though not the texts that I will be concentrating on). However, the editors' intention for the volume is to help theorize what they argue has been a neglected thread of modernism, which addresses the already mentioned crisis of modern life by aiming to contain or counter it in the aesthetic realm. This is a different modernist approach from the more widely acknowledged literature that registers and seeks to represent "die kontingente Verfaßtheit der modernen Gesellschaft," by focusing on the fragmentary nature of experience, for example, or deploying an ironic stance.²¹

Die literarische Moderne [verfügt] *auch* über eine Seite [...] die im Angesicht der vor allem im Gefolge der Zeit nach der Ersten Weltkrieg sich ausbreitenden Orientierungskrisen einen autoritären Ausweg aus den Widersprüchen und Beliebigkeiten der als rettungslos kontingent erfahrenen Zeit sucht [...] In ihren ästhetischen Präferenzen folgt diese 'Spielart' der Klassischen Moderne darum einer Sinnfälligkeit, die den artifiziellen und kontingenten Grund ihrer autoritären Selbstermächtigung nicht invisibilisiert, sondern *sichtbar macht* und nachgerade *offensiv ausstellt*.²²

This militant stance, which seeks to use deploy aesthetics in order to undo social and political fragmentation, is what "Souveränität der Literatur" means. The search for an aesthetic totality, a term the authors use to indicate texts that aim at wholeness, completeness, or the exclusion of ambiguity in favor of a single vision, becomes, then, the aesthetic analog to political totalitarianism, a point that will be repeated by Hebekus.

²¹ Uwe Hebekus and Ingo Stöckmann, *Die Souveränität Der Literatur: Zum Totalitären Der Klassischen Moderne 1900-1933* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 7.

²² Hebekus and Stöckmann, *Die Souveränität der Literatur*, 9-10.

My project engages with similar issues but it diverges in significant ways. In agreement with Hebekus and Stöckmann, I take as my starting point the idea that there is a historical specificity to the concept of form that German authors and artists employ in the early twentieth century. Some of this specificity has to do with technological advances, as my engagement with Jünger will illustrate, but this is just one cause among others. More importantly, and in line with Stöckmann's and Hebekus's study, I want to argue that these form concepts have an ethical or political dimension. The examples in my study seek to mobilize aesthetic resources to deal with a crisis of ethical, moral or political values, which is the crisis of nihilism. To my knowledge, this connection between nihilism and form has not been explored in depth. Another point at which I diverge from the theme of *Die Souveränität der Literatur* is on the political nature and political effectiveness of form concepts in themselves. My case studies aim to show that form often fails in the task the authors imagine for it and that, in order to be politically effective, art and form require a political content. There are several reasons for this that will become clear by way of specific examples, but one issue is that form, even a form that attempts to structure and control disparate elements, that aims at "totality" as Hebekus and Stöckmann would say, is essentially ambiguous, a point that will prove especially important for Mann's thinking, but will also play a role in my consideration of Jünger and Hesse. The question of how to interpret these form concepts will come up again and again, because form is a slippery term and is by nature difficult to pin down. Despite this, form seems to have the potential to manifest meaning and value on its own, at least this is what comes through in the texts I examine. For this reason it invites consideration as an alternative to values in a time of ethical and political uncertainty, when the existence of a grounding absolute no longer seems assured.

Form is a radically different principle from value, such as the values of religion or a political party, although there will be examples throughout this project that detail political and religious uses of form. Carl Schmitt's *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*, for example, argues that the success of the Catholic Church at wielding power can be tied to its capacity to give form to political and social reality.²³ The difference between a theory like Schmitt's and the form concepts I am interested in here lies in the capacity of religious and political dogmas to identify and name an absolute that validates their program: the authority of a transcendent God and His revelation through the medium of sacred texts, in the case of the Abrahamic religions; the will of the *Volk* or of voters, in the case of fascism or democracy; the revolution leading to the emancipation of the working class and the end of class struggle, as in the case of Marxism and so on.²⁴ These were all active ideologies at the historical moment in question that, in a certain sense, existed in defiance of nihilism. A fruitless defiance, in Nietzsche's view. He never tired of criticizing causes like socialism and nationalism in addition to his sustained attack on religion.²⁵ These ideologies therefore provide a helpful contrast to the type of theory I consider. My examples are authors who refuse, deny or question the possibility that a single, stable absolute that can fill the void is already available and one needs simply to subscribe to it. Yet they remain committed to the idea that such a principle exists, not in a world

²³ "Hier ist eine substanzielle Gestaltung der historischen und sozialen Wirklichkeit gelungen, die trotz ihres formalen Charakters in der konkreten Existenz bleibt, lebensvoll und doch im höchsten Maße rational ist. Diese formale Eigenart des römischen Katholizismus beruht auf der strengen Durchführung des Prinzips der Repräsentation," Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und Politische Form*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 14.

²⁴ Democracy may not actually fit with this model if we accept the idea put forward by Claude Lefort that in a democracy, the exercise of power "represents the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent rules. This phenomenon implies an institutionalization of conflict. The locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be co-substantial with it – and it cannot be represented." In this sense, we could say that democracy is a political commitment without a determinate content. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 1988), 17.

²⁵ Nietzsche's criticism of German nationalism in *Götzen-Dämmerung*, for example: "Was den Deutschen abgeht:" "die grosse Politik täuscht Niemanden ... Deutschland gilt immer mehr als Europas Flachland," KSA 6, 103-110, here 105.

beyond, but within historical reality, only it still needs to be manifested, or discovered. This is where the concept of a higher form, an absolute form that can ground claims about truth and meaning without relying on anything else, becomes relevant. Form comes in not to reverse the fragmentation associated with modernity, but to try and fill the void of a lost absolute.

The works I consider in this project suggest that for a society lacking a shared commitment to either a political ideology or a religion, the concept of form appears as an alternative worth exploring. They understand form as a rigorous ordering principle that has the potential to provide structure, hierarchy and meaning in the aesthetic and socio-political realms. Unlike the examples just mentioned, employing a form concept as a grounding rule avoids naming a stable absolute and this, on the surface, seems to avoid the nihilist trap. But this also means that the form lacks any normative content, something that would clearly designate certain actions, outcomes or beliefs as right or wrong. Form is a relatively open concept; it is suggestive, a heuristic that may produce different outcomes, but can nevertheless provide structure to what would otherwise be chaos. So, for example, Jünger's manifesto/essay *Der Arbeiter* (1932) argues that order and meaning can be restored to politics and society through representing the "*Gestalt* of the worker." I will argue that the *Gestalt* is a type of functional form Jünger invents in response to nihilism and that this form has no content and no substance. I contrast this with other readings that assume Jünger's *Gestalt* represents *something*. I will argue that it is rather an example of a form detached from anything concrete that nevertheless has the potential to generate meaning and value.

I will also focus on Hermann Hesse's novel *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943), in which a game of symbols and rules that has no purpose or end except itself comes to stand in as the central organizing principle of a utopian society. I will argue that the Glass Bead Game that Hesse

invents is a form without a content, an unattached, organizing concept much like Jünger's Gestalt of the Worker.

Thomas Mann's work both confirms the trend I identify in Hesse and Jünger and provides a contrast to it. His novel, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (1947), takes a critical view of the notion of a totalizing form. Mann's novel centers on a principle of musical composition called *der strenge Satz*, by means of which the author illustrates the dangers of formal excess. In Mann's novel, the *strenger Satz* becomes a kind of higher law that determines musical ideas, and this is presented as a potential threat to traditional aesthetic and ethical values. This is only a brief outline and, as my project will illustrate, each work contains contradictions and complexities that undermine the aim of overcoming nihilism. These contradictions may even be symptomatic of the difficulty that the task of overcoming nihilism presents.

The magnitude of the problem might explain why the "argument" or "solution" these authors offer is framed in an imaginative or fictional context. The texts that I am working with are literary rather than theoretical, even as they attempt to extend their analyses and influence beyond the boundaries of art. Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* poses issues of genre identification that I will discuss more closely in the next chapter. I nevertheless want to suggest that we should take seriously the theories of form that these authors develop. To varying degrees, these reflect the real social and historical conditions that they observed and, in Jünger's case especially, the fiction is presented as prophesy, so that the theory implies the possibility of praxis. Furthermore, these works are not an anomaly; rather, they are entangled in an important strand of modernism in Germany and Europe that shared the aim of using art to influence life: the avant-garde. As this project will examine at length, the historical avant-garde, whose central aim was to demolish the

barriers between aesthetics and the socio-political sphere, constitutes the background to the works of prose I examine. Jünger is the only one of my authors who could be classed as avant-garde—a label he did not actively embrace—but each author develops form concepts that are a reflection on, or in some ways a reaction to, the program of radical, avant-garde aesthetics. This is especially evident in Thomas Mann’s case, since he bases his novel on the real music of Arnold Schoenberg and its theorization by Theodor Adorno.

I argue that the works by Jünger, Mann and Hesse I consider function as experiments, where the application of a meaning-generating formal concept to the socio-political realm is explored in the controlled environment of literature. But in each case, this application proves excessive and the resulting formalism is always in danger of losing sight of its initial aim, so that the project of finding an answer to nihilism may appear as itself a type of nihilism.²⁶ With this in mind, I want to look now at nihilism as a philosophical problem and in particular how it was theorized by Nietzsche. My argument is that both the problem these authors identify and the solution they attempt can be tied back to Nietzsche’s profound influence on European culture at the start of the twentieth century. The following section will make clear how form emerges as a solution to nihilism out of Nietzsche’s writings, to be taken up and transformed by artists and thinkers of the early twentieth century, including the subjects of this study. The formal excesses that find expression in *Der Arbeiter*, *Doktor Faustus* and *Das Glasperlenspiel* can be tied to Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian, which was central to his project of overcoming nihilism.

²⁶ I intend to roughly follow Robert Pippin’s definition of “formalism” as a preoccupation with “pure” form that has no content. See Pippin, “What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel),” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no.1 (2002), 3, footnote.

1.1 Nihilism, according to Nietzsche

What exactly do we refer to when we use the term nihilism? Is it a movement, a philosophy, an attitude, a state of affairs, an event, a belief? All of these? One point that almost all scholars who have engaged with it can agree on, it seems, is that nihilism has many faces. As one recent study puts it, nihilism is a “constellation of related concepts and problems.”²⁷ Consequently, there have been a number of studies devoted to understanding and classifying different types of nihilism, as well as an awareness of the malleability of this concept.²⁸ My aim is not to argue for or against any of these, nor to provide a new understanding of what nihilism is or how it originated. My project does, however, aim to expand our understanding of the role that nihilism played in the literature and thought of the period under investigation. But, before I move on to discuss the historical specificity of nihilism that this project is interested in, it is necessary to provide a minimal definition of what I am working with.

At its most general, nihilism is the view that there is no transcendent, stabilizing ground for truth, meaning or value. The common, bordering on cliché, way to articulate this problem is that there is no God, or no absolute. As one study of nihilism summarizes it, “if God exists, then all truth, meaning, and value come from him. But if not, then the very idea of truth or meaning no longer seems possible.”²⁹ This is the sense in which Nietzsche’s Zarathustra announces that God has died and calls himself “Zarathustra, der Gottlose.”³⁰ Many accounts of this problem have tended to grapple with what such a situation means for the individual, and how it would be

²⁷ Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2.

²⁸ Noteworthy studies that provide a classification of different types of nihilism include: Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Paul van Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018); Karen Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

²⁹ Stewart, *The History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, 10.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, KSA 4, 215. Hereafter cited as *Z*.

possible to imbue one's life with purpose and meaning.³¹ However, nihilism also has a social or collective component and this will be the more profound and consequential issue for the authors I will consider. We do not live alone, but in groups where everything we create, from our laws, customs, and political parties to artworks, cities, and educational institutions are built to reflect certain shared notions of truth, meaning and value. Nihilism in this context means that the objectivity or shareability of such truths and values is destabilized: they become unconvincing. The consequences of this are often referred to under the banner of relativism.³² What makes our values and truths relative is the sense that if there is no absolute truth and no final authority, such as an omnipotent, non-human being to appeal to, then people have to create their own truths, values and meanings. But such truths will necessarily lack the force of an absolute. This is an issue that continues to haunt contemporary society and has little to do with the ability of individuals to find meaning or truth in their own lives, whether that involves a personal commitment to religion, or some other ideology. Eventually, such values are contingent. Bernard Reginster, in a detailed study of nihilism in Nietzsche's thought phrases it so: "If there are no objective values, then nothing really matters: for human beings who need their lives to have meaning, this lack of normative guidance spawns nihilism."³³

As the abundance of studies addressing this issue makes clear, these are perennial questions and issues that can be traced back to the roots of western philosophical thinking. It is

³¹ An often repeated phrase is: "Nihilism is the conviction that life is meaningless, or not worth living." Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 8.

³² It is important to point out that relativism is a vast and complex area of study for philosophers and there is a vast literature on it. It is however frequently associated with nihilism. Here, I am using "relativism" in the most basic sense as the view that procedures to determine what is true or false, right or wrong are "products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them." Maria Baghramian and J. Adam Carter, "Relativism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Spring 2022). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/relativism/>; cf. also Stewart, *The History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, 10-15.

³³ Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 8.

also not a given that nihilism has to be a problem.³⁴ Nietzsche and the subjects of the present study believed that it was. Nietzsche's importance for this project lies in the way that he reconceived these issues in a modern context and in the originality of the solutions he offered. Philosophers generally agree that nihilism was the "central problem" of Nietzsche's philosophy: In its diagnostic mode as a genealogy of western thought, Nietzsche's writing identifies nihilism as the endpoint of western intellectual history; in its speculative mode, his work lays out a program for overcoming it.³⁵ Nietzsche theorized the possibility of revaluating values, of re-establishing meaning and truth in the absence of God and of transcendence. In doing so, he inspired authors and thinkers after him who grappled with the same problems. This project takes it for granted that authors who are not philosophers engage with these issues organically and haphazardly, which can also be said of their engagement with Nietzsche in general. The influence of Nietzsche's philosophy on German thought in the early twentieth century is undeniable, he was an "event," as the philosopher and WWI veteran Karl Löwith phrased it: "Ohne diesen letzten deutschen Philosophen läßt sich die deutsche Entwicklung gar nicht verstehen [...] Er ist wie Luther ein spezifisch deutsches Ereignis, radikal und verhängnisvoll."³⁶ Hesse, Mann and Jünger all read and claimed to be influenced by Nietzsche and, despite the differences in what they took from him, there is still a lot of overlap. Nietzsche centered his response to nihilism around a very specific type of creative, formative impulse and this is one

³⁴ Many philosophers do not believe that nihilism is a problem at all and the second half of the twentieth century produced a number of thinkers who lean in this direction. Richard Rorty, who comes at the issue of belief from a pragmatist position, is a strong defender of the idea that "moral and political principles should be viewed as abbreviations for narratives of successful use of tools, summaries of the results of successful experiments, rather than as insights into the nature of anything large (Society, or History, or Humanity)." Similarly to Nietzsche, Rorty argues that belief in a non-human authority is a form of self-abasement that diminishes the value of the here and now. But Rorty dissuades people from seeking value in the "sublime" ie. the "unrepresentable, undescrivable, ineffable" and from the pursuit of greatness as a human end. Rorty, *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2021), xxxiii; xxx; xxvii.

³⁵ Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 21.

³⁶ Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 6.

major feature of his thinking that struck a chord with so many artists and writers. The centrality of aesthetic form for Nietzsche's thought can be linked to his understanding of the evolution of nihilism. The following section repeats many well-known aspects of Nietzsche's thinking on this topic. But, while my reading of Nietzsche here may not be radically new, it is necessary because it draws out the elements I see as being especially important for the reception of his work by the authors covered in this project.

A good place to start any investigation of Nietzsche's nihilism is his *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), as it presents both a theory of its origins and draws a connection between form-giving and value. In this work, Nietzsche insists that the highest values upon which western civilization is founded are not ahistorical, but rather the result of a long evolutionary process that has led finally to reveal their baselessness. This means that the ethical and moral "truths" that have governed people's lives can no longer be rationally supported. Nietzsche's genealogy begins in the era before Judaism and Christianity, when the governing moral and ethical values were those of the ruling classes. These pre-modern, aristocratic groups of "strong" individuals who believed in their own superiority and had an aversion to those beneath them invented the categories of good and bad to reflect their own strengths. It was "die Vornehmen, Mächtigen, Höhergestellten und Hochgesinnten, welche sich selbst und ihr Thun als gut, nämlich als ersten Ranges empfanden und ansetzten."³⁷ Nietzsche believes this to be an almost universal rule that holds true not only for Greece and Rome, which hold a particular interest for him, but for all early civilizations. These societies functioned according to the principle that might is right until, via the "slave morality" of the peoples dominated by these value-giving aristocrats, their values

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, 259. Hereafter cited as *GM*.

were supplanted by the “ascetic ideals” that continue to serve as the default in Nietzsche’s own time.

Ascetic ideals mean, for Nietzsche, not only Christianity but all beliefs and ideologies based on a “Wille zur Wahrheit,” including the sciences and political ideologies, whether anarchism or nationalism.³⁸ As he frequently asserts, the ascetic ideal is synonymous with the will to truth, it is “der Glaube an einen *metaphysischen* Wert, einen Wert *an sich der Wahrheit*, wie er allein in jenem Ideal verbürgt und verbrieft ist.”³⁹ But the idea that truth is to be found in a metaphysical realm, a different world than this one leads, over time, to an atheistic nihilism:

Der unbedingte redliche Atheismus (– und seine Luft allein athmen wir, wir geistigeren Menschen dieses Zeitalters!) steht demgemäss nicht im Gegensatz zu jenem Ideale [das asketische Ideal E.M.] wie es den Anschein hat; er ist vielmehr nur eine seiner letzten Entwicklungsphasen, eine seiner Schlussformen und inneren Folgerichtigkeiten, – er ist die Ehrfurcht gebietende Katastrophe einer zweitausendjährigen Zucht zur Wahrheit, welche am Schlusse sich die Lüge im Glauben an Gott verbietet.⁴⁰

God, for Nietzsche, means not simply the figurehead of a specific religious tradition. Rather, to use Heidegger’s interpretation, “die Namen Gott und christlicher Gott in Denken Nietzsches [werden] zur Bezeichnung der übersinnlichen Welt überhaupt gebraucht werden. Gott ist der Name für den Bereich der Ideen und der Ideale.”⁴¹ To say that God is dead, that we live in a time of atheism, as Nietzsche does in his later work, means that “die übersinnliche Welt ist ohne wirkende Kraft” and, if that is the case, “dann bleibt nichts mehr, woran der Mensch sich halten und wonach er sich richten kann.”⁴² So, as long as people by and large believed in the objective reality of “God,” or a transcendent reality, they could be assured that the ideals, goals, morals

³⁸ *GM*, 400.

³⁹ *GM*, 400.

⁴⁰ *GM*, 409.

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, “Nietzsches Wort »Gott ist tot«,” *Holzwege*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 5, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), 216.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, “Nietzsches Wort »Gott ist tot«,” 217.

and ethical values that this belief brought with it likewise had an objective reality, because they were legislated by a higher authority and therefore had an absolute status. But the desire for a higher truth that this belief entails inevitably turns against itself by showing this underlying assumption be a lie.⁴³ Another way to put this is that when people reject the idea that our highest values are products of the here and now and seek to justify them by appeals to a non-human authority located in a transcendent realm, they put their faith in something that cannot, in the end, stand up to its own measure of truth.⁴⁴ In Nietzsche's interpretation, modernity is the point at which this project becomes aware of its internal contradictions.⁴⁵

However, there is another aspect that Nietzsche considers: In pursuing this type of measure for truth, people devalue the immanent world in which we live. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* claims that locating the measures for truth and meaning in another, higher reality has the effect of making life ever more unbearable and less attractive, because it denies the inherent value of life as an embodied, lived experience: "Dieser Hass gegen das Menschliche, mehr noch gegen das Thierische, mehr noch gegen das Stoffliche, diese Abscheu vor den Sinnen, vor der Vernunft selbst, diese Furcht vor dem Glück und der Schönheit, dieses Verlangen hinweg aus allem Schein, Wechsel, Werden, Tod, Wunsch, Verlangen selbst – das alles bedeutet, wagen wir es, dies zu begreifen, einen *Willen zum Nichts*, einen Widerwillen gegen das Leben."⁴⁶ This is also

⁴³ "Doch man wird es begriffen haben, worauf ich hinaus will, nämlich daß es immer noch ein *metaphysischer Glaube* ist, auf dem unser Glaube an die Wissenschaft ruht. [...] Aber wie, wenn dies gerade immer mehr unglaubwürdig wird, wenn nichts sich mehr als göttlich erweist, es sei denn der Irrtum, die Blindheit, die Lüge – wenn Gott selbst sich als unsre längste Lüge erweist?" Ellipses added. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, KSA 3, 577. Hereafter cited as *FW*.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche writes about higher values, human goals and meaning almost interchangeably but, for the sake of simplicity, I will mostly use the terms "higher values" or "absolute values" to denote what it is Nietzsche is interested in.

⁴⁵ Robert Pippin phrases it in a similar way: "This entire post-Platonic project has begun to collapse under the weight of the dilemmas and *aporiai* it created for itself." Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 80-81.

⁴⁶ *GM*, 412.

why Nietzsche comes to equate Christianity with nihilism.⁴⁷ This attitude assumes that once the transcendent realm disappears, there is no other way for us to determine what is valuable and what is true. “Die extremste Form des Nihilismus,” he writes, “wäre die Einsicht: daß jeder Glaube, jedes Für-wahr-halten notwendig falsch ist: weil es eine wahre Welt gar nicht gibt. Also: ein perspektivischer Schein, dessen Herkunft in uns liegt (insofern wir eine engere, verkürzte, vereinfachte Welt fortwährend nötig haben).”⁴⁸ In Nietzsche’s formulation, once people realize that an interpretation of the world held to be unconditionally true was basically wrong, precisely because it was based on something beyond, a *Jenseitigkeits-Lösung*, there arises a profound confusion regarding how any new interpretation, hence any new values, could attain to something like objectivity.⁴⁹ If values are relative, or simply subjective, then they do not seem worth striving for.

This issue affects not only ethics and morality, however, but all areas of culture and shared life, such as art and politics. Nihilism in this sense can be characterized as decadence, which Nietzsche writes about at length, often in connection with Christianity. In *Der Antichrist* (1889) he calls Christianity and Buddhism “nihilistische Religionen zusammen [...] décadence-Religionen.”⁵⁰ There is also his invective against Wagner’s music as decadent in *Der Fall Wagner* (1888).⁵¹ Nietzsche does not dwell on the exact reasons for why nihilism leads to cultural decline, but there are strong implications that the devaluation of values leads to a sense

⁴⁷ “Es ist in tiefstem Sinne nihilistisch,” Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, KSA 6, 310.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887, KSA 12, 354.

⁴⁹ The term “Jenseitigkeits-Lösung” appears in *GM*, 404.

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, KSA 6, 186.

⁵¹ “Er [Wagner] schmeichelt jedem nihilistischen (– buddhistischen) Instinkte und verkleidet ihn in Musik, er schmeichelt jeder Christliche, der religiösen Ausdrucksform der décadence. Man mache seine Ohren auf: Alles, was je auf dem Boden des verarmten Lebens aufgewachsen ist, die ganze Falschmünzerei der Transscendenz und des Jenseits, hat in Wagners Kunst ihren sublimsten Fürsprecher.” Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, KSA 6, 43.

of general fatigue, of an inability to create anything new or original. In one of his unpublished notes, he suggests why nihilism destroys originality:

Die nihilistischen Konsequenzen der politischen und volkswirtschaftlichen Denkweise wo alle "Principien" nachgerade zur Schauspielerei gehören: der Hauch von Mittelmäßigkeit, Erbärmlichkeit, Unaufrichtigkeit usw. Der Nationalismus, der Anarchismus usw.

[...]

Die Stellung der Kunst: absolute Unoriginalität ihrer Stellung in der modernen Welt. Ihre Verdüsterung.⁵²

The state of decline that sets in as a result of passive nihilism, wanting nothing, affects art and politics just as it does ethics because nothing seems worth taking seriously any longer. This aspect of nihilism will return in Hesse and Mann's work, where concerns about the end of creativity and originality in art will appear as evidence that nihilism has infiltrated the social fabric.

These developments are bound to have profound, manifold consequences, many of which will not be immediately evident.⁵³ They do, however, put the individual under enormous pressure to find some way out. As early as *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878), Nietzsche argues that if humanity lacks a shared goal, this leads individuals to see their own lives as meaningless:

"Denn die Menschheit hat im ganzen *keine* Ziele, folglich kann der Mensch, in Betrachtung des ganzen Verlaufs, nicht darin seinen Trost und Halt finden, sondern seine Verzweiflung. Sieht er bei allem, was er tut, auf die letzte Ziellosigkeit der Menschen, so bekommt sein eignes Wirken in seinen Augen den Charakter der Vergeudung."⁵⁴ There is a clear affective dimension to this realization, so that an individual comes to feel that life is simply not worth living. If life has no

⁵² Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1885-Herbst 1886, KSA 12, 127.

⁵³ Cf. Pippin: "Nietzsche does not rely on any direct or obvious manifestations of 'social distress' or 'physiological degeneration' as evidence of any nihilism crisis [...] Nietzsche, that is, is well aware that among almost all of his contemporaries there is very little sense of any great moral crisis, or even any disaffection with modern ideals." Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 86.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, KSA 2, 53.

point, then suffering has no point either and this realization can prove unbearable, as Nietzsche recognizes: “Die Sinnlosigkeit des Leidens, nicht das Leiden, war der Fluch, der bisher über der Menschheit ausgebreitet lag.”⁵⁵ The pointlessness of suffering will prove especially important when I consider Ernst Jünger’s work, which is driven in large part by the need to give meaning to the suffering and sacrifice of soldiers in WWI. Nietzsche believes that the need to avoid this type of nihilism is the reason that many people continue to cling to the so-called ascetic ideals, because these at least provide the illusion of meaning. In *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, he criticizes this popular response, which may temporarily close the door “vor allem selbstmörderischen Nihilismus,” but only at the cost of devaluing life in an even more nefarious way.⁵⁶ The alternative Nietzsche presents is to see the collapse of transcendent values as an opportunity.

One way he formulates this is through the parable, “Wie die ‘wahre Welt’ endlich zur Fabel wurde,” in which the religious, or Platonic (he sees these as equivalent in this regard), division of the world into the present one of appearances and a divine world of truth leads logically to disbelief in the “true” world, followed by disbelief in the world of appearance, i.e. reality: “Die wahre Welt erreichbar für den Weisen, den Frommen, den Tugendhaften” becomes “unerreichbar für jetzt, aber versprochen” then “unerreichbar, unbeweisbar [...] eine Idee, die zu Nichts mehr nütz ist” and so on until it loses all credibility and finally: “Die wahre Welt haben wir abgeschafft: welche Welt blieb übrig? Die scheinbare vielleicht? ... Aber Nein! Mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die scheinbare abgeschafft.”⁵⁷ Nietzsche describes this as humanity’s midday, the point at which the future may begin: “Mittag [...] Ende des längsten Irrthums; Höhepunkt der Menschheit.”⁵⁸ If passive nihilism is the acceptance that our values

⁵⁵ *GM*, 411.

⁵⁶ *GM*, 411.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, KSA 6, 80-81. Hereafter cited as *GD*.

⁵⁸ *GD*, 81.

disappear along with the higher world, what Nietzsche ultimately promotes is an active nihilism that consciously rejects the Christian moral worldview of the past and attempts to create new truths and new values that no longer present themselves as the command of a non-human authority.⁵⁹

The basis for a new way of establishing what is true and what a value is can be tied back to how Nietzsche understands the origin of the problem, which is the point of pursuing a genealogical investigation in the first place. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* is critical of the initial, historical act of shifting the legislative, value-instituting authority away from the immanent sphere of human beings and into a “jenseits” or transcendent realm. Take, for instance, the contrast Nietzsche draws between the life affirming, self-legislated values of what he denotes as the pre-Christian aristocratic classes and the life-negating values that supplant these. The aristocrats, “die Vornehmen, Mächtigen, Höhergestellten,” declared themselves to be “die Guten” and had the strength “werthe zu schaffen, Namen der Werthe auszuprägen.”⁶⁰ This ability to turn immediate, life-affirming values—for Nietzsche this also means they are egoistic values—into higher values is evidence of a specific sort of creative capacity: “Seine Feinde, seine Unfälle, seine Unthaten selbst nicht lange ernst nehmen können – das ist das Zeichen starker voller Naturen, in denen ein Überschuss plastischer, nachbildender, ausheilender [...] Kraft ist.”⁶¹ This excess of creative, legislative power is what Judeo-Christian “slave morality” denies and labels as evil. Slave morality holds that “die Elenden sind allein die Guten, die Armen, Ohnmächtigen, Niedrigen sind allein die Guten [...] für sie allein giebt es Seligkeit, – dagegen

⁵⁹ “Jede fruchtbare und mächtige Bewegung der Menschheit hat zugleich eine nihilistische Bewegung mitgeschaffen. Es wäre unter Umständen das Anzeichen für ein einschneidendes und allerwesentlichstes Wachstum, für den Übergang in neue Daseinsbedingungen, daß die extremste Form des Pessimismus, der eigentliche Nihilismus, zur Welt käme. Dies habe ich begriffen.” Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887, KSA 12, 468.

⁶⁰ GM, 259.

⁶¹ GM, 273.

ihr, ihr Vornehmen und Gewaltigen, ihr seid in alle Ewigkeit die Bösen [...] die Gottlosen.”⁶²

For Nietzsche, this worldview generates a model of the human subject that leads as much to nihilism as the death of God does, because it attracts neither love nor reverence: “Wir sehen heute Nichts, das grösser werden will, wir ahnen, dass es immer noch abwärts, abwärts geht [...] was ist heute Nihilismus, wenn er nicht das ist? ... Wir sind des Menschen müde.”⁶³

Following on from this, Nietzsche’s theorization of the revaluation of values—“Umwertung aller Werthe”—as a response to the challenge of nihilism seeks to reverse what he understands as the mistakes of the past. Firstly, a revaluation must reject the will to truth and the belief in transcendence and focus on life as an embodiment within *this* reality that seeks growth rather than decline. It must acknowledge that “das Leben selbst zwingt uns Werthe anzusetzen, das Leben selbst werthet durch uns, wenn wir Werthe ansetzen.”⁶⁴ This also means turning against Christian morality, “weil Leben etwas essentiell Unmoralisches ist.”⁶⁵ The revaluation of values requires an almost sublime affirmation of all the consequences of nihilism—“sich aber als Menschheit (und nicht nur als Individuum) ebenso vergeudet zu fühlen, wie wir die einzelne Blüthe von der Natur vergeudet sehen, ist ein Gefühl über alle Gefühle”—accompanied by the strength to overcome this state of affairs.⁶⁶ Even more importantly, though, the revaluation of values centers on a creative capacity, the “Überschuss plastischer, nachbildender, ausheilender [...] Kraft” that is able not only to create values, but to insist on the objective validity of these, to name them (“Namen der Werthe auszuprägen”).⁶⁷ These abilities are essential to Nietzsche’s

⁶² *GM*, 267.

⁶³ *GM*, 278.

⁶⁴ *GD*, 86.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, KSA 1, 19. Hereafter cited as *GdT*.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, KSA 2, 53.

⁶⁷ *GM*, 259.

Übermensch: a new form of the human subject who will be able to thrive at a point beyond nihilism.

Nietzsche's most extensive meditation on the *Übermensch* and the death of God is *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85). This unusual and partly narrative text centers on the life and teachings of a fictional prophet who leaves his solitary home in the mountains in an attempt to bring wisdom to the public. Zarathustra claims that "der Mensch ist Etwas, was überwunden werden soll," and that now is the time for humanity to grasp this "Ziel" as its destiny, which is the *Übermensch*.⁶⁸ "Todt sind alle Götter" says Zarathustra, "nun wollen wir, dass der Übermensch lebe."⁶⁹ But the people in the market square where Zarathustra has come to preach laugh at his warnings and admonishments. These townspeople are a foretaste of what humanity could look like without shared goals and values. In *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, "die letzte Menschen" value their averageness and have forgotten the meaning of love, creation and longing, concepts that entail capacities beyond what human beings require simply to survive in comfort.⁷⁰ This example illustrates the outcome of denying that nihilism is a problem at all: a society of people who consider themselves happy, but whose existence will be unremarkable, with neither highs nor lows. It is clear then that, in Nietzsche's view, the consequences of nihilism for the socio-political realm happen irrespective of whether or not individuals are convinced by or even aware of the advent of nihilism.

It is vital then that the revaluation of values takes place at the collective level of humanity's understanding of itself and its possibilities. Alain Badiou, whose reading of Nietzsche features prominently in my study, puts it this way: "'God is dead' means that man is

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, KSA 4, 19. Hereafter cited as *Z*.

⁶⁹ *Z*, 102.

⁷⁰ "'Was ist Liebe? Was ist Schöpfung? Was ist Sehnsucht? Was ist Stern?' – so fragt der letzte Mensch und blinzelt./Die Erde ist dann klein geworden, und auf ihr hüpfte der letzte Mensch, der alles klein macht." *Z*, 19.

dead too. Man, the last man, the dead man, is what must be overcome for the sake of the overman. What is the overman? Simply man without God.”⁷¹ Humanity without God will have to invent new ways of valuing and meaning-giving that no longer rely on an authority external to human reality, whether God or any other ideals that are in conflict with life. But humanity without God, the *Übermensch*, will also be a new type of human subject, who will replace the “dead man,” in Badiou’s language, the one who continues to search for a way out by holding onto the possibility of truths guaranteed by a transcendent reality.

Nietzsche attempts to debunk these higher truths throughout his work, including in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but he also wants to make clear that new higher values and a new type of value-giving are possible. Even if the suicidal nihilism Nietzsche discusses in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* could be overcome through a personal commitment to higher values, a willingness to die for one’s country, for example, or a belief in the absolute value of human life or the life of one’s family, all of which individuals could theoretically posit for themselves, these remain *subjective* values.⁷² The state of affairs whereby humanity has no objective goals or higher values is a socio-political problem and the refusal to see it as such only makes the problem worse. The *letzte Menschen* have given up on the search for objective goals and meaning in favor of a comfortable optimization and, from Nietzsche’s point of view, there is something very wrong with this approach. The already mentioned passage from the *Nachlaß* suggests several real-world consequences that many ordinary people would probably agree are undesirable: political movements like nationalism and anarchism, *Mittelmäßigkeit*, *Erbärmlichkeit*,

⁷¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 168.

⁷² The issue of whether Nietzsche believes in any “objective” values is the subject of debate among philosophers. Reginster discusses the issue of “subjective” values at length and with reference to the philosophical literature on this topic. See Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, esp. “Nihilism,” 67-97.

Unaufrichtigkeit, and the phenomenon whereby “principles” become performative, a “Schauspielerei.”⁷³

1.1.1 Other views of nihilism in modernist literature

This is the intellectual legacy that thinkers of the early twentieth century inherit from Nietzsche: an awareness of cultural, political and moral decline, a sense of intense meaninglessness, valuelessness and a very convincing argument that the death of God leaves us without any obvious way forward. We see evidence of it not only in the three major works that this study focuses on, but throughout modernist literature, described using a variety of terms. Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (1924) echoes Nietzsche’s formulation of the problem through the character of Hans Castorp, an individual whose historical moment fails to provide “eine befriedigende Antwort [...] auf die Frage Wozu?”⁷⁴ Mann’s narrative claims that while it is possible to invent one’s own “Ziele, Zwecke, Hoffnungen,” when “die Zeit selbst der Hoffnungen und Aussichten bei aller äußeren Regsamkeit im Grunde entbehrt” it produces “eine gewisse lähmende Wirkung.”⁷⁵ The lack such objective goals is the main reason that Hans prefers the repetitive, static, morbid atmosphere of a sanatorium to life in ordinary society. Nihilism also permeates the narrative of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* (1929) whose main character, an unexceptional man from the fringes of society, refuses to believe in anything higher than his own strength and immediate needs, not even the modest goal of labor reform. “Franz lacht und lacht” when a worker tries to recruit him; “es rettet uns kein höheres Wesen, kein Gott, kein Kaiser, kein Tribun, uns von dem Elend

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1885-Herbst 1886, KSA 12, 127.

⁷⁴ Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, GKFA 5.1, 54.

⁷⁵ Mann, 54.

erlösen, können nur wir selbst tun.”⁷⁶ In answer to the question “was ist der Mensch, was ist das Leben” Franz Biberkopf believes that “es gleicht ner Hühnerleiter, von oben bis unten und so weiter.”⁷⁷ Nihilism is the central problem that Hermann Broch investigates in *Die Schlafwandler* (1931/32), which attempts to grapple with with “eine Zerspaltung des Gesamtlebens und - Erlebens” that the author believes has infected life to such an extent that even the realness of reality is now in doubt.⁷⁸ Broch does not mention Nietzsche directly, but his investigation of the evolution of relativism– “Zerfall der Werte”– and the growing insufficiency of established moral values in European thought brings to mind Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality. Broch also identifies the role of form in the construction of values, although a different understanding of it from what the current project focuses on: “Jedes Wertsystem geht aus irrationalen Strebungen hervor, und die irrationale, ethisch ungültige, Welterfassung ins absolut Rationale umzuformen, diese eigentliche und radikale Aufgabe der ‘Formung,’ wird für jedes überpersönliche Wertsystem zum ethischen Ziel. Und jedes Wertsystem scheitert an dieser Aufgabe.”⁷⁹

It is no coincidence that authors who grapple with nihilism are drawn to thinking about form, form-giving or formalization. At a basic, intuitive level, the idea that values are created rather than found or bestowed leads one to consider how such creation takes place. Broch suggests that successful form-giving is the secret that transforms an irrational system of values into a rational and logical one, yet this turns out to be insufficient to give this system a lasting legitimacy: “Jedes Wertsystem scheitert an dieser Aufgabe.” For this reason, the values do not hold. The authors I have chosen to focus this study on pursue this idea further. They explore the

⁷⁶ Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf*, 4th. ed. (Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter Verlag, 1961), 298.

⁷⁷ Döblin, 94-95.

⁷⁸ Hermann Broch, *Die Schlafwandler: Eine Romantrilogie, Kommentierte Werkausgabe*, vol. 1, 2nd ed, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 420.

⁷⁹ Broch, 690.

possibility that elevating form to the position of the missing absolute could help fill the normative void. This project finds expression in different ways, as I will discuss at length in the individual chapters, from a focus on the abstract formal principles that unite the arts, to suggesting that life gains meaning by functioning according to hidden, historical forces, and the algorithmic possibilities for composing music that no longer rely on individual creativity. This is not what Nietzsche sought to do, but Nietzsche provides the impetus. Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism was influential because he argued that it was possible to remake the world of values without God and find new measures of value that fit the conditions of a new era. This meant setting aside traditional ethical and moral norms in favor of something new that could ground future values and truths. For Nietzsche, this project of creating new values acquires a certain identity, or identities: the *Übermensch* is one example, but the other essential term that comes to anchor the process of revaluation is Dionysos. Dionysos refers to a specific type of creative capacity, which represents the elevation of an aesthetic attitude, a form-giving impulse, above other ways of establishing value.

Dionysos comes to symbolize a particular way of responding to the challenge of nihilism that is rooted in a broad understanding of aesthetics.⁸⁰ One of Nietzsche's most famous expressions, from *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), republished simply as *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1878), is that "nur als ästhetisches Phänomen [ist] das Dasein der Welt gerechtfertigt."⁸¹ One of the profound questions that drives this work is how to give meaning to pain and suffering, which becomes an investigation of how suffering is

⁸⁰ Daniel Came phrases what he sees as the purpose of Nietzsche's aesthetics as follows: "Nietzsche was not interested in art as such. Nor was he interested in constructing an aesthetic theory of a recognizable traditional sort à la Hume and Kant—that is to say, he was not interested in the internal constitution of aesthetic judgments, or the degree of objectivity attributable to them [...] for he regarded the significance of art to lie not in l'art pour l'art but in the answers it provides to the problem of how to value human experience." Came, *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/12587981>

⁸¹ *GdT*, 17.

transformed through the process of art.⁸² “Das Buch,” he writes of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, “kennt nur einen Künstler-Sinn und -Hintersinn hinter allem Geschehen, – einen “Gott”, wenn man will, aber gewiss nur einen gänzlich unbedenklichen und unmoralischen Künstler-Gott [...] der sich, Weltschaffend, von der Noth der Fülle und Ueberfülle, vom Leiden der in ihm gedrängten Gegensätze löst.”⁸³ At the time he wrote the book, Nietzsche believed that musical, tragic drama could provide a “Rechtfertigung” for life and suffering that was not based on morality, nor on an enlightened, Socratic command of knowledge and reason. The character of Socrates appears as the villain in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* because his approach to knowledge and ethics leads to the end of Greek tragedy. Now, with Wagner, whom he addressed the work to, Nietzsche believed there was the possibility of a revival of tragedy that could lead to a broader cultural revival.⁸⁴ But he comes to reject this theory of renewal along with several other aspects of the tragedy book. In his later philosophy, the role of art in the justification of suffering is greatly diminished and there is no longer an emphasis on a metaphysical, artistic principle, a *Künstler-Gott*. However, Nietzsche retains the notion of form-giving, of Dionysian pessimistic creation as central to redefining values in a post-nihilist time. Not justification, but affirmation becomes the aim. The following section will examine the development of this concept as well as the issues it brings with it.

⁸²“Wie anders hätte jenes so reizbar empfindende, so ungestüm begehrende, zum Leiden so einzig befähigte Volk das Dasein ertragen können, wenn ihm nicht dasselbe, von einer höheren Glorie umflossen, in seinen Göttern gezeigt worden wäre.” *GdT*, 36.

⁸³ *GdT*, 17.

⁸⁴ Christopher C. Raymond writes that, for Nietzsche, “it is only now [...] since the Socratic drive has finally undermined itself and modern man’s faith in reason has been shattered, that tragedy can be reborn.” Nietzsche does not discuss nihilism in the original *Geburt der Tragödie*, but the idea that the decline of Socratic rationality makes a different form of giving meaning attractive again is a preamble, I would suggest, to his later adoption of Dionysos as a response to nihilism. Raymond, “Nietzsche on Tragedy and Morality,” in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, 72.

1.2 Dionysos and aesthetic form. The role of the “individual” in the revaluation of values

The aristocrats Nietzsche imagines in his *Zur Genealogie der Moral* possessed, as we saw, an excess of “plastischer, nachbildender, ausheilender [...] Kraft;” they were “volle[] Naturen” who were able to put this fullness to work.⁸⁵ This enabled them to create values and to define—in Nietzsche’s words to “imprint”—what a value even was.⁸⁶ Nietzsche often describes his readers as a kind of spiritual or intellectual aristocracy, such as when he addresses *Der Antichrist* (1888, published 1895) “den Wenigsten” or when he embraces his readers into an elevated “we,” as in this passage from *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*: “Wir geborenen Rätselrater, die wir gleichsam auf den Bergen warten, zwischen Heute und Morgen hingestellt und in den Widerspruch zwischen Heute und Morgen hineingespannt, wir Erstlinge und Frühgeburten des kommenden Jahrhunderts.”⁸⁷ These and similar gestures and metaphors very soon led readers to apply the label “aristocratic radicalism” to his work.⁸⁸ But the notion that Nietzsche simply wants to revive an imagined noble class distracts us from thinking of nobility and aristocracy as metaphors that represent the characteristics necessary for a revaluation of values. I disagree with readings that associate aristocracy simply with strength, because there is good reason to believe that the most important characteristic is the command of plasticity: the act of form-giving, in other words.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *GM*, 273.

⁸⁶ “Aus diesem Pathos der Distanz heraus haben sie sich das Recht, Werthe zu schaffen, Namen der Werthe auszuprägen, erst genommen.” *GM*, 259.

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, KSA 6, 167; *FW*, 574

⁸⁸ Christian Benne relates that the term “aristocratic radicalism” was first coined by the Danish scholar Georg Brandes in a letter to Nietzsche. Nietzsche agreed with the label in his reply, which led to its widespread usage in scholarship. Benne, however, argues that both Nietzsche and Brandes would have had a different definition of radicalism in mind, one characterized not by contemporary associations with extremism, but rather the shorthand for those who believed in “grundlegende[] Reformen.” See Benne, “Vom aristokratischen zum antiquarischen Radikalismus: Radikale Missverständnisse von Georg Brandes bis Oscar Levy,” in Reschke, Renate, and Marco Brusotti, *“Einige werden Posthum Geboren”: Friedrich Nietzsches Wirkungen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), esp. 408-410.

⁸⁹ Michael Gillespie, for example, writes that Nietzsche’s “final teaching” is that that “war and widespread destruction were inevitable, but [...] that this period of struggle might make possible the development of a martial aristocracy out of which his Übermensch might arise.” Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nietzsche's Final Teaching* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 161-162. While there is not the space here to disprove such a

This aspect becomes especially important for the posthumous reception of his work that the present project addresses. It also helps explain why Nietzsche became so influential with artists: These readers were drawn to the idea that art and the creative impulse could serve as models for a response to nihilism. As late as 1951, Gottfried Benn credited Nietzsche with introducing a new understanding of “*Artistik*” to German art. Calling it “*ein ungeheuer ernster Begriff*,” Benn defines *Artistik* as “*der Versuch der Kunst, innerhalb des allgemeinen Verfalls der Inhalte sich selber als Inhalt zu erleben und aus diesem Erlebnis einen neuen Stil zu bilden, es ist der Versuch, gegen den allgemeinen Nihilismus der Werte eine neue Transzendenz zu setzen: die Transzendenz der schöpferischen Lust.*”⁹⁰ Philosophers may dispute the accuracy of such an interpretation of Nietzsche, but Benn was not alone in taking from him the idea that nihilism meant the end of the focus on content (*Inhalt*) and the ascendancy of expression, style or form to fill the void left behind.⁹¹ Of course, Nietzsche was interested in a specific type of creativity, what he introduces as the Dionysian in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*.

Die Geburt der Tragödie presents the Greek god Dionysos as one side of the productive agon between order and chaos that leads to the creation of Greek tragic drama. The Dionysian artistic drive, characterized as “*Rausch*” and “*Trunkenheit*,” exemplifies the loss of self, the “*mystischen Selbstentäußerung*” to be found in dance, in the “*fiebrigen Regungen*” of folk festivals and in the “*Gewalt des Tones*” of the Greek choral hymn known as the dithyramb.⁹² The other side of this opposition is the artistic drive associated with the god Apollo, exemplified by

view, Nietzsche’s own life and representation of his struggle to reevaluate values as a mental and spiritual one having nothing to do with a martial or physically violent life speak for themselves.

⁹⁰ Gottfried Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1951), 12.

⁹¹ Steven Aschheim draws a contrast between Nietzsche’s “modernist appropriators,” who were “aware of the nihilist predicament they had inherited” and “concentrated on creative, positive reconstruction, enlisting Nietzsche as champion of sweeping visions of cultural and political redemption” and his post-modernist reception, which has focused on the philosopher’s “deconstructive” tendencies while leaving out the reconstructive aspect of his project. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 52-53.

⁹² *GdT*, 28, 31, 32, 33.

the static beauty of the plastic arts, certain measured, musical tones, and epic poetry. Where the Dionysian drive enacts the loss of self into a collective, the Apollonian drive supports “die Einhaltung der Grenzen des Individuums.”⁹³ Nietzsche writes that “Apollo, als ethische Gottheit, fordert von den Seinigen das Maas und, um es einhalten zu können, Selbsterkenntnis,” he represents what is measured and rule-bound: “Nicht zu viel” is an important Apollonian motto.⁹⁴

While *Die Geburt der Tragödie* advocates for a union of both drives as the ideal state of art—such as in Greek tragedy or potentially, so thought Nietzsche at the time, in the music of Richard Wagner—the Dionysian nevertheless emerges in a superior position. Nietzsche argues that the Apollonian art of “Schein” must put up extraordinary defenses against this excessive, intoxicated adversary. Faced with the orgiastic spectacle of Bacchic festivals, “das Individuum, mit allen seinen Grenzen und Maassen, ging hier in der Selbstvergessenheit der dionysischen Zustände unter und vergass die apollinischen Satzungen. Das Uebermaass enthüllte sich als Wahrheit, der Widerspruch, die aus Schmerzen geborene Wonne sprach von sich aus dem Herzen der Natur heraus.”⁹⁵ So, while the two drives ultimately push one another “gegenseitig zu immer neuen kräftigeren Geburten,” Nietzsche’s sympathies lie with the Dionysian drive.⁹⁶ Apollo’s “ganzes Dasein mit aller Schönheit und Mässigung ruhte auf einem verhüllten Untergrunde des Leidens und der Erkenntnis, der ihm wieder durch jenes Dionysische aufgedeckt wurde.”⁹⁷

The Dionysos concept becomes increasingly important in Nietzsche’s later philosophy and the way he defines it changes in order to account for its outsize role in his thinking. By the

⁹³ *GdT*, 40

⁹⁴ *GdT*, 40.

⁹⁵ *GdT*, 41.

⁹⁶ *GdT*, 25.

⁹⁷ *GdT*, 40-41.

time he adds a preface, “Versuch einer Selbstkritik,” to the 1886 republication of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, the Dionysos concept has largely absorbed the Apollonian into itself. For the later Nietzsche, the Apollonian artistic drive disappears from view, so that a Dionysian aesthetics, identified with “den Willen zum Tragischen,” not only becomes synonymous with aesthetic capacity itself, it acts as the stabilizing term within the revaluation of values.⁹⁸ This means the Dionysos concept increasingly takes on an ethical function. “Dionysian” becomes shorthand for “eine Philosophie, welche es wagt, die Moral selbst in die Welt der Erscheinung zu setzen, herabzusetzen und nicht nur unter die ‘Erscheinungen’ [...] sondern unter die ‘Täuschungen.’”⁹⁹

The Dionysian is simultaneously creative and destructive, measured and excessive:

Der Reichste an Lebensfülle, der dionysische Gott und Mensch, kann sich nicht nur den Anblick des Fürchterlichen und Fragwürdigen gönnen, sondern selbst die fürchterliche That und jeden Luxus von Zerstörung, Zersetzung, Verneinung; bei ihm erscheint das Böse, Unsinnige und Hässliche gleichsam erlaubt, in Folge eines Ueberschusses von zeugenden, befruchtenden Kräften, welcher aus der Wüste noch ein üppiges Fruchthland zu schaffen im Stande ist.¹⁰⁰

However, even though passages like the above do not mention Apollo, its characteristics as the form-giving, the ordering, the measured way of engaging with reality remain important both for Nietzsche’s aesthetics and for the program of revaluation he pursues. When, in his later work, he calls Dionysos “ein Richter” and “ein Maßstab [...] an dem Alles, was seitdem wuchs, als zu kurz, zu arm, zu eng befunden wird,” he extends on the version of the Dionysian offered in the tragedy text in important ways.¹⁰¹ While *Die Geburt der Tragödie* suggests that “die dionysische

⁹⁸ *GdT*, 16. Cf. Brian Leiter: “As everyone recognizes, while Nietzsche retains the label “Dionysian” for his own view [...] the contrast with the “Apollonian” drops out : whatever art now [i.e. in his later philosophy E.M] does to make the terrible truths bearable, it does under the heading of a “Dionysian” perspective on life.” Nietzsche, according to Leiter, is interested in the “restoration of affective attachment to life” as a response to the prospect of “suicidal nihilism” and great art has a role to play in this. Leiter, “The Truth is Terrible,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49, vol. 2 (Autumn 2018), 161.

⁹⁹ *GdT*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁰ *FW*, 620.

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, August-September 1885, KSA 11, 681.

Weisheit” serves to counter “die zufriedne Daseinslust der wissenschaftlichen Sokratik” by demonstrating where its limits are, it is nevertheless a step further to claim the Dionysian can function as the measure by which something may be judged, although the passage is noticeably ambivalent.¹⁰²

This paradoxical, dual character of the Dionysian is frequently overlooked in the secondary literature. Readings often focus on the excessive character of Dionysos, its characteristic “Rausch” understood as drunken self-abandon and not on the form-giving capacity that the concept entails.¹⁰³ But the later Nietzsche identifies both an Apollonian and a Dionysian form of *Rausch*: “Der apollinische Rausch hält vor Allem das Auge erregt, so dass es die Kraft der Vision bekommt.”¹⁰⁴ Apollo remains the representative of *Maler, Plastiker, and Epiker*, but Dionysos is the force of representation and transfiguration, of aesthetics, generally. “Im dionysischen Zustande ist dagegen das gesamte Affekt-System erregt und gesteigert: so dass es alle seine Mittel des Ausdrucks mit einem Male entladet und die Kraft des Darstellens, Nachbildens, Transfigurirens, Verwandeln, alle Art Mimik und Schauspielerei zugleich heraustreibt.”¹⁰⁵ This passage is not primarily about art. It concerns, rather, a particular way of approaching life. Karl Heinz Bohrer argues that the Dionysian and Apollonian become more and more entangled in Nietzsche’s later works, which is part of a general shift in focus away from art and towards something like aesthetic engagement with life, an aesthetic way of philosophizing

¹⁰² *GdT*, 128.

¹⁰³ Steven Aschheim’s characterization is typical of this reading. Aschheim refers to “wild Dionysian rhetoric,” “Dionysian anti-cerebralism,” “the Dionysian Nietzsche of wild self-abandon” and “the incompatible Dionysian longing for self-abandon and the constant Übermenschlich striving to self-overcome.” Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 56, 67, 80, 82.

¹⁰⁴ *GD*, 117.

¹⁰⁵ *GD*, 117.

even.¹⁰⁶ In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), Nietzsche does in fact call Dionysos a philosopher.¹⁰⁷ My interpretation is partly based on Bohrer's reading.

In addition to arguing that the Dionysian becomes the dominant term in Nietzsche's aesthetics and his ethics, Bohrer highlights the way that this concept recreates the Apollo-Dionysos opposition within itself.¹⁰⁸ This is especially important for how Nietzsche understands the relation between art and subjectivity. The Dionysian sustains both the ecstatic loss of the self as individual, the "Zerreissung des principii individuationis," that Nietzsche identifies with the experience of Greek tragedy, and the drive to self-reflection, the "principium individuationis," associated with the typically Apollonian mode of art.¹⁰⁹ The Dionysian then represents both the beauty of perceiving forms and the sublimity that results from the loss of the self in an aesthetic event. This results in a new understanding of *Schönheit* as the outcome of a process of transfiguration that begins with *Schmerz* and proceeds via *Melancholie* and *Wahnsinn* until these are sublated. Bohrer argues that in the later Nietzsche's aesthetics, the opposition of subject and object is transcended, so that beauty is neither the product of subjective perception nor of the artist's creativity, but exists as though for itself. "Es wird [...] klar, daß weder der subjektive Zustand noch der objektive Zustand des Schönen von einem Ich-Begriff kontrolliert werden."¹¹⁰ Bohrer isolates the term "Großer Stil," used by Nietzsche on several occasions, to describe this mode of the Dionysian, which he interprets as "eine[] neue[] Kunstsprache, die dem

¹⁰⁶ Eike Brock makes a similar observation: "Auch das Ur-Eine, Dionysos, muss etwas Apollinisches in sich tragen, denn sonst hätte es die gestalthafte Welt gar nicht erst aus sich hervorbringen können." Brock, *Nietzsche und der Nihilismus* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 91.

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, KSA 5, 238.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Großer Stil: Form und Formlosigkeit in der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2007), 218.

¹⁰⁹ *GdT*, 28.

¹¹⁰ Bohrer, *Großer Stil*, 221.

Naturalismus der aufkommenden Epoche opponierte, aber den ästhetischen Absolutismus der Avantgarden vorbereitete.”¹¹¹ I will return to this comment shortly.

Bohrer’s analysis, which I can only provide an outline of here, is significant because it makes the case that one of Nietzsche’s greatest contributions to modernism is to shift aesthetics out of the realm of individuals who make and perceive art (in Bohrer’s language “als produktions-und rezeptions-ästhetischer Vorgang”) and onto the event of art itself.¹¹² The subject, the self are no longer separate to the work, but components of the aesthetic realm, which the identification of *Dasein* as an aesthetic phenomenon paves the way for. But as the domain of the aesthetic is expanded in this way, it ceases to be about art, and comes to take on a range of other value-generating functions.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to appreciate why Nietzsche would salvage something of the idea that “das Dasein der Welt” may be justified “als ästhetisches Phänomen” and that “der rein artistische,” “antichristliche” “Weltauslegung und Welt-Rechtfertigung” is the only one that can reflect “der Instinkt des Lebens.”¹¹³ The proper name for such an instinct, Nietzsche claims, is *Dionysian*. This is one reason that, in *Götzen-Dämmerung*, he writes that the book on tragedy “war meine erste Umwerthung aller Werthe: damit stelle ich mich wieder auf den Boden zurück, aus dem mein Wollen, mein Können wächst - ich, der letzte Jünger des Philosophen Dionysos.”¹¹⁴ The Dionysian aesthetic valuation of life is therefore how one overcomes the nihilistic tendency to deny the immanent, material world.

Nietzsche wants life as a lived, embodied phenomenon to be at the center of revaluation. This chapter has not delved into his many statements about the importance of physical health and

¹¹¹ Bohrer, 232, 234.

¹¹² Bohrer, 225.

¹¹³ *GdT*, 17, 18, 19.

¹¹⁴ *GdT*, 160.

strength, which would not be out of place here. But I have sought to foreground his view that value needs to be located in the world as it is experienced, not in an ideal world beyond: “Die Welt scheiden in eine ‘wahre’ und eine ‘scheinbare’ [...] ist nur eine Suggestion der *décadence*,— ein Symptom niedergehenden Lebens ... Dass der Künstler den Schein höher schätzt als die Realität, ist kein Einwand gegen diesen Satz. Denn “der Schein” bedeutet hier die Realität noch einmal, nur in einer Auswahl, Verstärkung, Correctur ... Der tragische Künstler ist kein Pessimist,— er sagt gerade Ja zu allem Fragwürdigen und Furchtbaren selbst, er ist dionysisch.”¹¹⁵

The world as it is experienced is complicated, it is filled with suffering and all kinds of things that are “furchtbar” or “fragwürdig.” Greek tragic drama provides a model for how to affirm life’s terrible qualities by transforming them through the process of “Auswahl, Verstärkung, Correctur;” hence, Nietzsche sees that the way to counter nihilism is to adopt an approach to legislating value that understands life as an aesthetic phenomenon. This does not mean filling life with beauty, but rather affirming what is ugly and terrible in it as well. Rather than creating a new morality or new moral values, giving form to reality asserts a new measure of what could be valuable beyond the dichotomies of traditional morality. In one of his final works, Nietzsche summarizes his work in the following way: “Hat man mich verstanden? — Dionysos gegen den Gekreuzigten.”¹¹⁶

1.3 The role of the individual in overcoming nihilism

In case all this makes it seem as though Nietzsche’s is a philosophy only for strong, Dionysian individuals, I would emphasize again that the importance of the individual is never guaranteed. The Dionysian as a concept brings with it deindividuation and the disappearance of the self, as

¹¹⁵ *GD*, 79.

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, KSA 6, 374.

Bohrer's analysis makes clear. For Nietzsche, "das Einzelne [ist] verwerflich."¹¹⁷ The aesthetically grounded attitude to life extends to the self, as in this often-quoted passage from *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* that begins: "Eins ist Noth. – Seinem Charakter "Stil geben" – eine grosse und seltene Kunst."¹¹⁸ Here, Nietzsche conceives of style as a consistent set of formal features, an "artistic plan" applied to one's character that provides a framework to the self. The self is like a "Werk" and "wenn das Werk vollendet ist, offenbart sich, wie es der Zwang des selben Geschmacks war, der im Grossen und Kleinen herrschte und bildete."¹¹⁹ He continues: "Es werden die starken, herrschsüchtigen Naturen sein, welche in einem solchen Zwange, in einer solchen Gebundenheit und Vollendung unter dem eigenen Gesetz ihre feinste Freude geniessen: die Leidenschaft ihres gewaltigen Wollens erleichtert sich beim Anblick aller stilisirten Natur, aller besiegten und dienenden Natur."¹²⁰ Style results from a particular employment of the strong, violent will that is joyous about its own submission to a rule-bound order. Elsewhere, Nietzsche takes this point further, asserting that the individual is always the object of external forces rather than the actor: "Du wirst gethan! in jedem Augenblicke! Die Menschheit hat zu allen Zeiten das Activum und das Passivum verwechselt, es ist ihr ewiger grammatikalischer Schnitzer."¹²¹ Or in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*: "es gibt kein 'Sein' hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; der 'Täter' ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet, – das Thun ist Alles."¹²² In *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Nietzsche simply concludes that "der Einzelne, das 'Individuum,' wie Volk und Philosoph das bisher verstand, ist ja ein Irrthum: er ist nichts für sich, kein Atom, kein "Ring der Kette", nichts bloss Vererbtes von Ehedem, – er ist die ganze

¹¹⁷ *GD*, 152.

¹¹⁸ *FW*, 530.

¹¹⁹ *FW*, 530.

¹²⁰ *FW*, 530-531.

¹²¹ Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, KSA 3, 115.

¹²² *GM*, 279.

Eine Linie Mensch bis zu ihm hin selber noch ... Stellt er die absteigende Entwicklung, den Verfall, die chronische Entartung, Erkrankung dar [...] so kommt ihm wenig Werth zu.”¹²³ But here a problem arises: The human subject must overcome the illusion of individuality, but how does this negative view of individual agency fit with the task of revaluation? If Nietzsche is so suspicious of the rational, self-legislating individual, who, we should ask, is doing the re-evaluating?

The best answer is that Nietzsche produces two different visions of the future of humankind that are in conflict with one another and this conflict will resurface in the reception of his philosophy. On the one hand, much of Nietzsche’s writing from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* to *Ecce Homo* depicts the individual asserting oneself against the crowd, or overcoming a previous type of subjectivity, as in the idea of the *Übermensch*. At the same time, Nietzsche frequently questions the value and even possibility of individual agency. So, while Nietzsche’s work provides for a degree of hope and optimism— or what he terms “[den] Pessimismus der Zukunft [...] den Dionysischen Pessimismus”—that humanity without God will be capable of legislating a new mode of valuation anchored in an aesthetic capacity, it also announces the end of the human subject as it had been conceived up to the philosophy of his day.¹²⁴ The Dionysian “impulse of self-submersion” is one expression of this theme.¹²⁵ The notion that individuals are not the doers of their actions, but are the ones acted upon is another. Properly understood, the *Übermensch* straddles both sides of this contradiction: “Der Mensch ist Etwas, was überwunden werden soll,” Zarathustra tells the townspeople, “was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?”¹²⁶ The people have,

¹²³ *GD*, 132.

¹²⁴ *FW*, 622.

¹²⁵ The term “impulse of self-submersion” is borrowed here from Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 52. I assume Aschheim comes to use this phrase by adapting terms like “eintauchen” and “verschmelzen,” which appear frequently in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*.

¹²⁶ *Z*, 14.

of course, done nothing to overcome themselves. And yet, the message of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, as of so much of Nietzsche's writings, is that humankind does have the capacity for such a task.

Before leaving Nietzsche, I want to summarize the main takeaway points that concern this study. I began by discussing the increased interest in form as a corollary to the elevation of art within an ethics (Schiller) or to a sphere separate and free of ethical concerns (Baudelaire). Nietzsche takes this development further. In his account of the Dionysian valuation of life, aesthetics displaces other ways of establishing an ethics, such as religion or scientific reason. Nietzsche is not against science in the way that he is against religion but, in his view, all systems that rely on a will to truth fail to provide life with meaning and value. In contrast, the Dionysian attitude to life can be understood as a way of giving form to reality, collectively making it something that is meaningful and hence worthy of affirmation. This Dionysian aesthetics holds out the promise of overcoming nihilism, but it brings with it a certain ambivalence about individual agency. Benn's interpretation is helpful when he argues that Nietzsche's aesthetics elevates the creative act above any idea of content, it is art's becoming its own *Inhalt*, "sich selber als Inhalt zu erleben und aus diesem Erlebnis einen neuen Stil zu bilden."¹²⁷ The style—I would say the form—is then more crucial than the content, but it also takes precedence over individual genius or creative spirit, which are relegated to the background. The aim of the Dionysian aesthetic impulse is not to express anything in particular, but to make expressivity itself the goal of art and of life.

In a certain sense, no one is quite in control in Nietzsche's conception of the aesthetic, which makes it a threat to the idea of individual creativity and to the importance of the subject in

¹²⁷ Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik*, 12.

general. This makes it a thoroughly amoral attitude. For Thomas Mann, who read and wrote about Nietzsche extensively, but always more as an artist than a philosopher, this was an unacceptable solution. Mann characterizes Nietzsche as “ein Schrittmacher, Mitschöpfer und Ideensouffleur des europäischen -, des Weltfascismus.”¹²⁸ “Durch Nietzsches Ästhetizismus, der eine rasende Verleugnung des Geistes ist zugunsten des schönen, starken und ruchlosen Lebens, die Selbstverleugnung eines Menschen also, der tief am Leben leidet, kommt etwas Uneigentliches, Unverantwortliches, Unverlässiges und Leidenschaftlich-Gespieltes.”¹²⁹ Mann’s essay presents a limited interpretation of Nietzsche and it would be relatively easy to disagree with his assertion that Nietzsche does not care about *Geist*. But this passage nevertheless captures an aspect that was present in his writing and which the authors central to this project picked up on: There is something dangerous, because unpredictable and uncontrollable, in the idea of affirming life as an aesthetic phenomenon, because it elevates aesthetics beyond the reach of other forms of judgment. Mann provides imaginative substance to this theory in *Doktor Faustus*, where he works Nietzsche’s biography into Adrian Leverkühn’s and cites him in the narrative.¹³⁰ This novel is a kind of underground, intellectual biography that presents the philosopher as one possessed, more interested in an aesthetic idea than the individuals around him. Nietzsche was not, however, trying to make the individual disappear, nor to replace individual agency entirely with external, impersonal forces, as Jünger will attempt to do.¹³¹ As I

¹²⁸ Mann, “Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung,” *GKFA* 19.1, 215.

¹²⁹ Mann, “Nietzsches Philosophie,” 221.

¹³⁰ Mann discusses the relationship of Nietzsche to the novel at several points. See for example *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus: Roman eines Romans*, *GKFA* 19.1, 432.

¹³¹ Elizabeth Kuhn has identified a similar tension, although she places Nietzsche in a tradition of “anti-humanism”: “For humanity to thrive, the subject and all it entails must be dispensed with. Nietzsche is ultimately quite clear about what he wants to retain from humanity — the capacity for self-overcoming, becoming and transformation— and what must be expunged—consciousness, interiority and resentment.” Elizabeth Kuhn, “Toward an Anti-Humanism of Life: The Modernism of Nietzsche, Hulme and Yeats,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2011), 5, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/doi:10.2979/jmodelite.34.4.1>.

have tried to make clear in this section, Nietzsche remains ambivalent throughout, but after WWI, the situation begins to look somewhat different.

1.4 The war as the end of the human subject, the beginning of form. The structure of this project.

WWI provides important historical context for the present study. When war was declared, many in Germany had expected this to fill the void of values and meaning.¹³² The war did not meet this expectation for most. The aftermath was particularly brutal for Germany, because it was the losing party, which made it especially difficult to claim that the German war effort had been *for* anything. Ernst Jünger made it his mission to attempt to identify what the value of the war had been but, as I will explore in Chapter 2, the attempt to prove “daß das Geschehen inmitten eines durch Präzisionsinstrumente gespeisten Höllenfeuers über alle Fragestellungen hinaus und unabhängig von ihnen sinnvoll war” was exceptionally challenging.¹³³ In addition, the aftermath also meant revolution and a new form of government. So, while WWI was obviously catastrophic for the whole of Europe, Germany and Austria-Hungary were far more likely to experience it as a nihilistic event that seemed only to confirm the meaninglessness of sacrifice both at the collective and individual levels. The philosopher Karl Löwith, who had fought and been wounded, described “die überspannte Anstrengung einer nihilistischen und um alle Zeichen der Heimkehr betrogenen Generation.”¹³⁴ It was, Löwith observed, “[ein] Zustand einer allgemeinen Auflösung aller inneren und äußeren Bestände, an deren Bestehen nur unsere Väter

¹³² One representative work in this vein would be Max Scheler’s work of 1915 in which he praises the war as the most sublime event in the moral world since the French revolution and calls it a shared destiny. Scheler, *Der Genius des Krieges und der deutsche Krieg*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Verlag der Weissen Bücher, 1917), “Vorrede,” [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b15890](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b15890)

¹³³ Ernst Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 64. This collected edition cited as *SW* followed by volume number throughout.

¹³⁴ Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 16.

noch glaubten.”¹³⁵ Hesse justified his *Mißtrauen* for the newly created Weimar Republic because it had failed to overcome the ideological emptiness from which it had emerged: “Dieser haltlose und geistlose Staat ist entstanden aus dem Vacuum, aus der Erschöpfung nach dem Kriege [...] Deutschland hat es versäumt, seine eigene Revolution zu machen und seine eigene Form zu finden.”¹³⁶ But beyond a general feeling of meaninglessness and hopelessness, thinkers and writers during and after the war saw it as an event that also undermined the value of the individual and the possibility of individual agency. And this would have consequences for how writers imagined the new society that had begun to emerge during the Weimar period.

The impersonal and seemingly uncontrollable forces that determined events on the battlefield supported the view that the human subject was not an agent of history, but history’s tool. Having served for the entirety of the war, Ernst Jünger was especially sensitive to the way that technology was altering human possibilities: “Freier Wille, Bildung, Begeisterung und der Rausch der Todesverachtung reichen nicht zu, die Schwerkraft der wenigen hundert Meter zu überwinden, auf denen der Zauber des mechanischen Todes regiert.”¹³⁷ The characteristics that defined a good soldier prior to WWI were nullified by the inhuman intensity of military machinery, which annihilated the brave and willing just as quickly as it killed the cowardly. This led Jünger to conclude that a soldier’s main virtue is “daß er ersetzbar ist.”¹³⁸ Jünger believed the death of God was a given, but the end of the individual resonated deeply with him. The war seemed to prove that the individual human subject had lost importance and could no longer inhabit the center of any coherent system of values or beliefs: “Wir erlebten den Untergang des

¹³⁵ Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland*, 16.

¹³⁶ Hesse to Thomas Mann, December 1931, in *Hermann Hesse-Thomas Mann: Briefwechsel*, ed. Anni Carlsson (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 17.

¹³⁷ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, SW 8, 113.

¹³⁸ Jünger, 157.

Individuums und seiner ererbten Werte nicht nur auf den Schlachtfeldern, nicht nur in der Politik, sondern auch in der Kunst.”¹³⁹ Jünger’s solution to nihilism is to identify a principle for organizing and giving form to the new type of society emerging in the post-war period. He calls this “ein gemeinsamer Nenner” or “das Kennzeichen jeder Haltung, das noch Zukunft besitzt.”¹⁴⁰ The *Gestalt* of the Worker concept Jünger develops is an attempt to theorize and explicate a ruling principle that is rooted in a formalist aesthetics. But while he makes claims for its universality, it emerges out of the logic of mobilization and never loses the characteristics of either Prussian military culture or of the soldier as a masculine model for being and acting. Chapter 2 will consider how Jünger’s experiences in WWI help forge a new conception of post-nihilist subjectivity that is defined by a surrender to form. The war influences Mann and Hesse as well.

In Chapter 3, I will show how the *strenger Satz* expresses similar themes to Jünger’s work regarding the disappearance of the human subject, only in Mann’s novel the focal point is art, especially music. In *Doktor Faustus*, Mann’s narrator associates the period after the war with a palpable sense of nihilism: “Es wurde sehr stark empfunden und objektiv festgestellt: der ungeheure Wertverlust, den durch das Kriegsgeschehen das Individuum als solches erlitten hatte, die Achtlosigkeit, mit der heutzutage das Leben über den Einzelnen hinwegschritt, und die sich denn auch als allgemeine Gleichgültigkeit gegen sein Leiden und Untergehen im Gemüte der Menschen niederschlug.”¹⁴¹ The novel’s main character, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, seeks to overcome this general *Wertverlust*, which affects art as well as society, by establishing a new principle of composition, called *der strenge Satz*. This highly formal method promises a

¹³⁹ Jünger, 221.

¹⁴⁰ Jünger, 65, 66.

¹⁴¹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde*, GKFA 10.1, 529-530.

breakthrough, we could call it an *übermenschlich* breakthrough, to a new creative method that has the power to restore feeling and vitality to music and allow it to once again express something essential to human being. As Adrian's character claims, "wem also der Durchbruch gelänge aus geistiger Kälte in eine Wagniswelt neuen Gefühls, ihn sollte man wohl den Erlöser der Kunst nennen."¹⁴² Mann imagines a music dominated by formalism, where a rule-bound style of composition fills a void in creative inspiration, as if the era of creative individuality has come to an end and the artist is forced to invent a completely new way of composing that will paradoxically puts limits on creative freedom. This artistic *Durchbruch* is subtly paralleled with Germany's failed military campaign. The novel's narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, disagrees with Adrian's ambitions for art, but he appropriates the term *Durchbruch* to argue for the necessity of Germany's march into Belgium, which, unlike Adrian, he partakes in. The war is "das Mittel eines Volkes, zu einer höheren Form seines Gemeinschaftslebens durchzubrechen," he claims.¹⁴³ I will examine this relationship between aesthetic form and the socio-political realm that Mann's novel establishes in detail.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*. This novel tells the story of a future, utopian society whose members devote themselves to pursuing archaic intellectual interests. Women are excluded from this elite world, but so is individuality as a concept. The purpose of the system of social organization created to support the game is "das Auslöschen des Individuellen, das möglichst vollkommene Einordnen der Einzelperson in die Hierarchie."¹⁴⁴ The rules and values of the order that runs this futuristic body-politic emerge in response to the conflicts of the twentieth century, "eine Anzahl von schauerlichen Kriegen und Bürgerkriegen,"

¹⁴² Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 468.

¹⁴³ Mann, 438.

¹⁴⁴ Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Volker Michels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 8. This collected edition cited hereafter as *Werke*.

that led to “die Unsicherheit und Unechtheit des geistigen Lebens.”¹⁴⁵ Hesse imagines that the key to overcoming “die öde Mechanisierung des Lebens, das tiefe Sinken der Moral, die Glaubenslosigkeit der Völker, die Unechtheit der Kunst,” is the establishment of “einer neuen Sprache, nämlich einer Zeichen- und Formelsprache, an welcher die Mathematik und die Musik gleichen Anteil hatten [...] einen gemeinsamen Nenner.”¹⁴⁶ The Glass Bead Game is presented as a way of unifying cultures, histories and ideas, like a codified *Bildungsideal*. During and directly after WWI, Hesse often expressed the opinion that war was a part of human nature: “Gewiß haben jene recht, welche den Krieg den Ur- und natürlichen Zustand nennen.”¹⁴⁷ But he also believed that the goal of humanity was to attain a new level of civility and *Erkenntnis* that would prevent wars from happening. This could be achieved, he argued, through the recognition of a singular truth at the heart of all human knowledge. This truth “wird von Tausenden und tausendfach anerkannt und in tausend verschiedenen Arten ausgedrückt, ist aber stets nur eine Wahrheit.”¹⁴⁸ For this reason, Hesse advised against the politicization of *Geist*, but rather, “daß er [der Geist E.M.] noch viel mehr als bisher sich im Reich des Irrealen befestigte und auf politische Verwirklichung verzichte – nicht aus Resignation, sondern weil er höhere Befriedigungen kennt.”¹⁴⁹ *Geist* must be free to direct a way out of the state of conflict, and yet, when Hesse seeks to realize *Geist* as the highest value in his novel, it brings with it a certain social structure, a shaping and development of the individual through rigorous adherence to discipline and order that exist almost independently of living people. This tension and the reasons for it will need to be explored at length.

¹⁴⁵ Hesse, 17, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Hesse, 19, 32.

¹⁴⁷ Hesse, “Krieg und Frieden,” originally published as “Gedanken” in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 06.10.1918, reproduced in *Werke* 15, 201.

¹⁴⁸ Hesse, “Krieg und Frieden,” 204.

¹⁴⁹ Hesse, “Mein Standpunkt,” in *Aus ‘Die Friedens-Warte’: Blätter für internationale Verständigung und zwischenstaatliche Organisation*, Zürich, no. 7/9, 1918 in *Werke* 15, 200.

All three writers see the need for a response to the challenge of nihilism and, in each case, this finds expression as an aesthetically grounded ordering, or form-giving. In addition to clarifying how this works in the case of each author, the present study hopes to give a plausible account of why form is elevated to such a superior position. One important explanation is to be found in Nietzsche's philosophy and the way he links the affirmation of existence with aesthetics, thereby asserting the validity of aesthetics as a measure of value and truth generally. Nietzsche lays the groundwork for a form-driven project to overcome nihilism by suggesting that life is an aesthetic phenomenon and that the way to establish new values is via a Dionysian drive to affirm and give form to life. It is in the forming that life becomes its own goal, its own highest value together with all that is terrible and painful in it.

However, the authors I consider are not simply responding to Nietzsche, they are reacting to a post-Nietzschean moment in which human individuals seem to no longer be at the center of either ethical or aesthetic values. Whereas, for Nietzsche, the human subject, the Dionysian *Mensch*, remains central to the project of revaluation, the period immediately before and for a significant time after WWI sees the subject displaced. So there emerges the idea of form existing independently of immediate human interests. In art, this finds expression in the avant-garde movements that come to prominence in the early twentieth century. As we saw in the previous section, Bohrer identifies Nietzsche as a precursor to the avant-garde: "Er fand eigenständig den Begriff einer neuen Kunstsprache, die dem Naturalismus der aufkommenden Epoche opponierte, aber den ästhetischen Absolutismus der Avantgarden vorbereitete, nicht diskursiv, nicht propagandistisch, sondern maskiert wie der neue Dionysos, der Ariadne in 'smaragdener Schönheit,' das heißt in funkelnder, in rätselhafter Schönheit erschien."¹⁵⁰ This evocative

¹⁵⁰ Bohrer may be referring to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, where he describes Zarathustra's happiness as "smaragdenes Glück," and, commenting on a dithyramb, writes that "die Antwort auf einen solchen Dithyrambus der Sonnen-

passage suggests that a new Dionysian understanding of the absolute slips in under the cover of Nietzsche's new definition of beauty as the product not of the harmony between form and content but as form itself: "Schön meint hier nicht harmonisch-reizvoll im idealistischen oder hedonistischen Sinne. Schön meint formstark."¹⁵¹ Bohrer leaves the meaning of "ästhetischen Absolutismus" somewhat open here, but his treatment of Nietzsche points the way to understanding what the avant-garde does. The avant-garde does not limit itself to the arts. Following Nietzsche's example, it seeks to push aesthetic form out of the realm of art and into the socio-political sphere.¹⁵²

1.5 The nihilistic origins of the avant-garde

The avant-garde is another important cornerstone of the present study, so I want to give a brief summary of what I mean when using this term. Originally, "avant-garde" was applied to those leading a military advance; its transfer to the arts brought with it connotations of battle and of political action.¹⁵³ This is especially true of what is often described as the "historical" avant-garde of the early twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ In this context, avant-garde refers to the artworks and artistic practices that sought a radical break with pre-existing conventions in the arts, almost always with the concomitant aim of enacting political and social change. To break with prevailing social values and norms it was seen as essential to break with formal norms. Badiou

Vereinsamung im Lichte wäre Ariadne ... Wer weiss ausser mir, was Ariadne ist!" KSA 6, 345; 348. Bohrer, *Großer Stil*, 234; in some versions of the myth of Ariadne, Dionysos falls love with her after seeing her at Naxos and carries her away to be his wife. The motif of Dionysos appearing to Ariadne can be found in classical and early modern art. See also Apollodorus, *The Library* vol. 2, trans. James G. Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 137, https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.4159/DLCL.apollodorus_mythographer-library.1921

¹⁵¹ Bohrer, *Großer Stil*, 221. Bohrer also calls it "der Triumph der Form über den die Form gefährdenden Inhalt," 233.

¹⁵² Steven Aschheim likewise points to the influence of Nietzsche on the avant-garde, although his definition of the latter is broader than what Bohrer suggests. See Aschheim, "The Not-So-Discrete Nietzscheanism of the Avant-garde" in *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990*, 51-84.

¹⁵³ Cf. Karlheinz Barck, "Avantgarde" in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, 545.

¹⁵⁴ The distinction between the "historical" avant-garde, meaning the radical art of the first quarter of the twentieth century, from others is especially important to Peter Bürger's argument.

summarizes these as “tonality in music, the figure in painting, humanism in sculpture, the immediate intelligibility of syntax in poetry.”¹⁵⁵ As an umbrella term, avant-garde has been applied to a broad range of artistic movements – expressionism, futurism, constructivism, surrealism, dada, the list could continue – but in general what the avant-garde is has more to do with its aims, both aesthetic and political, vis a vis modernity than with any specific style or technical approach.¹⁵⁶

I will treat the avant-garde as distinct from modernism, although the relationship between the two continues to be the subject of debate.¹⁵⁷ Roughly speaking, there is long-standing disagreement as to whether the avant-garde is an instance of modernism, or a reaction to it. Two still highly regarded studies on this topic—Matei Călinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987) and Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) – reach different conclusions.¹⁵⁸ Călinescu argues that “the concept of the avant-garde—both politically and culturally—was little more than a radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity.”¹⁵⁹ He goes on to write that “there is probably no single trait of the avant-garde in any of its historical metamorphoses that is not implied or even prefigured in the broader scope of modernity.”¹⁶⁰ That Călinescu uses “modernity” rather than “modernism” here has to do with the specifics of his terminology, but

¹⁵⁵ Badiou, *The Century*, 133.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Karlheinz Barck, “Avantgarde” in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, 533.

¹⁵⁷ There are also geographical factors to consider. Matei Călinescu, for example, writes that modernism and avant-garde are more likely to be used synonymously in North America, whereas in Spain theorists drew a firm line between the respective terms *vanguardia* and *modernismo*. Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 118.

¹⁵⁸ Bürger’s study in particular remains influential. Kiesel, for example, claims that Bürger’s thesis “[wurde] zwar vielfach kritisiert, aber nie umfassend widerlegt.” Helmut Kiesel, *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne: Sprache, Ästhetik, Dichtung im Zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (München: C. H. Beck, 2004), 241.

¹⁵⁹ Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 95.

¹⁶⁰ Călinescu, 96.

his message is that avant-garde art is consistent with the aims and formal development of art in modernity and is therefore not a radically different category from modernism.¹⁶¹

In contrast, Peter Bürger considers avant-garde art to be a major formal and ideological break with modern art. Bürger argues that the avant-garde attempts to radically alter the concept of art as it developed within modern, bourgeois society. For him, the formal innovation of readymades like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), Dadaist recipes for poetry like Tristan Tzara's "Pour faire un Poeme dadaiste" (1916) or the photomontage aim to transform what art is. They are a protest against art as an institution. Instead of an art that separates itself from the social, their aim is to reabsorb art into life praxis, *Lebenspraxis* in Bürger's terminology.¹⁶² Bürger considers dada as the most quintessential expression of the avant-garde, because it sought to challenge the dominant values of bourgeois society through altering the role that art played in that society.¹⁶³ "The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society," he writes, "what is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men [*Lebenspraxis der Menschen*]." ¹⁶⁴ In this way, the avant-garde artists of this period seek to organize new ways of living by implementing a new aesthetic regime. Bürger's definition continues to be influential despite decades of criticism against many of the work's key arguments and his analysis of the

¹⁶¹ Călinescu elsewhere equates modernism with "aesthetic modernity": *Five Faces of Modernity*, 9.

¹⁶² For Bürger, this aim is what separates the avant-gardes both from other modernisms and from the radical art movements that followed the avant-garde of the 1910s, 20s and early 30s, what Bürger terms the neo-avant-garde: "The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions." Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michel Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58. Bürger refers to Tristan Tzara, "Pour faire un Poeme dadaiste," in Tzara, *Lampisteries precedees des sept manifestes dada* (place of publication not given, 1963), 64.

¹⁶³ "Only an art the content of whose individual works is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society can be the center that can be the starting point for the organization of a new life praxis." Bürger, 49-50.

¹⁶⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

ideology of the avant-garde will be relevant for understanding how my authors treat the division between art and the socio-political.¹⁶⁵

Both Bürger and Călinescu provide valuable background for the present study by helping to clarify the relationship between the avant-garde and nihilism. Călinescu addresses this directly when he writes that “the emergence and development of the avant-garde seem to be closely linked to the crisis of Man in the modern, secularized world.”¹⁶⁶ Călinescu identifies almost the same features of the avant-garde as Badiou and argues that these express an “antihumanistic” assessment of the world: “Distorting and often eliminating man’s image from their work, disrupting his normal vision, dislocating his syntax, the cubists and the futurists were certainly among the first artists to have the consciousness that Man had become an obsolete concept and that the rhetoric of humanism had to be discarded.”¹⁶⁷ Călinescu ties this back directly to Nietzsche’s influence, which may reflect how some avant-gardists read him, but is nevertheless a limited picture of the complex view of human agency he actually offers, as I have argued.¹⁶⁸ Bürger does not mention nihilism in his study, but he too focuses on the anti-individualistic drive of avant-gardism. The avant-garde produces works that aim at “the radical negation of the category of individual creation.”¹⁶⁹ In Bürger’s example – Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*– the artist signs his name on a mass-produced urinal, a common and vulgar object, and places it on display, undermining “the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”¹⁷⁰ In Chapter 2, I will consider how

¹⁶⁵ Some of the main criticisms are summarized in Jost Hermand, “Das Konzept ‘Avantgarde,’” in *Faschismus und Avantgarde*, ed. Reinhold Grimm et. al. (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980), 5-6.

¹⁶⁶ Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 125.

¹⁶⁷ Călinescu, 125.

¹⁶⁸ “For Nietzsche, modernity [...] had at least one clear-cut advantage over traditional humanism: it recognized that humanism was no longer viable as a doctrine, and that once God was dead, Man too had to clear the stage of history.” Călinescu, 126.

¹⁶⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 51.

¹⁷⁰ Bürger, 52

Jünger's writing is in dialogue with the avant-garde's challenge to individualism in art and its attempt to develop a creative practice based on materials and processes, rather than personality. Jünger adopts a great deal from the avant-gardes without, however, acknowledging any debt to revolutionary artistic movements.

In order to avoid tailoring my argument to the avant-garde's various historical manifestations, I want to be clear that my interest is in what the avant-garde means for the history of form. Whether this is better represented by cubism and futurism, as Călinescu suggests, or dada, as Bürger argues, or constructivism, which will be relevant for Jünger, or twelve-tone music, which will appear in Mann's novel, is not the vital question. As I explored in the previous section, Nietzsche was conscious that nihilism affected not just religious or moral values, but also art and aesthetic values. The death of God as the breakdown of authority, of "eternal metaphysical truths," of "ideas and ideals," to quote Heidegger again, takes place within the sphere of art as well.¹⁷¹ And so, aesthetic values represented by formal devices that seemed immutable suddenly lose their hegemonic status.¹⁷² These values, we could even say these truths of good art, were ingrained just as certain moral and ethical values were ingrained in European society and their breakdown creates a similar sense of chaos and freedom in the realm of art. The realization that art is suddenly without formal constraints calls for a response, but the answers lead in different directions.

One of these directions is to celebrate the end of formal constraints and to welcome a plurality of styles, methodologies and modes that correspond to the desires of the individual artist. This approach would celebrate the freedom of art from constraints and from utility. But there is also a movement in the opposite direction, which seeks instead to invent new artistic

¹⁷¹ Heidegger, "Nietzsches Wort »Gott ist tot«,“ 216.

¹⁷² Badiou, *The Century*, 133.

forms, new absolutes that can be applied in and outside the sphere of art. This is what Bohrer means by “der Absolutismus der Avantgarde.” Practitioners of the avant-garde generally believed that they were not simply creating new forms of art, but new forms of life and their attendant moral, ethical, political and social values. As one manifesto from within the dada movement announced, “wir Künstler als Vertreter eines wesentlichen Teiles der Gesamtkultur wollen uns mitten in die Dinge hineinstellen, die Verantwortung für die kommende, ideelle Entwicklung im Staate mitübernehmen.”¹⁷³

Most studies of the avant-garde are not, however, able to gain insight into how these ideas were being processed outside the artistic circles where they evolved. Călinescu and Bürger develop their theories by looking at avant-garde art, however they define it, and not by considering how other artists and writers reacted to it. As already mentioned, the authors I examine are modernist without belonging to the avant-garde, with the possible exception of Jünger. But there are still overlaps, suggesting that they all grasp certain aspects of this movement as inherently significant while jettisoning others. My study can therefore help to address a gap within research into the avant-garde by considering authors who are concerned with nihilism but not on board with the avant-garde response to it. Examining the question through the lens of Jünger, Mann, and Hesse also sheds light on the trajectory that form as a stand-alone concept takes in the interwar period and how it functions as an antidote to nihilism. The avant-garde takes advantage of the breakdown of traditional values and authority in both the aesthetic and the socio-political realms to assert new formal principles that apply outside of art as well. But the question of what a form is does not animate these projects as it does Hesse, Mann

¹⁷³ Arp et. al., “Manifest radikaler Künstler,” in *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1909-1938)*, eds. Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fänders (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1995), 174.

and Jünger's otherwise different literary works. This similarity has been largely overlooked, especially in the literature dealing with Mann and Hesse.

The present study therefore seeks to contribute to both the literature on these authors and the overlooked interconnections between them as well as to our understanding of the role of form in modernism. All three writers develop novel theories of form that they experiment with in a literary setting but these have not been examined in any great depth. Jünger has drawn some interest in this regard, perhaps because *Der Arbeiter* is not a work of fiction and because he flags the importance of form for his project by making extensive use of the term *Gestalt*. Mann's *strenger Satz* is enclosed within a fiction and has the added complication of being based on Schoenberg's twelve-tone method of composition. Hesse's Glass Bead Game appears on the surface to have little to do with form or the avant-garde. And yet all three concepts display remarkable correspondences both in terms of their realization and their purpose. Focusing on these similarities activates an awareness of affinities between these authors' understanding of the problem of nihilism and the meaning of form that have been hidden, while suggesting a seriousness to Mann and Hesse's forms that belies their location within works of fiction.

My study also argues for the relevance of these authors to our understanding of modernist aesthetics. While Mann continues to enjoy scholarly interest, studies of Hesse's work have been in decline since a highpoint in the 1970s.¹⁷⁴ Jünger may be a staple of German modernism, if only because of his interest as a historical figure, but the complexity of his aesthetics, both in *Der Arbeiter* and other texts from that period, has been largely overlooked. Or, if it is examined, this often takes place in the context of his politics. This is unavoidable given Jünger's early

¹⁷⁴ For an analysis of Hesse's shifting popularity, see Jörg Drews "'...bewundert viel und viel gescholten...': Hermann Hesses Werk zwischen Erfolg und Mißachtung bei Publikum und Literaturkritik," in *Hermann Hesse Today/Hermann Hesse Heute*, eds. Ingo Cornils and Osman Durrani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 21-31. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11136002>

nationalism and the often militant tone that his work took in the 1920s and early 30s. But if we only read him through an ideological prism, we miss most of what is interesting and prescient in his work from this period. Helmut Lethen has contributed to the idea that *Der Arbeiter* belongs in the avant-garde canon, but his analysis, which only touches very briefly on Jünger, can be expanded on.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, the connection between nihilism and form provides a concrete path to considering the wider, perennial question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. What the authors in this study have in common with the avant-garde is a sense that art can and should influence the socio-political realm. However, as I will show in the individual chapters, even within the confines of literature, such a project does not unfold as expected. Looking at the limitations of using form as an answer to the challenge of nihilism can help shed light on current debates around the applicability of aesthetic form outside the realm of art.¹⁷⁶

In the following, final section of this introduction I will examine two theoretical views of whether and how formal concepts may be used to achieve ethical or political ends, or to see such ends as the result of formal, aesthetic decisions. A historical approach that affords new insight into literary attempts to do this can help clarify the stakes of such projects. Whether we believe that form can be the source of values outside the aesthetic sphere depends on how we understand the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, or aesthetics and politics. This brief examination

¹⁷⁵ Helmut Lethen, “Unter dem Pflaster ist die Kanalisation,” in *Realisms of the Avant-Garde*, eds. Moritz Baßler, Benedikt Hjärtarson et. al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 470.

¹⁷⁶ An influential voice in this debate has been Caroline Levine via her study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Levine writes: “Form has never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics. It does not originate in the aesthetic, and the arts cannot lay claim to either the longest or the most far-reaching history of the term.” “Form will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference [...] it is the work of form to make order. And this means that forms are the stuff of politics.” Levine, 2, 3. For a critical response to this project see Eva Axer, “Einfache Formen: Eine doppelte Perspektive auf Form André Jolles, Caroline Levine,” *Aus Dem Leben Der Form: Studien Zum Nachleben Von Goethes Morphologie in Der Theoriebildung Des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Eva Axer and Eva Geulen (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021), 235-239.

of the avant-garde has sought to provide a glimpse of one historical moment in a fluctuating relationship open to interpretation. The event of nihilism opened the door for a renegotiation of this relationship, which many artists, not only the historical avant-garde, attempted. In the present day, the nature of the connection between the aesthetic and the socio-political realms continues to promote disagreement.

1.6 Form and National Socialism—Germany’s experiment with political aesthetics

In addition to making an argument for the centrality of the nihilist challenge to modernist aesthetics, the present study is in dialogue with recent trends in literary studies that consider the issue of form as an independent concept and attempt to theorize what this means. Recent studies of modernist form have spearheaded a reassessment of the relationship between these form concepts and totalitarian politics, in particular National Socialism. One of the most prominent figures within this reassessment is Uwe Hebekus. Hebekus’s main argument focuses on the totalizing, proto-fascist uses of an independent conception of form in the early twentieth century, especially in the interwar period. Hebekus sees the great gesture of modernism and its great folly in the attempt to elevate aesthetics to a sovereign position above the socio-political sphere. “Form ist sicher eines der Lösungsworte der klassischen Moderne,” he writes, “und es wird von dort sehr schnell auf andere, auch außerästhetische Diskurse übertragen.”¹⁷⁷ In his interpretation, there exists “eine[] bestimmte[] jedoch nur zu gern bis heute marginalisierte[] Richtung der Moderne” which, both in theory and in practice, fosters the complete independence of aesthetics from other spheres of life, a phenomenon he calls “ästhetische Autonomie.”¹⁷⁸ This is similar to Peter Bürger’s critique of aestheticism as an instance of art’s isolation from the social, but

¹⁷⁷ Uwe Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung: Zum Politischen Ort der Literatur im Zeitraum der Klassischen Moderne* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 63.

¹⁷⁸ Hebekus, 10

Hebekus is less interested in the l'art pour l'art movement than in its modernist descendants.

Hebekus argues that many modernist authors absorbed the tenets of art for art's sake and used these to create a new aesthetic language that was then successfully used by ideologues and political actors.

The novelty of Hebekus's argument lies in how he theorizes the link between aesthetic autonomy and totalitarian politics. While the idea that fascist politics and modernist or avant-garde art are somehow connected is not new, Hebekus seeks to show that modernist art is unavoidably political not because it takes a political stance, but precisely because of its independence from politics.¹⁷⁹ He summarizes this paradox in the following way:

Es geht dabei ausdrücklich nicht darum, ein Nachfolgerverhältnis zwischen Klassischer Moderne und nationalsozialistischer *Kunst* oder *Literatur* zu behaupten. Vielmehr soll gezeigt werden, daß die zu verhandelnde Texte [...] nicht oder allenfalls sekundär wegen ihrer manifesten Aussagegehalte, sondern vor allem aufgrund ihrer *ästhetischen Struktur* eine Tendenz der Moderne eröffnen, wie sie auch für den politischen *Diskurs* und das politische Imaginäre des Nationalsozialismus konstitutiv gewesen ist.¹⁸⁰

The link is not a causal one, or even a matter of art inspiring politics. Rather, Hebekus argues that “das moderne autonome Ästhetische [ist] in einer bestimmten Ausrichtung zugleich das Politische.”¹⁸¹ In this interpretation, the spheres of politics and aesthetics nourish each other by producing a shared commitment to the independence and authority of form. “In der avantgardistischen und theoretisch ambitionierten Variante nationalsozialistischer Ideologie leben [...] politische Souveränität und ästhetische Souveränität in einer symbiotischen Beziehung.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Key studies here include the collection of essays edited by Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, *Faschismus und Avantgarde* (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980) and Roger Griffin's *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning Under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁸⁰ Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung*, 10-11

¹⁸¹ Hebekus, 11.

¹⁸² Hebekus, 72.

Hebekus points to the breakdown of the Aristotelian, hylomorphic understanding of form as a turning point here. As I discussed earlier, in classical Greek philosophy, form, *morphē*, was understood as an element belonging to a content, *hyle*. Hebekus argues that this model remained relevant until the early twentieth century when “die Epoche der klassischen Moderne” gives rise to a conception of form. Hebekus seeks to prove that this new understanding of form “erstens radikal mit dieser formtheoretischen Tradition bricht und [...] zweitens mit nur geringer Verzögerung auf politische Entwürfe abstrahlt, die als totalitaristisch anzusehen sind.”¹⁸³ This “nicht-ontologischen,” “nach-metaphysischen” concept of form as an independent entity quickly finds application in areas of life where aesthetics did not previously have purchase. Hebekus’s examples include Georg Simmel’s theory of institutions and Alfred Rosenberg’s ideas on the external form of the body politic.¹⁸⁴ He argues that this model of form favors totalitarian political systems and Rosenberg’s *Der Mythus des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (1930) features prominently, so I want to discuss it briefly here, if only because the terminology overlaps with language that Jünger also employs.

In this tendentious political text, full of antisemitic invectives and mystical pronouncements, Rosenberg, a member of the NSDAP who was sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials, writes the discourse of form into the discourse of race. In Hebekus’s interpretation, Rosenberg develops a “will to form” (*Wille zur Form*), with the aim of *forming* the complexity of social phenomena into a visible, racially delineated totality.¹⁸⁵ To quote Rosenberg: “Diese Rassendominante fordert einen Typus. Und eine echte organische Freiheit ist nur innerhalb eines solchen Typus möglich. Freiheit der Seele wie Freiheit der

¹⁸³ Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung*, 64.

¹⁸⁴ Hebekus, 64.

¹⁸⁵ Hebekus, 68.

Persönlichkeit ist stets Gestalt. Gestalt ist stets plastisch begrenzt. Diese Begrenzung ist rassistisch bedingt. Diese Rasse aber ist das Außenbild einer bestimmten Seele.”¹⁸⁶ Rosenberg sees the forming of a people as an artistic activity. Hebekus argues that this amalgam of aesthetics and politics is made possible by the model of aesthetic autonomy, which treats form as something that can generate its own content, rather than functioning to represent something else:

“Ästhetische Formung wird dabei nicht länger als Prägung eines Amorphen verstanden, sondern als Verdichtung des lebensweltlich und außerästhetisch Vorgefundenen zu einem totalitären Innenraum des ästhetischen Artefakts.”¹⁸⁷ This means that an aesthetic representation of the *Volk* or the racially homogenous body politic, is also, simultaneously, the constitution thereof: “Die Darstellung der politischen Einheit des Gemeinwesens [wird] zugleich als deren Herstellung verstanden.”¹⁸⁸

I will return to this connection between form and representation in the next chapter, where I will argue that Jünger’s concept of a Gestalt has almost nothing in common with Rosenberg’s use of this term. I hope to thereby diffuse arguments that put Jünger in the same camp as Rosenberg and instead make the case that his theory of Gestalt has more in common with Hesse’s imagined game in *Das Glasperlenspiel*. For now, I want to concentrate on a different aspect of Hebekus’s study, because its central arguments hold considerable interest for my project.

Firstly, Hebekus provides concrete examples where form, having attained independence from the socio-political, achieves a platform for a political ideology precisely by virtue of this independence. Hebekus believes that a significant portion of modernist texts helped to construct

¹⁸⁶ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, ed. 163-166 (Hoheneichen: München, 1940), 529.

¹⁸⁷ Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung*, 24.

¹⁸⁸ Hebekus, 23.

“jenen Denkraum [...] innerhalb dessen sich die deutsche Ausprägung des politischen Totalitarismus, der Nationalsozialismus, als *Projekt* situiert hat.”¹⁸⁹ He also brings to light something quite similar to the “excess” inherent in certain applications of formal concepts I referred to earlier. With regards to Rosenberg, Hebekus writes that “eine solche Gestik eines forcierten Willens zur Form lässt sich angemessen wohl nur mit dem (proto-)poetologischen Terminus ‘Verdichtung’ umschreiben, einer Verdichtung, die gewaltsam das ‘Material’ in einen Aggregatzustand höherer Intensität und Artikuliertheit versetzt.”¹⁹⁰ The violent or excessive nature of form-giving will be evident in all the major texts I consider.

A second, unusual feature that renders Hebekus’s study noteworthy is that it goes against a lot of the received wisdom about the relationship between totalitarianism and aesthetics. Hebekus suggests that fascist totalitarian political programs are so closely bound up with modernist aesthetics, that Walter Benjamin’s famous statement that fascism “aestheticizes politics” is too weak in its assessment.¹⁹¹ The way totalitarian regimes use art is not, according to Hebekus, to hide some aspect of their essence, whether their brutality, the actual content of their politics or their own nihilism. Rather, “für dasjenige, was im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik vorbereitet wird und 1933 dann auf den Plan tritt, ist das moderne autonome Ästhetische in einer bestimmten Ausrichtung zugleich das Politische.”¹⁹²

Given the breadth of the claim, Hebekus’s choice of authors may seem narrow. Although his study aims to represent “wichtige, ja kanonische Texte der deutschsprachigen Literatur der klassischen Moderne,” almost all of the authors he examines were either political actors or were

¹⁸⁹ Hebekus, 10-11.

¹⁹⁰ Hebekus, 71.

¹⁹¹ Hebekus, 11; Hebekus is referring to the final section of Benjamin’s “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.”

¹⁹² Hebekus, 11.

producing works with a theoretical-political aim:¹⁹³ Carl Schmitt, Alfred Rosenberg, and Ernst Kantorowicz feature prominently. Artists who, at least for part of their careers, engaged either directly or via their art in a political program also serve to illustrate his argument: Leni Riefenstahl, Stefan George, and Gottfried Benn. This does not necessarily undermine Hebekus's central claims, but it suggests a gap that is worth exploring further, something the present study undertakes. In doing so, I also come to some different conclusions. One of these is to assert the centrality of nihilism to modernist form concepts, something Hebekus makes no mention of. Another is to show how form often fails at achieving either totality or representation. In effect, form can be so ill-suited to the task of replacing values that its usefulness in the political sphere is questionable at best. This is not to claim that Rosenberg's *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* was not a politically influential text, only to suggest that whatever made it politically useful was something other than the concept of form it developed.

To better understand what this "something else" could be, it is worth considering Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis. Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the attempt to unite aesthetics and politics is ingrained in a very specific way in German history. Germany's aesthetic-political project emerges, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, out of its historic lack of a single, national identity. Certain ways of thinking about form in Germany therefore have a nationalist substructure. This situation was aptly summarized in the nineteenth century by Karl Theodor Reinhold: "Die deutsche Nation war und blieb eine formlose, eine hoffnungslose Masse. Da kam endlich dieser große Bildner und Baumeister und zwang das deutsche politische Leben, daß es Form gewann, daß es sich gestaltete."¹⁹⁴ The great *Bildner* and *Baumeister* Reinhold means is

¹⁹³ Hebekus, 10.

¹⁹⁴ Karl Theodor Reinhold, *Das System Bismarck: Eine Festbetrachtung zum 75. Geburtstag des Fürsten v. Bismarck*, Bannen 1890, 6. Citation taken from Marcus Twellmann, "Gesetz und Gestalt zu Thomas Mann," in *Die Souveränität der Literatur*, 379.

Otto von Bismarck. Lacoue-Labarthe does not mention this work, but it fits with his main objective, which is to identify a unifying thread that is deeply lodged in German history. According to this narrative, the union of aesthetics and politics is central for Hegel and Nietzsche, it is then radicalized in the work of Heidegger and, in a more vulgar way, by Nazi thinkers like Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels. Identifying politics with aesthetics is “at the heart of the mimetic *agon* in which they both [Hegel, Nietzsche, E.M.] (and many others with them – in fact almost everyone, including Heidegger) saw Germany’s only chance at finding its identity and acceding to existence.”¹⁹⁵ In this vein, the political project of National Socialism is to realize the nation as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

The political (the City) belongs to a form of plastic art, formation and information, fiction in the strict sense. This is a deep theme which derives from Plato’s politico-pedagogic writings (especially *The Republic*) and reappears in the guise of such concepts as *Gestaltung* (configuration, fashioning) or *Bildung* [...] The fact that the political is a form of plastic art in no way means that the *polis* is an artificial or conventional formation, but that the political belongs to the sphere of *technē* in the highest sense of that term.¹⁹⁶

The terms *Gestaltung/gestalten* and *Bildung/bilden* will prove central to Jünger, Mann and Hesse, though in varying degrees: Mann for example is much more aligned with *Bildung* than *Gestalt*, while with Jünger the case is the opposite. But Lacoue-Labarthe’s point is that these terms have the same historical origin and that their application outside the strictly limited sphere of art carries strong connotations with a project of *volk*- or nation-building.

Hebekus acknowledges the influence of Lacoue-Labarthe, and his argument that the representation of a people is also its constitution (*Darstellung als Herstellung*) echoes Lacoue-Labarthe’s position.¹⁹⁷ However, they offer markedly different perspectives. Lacoue-Labarthe

¹⁹⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 68.

¹⁹⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, 66.

¹⁹⁷ Hebekus, 64, 397 (for example).

identifies antisemitism as an essential and perhaps the most important component of Nazi ideology, which also leads him to emphasize significant differences within modernism.¹⁹⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe argues that it would be “absolutely impossible” to confuse “Nazi ontology,” as expressed by Rosenberg and others, with Jünger’s *Gestalt of the Worker*, or with Heidegger’s philosophy, though that is another matter.¹⁹⁹ Apart from Rosenberg’s lack of philosophical integrity—Lacoue-Labarthe calls *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* a “barely readable hotch-potch of a book”—the idea of form he develops is driven by a preoccupation with race. Rosenberg intends to elevate the “Germanic soul,” the “Aryan type” to the status of an “absolute subject,” which pushes it beyond a theory of form and into the realm of myth.²⁰⁰ It is the Aryan type that provides the “Nazi myth,” as Rosenberg conceives it, with its “truth.”²⁰¹ Lacoue-Labarthe’s observation fits with a general point that I can only make tentatively here but will return to throughout this project: that form without a content is ill-suited to function as an absolute value. Rosenberg’s “myth” pertains to an immanent social and ethnic group, and this is what gives it a political contour that literary form concepts lack.

The examples I use in this study present a challenge to assumptions about the link between aesthetic form to political outcomes, because such assumptions take it for granted that the form concepts are “working” as intended when this may not actually be the case. I argue that the drive towards formal solutions has its roots in the event of nihilism, which makes it necessary to come up with a new measure for determining our highest values. But this project can fail or

¹⁹⁸ Hebekus actually suggests that anti-semitism may be a by-product of Nazi form concepts: “Es ist letztlich die als solche ebenso erkannte wie offen einbekannte Konstruktion von ‘Rassenbildern’ gewesen, welche die sicher verhängnisvollsten Folgen des nationalsozialistischen Regimes hervorgerufen hat. Damit ist - so die abschließende These der Studie - selbst noch der nationalsozialistische Rassismus und Antisemitismus ein Fall von Ermächtigung gewesen, die vor allem eines war: ästhetische Emächtigung,” Hebekus, 25.

¹⁹⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 96.

²⁰⁰ Lacoue-Labarthe, 95.

²⁰¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, 93-94.

produce something other than the desired result. In Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*, the main character, Josef Knecht, leads a life that perfectly combines mastery of the Glass Bead Game with submission to its logic of abstraction and formalization. His understanding of it reaches a state of such completion that his character begins to see the flaws in the system, at which point he can no longer submit his individuality to it. The control over the individual is so extreme that in the case of Knecht it fosters rebellion. In Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, formal innovation on its own proves incapable of achieving the main character's desired aim of creating a new musical language; it requires something else, which appears in the novel as demonic inspiration and transgression. But while *Doktor Faustus* hints at the possibility that this formally rigorous musical language is connected to political events, the novel never makes this explicit, it remains at the level of suggestion. The logic of both novels supports the idea that form on its own is an empty construct. Too empty to found a new society, as in *Das Glasperlenspiel*, or to provide a new standard for artistic creation, as in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. Form requires *something else* in order to have a normative function.

Ernst Jünger seems to be aware of this when he writes that "wir [befinden] uns in einer letzten, und zwar in einer sehr merkwürdigen, Phase des Nihilismus [...] die sich dadurch auszeichnet, daß neue Ordnungen bereits weitgehend vorgestoßen, daß aber die diesen Ordnungen entsprechenden Werte noch nicht sichtbar geworden sind."²⁰² It is difficult to imagine how Jünger's *Gestalt of the Worker*, which has no normative content, could help overcome nihilism. But in the revolutionary climate of the interwar years, between the disaster of losing the war and the possibility of a better future, this project is nevertheless intelligible. To say that these form concepts are empty of content, or that they become their own content, is not

²⁰² Jünger, "Über den Schmerz," SW 7, 190 (ellipses added).

to say that they are ever neutral. On this point, my study is in agreement with Lacoue-Labarthe and Hebekus; modernist uses of form are neither ahistorical, nor politically unaligned.

Form's in-between status, both empty and loaded, render it a volatile presence in the texts I examine. As my project will demonstrate, form brings with it what I would call "historical traces" that hint and its origin in a time and a place. This historical coloration brings with it a set of commitments that influence both the definition and application of form. In the case of my authors, Germanness is one such trace. Gender is another, and not in a way that can simply be attributed to the gender of the authors. The form concepts I will examine have a masculine quality, or at least one that is aligned to a certain model of stoic strength, rigor, structure and authority that suggests a military or monastic sense of order. While the projects to overcome nihilism that I examine aspire to be universal, they remain attached to the historical material from which they emerge. It is no coincidence that Jünger's *Gestalt of the Worker* develops out of his conception of the ideal soldier, that Mann calls the formal method of composition he creates a "Durchbruch," which is the successful, artistic counterpart to the German army's failed breakthrough to victory in France in World War I, or that Hesse's imagined utopia exists without women. It will be up to the individual chapters to consider these historical traces in depth.

Although this project focuses on a relatively narrow set of writers in the interwar period in Germany, it is connected to larger questions about the transhistorical nature and development of the concept of form. Lacoue-Labarthe traces the link between politics and aesthetics back to Hegel and even further back to Plato. There is a way in which the present study is a reframing of the question of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics that seeks to better understand how this relationship expressed itself in modernism. I will end then by returning to Badiou who, like Hebekus, identifies two types of form: the first is the Aristotelian formation of a material that

dominates aesthetic thinking until the late nineteenth century; the second exemplifies the early twentieth century view of form as “what the artistic act authorizes by way of a new thinking.”²⁰³ Badiou’s argument implies that perhaps this type form is not without content, but that its content is something like a new mode of thought seeking to be articulated. It does not take a revolutionary attitude to acknowledge that the historical break that nihilism presents demands a new thinking and this will bring with it the search for a new form that can express it. Form as an event that takes place simultaneously in the aesthetic realm and outside of it is the idea that Jünger, Mann and even Hesse, the most spiritual and hermetic of the three, grapple with in one way or another. This project does not seek either to endorse or to criticize these efforts, but to understand their logic and to pursue their development.

²⁰³ Badiou, *The Century*, 159.

Chapter 2. The Gestalt of the Worker–Ernst Jünger’s functional form

“Wer heute in Deutschland nach einer neuen Herrschaft begierig ist, der wendet den Blick dorthin, wo er ein neues Bewußtsein von Freiheit und Verantwortung an der Arbeit sieht.”¹

“Es ist unnötig geworden, sich noch mit der Umwertung der Werte zu beschäftigen – es genügt, das Neue zu sehen und sich zu beteiligen.”²

Nihilism, for Nietzsche, represented an opportunity to transform not only what we understand to be the highest values, but ourselves. In order to live without transcendent truths underwritten by a non-human authority, humanity will need to change to its very core and this is what the *Übermensch* represents. But the *Übermensch* is also a heuristic, a model, or, as has been suggested, a goal that we can strive towards but never achieve, so it leaves open the question of what a human subject without God would actually be like and how such a humanity would understand the ground of its own being.³ Ernst Jünger provides perhaps the most ambitious and underexamined answer to the question of what a new type of humanity that can find meaning without a transcendent absolute would look like, not as a direct response to Nietzsche, but within the same tradition, driven by similar concerns. In Jünger’s view, the new “type” would find purpose not in stable eternal truths, but in its own processes, driven not by the values of comfort, happiness or progress, but by the need to exist in concord with the forces driving technological change. *Fortschritt* for its own sake, thought Jünger, had already begun to act as a kind of

¹ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 8, 20. Hereafter cited as *A*. All volumes from this edition cited as *SW* followed by volume number throughout.

² *A*, 59-60.

³ Bernard Reginster, for example, writes: “In teaching the overman, he [Nietzsche E.M.] is not describing a determinate goal we ought to achieve. He is advocating overcoming, and to overcome essentially is, in a sense, to create over and beyond oneself. Longing for the over- man is what a commitment to the creative life implies. Nietzsche never offers a substantive characterization of the overman, because it represents the indeterminate, ever-receding formal objective of the individual who, by virtue of engaging in the pursuit of power, is perpetually in search of new challenges to meet, of new overcomings.” Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 251.

ultimate authority in human affairs and it was mobilizing people into patterns very similar to those of an absolute regime.⁴ Humanity needed to seize control of these forces, rather than be pulled along by them, and this meant asserting a new understanding of the human subject. These considerations were influenced not only by Nietzsche, but by the social and technological changes Jünger had observed as a *Frontsoldat* during WWI and in the period of revolution and instability directly after. The society emerging from the ruins of the war would work for the sake of working, just as the soldiers at the front had fought for the sake of fighting. Paradoxically, Jünger believed that such a posture was necessary to make sense of the seeming senselessness of the war.

Jünger took it for granted that society was in a state of nihilism, which he understood as the absence of absolute values or truths that could justify the suffering and sacrifice of the military battlefield. His writings from the 1920s addressed this problem, but left something of a gap: a central concept that could point the way finally to the overcoming of nihilism was lacking. *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (1932) fills this gap by arguing for a unifying concept that would imbue both the recent war and the technological progress Jünger saw taking place around him with meaning. And, it would act as a kind of absolute goal towards which humanity could and should strive. This would not be a value, but a new organizing principle that had the capacity to structure society in a meaningful way, thereby moving beyond nihilism and devaluation. Jünger invents a form concept built around the necessity of effective functioning, “working” in a very specific sense. *Der Arbeiter* calls this concept the Gestalt of the Worker (die Gestalt des Arbeiters). Examining this project is the purpose of the present chapter.

⁴ “Der Fortschritt [...] beginnt sich die Völker zu unterstellen in Formen, die von denen eines absoluten Regimes bereits wenig mehr unterschieden sind.” Jünger, *Die totale Mobilmachung*, SW 7, 140.

Prior to *Der Arbeiter*, Jünger was a prominent supporter of the “new” nationalism, as it is often called to differentiate it from the patriotic nationalism that had its high point in the nineteenth century.⁵ This is especially evident in the politically charged articles he wrote in the 1920s for publications like *Völkischer Beobachter*, *Standarte* and *Arminius*. There is general consensus that Jünger’s nationalism was less concerned with practical or party politics than with a spiritual commitment to a collective ideal. One critic even calls it a religion.⁶ “Der Patriotismus,” Jünger wrote in 1930 “wird durch einen neuen, stark mit Bewußtseinsmomenten durchsetzten Nationalismus abgelöst.”⁷ But the precise content of this belief, the nature of such *Bewußtseinsmomenten*, was generally left unarticulated. Nationalism, for Jünger, meant a militarized, future-oriented idea of the nation as something much greater and all-encompassing than simply a political entity. However, it is also clear that Jünger came to distance himself from the nationalist movement and severed almost all ties to politics in the years 1930-34, when *Der Arbeiter* was also written.⁸ This work comes then at an interesting turning point when Jünger is shifting his emphasis away from a nationalist, soldierly worldview in search of something radically new.⁹ “Es ist unnötig geworden, sich noch mit der Umwertung der Werte zu beschäftigen – es genügt, das Neue zu sehen und sich zu beteiligen.” This is what *Der Arbeiter*

⁵ His nationalism has also been described as *soldatisch* and *revolutionär*. See Matthias Schöning, “Kriegserfahrung und politische Autorschaft” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Matthias Schöning (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2014), 11.

⁶ Hans-Peter Schwarz writes that, in the period when he produced most of his political articles, “Jünger [betrachtete] demnach seine gesamte politische Aktivität als Wirken in einer Glaubensbewegung, um die Unruhe im nationalen Lager war für ihn Äußerung einer mächtigen religiösen Erneuerung.” Schwarz, *Der Konservative Anarchist: Politik Und Zeitkritik Ernst Jüngers* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1962) 64.

⁷ Jünger, *Die totale Mobilmachung*, 140.

⁸ Schöning, “Kriegserfahrung und politische Autorschaft,” 11.

⁹ Norbert Dietka puts forward a range of evidence to support the thesis that *Der Arbeiter* marks the point at which Jünger is already transitioning away from political writing to imaginative prose: “Mit der Veröffentlichung des *Arbeiters* war Jüngers ‘politisches Engagement’ schon merklich abgekühlt [...] Auch lässt sich nachweisen, dass die publizistische Tätigkeit ende 1929 [...] beinahe abrupt endet und nie wieder die Intensität der vorangegangenen Schaffensjahre 1925-27 erlangt.” Dietka, *Ernst Jüngers Entwurf von der ‘Herrschaft und Gestalt des Arbeiters’*: *Philologischer Versuch Einer Annäherung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016), 16.

attempts and he positions this text in a future beyond the major political movements of his time.¹⁰

Der Arbeiter was received with great interest and commercial success at the time of its publication during a period of crisis in the Weimar Republic and it is one of Jünger's most unusual and enigmatic works.¹¹ This book-length essay—80 short “chapters” divided into two roughly equal sections—departs from the narrative focus that characterizes much of Jünger's literary output in the 1920s, but it does not clearly belong to any single genre.¹² Combining elements of amateur anthropology, cultural and political theory, manifesto, and “Epochendiagnose,” as Heimo Schwilk calls it, the essay unfolds as the vision of a state without a figurehead, where a new human subject, “das Einzelne” rather than “das Individuum,” is at home and where human life derives meaning through representing a form.¹³ In *Der Arbeiter*, Jünger imagines this form expressing itself through an ideal subject, a worker type, whose functioning is rendered meaningful and significant through his relationship to this form. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the Worker in the masculine, not only to reflect the gender of the German noun *Arbeiter*, but to try and capture how Jünger understands this concept. Jünger never discusses the Worker in terms of gender—there is no mention of men or women at

¹⁰ “Der Sozialismus und der Nationalismus als allgemeine Prinzipien sind, wie gesagt, zugleich nachholender und vorbereitender Natur. Dort, wo der menschliche Geist sie für verwirklicht hält, deutet sich der Abschluß eines Zeitalters an, aber sogleich wird offenbar, daß dieser Abschluß neue Aufgaben, neue Gefahren, neue Möglichkeiten des Aufmarsches in sich enthält. In allen großen Ereignissen unserer Zeit verbergen sich sowohl die Endpunkte von Entwicklungen wie die Anfangspunkte neuer Ordnungen.” A, 254.

¹¹ In one study, Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner claimed that the first 5000 copies of the book were sold out prior to its official release. Heimo Schwilk, in his biography of Jünger, writes that three editions of *Der Arbeiter* were all sold out before the end of 1932. Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben; Die Biografie* (München: Piper, 2007), 352. Kaltenbrunner's figures are quoted in Dietka, *Ernst Jünger's Entwurf von der “Herrschaft und Gestalt des Arbeiters”*, 60.

¹² Jürgen Brokoff identifies six “Textdimensionen” to *Der Arbeiter*: “apokalyptisch-visionäre Text”; philosophical text; political manifesto in the spirit of the conservative revolution; “Beitrag zur Gesellschaftstheorie und Technik-Analyse”; “Kunsttheoretischer Entwurf” and a work of art in its own right. Brokoff, “Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt,” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 105.

¹³ Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger*, 355.

all—and his text leaves open the possibility that this concept is genderless. However, the way he imagines the Worker to express himself and to function is quite clearly an extension of the *Frontsoldat*, an image that brings with it characteristics that are coded as masculine, or at the very least as soldierly. I will likewise use the masculine form when referring to the soldier.

My reading of *Der Arbeiter* aims to fill a void in the existing criticism as well to correct a number of readings which, I argue, provide an over-simplified understanding of Jünger's text. While many readers have picked up on the presence of nihilism in Jünger's work, I am not aware of a reading that actually understands the Gestalt of the Worker as a response to it. Reinhart Wilczek understands the engagement with nihilism as one of the essay's main aims, but claims that Jünger's answer is to fight nihilism with nihilism.¹⁴ The extent to which Jünger's posture in *Der Arbeiter* suggests an active nihilism, in the sense in which Nietzsche understands it, deserves consideration. For Nietzsche, active nihilism was “ein Zeichen von Stärke [...] die Kraft des Geistes kann so angewachsen sein, daß ihr die bisherigen Ziele ('Überzeugungen', Glaubensartikel) unangemessen sind,” and we can see this posture, which refuses insufficient goals and insubstantial beliefs, in Jünger's writing too.¹⁵ But we get a clearer understanding of what Jünger is doing when we focus on the importance of the Gestalt of the Worker to his overall project. Another issue is the distraction created by Jünger's much later text, *Über die Linie* (1950), a work addressed to Martin Heidegger, which engages with the question of nihilism

¹⁴ “Das im Frühwerk bereits immanente Bewußtsein, an einer Epochenschwelle zu leben, die den Zerfall überkommener Ordnungen und Werte zeitigt, wird Jünger nun zum Ausgangspunkt und Motor eines visionären Entwurfs, der den Nihilismus durch eine nihilistische Haltung überwinden soll.” Wilczek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters: Ernst Jüngers Nietzsche-Rezeption* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999), 88.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887, *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 12, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; De Gruyter, 1999), 350. This collection cited as KSA followed by volume number throughout.

directly and at length.¹⁶ The scope of the present chapter does not allow for a comparative discussion of this essay alongside *Der Arbeiter*, but the most obvious difference is the absence from *Über die Linie* of the kind of unifying concept that the earlier work asserts. So, there is a temptation to think that whatever Jünger has to say on nihilism, he says in *Über die Linie*, even though that work appears at a time when the need to find a higher purpose towards which society should strive no longer occupies the author with the same urgency.

The other reason that the connection between the Gestalt of the Worker and nihilism has not been drawn has to do with how this concept has been interpreted. Critics have provided a variety of definitions, which is understandable since the Gestalt of the Worker is not an easy concept to define or classify and Jünger's language in *Der Arbeiter* is often suggestive and lacking in precision or lucidity. The term is a portmanteau of two unrelated concepts: worker and *Gestalt*, with the latter itself being an ambiguous term.¹⁷ In her history of the *Gestalt* concept, Annette Simonis highlights the difficulty of offering a single definition and focusses instead on clarification by way of a genealogy of its multiple deployments by artists and thinkers: "An die Gestaltkonzeption knüpfen sich Erwartungen, Versprechungen und Hoffnungen, die mit dem eigentlichen Semantik und schlichten Wortbedeutung auffallend kontrastieren."¹⁸ This statement could apply to the Gestalt of the Worker too. Simonis does not include Jünger in her study of *Gestalt*, but she does contribute to the scholarship on it elsewhere, calling the Gestalt of the

¹⁶ Shane Weller, for example, identifies the importance of nihilism for Jünger's thought, but focuses on *Über die Linie*. See Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 46-47.

¹⁷ Since the term *Gestalt* predates Jünger, I want to avoid confusion about where I am referring to his use of it as opposed to the more generic employment of this term by other thinkers. For this reason, I will use "the Gestalt" with an initial capital and article synonymously with "die Gestalt des Arbeiters," which Jünger often refers to simply as *die Gestalt*; "Gestalt" without an article will denote all other uses of the term, including where Jünger uses it to denote anything other than the Gestalt of the Worker. Jünger's language on this point is sometimes inconsistent. I will also use "Worker" capitalized synonymously with "worker type" to mean "der Arbeiter."

¹⁸ Annette Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 4.

Worker “[eine] rätselhafte [...] Entität” and “eine Grundkraft.”¹⁹ Jeffrey Herf writes that “Gestalt refers to the external appearance of objects – buildings, tanks, planes etc. – and people – workers, soldiers and the bourgeois.”²⁰ Wolf Kittler understands it as “a result of experiments, a theoretical concept [...] the product of the worker’s creativity itself.”²¹ My reading breaks with the idea that the Gestalt refers to an end goal, a thing, a product or energy. Jünger’s text consistently argues against the “thingness” or “quality” of his concept; rather, he intentionally foregrounds its unsayability with the aim of leaving a degree of mystery and ambiguity around it: “Von dem Augenblick, in dem man in Gestalten erlebt, wird alles Gestalt.”²² He declares that the aim of *Der Arbeiter* is not to tell reader what the Gestalt of the Worker is, but rather “überall dort, wo von der Gestalt die Rede ist, eine leere Stelle, ein Fenster offenzulassen, das durch die Sprache nur umrahmt werden kann und das vom Leser durch eine andere Tätigkeit als die des Lesens ausgefüllt werden muß.”²³ This is not the same as the conceptual “gap” that I have suggested was characteristic of Jünger’s writings from the 1920s: This is a deliberate, intentional gap, a window, but not one for looking out of so much as a space that demands active participation by the reader. Vincent Blok’s definition captures Jünger’s intention well when he suggests that “the Gestalt (Being) is necessary in order to regulate the elementary (becoming). Jünger understands this regulation in line with the metaphysical tradition so that a ‘substance’ is

¹⁹ Simonis, “Gestalt,” *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 326.

²⁰ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics In Weimar and the Third Reich*, (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 101. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.uchicago.edu/2027/heb.01992>.

²¹ Wolf Kittler, “From Gestalt to Ge-stell: Martin Heidegger Reads Ernst Junger,” *Cultural Critique* 69 (Spring, 2008), 84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.0.0007>.

²² A, 38.

²³ A, 89.

given a ‘form.’”²⁴ Blok is quite right to acknowledge the metaphysical element that Jünger imbues his concept with, but we can also understand it in less ontological terms.

Jünger’s *Gestalt* is also a far more radical employment of this term than what previous theorists had envisioned. Wilczek, for instance, believes that Jünger simply expands on Oswald Spengler’s use of the *Gestalt* concept, thereby adding another chapter to “diese Tradition des neovitalistischen Politikdiskurses.”²⁵ There are certainly points of convergence between *Der Arbeiter* and Spengler’s “morphology” of world history in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918): both present a kind of meta-history that aims to explain disparate phenomena via a unified theory.²⁶ Spengler too employs the term *Gestalt*, but in a different way.²⁷ And, unlike Spengler’s wordy theory of the state of decline, Jünger believes that the phenomena he observes are proof that revolutionary changes are taking place. The clearest difference though is in how Jünger’s *Gestalt* expresses a very modern idea of working and of what the increasing intrusion of technology into life—whether as tanks, artillery, photography or film—mean for the human subject and for society. I will return to Spengler later in this chapter when I discuss the background of the development of the *Gestalt* concept prior to Jünger.

²⁴ Vincent Blok, “An Indication of Being—Reflections on Heidegger’s Engagement with Ernst Jünger,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42, no.2 (2011), 199, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1080/00071773.2011.11006739>.

²⁵ Wilczek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters*, 88, 89.

²⁶ There is disagreement on how much Jünger borrows from Spengler. Wilczek and Schwarz both see Spengler as Jünger’s main resource, especially with regards to the *Gestalt* concept (Wilczek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters*, 90; Schwarz, *Der konservative Anarchist*, 199). The author, however, distanced himself from Spengler. See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens: Die Pessimistische Romantik und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk* (München; Wien: Hanser, 1978), 476. Bohrer argues that the attitude to technology sets Jünger apart from “der präfaschistischen deutschen Autoren” meaning Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, among others. See Bohrer, 467. I would suggest that while Jünger is using similar descriptive tools, the avant-garde aspects of his theory and the model of the human subject he develops put him in a different camp, ideologically as well as practically.

²⁷ Spengler uses the term more as a way of identifying the organic form that he believes history takes. At the most basic level, Spengler suggests that *Gestalt* is how we give form to history, where Jünger sees it as the expression of particular historical forces. Spengler, for example, writes: “Ich sehe in der Weltgeschichte das Bild einer ewigen Gestaltung und Umgestaltung, eines wunderbaren Werdens und Vergehens organischer Formen.” Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (München: Beck, 1920), 29.

In this chapter, I argue that the Gestalt of the Worker is an example of the wider theme of this project: form as a response to nihilism in the early twentieth century. This point will be elaborated at length throughout the chapter, but I suggest the following by way of a working definition for Jünger's concept: The Gestalt of the Worker is the metaphysically significant principle of effective functioning, "working" in a very specific sense, which actively forms people, matter, ideas and institutions so that they represent it. It is then not an ideal type, nor a representative figure connected to production or industrial wage labor. Readers have focussed a great deal on the Gestalt as representative of industrial workers or the *Frontsoldat* but, while Jünger's concept is certainly anchored in these, what makes it innovative is its abstraction from the reality of either the battlefield or the factory. Jünger believes that behind the phenomena of the soldier and the industrial worker there exists a single form concept. Historical circumstances like industrialization, the appearance of new technologies, Marxism, the mechanization of the battlefield during WWI all play a role in making such a concept available, but Jünger puts forward his own interpretation that attempts to go beyond politics and economics. The Gestalt is an abstract principle, but it is one that is understood in terms of formalization based on function and the sense that everything is working in a way that expresses the same principle. I will also call his Gestalt a functional form. This is still somewhat opaque, but the best way to expand on it will be through concrete examples from the text, which this chapter will provide. It should become clear that understanding the Gestalt as a form concept helps us both to grasp what Jünger is attempting to do in *Der Arbeiter* and to place his theory in the historical context of early twentieth century avant-garde aesthetics. Helmut Lethen has described *Der Arbeiter* as "eines der unbekannten Manifeste der deutschen Avantgarde."²⁸ This chapter will provide additional

²⁸ Lethen, "Unter dem Pflaster ist die Kanalisation," 470.

evidence for why this is the case. My argument is that Jünger's theory is an underappreciated piece in the story of avant-garde aesthetics and the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Germany's interwar period.

To get us to this point, it is necessary to establish a nuanced understanding of the *Gestalt* and its development in Jünger's thinking. I will begin then by providing some context for Jünger's concern with nihilism. I will then consider two prominent readings of *Der Arbeiter* and how these understand the *Gestalt* of the Worker in relation to politics. I will move on to illustrate how this concept develops out of Jünger's other major texts from the interwar period, in which functionality, or working for its own sake, comes to acquire an independent meaning and legitimacy. This background will provide a kind of genealogy of the *Gestalt* of the Worker by tracing it to the author's experiences in WWI, in particular to how he interprets trench warfare and its impact on what a human subject is and what it takes to give meaning to human life and endeavors. I will then examine Jünger's idea of functionality in light of other theories of working that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, since Jünger borrows the term *Gestalt* from scientific and aesthetic discourses contemporary with him, the middle sections of this chapter will provide some background for the history of this concept and indicate where he makes his intervention and his contribution. Jünger adopts many of the features of prior *Gestalt* theories but radically reinterprets and politicizes these to come up with a concept that is novel, strange, and is in many ways ill-suited to the task he imagines. This may be a reason that he ceases to focus on the *Gestalt* as his writing becomes increasingly symbolic and romantic throughout the 1930s. The final sections will examine the role of representation, both political and aesthetic, and attempt to situate Jünger in relation to the historical avant-garde to show that his theory of the *Gestalt* of the Worker comes across as both belated and timely in light of

aesthetic discourse contemporary with him. I want to suggest that it is nevertheless a supremely modernist concept, something that has been obscured by his use of the word *Gestalt*, a term that belongs to a previous era.

The other major point to prove is how *Der Arbeiter* imagines a point beyond nihilism, which Jünger understands as the restoration of genuine authority and order that is grounded in something absolute. Jünger's theory is the making absolute of the Gestalt of the Worker in the wake of what he understands as the valuelessness of the bourgeois historical period. "Im Zeitalter der bürgerlichen Scheinherrschaft kann von Macht entweder nicht mehr oder noch nicht die Rede sein. Die Zertrümmerung des absoluten Staates durch die allgemeinen Prinzipien erscheint als ein grandioser Akt der Schwächung und Entwertung einer ausgebildeten Welt."²⁹ "Herrschaft" in *Der Arbeiter* broadly denotes a combination of authority, power, mastery and domination, though not the domination of and by individuals, but that of an absolute form. There is a dehumanizing, deindividualizing aspect to this that will need to be explored. The subtitle to Jünger's essay—*Herrschaft und Gestalt*—indicates that *Herrschaft* and *Gestalt* are necessarily connected.

2.1 Background, the problem defined and an overview of Jünger's solution (before the Worker)

Jünger's literary fame during the period that interests me here, beginning with the publication of his first major account of the war in 1920 and ending with *Der Arbeiter* in 1932, rests on a series of popular works he wrote based on his experiences as a trench soldier in WWI. In *Stahlgewittern* (1920), *Das Wäldchen 125* (1925), *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922) and several other works presented the war in its stark brutality, as a daily expenditure of life over

²⁹ A, 75.

paltry goals: holding a position, capturing a hill, following an order from above that meant nothing to the soldiers on the ground and so forth. In contrast to the other great war novel of the Weimar era—Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1928)—Jünger’s works take little interest in the phenomena of wartime camaraderie, humor and friendship. Unlike Remarque’s characters, whose complaints about the war and the injustice of their participation in it are profoundly human in their rational ordinariness, Jünger’s soldiers appear in a godlier light: they do not grumble or ruminate, they do not talk about what they will do when the war is over. Jünger’s soldiers face death with a resignation that is difficult to rationally comprehend. Remarque presented the war as a tragedy that society would struggle to recover from.³⁰ Jünger presented it as a world unto itself, run according to its own mysterious logic. Unlike Remarque, Jünger never became a pacifist.

Jünger never denounced the war because, among other things, to label it a folly would have meant that those who died had died in vain. He set out to prove that “die Sache nichts und die Überzeugung alles [ist] [...] und wer für einen Irrtum starb, bleibt doch ein Held.”³¹ He came to believe that the role of the *Dichter* was to give meaning to the war: “erst spät und nur durch die Kraft des Dichters [kann] gezeigt werden [...] daß das Geschehen inmitten eines durch Präzisionsinstrumente gespeisten Höllenfeuers über alle Fragestellungen hinaus und unabhängig von ihnen sinnvoll war.”³² Not that the *Dichter* invents its meaning; rather, his power is to see what others do not and what Jünger “sees” and attempts to show others is that the war revealed something entirely new to the world: a new course that human history was charting under the

³⁰ Here is how Remarque’s narrator summarizes the war shortly before his own death just before the Armistice: “Wenn wir jetzt zurückkehren, sind wir müde, zerfallen, ausgebrannt, wurzellos und ohne Hoffnung. Wir werden uns nicht mehr zurechtfinden können.” Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, ed. Thomas F. Schneider, 6th ed. (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2020), 257.

³¹ Jünger, *Der Kampf als Inneres Erlebnis*, SW 7, 100-101. This work cited hereafter as *KiE*.

³² *KiE*, 64.

aegis of a new principle. Jünger interprets the increasingly mechanized battlefield, where shelling would last for hours and poison gas could wipe out entire battalions, as evidence that a new form of being has emerged onto the global stage.³³ Identifying this new form of being becomes synonymous for Jünger with his other main goal: to show that the millions who had died in the war did not die in vain. This did not mean proving that there was after all a cause that could justify the sacrifice involved, but rather demonstrating that the war as an expression of a transformation that was happening on a planetary scale. *Der Arbeiter* extends the scope of this project beyond WWI to attempt to explain the direction that all history is taking.³⁴ We can read it profitably in light of Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*: Nietzsche's Zarathustra says "der Übermensch ist der Sinn der Erde."³⁵ The Gestalt of the Worker serves a similar purpose by giving meaning to history.

In many ways, the problem of nihilism and the problem of ascribing meaning to WWI were bound together in his thinking. Nietzsche was an influential source for Jünger, especially in his identification of nihilism as the devaluation of values. Jünger is alert to Nietzsche's insight that in the absence of an absolute (what religion usually refers to as God) there is nothing to guarantee the value of any goal that people set themselves, no final authority to settle disputes about the kind of higher order values that give life purpose. "Es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die

³³ Antoine Bosquet makes a similar point: "Jünger would repeatedly return to the idea that the war had made manifest 'the elemental', the fundamental vital force of becoming that he interpreted through the lens of a metaphysical reading of the will to power." Bosquet, "Ernst Jünger and the problem of nihilism in the age of total war," *Thesis Eleven* 132, no.1 (2015), 25, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1080/00071773.2011.11006739> 10.1177/0725513615619501.

³⁴ Some analyses have read *Der Arbeiter* at its core as an elaboration of Jünger's earlier and shorter essay "Die totale Mobilmachung." Hans-Peter Schwarz claims this was the case among many contemporary readers. More recently, Uwe Ketelsen writes: "Beide Publikationen sind, wenn man so will, spezielle Subtexte eines einzigen großen Essays." I am treating the two works as different in scope and ambition, for reasons that will be made clear in this chapter, but especially due to the insistence on the term Gestalt as central to the project, which "Die totale Mobilmachung" lacks. Ketelsen, "Zur Ernst Jünger's *Die totale Mobilmachung* (1930) und *Der Arbeiter* (1932)," 82; cf. also Schwarz, *Der konservative Anarchist*, 88.

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, KSA 4, 14.

Antwort auf das ‘Warum’? was bedeutet Nihilismus? – daß die obersten Werte sich entwerten.”³⁶

Jünger is not simply imitating or translating Nietzschean philosophy. He reads Nietzsche, but his own work remains tied to his lived experience and the attempt to process and interpret it.³⁷ For him, the most pressing consequence of nihilism is that it becomes difficult to ascribe meaning to the war and the sacrifice it involved. What was the war for, if there are no higher values? The second consequence is that post-war society, in which traditional structures of power and authority have collapsed, lacks an adequate structuring principle that would legitimate any future acts of sacrifice.

This situation needs to be addressed because, for Jünger, sacrifice is a kind of measuring rod for the extent to which a cause or an idea has authority. He comes to argue that people draw their idea of what is meaningful from sacrifice: “Das tiefste Glück des Menschen besteht darin, daß er geopfert wird, und die höchste Befehlskunst darin, Ziele zu zeigen, die des Opfers würdig sind.”³⁸ I will come back to the issue of self-sacrifice and why it is so central to Jünger’s idea of a meaningful existence. At this point, it is important to note that while Jünger would agree that nihilism negatively impacts the human subject’s ability to find meaning in what he or she does, the ultimate response to it must be collective; any theory that attempts to establish what is meaningful must acknowledge the diminished role of individual subjectivity.

Jünger takes it for granted that the society around him is governed according to values, ideologies and beliefs that ran their course even before WWI. Moreover, he argues that the very language of values belongs to a previous way of thinking that is centered on the individual and is

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887, KSA 12, 350.

³⁷ Reinhard Wilczek provides a detailed examination of places where Jünger cites Nietzsche or refers to him directly. Wilczek’s analysis shows that many direct references to Nietzsche were removed in later versions of Jünger’s war books. Wilczek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters*, 14-21.

³⁸ A, 78.

now in the process of a complete restructure: “Es gehört aber zu den Kennzeichen einer neuen Zeit, daß in ihr die bürgerliche Gesellschaft, gleichviel ob sie ihren Freiheitsbegriff in der Masse oder im Individuum zur Darstellung bringen möge, zum Tode verurteilt ist. Der erste Schritt besteht darin, daß man in diesen Formen nicht mehr denkt und fühlt, der zweite, daß man in ihnen nicht mehr tätig ist.”³⁹ The “death of the individual” calls not for new values, but for new forms of thought and action. What is needed, according to Jünger, is a totalizing principle that is able to organize a new anti-individualistic society. This is an anti-humanist reading of history that sees the human subject not as the creator of order, meaning and structure, but rather as the object of unseen, impersonal forces. The best that people can hope to do is to be aware of and develop the ability to harness such forces, which Jünger refers to often simply as the “elemental.” Jünger theorizes the connection between people and the elemental as one of “representation” (this will be a crucial term). It is only by representing this metaphysical reality that any person or institution can have the authority to determine what is worth the sacrifice of individual lives in war. The Gestalt of the Worker, for Jünger, is how elemental forces find expression in the modern technological world, hence *it* emerges as the only answer to nihilism: “Unsere Hoffnung liegt in dem neuen Verhältnis zum Elementares, das dem Arbeiter gegeben ist.”⁴⁰

The origin of Jünger’s idea of the Worker can be found, I want to suggest, in the model of working that Jünger observed on the battlefield; it can be traced to his first novel *In Stahlgewittern* and through his other war books. There, he noted that the best soldiers followed a certain model of disciplined working that could fill the gap left in the absence of higher values and provide actions with meaning and purpose when they seemingly had none. These soldiers,

³⁹ A, 27.

⁴⁰ A, 217.

who no longer believed the patriotic slogans that had drawn them into battle, were nevertheless entirely committed to performing the tasks that had been assigned them, even when these seemed to have no clear goal and when carrying them out risked death. This was a mode of working for its own sake, rather than working to achieve a specific goal or effect. The worker type, as Jünger refers to him, is therefore a kind of ideal subject whose existence is defined by this new way of working. I am going to refer to this model of working as “functionality” to highlight the specificity of Jünger’s vocabulary; Jünger describes *Arbeit* on a number of occasions as “eine Funktion” that has a total quality, which means that any activity in the technological age can be synonymous with work.⁴¹

In addition to helping place *Der Arbeiter* into dialogue with other discourses on working, functionality better captures what Jünger is interested in. This term suggests the deindividualization that allows the contemporary subject to be at home in the technological age. “Wir erlebten den Untergang des Individuums und seiner ererbten Werte nicht nur auf den Schlachtfeldern, nicht nur in der Politik, sondern auch in der Kunst.”⁴² Jünger believes that this decline of the importance of the individual is in large part the result of increasing technologization; technology, especially as weaponry, transport, photography and velocity, was permanently altering how people comprehended their own being.⁴³ Jünger argues that humanity must learn to speak the language of technology, which means learning to function in a similar

⁴¹ A, 107; Jünger rejected outright any economic dimension to his theory: “[Arbeit] ragt vielmehr gewaltig über alles Wirtschaftliche hinaus, über das sie nicht einfach, sondern vielfach zu entscheiden vermag und aus dessen Bereiche nur Teilergebnisse zu erzielen sind.” A, 94; also “Die Ansprüche des Arbeiters greifen [...] über alle ständischen Ansprüche hinaus. Insbesondere wird man nie zu sauberen Ergebnisse kommen, wenn man den Arbeiter schlechthin mit der Klasse der Industriearbeiter identifiziert.” A, 81.

⁴² A, 221.

⁴³ Elisa Primavera-Lévy makes a similar assessment: “Von der am eigenen Leibe erfahrenen, überwältigenden Kraft der technologischen Ordnung in den Materialschlachten gewann Jünger den bleibenden Eindruck, dass alle Spielarten des humanistischen Denkens durch die ungezügelten Ausbruch der Zerstörung ein für alle Mal widerlegt seien.” Primavera-Lévy, *Die Bewahrer der Schmerzen* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2012), 179.

way to the machine.⁴⁴ This is an urgent task: “Wo der Mensch in den Bahnkreis der Technik gerät, sieht er sich von ein unausweichbares Entweder-Oder gestellt. Es gilt für ihn, entweder die eigentümlichen Mittel zu akzeptieren und ihre Sprache zu sprechen oder unterzugehen.”⁴⁵

This means that the defining characteristic of working is not that it produces objects or products, but that it embraces mechanization as a model for how the subject functions. Only by doing so can the human subject belong in this new environment. Jünger often uses the term “organische Konstruktion” to describe this machine-like form of subjectivity, which designates that the human subject and the machine are in a functioning symbiosis, which is not to be understood as simply a machine attached to a person: “Die Verwirklichung des totalen Arbeitscharakters,” he writes “macht sich bemerkbar, indem einerseits der Typus der ihm eigentümlichen Mittel zu seiner Wirksamkeit bedarf, andererseits aber sich in diesen Mitteln eine Sprache verbirgt, die nur durch den Typus gesprochen werden kann.”⁴⁶

However, central to Jünger’s thinking is the conviction that the human subject should never become just a machine. In this, I would suggest he foreshadows Donna Haraway’s nuanced understanding of the convergence of humanity and technology in *A Cyborg Manifesto*. Haraway’s cyborg is the new identity of the human subject in the late twentieth century, a “mythic time,” as she calls it in which “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”⁴⁷ Haraway argues for a revolutionary politics rooted in this new subjectivity, which accepts and radicalizes the undoing of traditional boundaries on a planetary

⁴⁴ Reinhard Wilzcek makes the case that the Gestalt of the Worker is meant to overcome the traditional division between humans as creators and as victims of technology: “Die Dichotomie von Schöpfer und Opfer wird von Jünger in einem neuen Menschentypus synthetisiert.” Wilzcek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters*, 102.

⁴⁵ A, 170.

⁴⁶ A, 181.

⁴⁷ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6.
<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.001.0001>

scale: “From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet [...] from another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”⁴⁸ While both authors present utopian visions of a subject altered by technology, *A Cyborg Manifesto* embraces partial identity, contradiction, irony, de-structuring and “perversity.”⁴⁹ This vision is a related but irreconcilable counterpart to *Der Arbeiter*, that likewise seeks to articulate the underlying unity and organizational structure within the changes technology is bringing about. There is little overlap between Haraway’s feminist politics and Jünger’s embrace of mobilization, but I would avoid seeing Jünger as simply the representative of the first mode Haraway identifies as the imposition of a “grid of control.” For Jünger, the human subject must always be the representative of a higher principle, never the unwitting victim of an imposed, alien structure: “Insofern der Einzelne sich der Arbeitswelt zugehörig fühlt, äußert sich seine heroische Auffassung der Wirklichkeit darin, daß er sich als Vertreter der Gestalt des Arbeiters begreift. Diese Gestalt deuteten wir an als den innersten Träger, als die zugleich tätige und leidende Kernsubstanz dieser unserer von jeder andersartigen Möglichkeit durchaus unterschiedenen Welt.”⁵⁰ In order to elevate functionality beyond the merely material, Jünger grafts this conception of working without a clear goal onto the concept of Gestalt that was influential around the turn of the century in scientific and artistic circles. The result is a novel, hybrid concept that retains traces of the holism and vitalism of traditional Gestalt theories but aims to subject these to the form-giving, functional principle that dominates the technological age.

⁴⁸ Haraway, 15.

⁴⁹ Haraway, 8.

⁵⁰ A, 70.

2.1.1 The role of politics and some criticism of Jünger

Is this a political or a literary-aesthetic undertaking? This question is of central importance because it is here that the salience of Jünger's theory for addressing the challenge of nihilism lies. Jünger believes that nihilism must be addressed in the political realm, where the distribution of power and the assertion of collective meaning take place. His essay claims that seeing the *Gestalt* will lead naturally to certain power arrangements or political forms at the collective level, such as a state, although his vision ultimately extends to the globe. He writes that the purpose of his essay is to make visible an emerging form and in so doing to both explain and influence history. This project clearly extends beyond the subject, whose main task is to submit to the changes taking place. And yet, Jünger's writing does not prescribe any course of action, only a way of looking that should allow the reader to see what he sees: "Der Plan dieses Buches besteht darin, die Gestalt des Arbeiters sichtbar zu machen jenseits der Theorien, jenseits der Parteiungen, jenseits der Vorurteile als eine wirkende Größe, die bereits mächtig in die Geschichte eingegriffen hat und die Formen einer veränderten Welt gebieterisch bestimmt."⁵¹

There is a peculiar interrelationship at work here between power and visual representation that has led to a sharp division between critics on the question of just how political Jünger's theory is. On the one hand, readers like Russell Berman and Jeffrey Herf argue that his aesthetics are irredeemably in the service of fascist or nationalist ideology. On the other, there is a line of criticism that understands his writing as non-political: One of the most influential works in this tradition is still Karl Heinz Bohrer's *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens*. Both positions hinge on the status of aesthetics in *Der Arbeiter*. The latter, roughly speaking, argues that Jünger's theory is too aesthetically invested to be sensibly considered a political theory; the work is aestheticist, but

⁵¹ A, 13.

in a theoretically productive, interesting way. The former argues that the work is clearly dealing with political questions of power, domination and representation and that its solutions elevate the aesthetic over other considerations. Hence, it is aestheticist in a politically dangerous way.

This line of criticism is in many ways an extension of Walter Benjamin's famous assessment that Jünger's writing is the application of the *l'art pour l'art* theory to the object of war.⁵² It is in this vein that Jeffrey Herf writes that "Jünger places the language of will and the soul in the service of German nationalism"⁵³ and that "[Jünger] was an ideal typical aesthete of the Right and, like other members of the European avant-garde, was drawn to technology because he believed it could help aestheticize politics and thus resolve a crisis of cultural decadence and decline."⁵⁴ Russell Berman, meanwhile, has argued that Jünger's focus on the visual has sinister underpinnings: "For it is visual form that will, in Jünger's modernist account, displace an obsolete culture of bourgeois writing and guarantee the authority of fascist domination."⁵⁵ Berman sees Jünger's attempt to represent the *Gestalt* as a type of ekphrasis whose ultimate aim is the "denigration of writing as non-visual" and "the effort to appropriate language in order to surpass it with the production of the image."⁵⁶ Berman's criticism rests on an assumption that Jünger succeeds at creating an *image* of the *Gestalt*, an "absent object" that Berman identifies with the "Gestalt of Hitler" descending from the clouds and into Nuremberg in Leni Riefenstahl's film.⁵⁷

⁵² Walter Benjamin described the "new theory of war" that Jünger presents thus: "[sic] ist nichts anderes als eine hemmungslose Übertragung der Thesen des *L'Art pour l'Art* auf den Krieg." Benjamin, "Theorien des deutschen Faschismus: Zu der Sammelschrift *Krieg und Krieger*. Herausgegeben von Ernst Jünger," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 240.

⁵³ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 85. Also, Russell Berman, "Written Right Across Their Faces: Ernst Jünger's Fascist Modernism," in *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*, eds. Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 60-80.

⁵⁴ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 71.

⁵⁵ Berman, "Written Right Across Their Faces," 62.

⁵⁶ Berman, 77.

⁵⁷ Berman, 76.

I wish to make the case that there is more to the story, and it has to do with how Jünger understands form. When Herf claims that Jünger is an aesthete, he means that Jünger wanted to see and to depict the grotesqueries of war as beautiful and intoxicating: “The effect of Jünger’s visions of total mobilization and the transformation of ‘life into energy’ was to associate political and social domination with the most elevated symbols of German cultural traditions—beauty, will and form.”⁵⁸ This appears to be an implicit reference to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whose “Manifesto of Futurism” praises the beauty of war and technology.⁵⁹ “Jünger’s ‘poetry of steel,’” writes Herf, “reconciles beauty to the world of technology and military power.”⁶⁰ Berman’s critique likewise assumes that the image of the Gestalt that Jünger’s text produces is the end-goal of the essay, something definitive that the reader can grasp. He writes that the Gestalt is the invocation of an object that can serve as a substitute for fallen soldiers: “Ekphrastic writing becomes an exchange, a sacrifice of atonement as payment for the absent bodies.”⁶¹ Tellingly, Berman reverses Jünger’s phrase, *Herrschaft and Gestalt*, sometimes *Herrschaft of Gestalt* to create “*Gestalt of Herrschaft*,” thereby suggesting that Jünger means to show us what the new leader or leaders of post-war Germany will look like.⁶²

My alternative reading of Jünger’s theory should make clear that he never actually shows us the Gestalt because he conceives of it in terms of a form-giving action rather than thingness. To the extent that the text promises visibility at some point in the future, this will happen via a

⁵⁸ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 106.

⁵⁹ The oft-cited passage reads: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn of women.” Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Marinetti - Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint, and Arthur A. Coppotelli (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 42. I will return to Marinetti at the end of this chapter to show that the differences between *Der Arbeiter* and Marinetti’s futurism are stronger than the similarities. For now, I will note that the word “Schönheit” does not appear a single time in *Der Arbeiter*, while the adjective schön is used almost exclusively to deride the bourgeoisie, for example: “Ewig würde [der Bürger] sich an seine schönen Anklagen ergötzen.” A, 25.

⁶⁰ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 78

⁶¹ Berman, “Written Right Across Their Faces,” 76

⁶² Berman, 70.

collective representation of it. Jünger understands the Gestalt of the Worker as a formal principle that people and matter can represent by being organized according to a shared model, which is what renders them part of a significant whole. This is how he interprets the traditional definition of Gestalt, which I will discuss in detail further on, when he writes that “die Gestalt ist das Ganze, das mehr als die Summe seiner Teile enthält.”⁶³ To equate the Gestalt with an individual person or an object that may be recovered is to read more into the theory than what the author gives us. To the extent that we can say Jünger’s project is aestheticist, we need to adjust how we understand this term: the purpose of form, for Jünger, is not to make things beautiful nor to produce aesthetic experiences. This comes back to the decline of the individual. Beautiful and sublime forms are there to be enjoyed by or at least experienced by people. In contrast, Jünger’s idea is that form provides a meaningful structure to a new type of society characterized by deindividualization. It has nothing to do with an aesthetic experience.

This also means that *Der Arbeiter* has a political dimension, even if its aims are often far removed from mundane political language and concerns.⁶⁴ Bohrer argues that *Der Arbeiter* belongs to the literary tradition of utopias and that the text’s conscious distance from real political questions precludes its categorization as a work of political theory: “Das gegen ökonomischen Determinanten gerichtete Fluchtinteresse läßt keine soziopolitischen Kategorien zu.”⁶⁵ Bohrer also uses “apolitical” and “metaphysical” to describe the concepts “Gestalt” and “Arbeiter” as Jünger develops these.⁶⁶ Bohrer’s reading is detailed and sophisticated and I would not suggest that it is a misreading. My aim is rather to rephrase the question of whether Jünger’s

⁶³ A, 39.

⁶⁴ One major aspect of Jünger’s world-view that differentiates him from National Socialism is that he rejects the path of parliamentarism and legality as means for realizing the ideal within the socio-political realm. Cf. Dietka, *Ernst Jünger’s Entwurf von der “Herrschaft und Gestalt des Arbeiters”*, 78-79.

⁶⁵ Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens*, 470.

⁶⁶ Bohrer, 476.

text is political to focus on how he combines aesthetics and politics into his concept of the Gestalt of the Worker. I would argue that formalization or the drive to form in the socio-political sphere cannot be defined either as an aestheticization of politics, or a politicization of aesthetics.⁶⁷ It is rather a re-conception that attempts to combine these and other spheres of experience that are often viewed in separation into a cohesive unity. The unity is achieved because Jünger imagines all of these spheres to represent the same form.

This use of form is nevertheless in dialogue with modernist and avant-garde formalist aesthetics that were current when *Der Arbeiter* was written. *Der Arbeiter* is also a unique contribution to this discourse. The Gestalt of the Worker is a form that should be understood in terms of function, or formalization. Jünger absorbs fragments of theories that were influential at the time, such as the “form follows function” principle coined by Louis Sullivan and expanded by figures associated with the Bauhaus, among them Martin Gropius.⁶⁸ The Gestalt is a functioning form, something that has no content and no identity, but can nevertheless generate a specific order of people, matter and social relations. As I will discuss in greater detail, Jünger’s preferred verb to describe this process is “mobilisieren,” a term that extends beyond military mobilization to describe the kind of form-giving he is interested in. The Gestalt might therefore be profitably compared to an algorithm in mathematics or computing, as a procedure that

⁶⁷ A reference to the Walter Benjamin’s well-known formulation, “So steht es mit der Ästhetisierung der Politik, welche der Faschismus betreibt. Der Kommunismus antwortet ihm mit der Politisierung der Kunst.” Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, 469.

⁶⁸ This famous quote from Sullivan originates from his “The tall office building artistically considered” and reads: “It is the pervading law of all things organic, and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, or all things human and all things superhuman [...] that form ever follows function. That is the law.” Louis Sullivan, reproduced in *Architecture and Design in Europe and America, 1750--2000*, ed. Dorothy C. Rowe and Abigail Harrison-Moore, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 263. Gropius’s “Programme of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar,” among other works, also has parallels to Jünger’s theory: “The Bauhaus strives to bring together all creative effort into one whole.” See *ibid*, 377.

generates a specific output when applied. Viewed in this light, the Gestalt of the Worker is much less sinister than critics like Berman and Herf would argue.

I will return to this question of the relationship between aesthetics and the socio-political sphere, or aesthetics and ethics. But firstly, I want to consider how the model of functioning that underpins Jünger's theory emerges in his war books out of the paradigms of discipline and functionality on the battlefield.

2.2 Functionality as the response to wartime nihilism

Readers of Jünger generally take it as given that the Gestalt of the Worker develops out of the typical trench soldier, which means the Worker is an extension of Jünger's own self-conception or, more specifically, the group-based identity he takes on in the trenches as one soldier among many.⁶⁹ But I am not aware of a reading that has sought to isolate the essential quality that defines the soldier and the Worker. One connection that Jünger draws is that the soldier, like the Worker, is "[der] Träger einer echten Gestalt."⁷⁰ Since it is my purpose here to define and trace the development of the Gestalt of the Worker, it is necessary to dig deeper.

In my reading, the form of life that Jünger believes the soldier embodies is captured in ideas of disciplined functionality and automated sacrifice in the absence of a higher purpose. These characteristics, in particular the functionality of the soldier, have been largely neglected in the secondary literature. Functionality, a term that I will attempt to give a clear account of in the following two sub-chapters, and sacrifice become intertwined in the war books and form the basis of the Gestalt concept. It is this feature that makes it a functioning form, as I defined it in

⁶⁹ For example, Brokoff argues the worker is an extension of the soldier, with both acting as conduits of elemental forces. "Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt," *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 107-109.

⁷⁰ A, 43.

the previous sub-chapter. Jünger's texts prior to *Der Arbeiter* lack a central principle like this and it gives his work a new dimension when he begins to employ it. However, the roots of it are already there in his first published works and arise in response to the problem of understanding what the war was for.

Finding a justification for the sacrifice of the war is one of Jünger's primary concerns in his autobiographical war books and he expresses it both within these works and in comments surrounding their publication. In the preface to *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, for example, the author states that what troubled him in the period after WWI was the lack of public recognition for what those at the front had suffered and given up. In the public imagination, the war had been a pointless exercise, especially since Germany had lost, and this reduced the esteem in which the army was held. This, at least, was Jünger's view. "Hatte man denn wirklich nur der reinen, sinnlosen Gewalt Herz und Arm geliehen, und waren diese unzähligen Männer nur von einem geistlosen Gehorsam getrieben, unter der unwiderstehlichen Wucht von Massenpsychosen dem Tode entgegengetreten?"⁷¹ Clearly, the answer had to be "no" but, at this point in his writing, Jünger has not yet come upon a principle that could be held up to both veterans and the general public as a justification. The closest he comes to defining the purpose behind the war is to frame it as an expression of larger forces demanding human sacrifice, without actually identifying what these forces are: "Die großen geschichtlichen Leistungen [besitzen] die Eigenschaft [...] daß an ihnen der Mensch nur als Werkzeug einer höheren Vernunft tätig war."⁷² In the absence of a better explanation for what this "higher reason" might be, Jünger's narratives place their focus on what it means to be a *Werkzeug*, or instrument, in this sense.

⁷¹ Jünger, *Politische Publizistik 1919 Bis 1933*, ed. Sven Olaf Berggötz (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2001), 92.

⁷² Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 93.

In Stahlgewittern traces the simultaneous disillusionment of the recruit sent to the front and the emergence of functioning—a specific way of working—as the mark of the ideal soldier. For the young men, the war is initially interpreted through romanticized visions of dangerous adventure and the possibility of sacrifice for a higher purpose. Although the exact cause for which they fight is shrouded in vagueness, a sense that the war will be for *something* exercises its aesthetic power over the imagination: “Da hatte uns der Krieg gepackt wie ein Rausch [...] Der Krieg mußte es uns ja bringen, das Große, Starke, Feierliche.”⁷³ Watching the German landscape from a train, the narrator reflects: “Wie schön war doch das Land, wohl wert, dafür zu bluten und zu sterben. So hatte ich seinen Zauber noch niemals gespürt.”⁷⁴ The young men’s shared enthusiasm for the war is summarized by the statement “Kein schöner Tod ist auf der Welt.”⁷⁵

The narrator’s thoughts of a death in the name of this strong compound of land, beauty and intoxication are cut short during his first encounter with the reality of the front. Shortly after arriving, he witnesses an enemy bombing of the village where his battalion is stationed. The scene seems “lächerlich” until the first victims appear: “Mit einem merkwürdig beklommenen Gefühl der Unwirklichkeit starrte ich auf eine blutüberströmte Gestalt mit lose am Körper herabhängendem und seltsam abgeknicktem Bein [...] Was war das nur? [...] Das war so rätselhaft, so unpersönlich.”⁷⁶ The unreal reality of the war interferes with the desire to attach meaning to it. “Im Leben [bestimmt] der Sinn des Ganzen die Eindrücke,” he writes, but this sense of a whole is missing from the experience of war.⁷⁷ Instead, it is a random series of events, the arbitrariness of which is heightened by the material scale of industrial warfare: “Eine

⁷³ Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern*, SW 1, 11. Hereafter cited as *Stahl*.

⁷⁴ *Stahl*, 39.

⁷⁵ *Stahl*, 11.

⁷⁶ *Stahl*, 12-13.

⁷⁷ *Stahl*, 98.

Kompanie nach der anderen war, dicht gedrängt im Trommelfeuer ausharrend, niedergemäht, dann waren die Leichen durch die von den Geschossen hochgeschleuderten Erdmassen verschüttet worden, und die Ablösung war an den Platz der Gefallenen getreten.”⁷⁸ Jünger’s idea that the individual is “dead” can be traced back to these experiences. The industrial scale of warfare means that a battalion can be wiped out in a single bombing, no matter how noble or skilled the individual soldiers. He will continue to refer to the war to make this point in *Der Arbeiter*. Describing a failed operation at Langemarck, he writes: “Wir sehen hier einen klassischen Angriff zusammenbrechen, ungeachtet der Stärke des Willens zur Macht, der die Individuen beseelt, und der moralischen und geistigen Werte, durch die sie ausgezeichnet sind.”⁷⁹ The individual is powerless against “der Zauber des mechanischen Todes.”⁸⁰ Hence, Jünger comes to believe that the virtue of the soldier is “daß er ersetzbar ist und daß hinter jedem Gefallenen bereits die Ablösung in Reserve steht.”⁸¹

In a similar way, the idea of a “beautiful death” becomes a laughable conceit when one sees the speed of the new battlefield and the extent of destruction that the body undergoes when coming into contact with the new methods of warfare: grenades, gas, machine guns. At another point of *In Stahlgewittern*, the narrator, a seasoned soldier now, observes how a young recruit reacts to the reality of trench warfare. The scene begins when one of the sentries (usually the first victims of a surprise attack) collapses in the trench after being shot. His comrades are immediately at his side, attempting to bandage his headwound before someone exclaims, “Hat ja keen Zweck mehr, Willem” to which the reply comes, “Mensch, hei atmet doch noch.” The narrator continues:

⁷⁸ *Stahl*, 106.

⁷⁹ *A*, 113.

⁸⁰ *A*, 113.

⁸¹ *A*, 157.

Dann kommen die Sanitäter, um ihn zum Verbandplatz zu tragen. Die Bahre stößt hart gegen die winkligen Schulterwehren. Kaum ist sie verschwunden, ist alles wieder beim Alten. Einer wirft einige Schaufeln Erde über die rote Lache, und jeder geht seiner Beschäftigung nach. Nur ein Neuling lehnt noch mit bleichem Gesicht an der Verschalung. Er müht sich ab, die Zusammenhänge zu fassen. Das war ja so plötzlich, so furchtbar überraschend, ein unsäglich brutaler Überfall. Das kann ja gar nicht möglich, nicht Wirklichkeit sein.⁸²

The passage between life and death is too swift for the others to reflect on, and occurs too frequently. What is left? These lines give us the germ that will later develop into the Gestalt of the Worker. While the new recruit tries hard to find the connections that will presumably offer insight into how and why such a thing could happen, the seasoned soldiers turn immediately to fulfilling their roles and functions. The feeling, attributed to the newcomer, that nothing makes sense in this environment, is an echo of the narrator's own first impressions of the war. The way to deal with these shocks is not to contemplate or reflect on the events, as a Remarqueseque narrator might do, but to simply continue to perform assigned tasks, the phenomenon captured in the line "jeder geht seiner Beschäftigung nach". Model soldiers do this despite the knowledge that at any moment their lives could end in a random and meaningless event. The author will later assert that "unter dem Sturmschritt verwehen alle Werte der Welt wie herbstliche Blätter."⁸³ In this climate, the performance of a function becomes synonymous with a new kind of heroism.

Rather than seeking to distinguish oneself through an act of unique bravery, the ideal soldier accepts the role of a functionary, someone who can throw a grenade as well as throw oneself into the path of fire without agonizing over the causes or consequences of the action. Jünger's ideal is that of "[ein] Menschenschlag[], der sich mit Lust in die Luft zu sprengen vermag und der in diesem Akte noch eine Bestätigung der Ordnung erblickt."⁸⁴ *In Stahlgewittern*

⁸² *Stahl*, 54.

⁸³ *KiE*, 48.

⁸⁴ *A*, 41.

and Jünger's other major war books (*Das Wäldchen* 125 and *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*) do not lack for passages that refer to acts of bravery or heroism, but the actions that these labels attach to are almost always characterized by a stoic acceptance of their task or work-oriented nature to the exclusion of wider considerations. Jünger's narratives approvingly highlight the impersonal way in which soldiers perform their assigned duties. We see, for example, how a field doctor, "von den Schrecknissen und Erregungen der elementaren Zone umgeben," continues to be occupied "mit ameisenhafter Kaltblütigkeit am Ausbau seiner Ordnungen."⁸⁵ Elsewhere, Jünger's narrator pulls his troops through the battle-scarred landscape while "dazwischen erschollen Zurufe, Befehle und in eintöniger Wiederholung die langgezogenen Hilfeschreie im Trichtergelände verlorener Verwundeter."⁸⁶ The company seems at the point of collapsing in response to such horror, but the narrator shouts and physically forces them to continue and only for this reason, he asserts, do they make it. The soldiers' duty is not to friends, comrades or life, but rather to the task they have been given: "Es wird [...] ohne Hoffnung, rein pflichtgemäß gekämpft. Das Handwerksmäßige tritt stark hervor."⁸⁷

In *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, Jünger unambiguously states that the will to function effectively is what explains the motivation of soldiers. "Der Graben," he writes, "machte den Krieg zum Handwerk, die Krieger zu Tagelöhnern des Todes."⁸⁸ In a chapter devoted to examining fear, the author investigates what it is that drives soldiers to overcome it:

Aber vielleicht besteht dieser Antrieb in der Disziplin? Auch das kann nicht sein, denn hier ist jeder auf sich gestellt [...] Dann ist doch wohl das Vaterland, das Gefühl der Ehre und der Pflicht das Bewegende? Aber wenn jetzt, gerade jetzt, wo uns die Granateinschläge wie ein Wald von feurigen Palmen umgeben, jemand uns diese Worte zurufen wollte, so würde er nur einen wilden Fluch zur Antwort bekommen. Hier ist kein

⁸⁵ *Stahl*, 38.

⁸⁶ *Stahl*, 110.

⁸⁷ *Stahl*, 304-305.

⁸⁸ *Stahl*, 30.

Raum für Begeisterung [...] hier findet eine Arbeit statt, die fast bewußtlos geleistet wird und insofern einen tierischen Charakter hat.⁸⁹

The soldier is not driven to become an instrument because he thinks this is the best way to serve Germany's cause; this would be insufficient as an explanation. Jünger's view, at this point, is rather that by accepting that one is no longer an individual on the battlefield, the soldier opens himself up to a higher form of order that manifests as an impersonal and arbitrary form of work, what I am calling functionality. "Soweit der Mensch hier Individuum ist, ist er nur aus Angst zusammengesetzt. Aber gerade, daß er sich trotzdem bewegt, das beweist, daß ein höherer Wille hinter ihm steht."⁹⁰ The soldier is willing to let "die potenzielle Energie der Idee" employ him as its "Werkzeug," and it is this willingness to neglect one's subjectivity that makes the work of soldiering "eine Heldentat."⁹¹ Jünger does not specify what the content of the "idea" here is. The point is, rather, to actively surrender to the forces at work on the battlefield. What is heroic is the act of abnegation, a pure willingness in the absence of conviction, rather than the nature of any specific act and what it contributes.

One of the consequences of this model of functionality on the battlefield is the separation of inner experience from what we could provisionally call interiority. We need to therefore be wary of reference to what is "inner," such as the title of the essay itself, to name one instance. We should not mistake the "inner" for reflection or contemplation, as categories of experience.⁹² Inwardness itself takes on, for Jünger, an impersonal quality: It is not the experience of one's own consciousness and thoughts that are of interest, but rather the feeling of something larger

⁸⁹ *KiE*, 89.

⁹⁰ *KiE*, 89.

⁹¹ *KiE*, 90.

⁹² David Durst has written on the "critique of contemplation" in Weimar Germany, arguing that this was a widespread attitude within avant-garde art and thinking: "Representatives of the historical avant-garde in Germany arose in no small part as a critique of the contemplative character of modern art and culture found, for instance, in the expressionist movement." Durst, *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany, 1918-1933* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 35.

expressing itself through one's subjectivity. The soldier thus becomes a functioning shell for the forces that drive not only the war but all events of historical magnitude.

The final lines of the *Kampf* essay reveal what is at stake here: "Aber wer in diesem Krieg nur die Verneinung, nur das eigene Leiden und nicht die Bejahung, die *höhere Bewegung* empfand, der hat ihn als Sklave erlebt. Der hat kein inneres, sondern nur ein äußeres Erlebnis gehabt [emphasis added]." ⁹³ Compared with this higher "movement," everything else is fleeting. To be the subject of an inner experience of the war means to recognize that this principle was acting through oneself. At the time he writes the *Kampf* essay, Jünger employs vague terms like "die Energie der Idee" or "höherer Wille" to denote this something, but these are placeholders. He never elaborates on them, nor does he attempt, at this point, to gather these designations for what is higher into a unified thesis. The question of the agent behind the *Werkzeug* therefore remains unanswered, but the language Jünger uses invites us to think about it in quasi-religious terms. How is his ideal soldier different from an *instrument of God* for example? This question drives the following section.

2.3 Functionality extended: the meaning of work according to Max Weber and Giorgio Agamben

The model of effective functioning just outlined underwrites Jünger's theory of the Gestalt of the Worker. So, I want to digress briefly to consider the context around this understanding of work, which partly explains why an author like Jünger can adopt it as a metaphysically significant principle. What understanding of work is he building on and what does it mean to elevate this kind of working to the status of being an end in itself, a *l'art pour l'art* reconceived as work for work? Considering this in depth should make clear that there is a certain form-centeredness to

⁹³ *KiE*, 103.

this theory of working that is amenable to the addition of the term “Gestalt” to create the Gestalt of the Worker.

In *Die protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus* (1904-05), Max Weber attempted to define and explain the new mode of working that had begun to dominate not only the working day in modern industrial societies, but what people saw as the purpose of labor. Weber was convinced that capitalism was successful at creating profit because at its core was an ideology of working that treated one’s job (*Beruf*) as an end in itself. This was fundamentally different from the formerly dominant understanding of work as a means of subsistence that one has to engage in to survive, but would be better off avoiding, if it were possible. Weber phrases this outdated mantra as “wie bei einem Maximum von Bequemlichkeit und einem Minimum von Leistung dennoch der gewohnte Lohn zu gewinnen sei.”⁹⁴ In contrast, capitalism at its most successful and efficient requires “nicht nur ein entwickeltes Verantwortlichkeitsgefühl” but the ability to treat work “als ob sie [die Arbeit E.M.] absoluter *Selbstzweck* –“Beruf”– wäre.”⁹⁵ Such a change is “nichts Naturgegebenes” but rather “das Produkt eines lang andauernden ‘Erziehungsprozesses.’”⁹⁶

Weber’s famous genealogy of this drive to work argues that the spirit of capitalism developed out of Calvinist teachings on work, which emphasized that tireless activity–“rastlose Berufsarbeit”– was immanent evidence that an individual was one of God’s chosen.⁹⁷ This model of work, which originates, according to Weber, primarily in reformed communities in Britain and America, has much in common with the monastic asceticism of the middle ages.⁹⁸ Reformed

⁹⁴ Max Weber, *Die Protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-07432-6>

⁹⁵ Weber, 48.

⁹⁶ Weber, 48.

⁹⁷ Weber, 94.

⁹⁸ “Die religiöse Wertung der rastlosen, stetigen, systematischen, weltlichen Berufsarbeit als schlechthin höchsten asketischen Mittels und zugleich sicherster und sichtbarster Bewährung des wiedergeborenen Menschen und seiner

churches had brought “die Askese aus den Mönchszellen heraus in das Berufsleben.”⁹⁹ So, while working describes mundane activities belonging to the physical world, it nevertheless takes on a religious significance. This does not alter the kinds of work people do, but rather the purpose of working. It is not what one does but the inexhaustible effort with which one does it that are significant, because “die Arbeit ist darüber hinaus, und vor allem, von Gott vorgeschriebener *Selbstzweck* des Lebens überhaupt.”¹⁰⁰ There is a contradiction at work here because, as long as God is in the picture, this *Selbstzweck* is never actually for itself. Rather, it is a material sign that indicates the presence of something higher: a transcendent absolute that gives work its special status.

Weber sees the extraordinary feature of this model of work in the fact that it can continue to function as an end in itself even once God is taken out of the equation. “Heute ist ihr Geist – ob endgültig, wer weiß es? – aus diesem Gehäuse entwichen. Der siegreiche Kapitalismus jedenfalls bedarf, seit er auf mechanischer Grundlage ruht, dieser Stütze nicht mehr.”¹⁰¹ Cloaked in secularity, the capitalist “spirit” finds its way, according to Weber, into other areas of life, such as the military: “Das asketische Prinzip der ‘Selbstbeherrschung’ machte den Puritanismus auch mit zum Vater der modernen militärischen Disziplin.”¹⁰² This suggests a direct link between the spirit Weber identifies and the experience of soldiering that Jünger bases his theory on.

At the same time as Weber was engaged in this investigation into the roots of the capitalist work ethic, engineers and economists were working to harness and implement that

Glaubensechtheit mußte ja der denkbar mächtigste Hebel der Expansion jener Lebensauffassung sein, die wir hier als ‘Geist’ des Kapitalismus bezeichnet haben.” Weber, 165.

⁹⁹ Weber, 171.

¹⁰⁰ Weber, 147.

¹⁰¹ Weber, 171.

¹⁰² Weber, 102 (footnote).

ethic as effectively as possible. A new science of management had arisen in the nineteenth century, the aim of which was to increase worker productivity. One of the most prominent figures of this movement was the mechanical engineer Frederick Taylor. Taylor's system, called "scientific management," was especially popular in Germany after WWI (although Fordism was also influential) as industrialists keen to rebuild the economy set up institutions devoted to implementing his theories.¹⁰³ In a nutshell, Taylor's research into productivity was aimed at increasing efficiency of both workers and machines by cutting down on any unnecessary expenditure of energy. He ended up applying similar principles both to the worker and the tools, thereby automating both as much as possible. For Taylor, machines should have "well designed machinist operators whose work should be broken down into 'operational elements' or 'tasks' [...] to determine the quickest time such tasks could be accomplished."¹⁰⁴ Improving worker efficiency meant removing as much decision making power from the worker as possible. Instead of using a complex set of skills, workers needed to follow instructions written on cards by managers.¹⁰⁵ "Work was to become disciplined participation in industrial society's progress. Alternative views are eliminated by assumption."¹⁰⁶ The end-goal of Taylor's system was a "mutually income-enhancing division of labor."¹⁰⁷

Despite the rancor that Taylorism caused among workers, there was also widespread acquiescence to this automation of the human subject, which Peter Borscheid explains in terms

¹⁰³ Peter Borscheid details this development and names the *Ausschuß für Zeitstudien* within the *Ausschuss für Wirtschaftliche Fertigung* (AWF) and the *Reichskuratorium für Wirtschaftlichkeit* as examples of institutions that were devoted to the theory. Borscheid, "Die Tempomacher: die Rationalisierungsbewegung und die Beschleunigung des Lebens in den Weimarer Jahren," *Zeitschrift Für Unternehmensgeschichte* 41, no.2 (1996), 129. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40695662>.

¹⁰⁴ G.W. Clark, "Machine-Stop Engineering Roots of Taylorism" in *Scientific Management: Frederick Taylor's Gift to the World?*, eds. Hugo J. Kijne and J.-C. Spender (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 48-49.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, 49.

¹⁰⁶ J.-C. Spender, "Villain, Victim or Visionary?: The insights and flaws in F.W. Taylor's ideas," in *Scientific Management: Frederick Taylor's Gift to the World?*, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Spender, 20.

of a general “Tempolust” in the post-WWI era that many segments of society identified with modernity.¹⁰⁸ While some contemporary critics claimed Taylorism was not fit to serve “den geistigen Bedürfnissen eines Kulturvolkes,” there was nevertheless widespread enthusiasm for “Leistungssteigerungen” in all areas of life.¹⁰⁹ The reduction of the worker to pure functioning, which could be sped up or slowed down through effective time management and mechanization, was a new idea, one that was successfully lampooned by Charles Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936). But anxiety regarding the end-goal of all this efficiency was mixed with fascination. This ambivalent attitude was captured in the well-known scene in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), in which the workers who keep the city’s machine running appear in a choreographed dance that references factory work but cannot be mistaken for it.¹¹⁰

Giorgio Agamben provides a more recent analysis of these trends, likewise with a focus on the Christian tradition, highlighting the way that acting effectively became synonymous with *being* effective. In *Opus Dei*, his work on the evolution of what he terms “operativity” as a metaphysically-grounded moral concept, Agamben argues that the institution of the priestly office by the Christian church gave newfound importance to the concepts of operativity and effectiveness in both theology and philosophy. Agamben’s genealogy argues that the early church needed to make a distinction between the office of the priest and Christ, who was understood to be the true agent guaranteeing the salvific effects of the liturgical activity performed by the priest. This meant that those administering the most important functions of the church came to be understood as instruments, whose being was determined by their effective operativity *as instruments* of divine actions.

¹⁰⁸ Borscheid, “Die Tempomacher,” 125, 138.

¹⁰⁹ Adolf Halfeld, *Amerika und Amerikanismus*, quoted in Borscheid, “Die Tempomacher,” 133; “Die Tempomacher,” 137.

¹¹⁰ *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang, 0:13:50 to 0:17:50.

[Being] coincides without remainder with effectiveness, *in the sense that it does not simply exist but must be effectuated and actualized*. What is decisive is no longer the work as a stable dwelling in presence but *operativity*, understood as a threshold in which being and acting, potential and act, working and work, efficacy and effect, *Wirkung* and *Wirklichkeit* enter into a reciprocal tension and tend to become undecidable.¹¹¹

Within the scope of the operation, the act becomes its own end and the performance becomes identical with reality. Agamben writes that “operativity and effectiveness define [...] the ontological paradigm that in the course of a centuries-long process has replaced that of classical philosophy,” meaning that, in contemporary thinking, “being and acting” have “no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real.”¹¹²

Agamben is critical of this history because of the overly large role that duty, order and command take on once this definition of being escapes the world of the religious order and enters society at large, just as for Weber monastic asceticism left the monastery and became worldly asceticism.¹¹³ Putting to one side this larger argument, I want to suggest that the importance of functionality to Jünger’s theory cannot be properly appreciated without reference to the trends both Agamben and Weber identify. Agamben’s argument is especially relevant insofar as he presents a case in which a subject carrying out an action necessarily becomes “indifferent to the ethical quality of his action” because the act does not belong to the one performing it.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 47.

¹¹² Agamben, xii-xiii.

¹¹³ Agamben’s genealogy of office is a kind of prolegomena to a philosophy that attempts to free ethics and politics of this legacy. “If being does not exist, but must actualize itself, then in its very essence it is will and command; and vice versa, if being is will, then it does not simply exist but has to be. The problem of the coming philosophy is that of thinking an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will.” Agamben, 129.

¹¹⁴ Agamben, 54.

Agamben's and Weber's analyses converge on the issue of the *Selbstzweck*, or self-justification of work, operativity, or functionality, as I have termed it here. Both accounts agree that at some point the subject transitions from functioning as an instrument of a higher power to simply functioning, and yet the religious value attached to such action persists in the absence of an absolute authority. Jünger's writing absorbs these ideas about effective functioning, but it also reflects the pressure to maintain the metaphysical significance of activity in the absence of higher values. All three thinkers recognize that even though actions can become self-justifying or autotelic, some kind of need to explain what it is all for remains. We may want to think back to Nietzsche's unanswered question—"Es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die Antwort auf das 'Warum'?"—as the threshold to nihilism. Jünger is not content to stop at functionality or claim that working for its own sake can continue indefinitely. Even if the soldier could be satisfied with nothing but functionality in the long term, there is still the issue of who has the authority to give the command, which comes back to the important question of *Herrschaft* and what kind of principles genuine *Herrschaft* could be grounded in. Jünger writes: "Die Entscheidung über Krieg und Frieden ist das höchste Regal. Als solches setzt sie eine Armee voraus, die als Instrument eines fürstlichen Willens gehandhabt zu werden vermag."¹¹⁵ But who are the "Fürsten" of post-war Europe?

Jünger wants to make the case that functionality can be an end in itself so that, as already mentioned, "wer für einen Irrtum starb, bleibt doch ein Held." If functionality is autotelic, then even if the supposed cause that was fought for turns out to be false, the meaning of the effort is salvaged. But he also sees that, beyond the battlefield, there needs to be a way other than rank and military hierarchy to determine what grounds the authority of a command.¹¹⁶ Authority has

¹¹⁵ *Schmerz*, 178-9.

¹¹⁶ *KiE*, 100-101.

to be able to harness the “elementare[] Kräfte” that Jünger argues are still active everywhere.¹¹⁷ Leadership must be able to speak “eine elementare Befehlssprache.”¹¹⁸

The danger that Jünger appears to want to skirt is to posit a notion of working that is no different from Taylorism, which is also a model for achieving effective functioning, but without any kind of heroic end in mind. Taylorist efficiency is driven by the motive of mutual profit, hence it leaves no space for anything beyond the satisfaction of material needs.¹¹⁹ Weber’s observation that capitalism is now automated—“auf mechanischer Grundlage ruht”—and hence no longer requires any spiritual principle would be anathema to Jünger, who rejects a system that aims at nothing beyond materialism or efficiency for its own sake. At one point in *Der Arbeiter*, he seems to allude directly to the efficiency principle that was in vogue at the time:

Wer eine Herrschaft der wirklich produzierenden Kräfte wünscht, muß auch fähig sein, von der wirklichen Produktion als von einer großen und umfassenden Fruchtbarkeit sich eine Vorstellung zu machen, die aufs Ganze geht. Denn nicht darauf kommt es, die Welt zu schematisieren, sie über die Leisten irgendwelcher Spezialsprüche zu schlagen, sondern darauf, sie zu verdauen. Solange monotone Geister an der Arbeit sind, kann die Zukunft unter keinem anderen Aspekt erscheinen als unter dem der Nüchternheit.¹²⁰

There may be a slight play on *das Ganze* in the idiomatic phrase that means “to go all the way.” But even just taking the passage on its face, there is a clear difference between Taylor’s efficiency and what Jünger is suggesting, which is a productive, fertile plan rather than simply a production plan, an excessive plan under the aegis of *Rausch* rather than *Nüchternheit*. Note the

¹¹⁷ A, 62.

¹¹⁸ A, 168.

¹¹⁹ Taylor phrased the argument in favor of adopting scientific management in the following way: “The general adoption of scientific management would readily in the future double the productivity of the average man engaged in industrial work. Think of what this means to the whole country. Think of the increase, both in the necessities and luxuries of life, which becomes available for the whole country, of the possibility of shortening the hours of labor when this is desirable, and of the increased opportunities for education, culture, and recreation which this implies. But while the whole world would profit by this increase in production, the manufacturer and the workman will be far more interested in the especial local gain that comes to them and to the people immediately around them.” Friedrich Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919), 142. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044014496327>.

¹²⁰ A, 97.

impersonal language attached to *Herrschaft*: the productive powers are the ones in control, not any person who manages to see the whole. Jünger is imagining a kind of self-organization of mutually functioning units, whose tasks are not menial, because they belong to a larger structure.

In *Der Arbeiter*, Jünger is more explicit about the soldier's dual character. On the one hand, he functions like a machine and his virtue lies in his replaceability; on the other, he must will his ascendance above base materialism, his aim should be "nicht nur Material, sondern zugleich Träger des Schicksals zu sein."¹²¹ Somewhat counterintuitively, success in the first instance activates the second: "Der Einzelne [erscheint] unter heroischen Aspekten auf der einen Seite als der Unbekannte Soldat, der auf den Schlachtfeldern der Arbeit vernichtet wird" but "eben deshalb" the same subject appears as "der Herr und Ordner der Welt als gebietender Typus im Besitze einer bisher nur dunkel geahnten Machtvollkommenheit."¹²² The alternative, functionality without a higher purpose, leads to a sense that nothing has any meaning or value: nihilism, to put it simply.

In *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Nietzsche claimed that suffering became unbearable only when it appeared meaningless, which was the reason that many people clung on to the so-called ascetic ideals that could at least provide the illusion of meaning.¹²³ Jünger does not pursue the question of whether and how physical pain and injury should be avoided, his essay "Über den Schmerz," which I will discuss shortly, makes the case for the utility of pain, but he does want to prevent the kind of spiritual or mental suffering occasioned by the lack of any higher purpose behind physical agony.¹²⁴ Without neglecting to describe the intense pain of his own battle

¹²¹ A, 70.

¹²² A, 47.

¹²³ See Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, 411.

¹²⁴ This is a very similar argument to one we find at the end of Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral*: "Er [der Mensch E.M.] litt auch sonst, er war in der Hauptsache ein *krankhaftes* Tier: aber *nicht* das Leiden selbst war sein Problem, sondern daß die Antwort fehlte für den Schrei der Frage 'wozu leiden?' Der Mensch, das tapferste und

wounds, he is quite clear in his argument that neither pain nor death are the direct cause of suffering, which is rather a mental state that comes about when pain and death find no justification.¹²⁵ He records this phenomenon in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*: “Furchtbar sind die Rufe der einsam Sterbenden, die aus dem Dunkel heraus in langen Pausen anschwellen und verklingen wie die von Tieren, die nicht wissen, warum sie leiden müssen.”¹²⁶ Jünger is not in principle opposed to unleashing the animalistic side of human subjectivity and comparisons with animals have appeared in several quotes already, but it is important for him that the individual is never reduced to a state of pure animality, as in this passage.

2.4 Beyond discipline—Über den Schmerz and “Verhaltenslehren”

There is a lot at stake, then, in leaving room for something higher that justifies the soldier’s labor as well as his physical agony. The presence of a purpose behind the work of soldiering is what elevates the human subject above the animal, but it is also what differentiates a person from being *just* an instrument. In the same way the human body should never be reduced to a suffering animal body, so it must never be seen as only a device, or material, because this too will cause intense suffering, as in this passage describing wounded soldiers in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*: “Sie sind wirklich Material, Material, das die Idee, ohne daß sie es wissen, für ihre Ziele verbrennt [...] das ist die Ursache ihrer Leiden.”¹²⁷ There is a tension at this point in Jünger’s thinking between seeing functionality as its own reward, so to speak, and the need to

leidgewohnteste Tier, verneint an sich *nicht* das Leiden; er *will* es, er sucht es selbst auf, vorausgesetzt, daß man ihm einen *Sinn* dafür aufzeigt, ein *Dazu* des Leidens.” KSA 5, 411.

¹²⁵ Jünger was likely aware of this line from Nietzsche’s *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*: “Die tieferen Menschen haben zu allen Zeiten gerade deshalb Mitleiden mit den Thieren gehabt, weil sie am Leben leiden und doch nicht die Kraft besitzen, den Stachel des Leidens wider sich selbst zu kehren und ihr Dasein metaphysisch zu verstehen; ja es empört im tiefsten Grunde, das sinnlose Leiden zu sehen.” KSA 1, 377.

¹²⁶ *KiE*, 88.

¹²⁷ *KiE*, 81.

identify a higher principle. No term that Jünger employs here seems sufficient, which is one way to explain why he varies the language he uses to describe it, whether “Schicksal,” “Idee,” “höherer Wille” or something else.

The problem reemerges in the 1934 essay *Über den Schmerz*, in which Jünger explores the idea that pain and the disciplined response to it might serve as self-justifying measures of authority. Here, the willingness to submit the body to pain and sacrifice it for a higher principle is presented as a way that nihilism may be confronted and overcome.¹²⁸ Jünger argues that society finds itself “in einer sehr merkwürdigen [...] Phase des Nihilismus” in which “neue Ordnungen” have already begun to emerge, but that “die diesen Ordnungen entsprechenden Werte noch nicht sichtbar geworden sind.”¹²⁹ The *Schmerz* essay sees part of the answer in new attitudes to the body and selfhood. Jünger argues that technology, whether in the form of anesthesia, photography, armaments or the automobile, is changing long-held views on the object-status of the self. Anesthesia, for example, has altered people’s relationship to pain. As a result, this technology has changed how they view the body: “So erscheint die Narkose auf der eine Seite als eine Befreiung vom Schmerz, auf der anderen verwandelt sie den Körper in ein Objekt, dem das mechanischen Eingriff in der Art eines leblosen Stoffes offensteht.”¹³⁰

The *Schmerz* essay concludes that pain, as a phenomenon of convergence between the body and metaphysics, that is, between the body’s experience of objective reality and the invisible principles that express themselves within that reality, can serve as a measure of one’s connection to these principles: “Wo kein Wert standhält, bleibt die auf den Schmerz gerichtete

¹²⁸ Primavera-Lévy makes a similar argument vis a vis pain as the site where Jünger seeks to overcome nihilism, beginning with *Über den Schmerz* and *Der Arbeiter* but extending to the author’s post-WWII texts. “Jünger begreift den Schmerz als einzigen Wert, der nach dem Niedergang aller anderen Werte bestehen bleibt. Somit ist er konsistent, wenn dieser Schmerz-Wert als rettende Kraft bestimmt wird.” Primavera-Lévy, *Die Bewahrer der Schmerzen*, 209.

¹²⁹ *Schmerz*, 190.

¹³⁰ *Schmerz*, 188.

Bewegung als ein erstaunliches Zeichen bestehen: in ihr verrät sich der negative Abdruck einer metaphysischen Struktur.”¹³¹ This passage reads as deliberately mysterious, what is a negative imprint of a metaphysical structure? It is helpful to bear in mind here that Jünger’s essay is less about different types of pain and their perception, than it is about the situations, or the *Räume*, in which pain becomes an unavoidable fact, the battlefield especially. Pain belongs to a realm that is central to Jünger’s thinking: the realm of violence. Pain then is like a trace left within the body from coming into contact with the violence of historical events.¹³² In this context, discipline in the face of pain can act as an indicator that one is in concert with these, rather than struggling against their necessity, because to be disciplined means “das Leben völlig in der Gewalt zu halten, damit es zu jeder Stunde im Sinn einer höheren Ordnung zum Einsatz gebracht werden kann.”¹³³ Jünger’s ideal subject, his model of what he terms the new “Feldherr,” is willing to treat the body as material that will be used up, but he must avoid becoming just material. What comes through here once again is the intense concentration on order and structure as indicators of a higher principle. *Über den Schmerz* calls for a striking level of discipline and the will to self-sacrifice, a violence against the self even, in order to avoid falling into nihilism.

Jünger’s focus on discipline as a measure is not without basis; it develops against the backdrop of what Helmut Lethen theorizes under the heading of “neusachliche Verhaltenslehren.” Lethen’s account provides a detailed genealogy for the codes of behavior that influenced intellectuals in the post WWI period and the assumptions about human nature that these entailed. The war had given fresh support to a “pessimistic anthropology,” the central

¹³¹ *Schmerz*, 190-191.

¹³² Cf. Marcus Bullock, who suggests one of the strengths of Jünger’s writing is “to uncover currents of time and continuity in the experience of violence.” Bullock, *The Violent Eye: Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions on the European Right* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 182.

¹³³ *Schmerz*, 159.

assumption of which was that “der Mensch ‘von Natus aus’ zur Destruktion neigt und die Zivilisation einen barbarischen Kern hat.”¹³⁴ In response to this, writers of the 20s and 30s became increasingly interested in the role of comportment in building and maintaining an effective political and interpersonal culture.¹³⁵ In Lethen’s account, WWI had left behind “[ein] desorientierte[s] Subjekt” in need of instructions, an “external voice,” for how to act and how to be in a radically altered social setting. This need spawned books and theories devoted to analyzing how people performed and maintained a certain character in social settings while deemphasizing what people thought or felt, so-called *Verhaltenslehren*.¹³⁶ Lethen summarizes it so: “Verhaltenslehren üben strategisch angelegte Selbstinszenierungen ein: ihr Ziel ist das Training eines funktionalen Ich.”¹³⁷

Lethen is interested in how figures like Jünger interpret this promise of “Selbstinszenierung,” which turns behavior into a studied artform of self-control and maintaining distance.¹³⁸ He suggests there is paradox at work in the *Verhaltenslehren*: “Einerseits manifestiert sich in ihnen das Einverständnis mit dem Objektstatus des Menschen, andererseits halten sie trotzig an der Machbarkeit des Schicksals fest.”¹³⁹ In the *Schmerz* essay, Jünger alludes to an ideal subject, who is able “sich selbst als Objekt zu sehen,” an ability not to be confused

¹³⁴ Helmuth Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 7.

¹³⁵ Lethen’s account is wide-ranging and drawn from many sources, including the anthropologist Helmuth Plessner and the psychologist Karl Bühler. The “neusachlichen Verhaltenslehren” as he calls them were a kind of leitmotif for different authors and thinkers, including, among many, Ernst Jünger, Bertolt Brecht, Max Weber and Martin Heidegger. Lethen’s point is that the ideas associated with this sort of anthropology were more attractive to thinkers of the avant-garde, as opposed to the group of authors he considers “modernists”: Thomas Mann, Hugo v. Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, for example. Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte*, 21-22

¹³⁶ Lethen, 64.

¹³⁷ Lethen, 36.

¹³⁸ It should be noted that Lethen is critical in his assessment of *Über den Schmerz* and *Der Arbeiter* because of their reflexive dismissal of the spheres of ethics and morality: “Ihr Grundtenor ist von Aggression bestimmt, ihr Vokabular nicht frei von Sadismus.” Lethen, 187.

¹³⁹ Lethen, 37.

with “eine Psychologie alten Stils.”¹⁴⁰ Lethen argues that for writers of Jünger’s generation such self-objectification was bound up not with passivity, but the opposite: it opened up a new realm of action. “Die Bejahung des Ganges der Dinge ist der verzweifelte Versuch einer neusachlichen Generation, sich in die Fremdsteuerung einzuschalten, um in der List des Einverständnisses an der Kraft der historischen Prozesses teilzuhaben und dadurch den Glanz der Täterschaft zu erneuern.”¹⁴¹ Against this backdrop, it is possible to appreciate why Jünger elevates the objectification of the body and the submission of the self in the way that he does: self-objectification and self-styling go hand in hand. Collectively understood, the *Verhaltenslehren* develop methods of forming the self and maintaining that form as a way of avoiding the actual lack of a higher principle to one’s actions. One hopes that by objectifying the body, the self gives the impression of being in concert with historical processes, which serves as a defense mechanism against the actually overwhelming course of events.

Über den Schmerz takes the deindividualized, objectified subject as a historical given and puts forward a model of how to use this to one’s advantage, but the author is aware that this program cannot be the definitive answer to the problem of nihilism. At certain points in this essay it appears that Jünger is willing to consider the disciplined imperviousness to pain as the answer to the question of authority in the technological age: “Der Schmerz [ist] der einzige Maßstab, der sichere Aufschlüsse verspricht.”¹⁴² But the end of *Über den Schmerz* reveals that this is only a half-way point to something else that remains unknown and unseen. Jünger describes the present as a period of disorder awaiting release: “Man begreift das Nebeneinander von hoher organisatorischer Fähigkeit und der völligen Farbenblindheit gegenüber dem Wert,

¹⁴⁰ *Schmerz*, 181.

¹⁴¹ Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte*, 37.

¹⁴² *Schmerz*, 191.

den Glauben ohne Inhalte, die Disziplin ohne Legitimation. ”¹⁴³ This period should be the followed by “[die] Errichtung neuer Feldherrnzeichen,” though Jünger does not elaborate on what these will be.¹⁴⁴ The sense of imminent breakthrough that permeated *Der Arbeiter*, published two years earlier, is missing from the later essay.

Über den Schmerz is an attempt by the author to wind down some of the more radical positions he takes in the earlier text while extending the theory of the Worker/soldier as a new human “type.” There is still the same drive to transform metaphysical speculation into a politically salient theory, but the later essay lacks access to a central principle: he makes no mention of the Gestalt of the Worker, nor is there any programmatic focus on *Herrschaft*. *Über den Schmerz* gives the impression of an addendum to *Der Arbeiter* that explores the place of pain in the modern world with oblique references to the earlier text, but without developing a consistent theory of its own. In the preface to the collection where the essay appeared, Jünger singled it out as a text that attempts to further think through what *Der Arbeiter* started: “Unter meinen Arbeiten steht diese ‘am weitesten vorn.’ Sie springt aus der im ‘Arbeiter’ festgelegten Stellung wie ein Laufgraben vor.”¹⁴⁵

There are some important points to draw from this brief consideration of *Über den Schmerz* and *Der Arbeiter* side by side. Firstly, it furthers the argument I made earlier about the unique position of *Der Arbeiter* in Jünger’s body of work. By attempting to define the ordering principle that his other essays and autobiography only hint at, *Der Arbeiter* becomes a substantially different sort of text, more philosophical, less like social commentary and generally more systematic. More importantly though it tells us something about what the Gestalt

¹⁴³ *Schmerz*, 190.

¹⁴⁴ *Schmerz*, 191 .

¹⁴⁵ Jünger, “Vorwort zu ‘Blätter und Steine’,” SW 14, 163.

contributes to Jünger's thinking. On the one hand, it seems that formalism is central to how Jünger conceives of the ideal human subject and that the term *Gestalt* is not necessary to express this. In the *Schmerz* essay, "form" becomes synonymous with discipline—"[als] Disziplin bezeichneten wir die Form, durch die der Mensch die Berührung mit dem Schmerze aufrechterhält"—which seems in line with Jünger's reflections on discipline in the war books.¹⁴⁶ It is evident though that without access to a central principle, the theory loses the decisiveness and polemical force of *Der Arbeiter*.

There are undoubtedly historical reasons that can explain why Jünger produces a less radical, more conventional essay at this point in time. His reaction to the National Socialist takeover was to rapidly curtail his engagement with political ideas and to downplay the political nature of his previously published works.¹⁴⁷ The concept of the *Gestalt* is clearly more than just a name; while it does not exhaust Jünger's application of form to the socio-political sphere, it nevertheless adds something tangible to it. In order to better understand why this is the case, I want to take a closer look now at where the *Gestalt* concept comes from and why it becomes so central to *Der Arbeiter*.

As I indicated in my introduction to this chapter, *Gestalt*/the *Gestalt* of the Worker have been difficult terms for readers of Jünger to clearly define. Before considering how he uses this term in *Der Arbeiter*, I want to examine what kind of theoretical baggage he takes on when he imports the history of aesthetic form conceived under the concept of *Gestalt* in German thought into the concept of functionality. By combining this aesthetic legacy with effective functioning,

¹⁴⁶ *Schmerz*, 164-165.

¹⁴⁷ Matthias Schöning writes: "Auch wenn man über die konkreten Gründe der realen Autorperson noch immer zu wenig weiß – aus Vorsicht hat Jünger nach einer Hausdurchsuchung zahlreiche Selbstzeugnisse der frühen NS-Zeit vernichtet –, ist unübersehbar, dass Jünger sich gerade nicht als Avantgardist der NS-Bewegung reinterpretiert hat. Auch die punktuellen Kontakte mit Personen aus Hitlers Umgebung werden nicht erneuert." Schöning, "Kriegserfahrung und politische Autorschaft," 17. For details on the infamous raid of Jünger's Berlin residence and his complicated relationship with the new regime see Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, esp. 356-360.

he gives the term its unique flavor in *Der Arbeiter*. Looking at this history will allow us to see where and how Jünger makes his intervention.

One peculiar aspect of Jünger's decision to adopt the term *Gestalt* in his writing is its anachronistic timing: the "Gestaltbegriff" entered discourse in earnest in the late eighteenth century though Goethe's use of the term in his writings on morphology.¹⁴⁸ It enjoyed a renaissance in scientific and artistic circles around the fin de siècle, about 30 years prior to the publication of *Der Arbeiter*. Jünger initially employs "Gestalt" in an unsystematic way, then very deliberately as the Gestalt of the Worker in *Der Arbeiter*. He then continues to use it for many decades, long after it fades from mainstream discourse entirely, but he will drop "Arbeiter" and use it as a standalone term. The essay "Name, Typus, Gestalt" is published in 1963; "Prognosen", which speaks of a "Gestaltwandel," appears in 1993. It is not possible here to examine the history of this concept in detail, but I want to suggest that Jünger's deployment of it is both continuous with some aspects of Gestalt theory as well as a major break. The following outline will therefore be brief and pick up on the most relevant elements of the concept for Jünger's thinking.

2.5 A brief history of the Gestalt concept and Jünger's intervention

At the beginning of the twentieth century, thinkers from a range of scientific disciplines adopted the term *Gestalt* in order to challenge prevailing trends in the sciences that favored a positivist and mechanical view of biological life and human perception.¹⁴⁹ Scholars in the humanities

¹⁴⁸ Annette Simonis argues that "der Gestaltbegriff von Anfang an mit der Goetheschen Aura aufs engste verschränkt ist und im deutschen Sprachraum von dort einen wesentlichen Teil seiner Attraktivität bezieht." Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin*, 15-16.

¹⁴⁹ Martin Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

meanwhile saw in the Gestalt concept the promise of an objective, scientific way to understand aesthetic concepts like beauty, form, and creativity.¹⁵⁰ Gestalt seemed to offer the possibility of finding a middle ground between natural science and the arts by showing how both develop according to similar laws. This was the perspective developed by Goethe, who employed the term in his writings on morphology to refer to the wholeness of perpetually developing organic forms or “die lebendigen Bildungen.”¹⁵¹ For Goethe, the aim of morphology was to capture what chemical and anatomical studies of living organisms could not grasp: the living force that unites the parts into the whole since “[jedes] Lebendige ist kein Einzelnes, sondern eine Mehrheit.”¹⁵² This approach would fulfill one of the central aims of scientific inquiry: “Es hat sich [...] in dem wissenschaftlichen Menschen zu allen Zeiten ein Trieb hervorgethan, die lebendigen Bildungen als solche zu erkennen, ihre äußern, sichtbaren, greiflichen Teile im Zusammenhange zu erfassen, sie als Andeutungen des Innern aufzunehmen und so das Ganze in der Anschauung gewissermaßen zu beherrschen.”¹⁵³

The term *Gestalt* had an ambivalent role in this project. On the one hand, it did justice to the “komplex des Daseins” by pointing to the existence of a fixed element in the moving system, that which makes a living being what it is in spite of the visible changes it undergoes over time.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, Gestalt is not easy to either identify or define: “Betrachten wir [...] alle Gestalten, besonders die organischen, so finden wir, daß nirgends ein Bestehendes, nirgends ein Ruhendes, ein Abgeschlossenes vorkommt, sondern daß vielmehr alles in einer steten

¹⁵⁰ “Die Reflexion über Gestalt verspricht ihren Verfechtern, Antworten oder zumindest Hinweise zu geben, um das Rätsel des Lebendigen und des Ursprungs der Formen zu lösen (Goethe), das Geheimnis der Kreativität zu enthüllen (Simmel), das Zustandegekommen der schönen bzw. stimmigen Form oder die Bedingungen des gelungenen Kunstwerks (Carl Einstein, Adorno) zu beleuchten.” Simonis, *Gestalt Theorie von Goethe bis Benjamin*, 4.

¹⁵¹ J. W. Goethe, *Schriften zur Morphologie, Sämtliche Werke: Briefe, Tagebücher Und Gespräche*, vol. 24, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 391.

¹⁵² Goethe, 392.

¹⁵³ Goethe, 391.

¹⁵⁴ Goethe, 392.

Bewegung schwanke.”¹⁵⁵ For this reason, Goethe emphasized that the Gestalt concept did not describe a permanent state of affairs: “Wollen wir also eine Morphologie einleiten, so dürfen wir nicht von Gestalt sprechen: sondern wenn wir das Wort brauchen, uns allenfalls dabei nur die Idee, den Begriff oder ein in der Erfahrung nur für den Augenblick Festgehaltenes denken.”¹⁵⁶ Hence the phrase from a short fragment on morphology that states “Gestaltlehre ist Verwandlungslehre.”¹⁵⁷

Jünger’s use of the term mimics Goethe’s in many ways, although the extent of direct influence is unclear. Jünger had been an avid reader of Goethe since his school days and recorded an intense engagement with his work on many occasions as an adult.¹⁵⁸ Scholars have noted that Jünger’s reflections on nature, especially in *Das abenteuerliche Herz* (1929/1938), display affinities to Goethe’s thinking on the natural sciences.¹⁵⁹ But we can see traces of Goethe’s language in many of Jünger’s works. In an article titled “Der Wille zur Gestalt,” for example, Jünger refers to the importance of “morphologische Betrachtung.”¹⁶⁰ At the same time, we should be wary of attributing Jünger’s adoption of the Gestalt concept to Goethe alone, since it was used by many authors Jünger was familiar with, including Spengler. Jünger actually recorded his surprise at discovering the similarity between his and Goethe’s use of Gestalt almost 40 years after publishing *Der Arbeiter*, suggesting he was unfamiliar with the precise way in which Goethe used the term.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Goethe, 392

¹⁵⁶ Goethe, 392.

¹⁵⁷ Goethe, 349. Cf. Daniel Carranza. “The Gift of Metamorphosis: Goethe’s Poetic Science of Form,” (PhD Diss., University of Chicago, 2020), 13. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gift-metamorphosis-goethes-poetic-science-form/docview/2424512800/se-2>.

¹⁵⁸ Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, 227; 211.

¹⁵⁹ See Gregor Streim, “Das Abenteuerliche Herz,” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 136-137.

¹⁶⁰ Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 491.

¹⁶¹ According to Figal, it was not until 1970 that Jünger began to seriously engage with Goethe’s *Gestaltbegriff*. Günter Figal, “Gestalt und Gestaltwandel: Morphologie bei Jünger und Goethe” in *Morphologie und Moderne*:

Jünger likely absorbed Gestalt thinking from a range of contemporary sources and Goethe was, after all, the primary reference for other Gestalt theorists, including the term's main fin de siècle promoter, Christian von Ehrenfels.¹⁶² Ehrenfels imported the term into psychology with his 1890 essay "Über Gestaltqualitäten," which aimed to show that the human experience of the world happened through the prism of so called "higher order" Gestalt qualities. In Ehrenfels's account, human perception of complex forms, such as a literary or musical style, as well as concepts that seem to exist apart from specific instantiations ("marriage" or "war"), had to be explained in terms of some essential quality that accompanied the perception of these things.¹⁶³ Ehrenfels called these "Gestalt qualities" and argued that these could not be reduced to either sensation or judgement and were neither clearly physical nor psychological.¹⁶⁴ These qualities existed within the human subject, but were also somehow independent of intention. Ehrenfels described them as "positive Vorstellungsinhalte."¹⁶⁵

The possibility, suggested by Ehrenfels's work, that Gestalt could clarify long-standing issues in epistemology and theories of perception electrified debate in the still-emerging field of psychology.¹⁶⁶ Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler deserve a brief mention here; all of them, in different ways, were interested in applying the theory of higher order forms to explain phenomena like motion perception and problem solving. The resulting Gestalt school emphasized the importance of form in ordering sensations. Form, according to this view, defines

Goethes 'anschauliches Denken' in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften Seit 1800, ed. Jonas Maatsch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 233-234.

¹⁶² Other authors that have been named as possible sources for Jünger's adoption of the term include Oswald Spengler, Graf Keyserling and Ludwig Klages. Cf. Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens*, 476, 621.

¹⁶³ For a summary of Ehrenfels's theory see Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 89.

¹⁶⁴ Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 90.

¹⁶⁵ Christian von Ehrenfels, "Über Gestaltqualitäten," in *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* (1890), 262.

¹⁶⁶ According to Ash, these problems were "so obviously relevant to both philosophical and broader cultural debates that nearly every philosopher and psychologist of the day had something to say about them." Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 90.

how people interact with the world. Rather than experiencing sensations in isolation, the mind grasps “Gebildefassungen,” which means “objects in a broad sense of the word, as well as “relational contexts.” They are something specifically different from and more than the summative totality of the individual components. Often the “whole” is grasped even before the individual parts enter our consciousness. The process of knowing [...] is very often a process of “centering”, of “structuring.”¹⁶⁷

At stake were more than academic issues about how humans perceived. Gestalt theory touched on questions of whether there was more to the human subject than what could be empirically observed and quantified, questions that continue to provoke debate.¹⁶⁸ In opposition to researchers who viewed nature (including the human subject) in mechanistic terms, so that they sought to explain complex processes in terms of the functioning of their component parts, Gestalt theorists wished to assert the primacy of immaterial categories like order, meaning and structure for human experience.¹⁶⁹ In their view, there was a fundamental difference between what the mind experiences as structures, forms etc. and collections or groups of individual components.¹⁷⁰ If it could be proven that the human subject added something irreducible, though intangible, to the world he or she perceived, then it would be feasible to assert that the human subject could not be reduced to his or her biology.¹⁷¹ As Martin Ash clarifies in his history of Gestalt Psychology in Germany, “Gestalt theorists asserted the primacy of perception over

¹⁶⁷ Gabrielle von Wartensleben, “Die christliche Persönlichkeit im Idealbild,” quoted in Ash, 123.

¹⁶⁸ Ash, 14.

¹⁶⁹ Mechanism continues to be influential in contemporary philosophy of science, eg. Bechtel and Abrahamsen’s definition: “A mechanism is a structure performing a function in virtue of its component parts, component operations, and their organization. The orchestrated functioning of the mechanism is responsible for one or more phenomena,” quoted in Carl Craver and James Tabery, “Mechanisms in Science,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/science-mechanisms/>

¹⁷⁰ Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 2.

¹⁷¹ Simonis summarizes this as the belief in “der Existenz eines Gestaltförmigen Mehrwerts im menschlichen Wahrnehmungsakt.” Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin*, 6-7.

sensations in the constitution of consciousness, and advanced a conception of the subject as involved in, rather than separated from the world [...] theirs was a quest for objective order that lies not behind, but within the flux of experience.”¹⁷²

Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler and their students were experimental psychologists; they attempted to back their theories with empirical evidence. But, as Ash points out they also “came from the cultured upper middle-class milieu that nurtured most of Germany’s academic scientists.”¹⁷³ Ash makes the case that Germany’s Gestalt theorists were for the most part cultivated humanists, “Bildungsbürger,” who emphasized “an aesthetic discourse of inherent order and meaning over technological categories of domination and control” and thus “reaffirmed Bildungsbürger values.”¹⁷⁴

This is not to say that Gestalt discourse was progressive. On the contrary, the term attracted many thinkers who rejected the technological and social changes that were then taking place in Europe. The most important, but not only example, is Oswald Spengler.¹⁷⁵ The first volume of Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* contained the heading “Gestalt und Wirklichkeit,” but the work was far removed from the experiments of Gestalt Psychologists. Spengler’s aim was to show that history was like a living organism that developed according to certain internal laws. Using Goethe as his main authority, Spengler argued that scientific and conceptually oriented theories of “the world” could never accurately grasp their object. Spengler’s theory was hostile to modern science, including logic, which he believed destroyed the imaginative and spiritual qualities necessary for human flourishing: “Je reiner eine Welt als ein ewig Werdendes angeschaut wird, desto zahlfremder ist die ungreifbare Fülle ihrer

¹⁷² Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 2

¹⁷³ Ash, 117.

¹⁷⁴ Ash, 306.

¹⁷⁵ Another example would be philosopher and psychologist Ludwig Klages.

Gestaltung. So unterscheidet sich hinsichtlich der Methode Goethes vielberufene ‘exakte’ sinnliche Fantasie, die das Lebendige unberührt läßt, von dem exakten, tötenden Verfahren der modernen Physik.”¹⁷⁶ “Der Verstand, der Begriff tötet in dem er erkennt,” he writes, while “das Anschauen beseelt.”¹⁷⁷

Despite the anti-scientific outlook that Spengler takes, the term *Gestalt* performs a similar task here as it does in Gestalt psychology. Both approaches seek to preserve an idea of the human that evades positivistic or mechanistic definitions. It is perhaps also useful to note in passing that, in a parallel movement, the Gestalt concept began to play an important role in art and philosophy. The list of thinkers who made use of the term or investigated its implications in their work includes some of the most influential writers of the era: Stefan George, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Georg Lukács, Carl Einstein and Walter Benjamin.¹⁷⁸ It should be noted, however, that none of these thinkers thematized Gestalt to the extent that Jünger did.

While all of these approaches were in the air in the lead up to Jünger’s literary career, the most likely direct influence may have been the biologist turned philosopher Hans Driesch. Driesch had carried out experiments on sea urchins and frog’s eggs in the 1890s and he believed that the results of these proved the existence of a dynamic teleology in nature.¹⁷⁹ Driesch was inspired by Germany’s long tradition of vitalism or vital materialism (the belief that living forms contain an irreducible “elementary force”). Driesch’s experiments convinced him that the ability of an organism to regenerate or to develop from a single part could not be explained by existing models of chemical or physical causation. Driesch borrowed an Aristotelian term, *entelechy*

¹⁷⁶ Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 140.

¹⁷⁷ Spengler, 147

¹⁷⁸ This list is taken from Annette Simonis, *Literarischer Ästhetizismus: Theorie der Arabesken und Hermetischen Kommunikation der Moderne* (Berlin: Max Niemeyer, 2000), 384. Simonis also includes Ernst Jünger on her list.

¹⁷⁹ Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 80-83.

(έντελέχεια), to suggest that biological reproduction was driven by an elementary force that could not be located in the organism's chemical makeup.

Driesch expanded these ideas to theorize about cognition and aspects of human experience like the will. Human activity, he argued, cannot be explained in terms of physical or chemical reactions but rather in terms of a qualitatively different *something* that we can only infer as existing.¹⁸⁰ What exactly was entelechy? “Mit dem eigentlich ‘Materiellen,’ mit dem eigentlichen Begriff des ‘Raumerfüllens’ und ‘Widerstandsleistens’ hat, selbst wenn dasselbe dynamisch gefaßt wird, Entelechie gar nichts zu tun.”¹⁸¹ In other words, Driesch claimed that biological and psychological processes were the result of immaterial but real forces.

Claims of this nature put Driesch at odds with other biologists and natural science more broadly, but they were of great interest to philosophers and, after a brief period teaching philosophy of natural science at Heidelberg, he transferred to the philosophical faculty there before moving on to other professorial appointments, including at the University of Leipzig.¹⁸² It was in this context that Jünger studied under Driesch when he enrolled at Leipzig in 1923.¹⁸³ Comparative studies of the two authors have identified a number of links to Driesch's philosophy of nature in Jünger's work, but what is of interest here is how Jünger changes the conversation.¹⁸⁴

The preceding examples provide important historical background and evidence for the kinds of debates about form that were current prior to Jünger writing *Der Arbeiter*. To summarize the most important aspects then, we can say that Gestalt is used to frame empirical

¹⁸⁰ Ash, 82.

¹⁸¹ Hans Driesch, *Der Vitalismus als Geschichte und als Lehre* (Leipzig: Barth, 1905) quoted in Marcel Weber, “Hans Drieschs Argumente Für Den Vitalismus,” *Philosophia Naturalis* 36, (January 1, 1999), 277. https://www.digizeitschriften.de/id/510319696_0036

¹⁸² Cf. Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*, 83.

¹⁸³ Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, 259-260.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, Bernd Stiegler, “Technik,” *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 352.

observations about nature or the human subject in terms of their vital wholeness. Gestalt-based approaches tend to identify constancy despite flux in terms of the outer form of a thing. In practice, this discourse is interdisciplinary and tends to blur the line between the arts and sciences. An even more essential feature is its acceptance of metaphysics. Whether in biology, psychology or the arts, the premise “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” implies in this case an “other,” an unseen something that cannot be observed but which is responsible for the “greater.” This is also the case when we consider Driesch’s entelechy, and he confirms this by denying that entelechy can be explained via either space or matter.

Another recurring feature of this peculiar concept is its reliance on observation. Both the Gestalt theorists and philosophers of nature like Driesch started from empirical observation (at least, this was their claim). They were attempting to theorize what they had witnessed and, for them, turning to the metaphysical realm posed no inherent threat to a scientific worldview. This is the case because what we observe are the objective expressions of Gestalt. Gestalt theory is therefore a way of explaining observable phenomena in terms of what we cannot observe. It is not in itself an observable entity. From this, we can say that Jünger is potentially the first writer to treat Gestalt as something that can be represented via something else. He is also unique in theorizing it as an active force that appears on the historical stage, rather than using the concept to interpret history, as Spengler does.

Another likely appeal of Gestalt theory for Jünger is the way that this concept traditionally occupies a space between material and idea, physics and metaphysics. Like the term “form,” its mode of existing is never fixed. In what sense does a form exist? Jünger cultivates a combination of certainty and ambiguity with regards to his version of Gestalt theory and treads a line between materialism and idealism without committing to either. “Idealismus oder

Materialismus – das ist eine Gegenüberstellung unsauberer Geister, deren Vorstellungskraft weder der Idee noch der Materie gewachsen ist. Die Härte der Welt wird nur durch Härte gemeistert, nicht aber durch Taschenspielererei.”¹⁸⁵

2.6 The Gestalt of the Worker: Summary

To recapitulate the main points so far: Jünger’s war books characterize the ideal soldier as a subject willing to perform the work of soldiering without regarding the principle for which he fights. At the same time, such a higher principle is necessary to both treat the suffering that soldiers otherwise experience and prevent their endeavor from falling into a base materialism (Taylorism). But the war has also revealed that no such principle has currency. At certain points, Jünger asserts that there is some kind of “idea” or “higher reason” that employs the soldiers, but terms like this are placeholders that he does not elaborate on or attempt to theorize. Part of this has to do with the general way in which Jünger understands his writing as a realm of mystery in which truth is alluded to but rarely given a name.¹⁸⁶ But it is also the case that the events of the war demonstrated that conventional methods for deciding what is valuable and what goals are worth pursuing were no longer reliable. Jünger observed “daß es im Zuge der Bewegung Dinge von tödlichem Ernste gibt, die dennoch bedeutungslos werden [...] ähnlich wie im Gefechtsfeld ein verlassenes Dorf, ein verödetes Waldstück als das taktische Symbol des

¹⁸⁵ A, 34.

¹⁸⁶ Ingo Stöckman claims that despite Jünger’s long career, all his texts share a common “Tiefenstruktur”: “Auf einer imaginären Oberfläche bloßer Erscheinungen, die im ‘Blick’ des Autors den Status von bedeutenden Zeichen gewinnen, ordnen die Texte Phänomene an, die aufgrund ihrer Heterogenität zunächst disparat bleiben in einem zweiten Schritt aber tiefensemantisch integriert werden. Was auf der Oberfläche der Zeiterscheinungen als Summe zusammenhängender Zeichen auftritt, erweist sich in der ‘Tiefe’ als deren verschwiegene, aber zum Ausdruck drängende Bedeutungsuniversalie.” I would suggest this is another way of saying that Jünger’s texts generate hidden meanings through the juxtaposition of particular narrated phenomena or signs. Stöckman, “Zäsuren und Kontinuitäten des Gesamtwerks,” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 34.

strategischen Willens erscheint und als solches der höchsten Anstrengung würdig ist.”¹⁸⁷ Such “Anstrengung” is admirable, but Jünger also wants to name a principle that can stand above this perpetual movement without thereby claiming that the cycle of revaluation will cease. His aim is to establish a groundwork for *Herrschaft* that will end what he sees as the general state of disorder and lack of structure that society finds itself in, but he wants to do so without subscribing to any available religious or political programs or ideologies.

Jünger has no interest in the “isms” around him because none of these are related to an essential, or *elemental*, principle, and hence they are not worth supporting. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Jünger considers himself a nationalist throughout the 1920s, but begins to distance himself from this language in the 1930s, and not only because of changes happening in the political sphere. From the point of view he develops in *Der Arbeiter*, terms like “nationalism” and “socialism” belong to a way thinking that has not grasped the full measure of the new, which means they belong to an “Übergangslandschaft” or a transitional period in which people are seeking out the new but are not yet able to see its contours.

Es wird binnen kurzem keine politische Größe mehr geben, die nicht durch den Appel an die Sozialismus und an den Nationalismus zu wirken sucht, und es muß gesehen werden, daß diese Phraseologie jedem offensteht, der den Gebrauch der vierundzwanzig Buchstaben beherrscht. Diese Tatsache gibt zu denken [...] daß es sich hier nicht um Prinzipien handelt, die zu ‘verwirklichen’ sind, sondern daß sich hinter diesen Bestrebungen jener dynamisch-nivellierende Charakter verbirgt, der für den Übergangslandschaft kennzeichnend ist.¹⁸⁸

Passages like these help make the case that it is at least Jünger’s intention to move beyond the dualisms of party politics.¹⁸⁹ But this is not to say that his writing is therefore apolitical. On the

¹⁸⁷ A, 101.

¹⁸⁸ A, 253.

¹⁸⁹ Wolf Kittler, for example, writes that *Der Arbeiter* cannot be classified as either Left or Right: “[Jünger’s] book places itself explicitly above and beyond this distinction because it dates back to the seating order of the French Convention, the foundational body of bourgeois societies.” Kittler, “From Gestalt to Ge-stell,” 80.

contrary, Jünger's text is driven by socio-political concerns, only it understands politics in terms of the domination and representation of an absolute principle. Such a principle should reflect the new reality that he believes is in the process of coming into view. So far, Jünger has identified discipline in the face of pain and functionality as two modes of behavior that appear to have a built-in legitimacy in this new reality. With *Der Arbeiter*, he subsumes these into the term "die Gestalt des Arbeiters," which denotes the higher principle that his previous writing indicated must exist but had not identified.

Although I have offered a good deal of background now to support my reading of the Gestalt of the Worker as a functional form, I would like to extend on this in order to see the theory from all angles. One way to understand what Jünger's theory is doing is to see it in anthropological terms. He would certainly reject this approach because he understands his theory as the description of a metaphysical principle; he even calls the Gestalt "die Metaphysik."¹⁹⁰ But we can still read Jünger's approach as an attempt to understand contemporary cultures of working in terms of their deeper meaning. Weber's theory of the protestant work ethic attempts to interpret work under capitalism in terms of a religious principle that the act of working continues to carry within itself. Jünger sees a similar landscape of work but pays greater attention to technological interventions, which is unsurprising given there is a gap of 30 years separating *Der Arbeiter* from *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Technology is changing the way people perform their assigned functions and Jünger is asking, what does this mean? Why is the Worker/soldier becoming the dominant type of human subject and how can this be seen as a positive? What can be done to make this subject more than just a machine, as in the Taylorist system? He suggests that within the modern, technological world, subjects learn to

¹⁹⁰ A, 134.

function in a certain way that is synonymous for him with exhibiting a particular form. In one sense, *Der Arbeiter* claims that all aspects of life are now a form of working. Despite any protests the author makes in *Der Arbeiter*, we need to keep this mundane reading in mind because ultimately Jünger's theory has both its starting point and its aim within socio-political reality: it seeks to explain it and thereby to engender some kind of change within it.

However, and especially in light of his central concern with the problem of nihilism, we have to be clear that the essay's explanation for why functionality has become dominant has a strong metaphysical component; the interest that Heidegger and other philosophers have taken in it is not misplaced. *Der Arbeiter* lacks philosophical rigor, but it is still evident that its author attempts to explain phenomena in terms of a rudimentary metaphysics. For Jünger, the Gestalt of the Worker is synonymous with a new type of being: he frequently describes it as a "Sein," as in "dieses eigentümliche Sein des Arbeiters, das wir als seine Gestalt bezeichneten."¹⁹¹ I will return to the figure of the Worker shortly. First, I want to be very clear regarding the kind of being Jünger has in mind, because the issue is not so much existence as effectiveness.¹⁹²

2.6.1 The Gestalt of the Worker as a functional form

What stands out in *Der Arbeiter* is the way that the Gestalt is never a thing but rather an activity: it is a form defined by what it does, which is to give form to people and matter. This sounds paradoxical, and in many ways it is. Jünger's conception of the Gestalt is of something that sits between form and forming, with an emphasis on the latter. Nothing simply *has* a Gestalt, in the way that we might say a vase or a poem has a form. Rather, the Gestalt is always an active form-

¹⁹¹ A, 77.

¹⁹² I am of course referring back to Agamben's claim that in modernity, being and effectiveness become indistinguishable.

giving that imprints its form on people and matter by making them function. To represent the Gestalt means to function effectively in the technological age. Jünger describes it as a “planetarische Funktion des Einzelnen” achieving “eine Mannigfaltigkeit von planmäßigen Konstruktionen.”¹⁹³ This is not Taylorism, as Jünger would understand it, because Taylorism does not exhibit what he would call form. Jünger calls the Gestalt “das Ganze, das mehr als die Summe seiner Teile umfaßt,” but this whole is never static; rather, its parts are always in motion and always working in concert to express their form, in a similar way to how Driesch understood entelechy as a dynamic teleology.¹⁹⁴

Jünger’s metaphor for the forming that the Gestalt performs is “mobilization.” This seems at first to fit naturally, since the Gestalt evolves from the idea of the trench soldier’s functionality, only now it is translated into the governing principle of modern, industrial society. However, Jünger argues that military mobilization is just one example where the form-giving property of the Gestalt is at work. In his view, mobilization is a general term that is just as apt for describing life outside of the military as within it.

Matter represents the Gestalt when it becomes technology, while people represent it by becoming an ideal worker “type,” whom Jünger refers to either as “der Arbeiter” or “der Typus.” But there is a catch:

Die Mobilmachung der Materie durch die Gestalt des Arbeiters, wie sie als Technik erscheint, ist also in ihrer letzten und höchsten Stufe noch ebensowenig sichtbar geworden wie bei ihr parallel laufenden Mobilmachung des Menschen durch dieselbe Gestalt. Diese letzte Stufe besteht in der Verwirklichung des totalen Arbeitscharakters, die hier als Totalität des technischen Raumes, dort als Totalität des Typus erscheint.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ A, 158.

¹⁹⁴ A, 37.

¹⁹⁵ A, 181

From this passage we can read that the Gestalt appears, yet it will not be visible until its influence is total. This strange statement deserves consideration. The promise of a *Verwirklichung* carries with it traces of mysticism and utopianism, influences that several critics have correctly pointed out.¹⁹⁶ I would also venture to say the passage is visionary or oracular. In general, the way Jünger explains the Gestalt of the Worker has a sublime quality, if by sublime we understand “die Suche nach dem Unbekannten, nach dem, was sich der Darstellung entzieht, nach dem, was nicht mehr oder noch nicht in der Geschichte ist.”¹⁹⁷ I would argue that the Gestalt exhibits these characteristics.¹⁹⁸

Despite these mystical and aesthetic overtones and a general ambiguity around the Gestalt of the Worker, Jünger believes that his concept can find expression in the objective world via a living subject: the worker type. This is the point at which it makes sense to expand on what I have already said about this material realization of the Gestalt. Jünger describes the Worker not as an individual, since he is an alternative to the individual as a concept, but rather as “der Einzelne” or “der Typus.” This subject is characterized by his deindividualization, a lack of any characteristics that leaves him entirely open to the process of mobilization. While I have been referring to the Worker as masculine in line with the gender of the German noun, in Jünger’s text, the Worker has no evident gender, no interiority and no feelings. Although Jünger does use “feminine” as a synonym for weakness, at no point does he apply the labels feminine or

¹⁹⁶ Brokoff suggests *Der Arbeiter* exhibits both “prophetisch-visionäre” and apocalyptic tendencies. Brokoff, “Der Arbeiter,” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 106-107.

¹⁹⁷ Jörg Heiningen, “Erhaben,” *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in Sieben Bänden*, vol. 2, eds. Karlheinz Barck and Martin Fontius (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2001), 280.

¹⁹⁸ It is worthwhile pointing out that Jörg Heiningen includes *Der Arbeiter* in his summary of the sublime in the twentieth century, a period during which, he argues, sublimity served many countercultural thinkers, but especially the avant-garde. Deploying the sublime in art was “ein Zeichen der Suche nach alternativen Wertorientierungen.” Heiningen, “Erhaben,” 302.

masculine to individuals, only to principles.¹⁹⁹ His Worker exhibits an abundance of “masculine” characteristics, but he is not a “man.” In actuality, he is “nothing.” Jünger stipulates that “diese Definition des Typus negativen Charakter besitzt. Wenn man vom Individuum das Individuum abzieht, bleibt das Nichts zurück.”²⁰⁰ This nothingness is “die Andeutung einer ganz andersartigen Rangordnung.”²⁰¹ Jünger has abstracted the functionality of the model soldier from any idea of personality or individuality. Reduced to a *Nichts*, the Worker is the perfect subject of an ordering principle: “In demselben Grade, in dem sich die Individualität auflöst, verringert sich der Widerstand, den der Einzelne seiner Mobilmachung entgegenzusetzen vermag.”²⁰² Jünger’s project to overcome nihilism therefore comes to seem nihilistic itself, in that it reduces its central premise to nothing.

2.6.2 The Gestalt of the Worker as a source of *Herrschaft*

At this point, the soldier and the Worker part ways. The soldier carried out clearly assigned tasks and Jünger gave detailed descriptions of these in his previous works. But what tasks does the Worker have? The essay does not give any examples that a common reading might construe as work. To be the worker type does not mean to perform any kind of specific task. The Worker is definitely not idle, but the functionality that defines that the Gestalt of the Worker is an empty, object-less principle. The work that the Worker performs and which defines him is becoming and being the Worker. To refer back to Agamben’s definition of operativity, the Worker *performs* the worker type. In Jünger’s language, to be the worker type means being the representative of the

¹⁹⁹ For example, he makes this critique of “die Gesellschaft”: “Ihre weibliche Gesinnung verrät sich darin, daß sie jeden Gegensatz nicht von sich abzusetzen, sondern in sich aufzunehmen sucht.” A, 28.

²⁰⁰ A, 143.

²⁰¹ A, 147.

²⁰² A, 154.

Gestalt: “Arbeiter, Vertreter einer großen, in die Geschichte eintretenden Gestalt zu sein, bedeutet: Anteil zu haben an einem neuen, vom Schicksal zur Herrschaft bestimmten Menschentum.”²⁰³

This brings us back to Jünger’s other main concern in *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft*. In Jünger’s vision, the capacity to represent the Gestalt is a capacity that bestows the Worker with authority so that “Macht innerhalb der Arbeitswelt kann daher nichts anderes sein als Repräsentation der Gestalt des Arbeiters. Hier liegt die Legitimation eines neuartigen und besonderen Willens zur Macht.”²⁰⁴ This is the promise of a restoration of genuine authority that Jünger claims is the object of a general desire: “Seit Langem kennt man die Einheit einer Herrschaft nicht mehr, die dem Höchsten verpflichtet ist [...] doch ist die Sehnsucht überall irgendwie lebendig.”²⁰⁵ His solution to the nihilist challenge is to restore order and hierarchy by means of representing the metaphysical principle of the Gestalt. The will to power is therefore synonymous with a will to form:²⁰⁶ “Es wird ein Wille zur Gestaltung offenbar, der das Leben in seiner Totalität zu erfassen und in Form zu bringen sucht. Die Lebenseinheiten bereiten sich unter dem Schleier der verschiedenartigsten Ideologien auf ein kühnes, ebensowohl zentralisiertes wie umfassendes Eingreifen vor, in dessen Rahmen es wieder als sinnvoll empfunden werden kann, daß Opfer zu bringen und zu fordern sind.”²⁰⁷ As already mentioned, Jünger’s measure for whether or not something is meaningful is bound up with the question of sacrifice. Here, the author gives an indication of how he understands the restoration of the kind of authority that can make determinations regarding sacrifice and thereby overcome the state of

²⁰³ A, 72.

²⁰⁴ A, 77-78.

²⁰⁵ A, 232.

²⁰⁶ Heidegger saw Jünger as “der einzige echte Nachfolger Nietzsches” because he was able to see “das Seiende mit kalten und scharfen Augen überall als Willen zur Macht.” Martin Heidegger, *Zu Ernst Jünger, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 90 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 227.

²⁰⁷ A, 223-224.

nihilism. Behind the “veil” of ideologies and disputes, the lives of groups and subjects are attaining a form that will unify these into an “Einheit” within which the possibility of meaningful sacrifice is assured.

Once the *Gestalt* and *Herrschaft* become connected in this way, *Der Arbeiter* begins to concentrate on “die Herrschaft der Gestalt,” and it becomes increasingly clear that representing the *Gestalt* is what bestows political authority.²⁰⁸ But what does it mean to be a representative of the *Gestalt* which, I am suggesting, is a conceptually empty, sublime principle that Jünger’s writing claims is not yet visible? The theory hinges on how he understands the term “representation,” which is neither clearly political nor clearly aesthetic in his usage:

Es kommt nicht darauf an, daß wir leben, sondern daß überhaupt auf der Welt wieder die Führung eines Lebens im großen Stile und nach großen Maßstäben möglich ist [...] Herrschaft, das heißt die Überwindung der anarchischen Räume durch eine neue Ordnung, ist heute nur möglich als Repräsentation der Gestalt des Arbeiters, die Anspruch auf planetarische Gültigkeit stellt. Es deuten sich viele Wege an, auf denen diese Repräsentation erreicht werden soll. Alle diese Wege zeichnen sich durch revolutionären Charakter aus.²⁰⁹

This extraordinary passage gives us the full scope of what Jünger’s vision entails, but what it outlines remains in a grey zone between ideas and their practical implementation. The grand style here is almost certainly an allusion to Nietzsche’s aphorism: “Der grosse Stil entsteht, wenn das Schöne den Sieg über das Ungeheure davonträgt.”²¹⁰ Critics have pointed out that the desire to unite art with *Staatskunst* already implicates Jünger’s theory in a dangerous constellation of ideologies that includes fascism and national socialism.²¹¹ Jürgen Brokoff expresses this view,

²⁰⁸ A, 248.

²⁰⁹ A, 205.

²¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches II*, KSA 2, 596.

²¹¹ Brokoff writes that while Jünger’s concept of a totalitarian state should not be confused with the NS state, his demand for an “Einheit von Kunst und Staatskunst” nevertheless displays certain “Berührungspunkte mit dem NS-Staat.” Brokoff, “Der Arbeiter,” *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 110.

but it goes back to Benjamin's critique of the aestheticization of politics in "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." I want to suggest that a careful reading of this passage and ones similar to it reveals that they are almost suspiciously empty of anything we can clearly identify as statecraft. *Herrschaft* suggests political domination, on a global scale here, but there is no sense that Jünger imagines the domination of one group, whether as a nation, a continent or a race, over another. Individuals, even groups of individuals, appear in the text in an abstract way. Who are they? What does their *Herrschaft* entail? We are simply not provided with concrete details that refer to existing socio-political entities, nor to specific ways that political power should be exercised. Instead, Jünger focusses on the domination of formal principles, not of persons.

This picture is complicated further when Jünger introduces the notion of the "state" as an extra level at which the Gestalt is to be represented. "State" does not refer to any existing governing body. Like the Worker, its realization exists at some point in the future and relies on the representation of the Gestalt: "[Es] gehört [...] heute zu den Aufgaben der Nation, daß sie sich nicht mehr nach individuellem Muster, sondern als Repräsentantin der Gestalt des Arbeiters begreift [...] Er bedeutet die Vernichtung der liberalen Deckschicht, die im Grunde nicht mehr als eine Beschleunigung ihrer Selbstvernichtung ist."²¹² At this point, it becomes increasingly challenging to maintain that Jünger's project is purely literary. It is one thing to claim that historical events may be explained in terms of an idea, such as the expression of the Gestalt of the Worker, but it is something else to suggest that this discovery can bring about changes to the real structures of the objective world. The appearance of the "state" in the essay suggests that the author is after all attempting to write a theory that is in *some way* political. But how exactly?

²¹² A, 201.

The Gestalt of the Worker provides a solution to the main contradiction outlined in my discussion of functionality: the imperative to submit oneself to effective functioning, without conviction, but for this functioning to nevertheless have a higher principle as a basis. We can see, though, that the tension has merely shifted to another area of his theory. Now the Gestalt, which is a formal principle, needs to be reintegrated into material reality, i.e. the political realm of the “state” and the human realm of the worker type. The key term in the instantiation of the Gestalt is “representation.” In asking to what extent or in what way *Der Arbeiter* is a political text, one approach has been to consider the author’s intent. So, we have seen that Herf and others have highlighted affinities between Jünger’s text and the conception of a totalitarian, fascist state, while Bohrer and Wilczek consider the project to be primarily imaginative or literary. I have tried to suggest that both approaches have merit, but that there are barriers to accepting either the one or the other as definitive. Jünger’s text is full of obscurities and ambiguities that make it difficult to take seriously as politics, and yet it deals with questions of power, state and representation, which suggests the theory could be applied to a political program, if not by the author then by someone else. Rather than engaging in a back and forth between these two positions, I want to take a different perspective by examining what Jünger means by “representation.” This term, in Jünger’s two-sided deployment of it, becomes the place where politics and aesthetics coalesce.

2.7 The state as a representation of the Gestalt–Jünger and Carl Schmitt

There is much to be said about the political aspects of Jünger’s work in the context of the Weimar republic, which it would be beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in detail. But some consideration of the political aspect or significance of the Gestalt of the Worker is

necessary, because it gets to the heart of Jünger's engagement with nihilism.²¹³ Jünger believes that the challenge of nihilism must be addressed in the political realm, where the distribution of power and the assertion of collective meaning take place. He attempts to make the case that authority must flow from specific configurations of the social, political and aesthetic spheres rather than from identifiable moral or ethical principles or from traditional authority, for example. The project to define and make visible the Gestalt of the Worker is therefore a project of restoration: Jünger suggests nihilism is cresting and that genuine *Herrschaft* based on the concept of the Gestalt will follow.

The concluding sections of *Der Arbeiter* develop the idea that the state is the proper seat for authority, but only such a state as can represent the Gestalt of the Worker. "Ein Zustand, der als Symbol des Ewigen Friedens anzusehen ist, wird niemals durch einen Gesellschaftsvertrag zwischen Staaten garantiert, sondern allein durch einen Staat von unbestreitbarem und imperialem Rang, in dem 'Imperium et libertas' sich vereint."²¹⁴ He conceives of this state as an "Arbeitsdemokratie" or "Arbeitsstaat" that would nevertheless be an interregnum between the current political situation and the final, planetary domination of the Gestalt. These are the sections of *Der Arbeiter* that come closest to critiquing the actually existing republic of the day, without naming it. At times, Jünger's observations on this topic seem rambling or banal, an expression of reactionary worries about disorder that take the metaphysically charged speculation

²¹³ The point is not to dispute that Jünger was a presence in politics. He did abstain from party politics and rejected two separate attempts to recruit him to the NSDAP. See Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, 311. However, he published articles in the 1920s for definitively right-wing journals, such as *Völkischen Beobachter* and *Der Stahlhelm*. One of the aims of his *Publizistik* during this period was to promote "das 'Fronsoldatentum' nicht etwa als Erinnerungsgemeinschaft, sondern als politischen Kampfverband gegen die Weimarer Republik." Schöning, "Kriegserfahrung und Autorschaft" in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 8. The direction of Jünger's politics is not in question here. My argument is rather that *Der Arbeiter* has different aims and a different focus from the earlier essays, which separates it from his distinctly political works. It is also written at a time when the militancy of his language is in decline. I return to this question in the final sub-section.

²¹⁴ A, 203.

of the essay's earlier sections in order to criticize the present republic: "Es offenbart sich hier, daß der nationalen Demokratie ein reiner Bewegungskarakter innewohnt, dem es an Gestalt und damit an echter Ordnung mangelt."²¹⁵

It needs to be said that the sections on the state are points where the writing entertains some of the most unsavory ideas in circulation including, at one point, eugenics. Although Jünger takes pains to make clear that race is not meant biologically here, the passage reads as an unfortunate misdirection of his desire for uniformity.²¹⁶ This is also where the text suggests literal, rather than symbolic or conceptual, violence—"dies ist die Atmosphäre des Sumpfes, die nur durch Explosionen gereinigt werden kann"—and where fears about "Herrschaftsverlust" as a result of peaceful protests by colonized peoples come to the surface.²¹⁷ All this suggests that Jünger does not manage to keep his essay insulated from the news and opinions of his day. His efforts to keep his distance from the NS regime, which he did not believe was the realization of the *Arbeitsdemokratie* he had imagined, are well documented and cannot be brought in here.²¹⁸ I would like, instead, to focus on the general point of the sections on the state, which I believe is relevant to this chapter: the need for the Gestalt to attain to representation at a collective level.

The Worker and the state that Jünger imagines both have authority and they draw it from the same source: they represent the Gestalt of the Worker. We can imagine the representation of the Gestalt as a way of creating structure at every level of social organization: the subject as a single unit, the state and the planet. Each level represents the same form. Representation is so central to Jünger's theory that he actually makes it synonymous with working: "Arbeit im

²¹⁵ A, 256.

²¹⁶ "Im Gegensatz zu jenen Phantasien von Auslese und Rassenverbesserung, die schon in den frühesten Staatsutopien eine Rolle spielen, ist hier [ie. im Arbeitsstaat E.M.] eine Art der Aufzucht möglich, die dem Satze entspricht, daß Rasse nichts anderes ist als die letzte und eindeutige Ausprägung der Gestalt. Zu ihr ist keine Größe berufener als der Staat – als die umfassendste Repräsentation der Gestalt." A, 298-299.

²¹⁷ A, 261, 259.

²¹⁸ See Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, chap. 13, esp. 358-359.

höchsten Sinne” is “[diese] totale Anstrengung [...] das heißt: Repräsentation der Gestalt des Arbeiters.”²¹⁹ Representation ushers in the political changes that Jünger claims are waiting in the wings: “Die Repräsentation der Gestalt des Arbeiters führt mit Notwendigkeit Lösungen von planetarisch-imperialen Ausmaßen zu.”²²⁰ Previously, I pointed to the importance of seeing to Jünger’s enterprise. Here, it becomes clear that the author understands representation as the act that could make it possible to visualize the Gestalt. At the same time, the Gestalt cannot be seen as if it were a common entity, since it is not a thing, and Jünger readily admits this in sometimes highly poetic formulations: “Eine Gestalt [kann] nicht im gewöhnlichen Sinne beschrieben werden [...] Unser Blick liegt diesseits des Prismas, das den farbigen Strahl in bunte Lichter zerbricht.”²²¹ This poses obvious problems for what he is trying to achieve, and I would argue that he does not manage to resolve these. The tension is nevertheless productive.

What does it mean to be the representative of a form? We have seen that Jünger rejects parliamentary representation, party politics and ideologies. He does not present a program with concrete political aims. Yet his use of “representation” is simultaneously political and aesthetic without ever committing to one or the other definition. For this reason, the essay is riven with references both to visual representation via conventional means—he often uses *bilden* or *sichtbar machen* in this sense—and political representation, as in *vertreten*. The essay also employs *gestalten* as a verb that can mean either a visual or a conceptual form giving. As such, the political and the aesthetic are intertwined in a way that can be difficult to differentiate, such as when he asserts that “[das] Sehen von Gestalten ist [...] ein revolutionärer Akt.”²²²

²¹⁹ A, 72.

²²⁰ A, 216.

²²¹ A, 89.

²²² A, 46.

The outcome of this peculiar argument is that domination, *Herrschaft*, is associated with the ability to represent: “Es ist auch weder das Individuum noch die Masse überhaupt befähigt zu einer angemessenen Beherrschung der Mittel; diese Herrschaft steht vielmehr einem Leben zu, das sich im Typus und seinen Gemeinschaften repräsentiert.”²²³ To be representative in this way means *showing the form of the new* in an all-encompassing sense, which the author likens to having a particular style: “Wenn der Stil, das Sichtbarwerden der neuen Linien als der Abschluß, als die Ausprägung vorhergegangener Veränderungen aufgefaßt werden kann, so setzt er zugleich den Beginn des Kampfes um die Herrschaft über die objektive Welt. Diese Herrschaft [...] bedarf der Szenerie, die sichtbar macht, welche Dinge begehrenswert sind und mit welchen Mitteln man sich auseinanderzusetzen hat.”²²⁴ Is this passage a type of political theory, or aesthetic theory? I would argue the question has no definitive answer, because the passage evokes a realm where there is no strict boundary between the aesthetic and the political. If scenery is a theatrical metaphor, then it is a metaphor that seeks expression in a political reality. It makes the new structure of *Herrschaft* visible.

The conflation of the political and the aesthetic means that the stakes of Jünger’s project remain ambiguous throughout. Even when he appears to be writing specifically about art, the implication of what he suggests stretch beyond the limited realm of artworks. Consider this passage from the chapter titled “Die Kunst als Gestaltung der Arbeitswelt,” a heading that already captures both the significance of visual art and the necessity of its subordination in Jünger’s theory. Here, he envisions a union of form and domination that enriches collective experience even as everything attains uniformity, or typicality, as he phrases it:

Die typischen Bildungen erscheinen hier als ein System von geschliffenen, präzisen, zweckmäßigen Charakteren, durch die die Gestalt im Bewegten und Mannigfaltigen

²²³ A, 241.

²²⁴ A, 98-99.

widergespiegelt wird [...] Zur höchsten Form der Bildung innerhalb der Arbeitswelt ist der Typus berufen, in dessen Wirkung der totale Arbeitscharakter unmittelbar zum Ausdruck gelangt. Der Sprache ruhender Symbole, in denen die reine Existenz zur Anschauung spricht, ist es vorbehalten, davon Zeugnis zu geben, daß sie kultische Bedeutung besitzt. Solche Zeugnisse wachsen im engen Zusammenhange mit der Staatskunst [...]. Erst hier gewinnt das Kleid der Erde jene letzte Fülle und jenen Reichtum, in dem sich die Einheit von Herrschaft und Gestalt offenbart und den keine Absicht zu erzeugen vermag.²²⁵

Like much of *Der Arbeiter*, this passage is extremely ambiguous, it communicates suggestively rather than speaking plainly. Jünger evidently presents a vision here of an objective reality in which both people and things have lost their identity and are in formation, so to speak. Subjects become precise characters, reflecting the Gestalt. The Worker, more than anyone else, is an instrument of this all-encompassing process of *Bildung*. And yet, this narrative lacks a political agent and human agency generally: “berufen” here recalls Weber and Agamben’s description of working and office, respectively, as something one is called to in a religious sense without any human intervention. In a similar way, the union of form and “Herrschaft” must be allowed to happen, it cannot be brought about by human agency. There is also a telling transition in the passage between representation, or “widerspiegeln,” which suggests a mimesis that captures the movement of the Gestalt and “offenbaren” as revelation or manifestation, a far stronger impulse that registers a breakthrough of something into the objective world.

We can add some helpful context to this conflation of aesthetics and politics by reading it against the backdrop of Carl Schmitt’s work. Jünger maintained a long-lasting friendship with Schmitt and was well acquainted with his writing.²²⁶ In a relatively early text titled *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (1923), Schmitt makes the case for a natural union between

²²⁵ A, 249-250.

²²⁶ The two maintained a correspondence for over 50 years, beginning in 1930, when Jünger enthusiastically read Schmitt’s *Politische Romantik* and *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Cf. Ingeborg Villinger, “Briefwechsel mit Carl Schmitt,” in *Ernst Jünger Handbuch*, 294.

form and authority, in which representation serves as the bridge from one to the other. The principle aim of Schmitt's essay is to explain, and hence justify, the success of the Catholic Church at wielding power within any number of different societies and political systems. "Mit jedem Wechsel der politischen Situation werden anscheinend alle Prinzipien gewechselt, außer dem einen, der Macht des Katholizismus."²²⁷ His explanation is that the church has the ability to represent what is transcendent within historical reality: "Hier ist eine substantielle Gestaltung des historischen und sozialen Wirklichkeit gelungen, die trotz ihres formalen Charakters in der konkreten Existenz bleibt, lebensvoll und doch im höchsten Maße rational ist. Diese formale Eigenart des römischen Katholizismus beruht auf der strengen Durchführung des Prinzips der Repräsentation."²²⁸

Schmitt derides the conventional understanding of political representation in terms of parliamentary democracy, which understands this concept only as "Vertretung."²²⁹ Catholicism, by contrast, wills its expression to form in multiple spheres, i.e. "zur ästhetischen Form des Künstlerischen, zur juridischen Rechtsform und endlich zu dem ruhmvollen Glanz einer weltgeschichtlichen Machtform."²³⁰ Schmitt's theory emphasizes that form is simultaneously aesthetic, political, institutional and legal. Power, in the sense of authority, is synonymous with the capacity to give shape to these different areas of socio-political life: "Die politische Macht des Katholizismus beruht weder auf ökonomischen noch auf militärischen Machtmitteln."²³¹ Instead, it is based on a long tradition of representing.

²²⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und Politische Form*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 7-8.

²²⁸ Schmitt, 14.

²²⁹ Schmitt, 43.

²³⁰ Schmitt, 36.

²³¹ Schmitt, 31.

Art has an important, but not a decisive, role to play here. Schmitt argues that the beautiful forms associated with art—visual art, music, rhetoric, poetry and visual symbols—achieve their most advanced expression as representation: “Aus der großen Repräsentation ergeben sich von selbst Gestaltung, Figur und sichtbares Symbol.”²³² Mastery over visual representation furthers Catholicism’s other aims, because its figures and symbols are superior to “die repräsentationslose Unbildlichkeit des modernen Betriebes.”²³³ However, the effective legitimacy of all these representations comes from the figure of Christ, hence the indisputable authority of the church’s representatives, such as the priest: “Sein Amt geht, in ununterbrochener Kette, auf den persönlichen Auftrag und die Person Christi zurück.”²³⁴ Schmitt insists that a transcendent, religious principle is necessary and that the formula only works in light of this legitimation: “Sie [die Kirche E.M.] repräsentiert Christus selbst, persönlich, den in geschichtlicher Wirklichkeit Mensch gewordenen Gott. Im Repräsentativen liegt ihre Überlegenheit über ein Zeitalter ökonomischen Denkens.”²³⁵ It is on this basis that he rejects a purely materialistic or technical-economic understanding of representation that attempts to replace the divine with an idea, as in “die Idee der Humanität” or in political theories not grounded in a transcendent principle, such as Marxism.²³⁶

Schmitt’s essay provides helpful context for Jünger’s argument for a union of power, form and representation. Both writers believe that an authority that is truly representative of a higher principle will represent that same principle in multiple spheres of life, including art and politics. Schmitt asserts that representation in this sense may be recognized via the creation of

²³² Schmitt, 37.

²³³ Schmitt, 37.

²³⁴ Schmitt, 24.

²³⁵ Schmitt, 32.

²³⁶ Schmitt, 53.

great forms, “[denn] die Fähigkeit zur Form, auf die es hier ankommt, hat ihren Kern in der Fähigkeit zur Sprache einer großen Rhetorik,” which Schmitt also refers to as “esprit classique.”²³⁷ Schmitt argues that great aesthetic forms are happy by-products of the ability of the church to represent a transcendent absolute. He is not especially attached to such forms. In other words, he does not argue for particular political structures *so that* we can have great art, but he nevertheless sees artistic forms as inseparable from Catholicism: they serve as the necessary visual accompaniment to its power.

The inseparability of power and visual representation is an evident similarity between Schmitt’s theory and Jünger’s argument for a state that represents of the Gestalt via the Worker. However, where Schmitt’s theory identifies its content as Christ, Jünger’s content is form itself. In arguing that the Gestalt is not a thing, not even a transcendent object, but a principle of functioning that is manifested via people and things, this is what I have attempted to show. Jünger’s theory does not present a content that can be separated from this functional form. This is a point at which he diverges from the theory of political form that Schmitt develops.

I want to suggest that this is a major point of difference between the theory developed in *Der Arbeiter* and actually realized political ideologies like National Socialism or Bolshevism.²³⁸ This is not to deny that *Der Arbeiter* shares some of the rhetoric of these ideologies and their programs, but it remains separated from them by the objective void at its center; it does not identify any existing entity, whether a group of people, an institution, a party or a nation, as the

²³⁷ Schmitt, 38.

²³⁸ Some contemporary readers disagreed. Ernst Niekisch, for example, was among those who welcomed *Der Arbeiter* for its Bolshevik tendencies. In a review for *Widerstand*, he wrote that Jünger’s work was “[eine] philosophische Verklärung der russischen Erfahrungswelt” and that Jünger proved, almost in spite of himself, that “das bolschewistische Rußland in Übereinstimmung mit dem Walten der vorherrschenden Welttendenz steht.” Ernst Niekisch, cited in Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben*, 356.

bearer of *Herrschaft*.²³⁹ For him, the authority to give form has no agent behind it, it is something that happens and cannot be brought about intentionally. The Worker, as the representative of the Gestalt, is the main expression of this happening, but he is not its cause. Jünger is aware of this void when he insists that the reader complement the Gestalt by means of an action other than the act of reading: “Wenn es uns gelungen ist, bei der Beschreibung einiger Veränderungen im menschlichen Bestande, die wir für bedeutsam halten, überall dort, wo von der Gestalt die Rede ist, eine leere Stelle, ein Fenster offenzulassen, das durch die Sprache nur umrahmt werden kann und das vom Leser durch eine andere Tätigkeit als die des Lesens ausgefüllt werden muß, halten wir diesen vorbeireitenden Teil unserer Aufgabe für erfüllt.”²⁴⁰

What Jünger presents is an open-ended imperative, not a program. This may go some way to explaining the scathing criticism that *Der Arbeiter* received from contemporary readers on the right. Another source of ire was that *Der Arbeiter* lacked any connection to the German Volk.²⁴¹ *Völkische Beobachter*, the official newspaper of the NSDAP, denounced the work as a mixture of Marxism and liberalism and generally “Lebensfremd.”²⁴² “Jünger’s ‘Arbeiter’ ist ein abstraktes Monstrum, ein Mondmensch der in einem Luftleeren [...] Raum wohnt.” Jünger, so claims the author, fails to see that the new age is one of “Blut und Boden.” “Es tut uns Leid um Ernst Jünger.”²⁴³ The author correctly identifies the incommensurability between the political program of National Socialism and Jünger’s contentless theory. Only by misinterpreting this

²³⁹ Some points of similarity with fascist ideology include how Jünger conceives of the “new man” and the “state.” So, for instance, we can draw a comparison with the right-wing politician Marcel Déat’s idea of “the total man in the total society, with no clashes, no prostration, no anarchy” or Benito Mussolini’s statement that “no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value, outside the state.” Both quoted without original references in Zev Sternhell, “Fascism” in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, chap. 1, ed. Constantin Iordachi (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 58.

²⁴⁰ A, 89.

²⁴¹ Cf. Eliot Neaman’s foreword to *A German Officer in Occupied Paris : The War Journals, 1941-1945*, xiii.

²⁴² Thilo von Trotha, “Das endlose dialektische Gespräch” in *Völkischer Beobachter*, Norddeutsche Ausgabe, 22.10.1932. Second supplement, no page number.

²⁴³ Ibid

theory would it be possible to claim that it can be compatible with a conventional political program.

A number of commentators have identified this conceptual emptiness behind Jünger's central principle, and it is generally seen as something that undermines the theory from within. Uwe Ketelsen, for example, claims that "Jünger kann am Ende sein Zeitalter des Arbeiters nur als leere Form, als eine reine Ordnung phantasmagorieren."²⁴⁴ For Ketelsen, this means that Jünger's theory does not achieve its aim, which is to elevate the socio-political order he envisions above pure functionality. "Sie ist Integration, die nichts zum Zweck hat als sich selbst [...] insofern konnte verabsolutierter Taylorismus für Jünger zur Quintessenz technisch bestimmter Modernität werden."²⁴⁵ Ketelsen argues that the consequence of this is that Jünger's longed-for aim of introducing a higher purpose to functionality cannot be achieved. I would agree that Jünger's theory overloads its central concept, asking too much of it. But we can turn the question around and ask instead, what does it mean for Jünger to raise formalism to this level? I would suggest that another way of reading *Der Arbeiter* is to concentrate on its forceful insistence that form can generate a higher meaning. So, I am going to use this notion of the Gestalt's emptiness as the launching point for the final section of this chapter, which considers this emptiness in the context of avant-garde aesthetics.

2.8 *Der Arbeiter* in the context of avant-garde aesthetics

Ketelsen's description of the Gestalt of the Worker as an "empty form" is meant as a dismissal, but it need not be. Conceptual emptiness is the unavoidable side-effect of the way Jünger

²⁴⁴ Uwe Ketelsen, "Zur Ernst Jünger's Die totale Mobilmachung (1930) und Der Arbeiter (1932)" in *Ernst Jünger im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Hans-Harald Müller and Harro Segeberg (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1995), 93.

²⁴⁵ Ketelsen, 94.

engages with the devaluation of values. Jünger's interwar texts understand the current absence of objective higher values as the undesirable outcome of the course history has taken, one that cannot be reversed. Instead of offering new values, *Der Arbeiter* argues for the replacement of values with a collective project of form-giving. At this point, the nihilist gesture to sweep away values seen as illegitimate or false and the post-nihilist project to restore something absolute that can give meaning to life and death intersect and become indistinguishable. Jünger prefers to focus on form rather than new values because he works on the assumption that the individual is a thing of the past and that the future belongs to a deindividualized, empty subject. The worker type emerging in the post-war period has no interiority, no desires and no identity. But the Worker is still capable of willing and of suffering. To avoid becoming just material, this subject must submit to an organizing principle. This organization, or forming, is simultaneously aesthetic and socio-political. The deindividualized subject must represent—in the Schmittian sense of that word—the Gestalt of the Worker. To call the Gestalt is an “empty form” is in no way to undermine the possibility of representing it.

Jünger's focus on form as the site of meaning-making does not develop in a vacuum and I have already attempted to provide some background for the view of human subjectivity that he adopts. But there is also the context of aesthetic praxis to consider. Jünger is writing at a time of avant-garde experimentation in which the individual recedes from being the focus of art. Helmuth Lethen describes *Der Arbeiter* as “eines der unbekannten Manifeste der deutschen Avantgarde,” a statement he grounds in what he calls the text's “physikalische Blick.”²⁴⁶ Lethen means by this that *Der Arbeiter* separates the idea of the human from everything that is organic and alive in the biological sense. *Der Arbeiter* succeeds, according to Lethen, at levelling away

²⁴⁶ Lethen, “Unter dem Pflaster ist die Kanalisation,” 470.

“die Erscheinungsformen des rauschenden Lebensdranges und fluiden Interaktionen,” which he identifies with a specifically avant-garde attitude towards human nature:²⁴⁷ “Die historischen Avantgarden nahmen jedenfalls die Grundfesten einer aus ihrer Sicht schwachen, d.h. humanistisch gefärbten Anthropologie auseinander, die die Natur des Menschen als Demokratiekompatibel begreifen wollte. Der Einzelne als Individuum und moralische Größe wurde von ihnen demontiert.”²⁴⁸

Lethen sees the decline of the individual in Jünger’s work in connection with a particular aesthetic praxis, in which the human subject as an organic, psychically invested being is suspended, so that this subject may be observed with a cold and detached gaze that practically demands “die Verletzung der Grenzen der Moral.”²⁴⁹ Lethen believes that this procedure delivers a new “Wahrnehmungsschärfe,” which leads ultimately to an increase in aesthetic interest: “Der ästhetische Reiz, den der Kunstgriff der scharfen Kontur bei den Zeitgenossen auslöst, ist nicht zu unterschätzen.”²⁵⁰ It would be difficult to disprove the notion that “Reiz” is somehow a happy byproduct within Jünger’s project, whether we consider his main focus to be the objectification of the body or the representation of the Gestalt. However, we have to ask who the beneficiary of such stimulus or excitement might be. The worker type does indeed see the world in a different light to the bourgeois individual, but this is not the source of enjoyment. “Da der Arbeiter [...] als Typus rassenmäßige Qualität besitzt, ist von ihm jene Eindeutigkeit der Betrachtung zu erwarten, die zu den Kennzeichen der Rasse gehört und die Voraussetzung jeder sicheren Wertung ist – im Gegensatz zu einem Genießertum, das im kaleidoskopischen Anblick der

²⁴⁷ Lethen, 470.

²⁴⁸ Lethen, 460.

²⁴⁹ Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte*, 187.

²⁵⁰ Lethen, 191.

Kulturen schwelgt.”²⁵¹ As previously noted, “Rasse” should not be read here to mean biological race, an idea Jünger sees as irrelevant to his theory.²⁵² The point is that the worker type does not stop to enjoy the formal structures of the worker state, the uniformity of which is a necessity, rather than the means to enjoyment or the object of an aesthetic experience. The characteristic way of perceiving anything here is with *Eindeutigkeit*.

Lethen’s theory is nevertheless helpful in clarifying how a particular view of the human subject enables certain kinds of artistic practice. Art, whether as literature, landscaping, rhetoric or urban planning, to name just a few forms that *Der Arbeiter* discusses, is just another aspect of life that must represent the Gestalt. For Jünger, this leads necessarily to cultural and artistic forms that are impersonal from their conception to their reception:

Die wirkliche Form ist nicht das Außerordentliche, wie es in den Vorstellungen des musealen Denkens lebt [...] Sie ist vielmehr das Alltägliche und kann nicht isoliert erscheinen, wenn sie nicht auch dem täglichen Gerät, wie es dem einfachen Leben zur Nahrung und Wirtschaft dient, eigentümlich ist. Dies aber, das unveränderliche Mittel von selbstverständlicher Perfektion, ist zu erwarten für jene umfassendste Stufe des Typus, die durch die Gestalt ihre passive Prägung erfährt.²⁵³

In passages like this, it is clear that the Worker is an object of formation in the same way that matter is. For Jünger, there is no division between art and ordinary life, because this would disturb the desired uniformity of the human environment. It would suggest, for example, that some people are artists while others are laborers, that some spaces are reserved for creativity while others are mundane. Instead, every endeavor in Jünger’s world strives for the same formal accomplishment.

²⁵¹ A, 216

²⁵² “Es sei hier wiederholt, daß Rasse innerhalb der Arbeitslandschaft mit biologischen Rassebegriffen nichts zu schaffen hat. Die Gestalt des Arbeiters mobilisiert den gesamten Bestand ohne Unterschied.” A, 156.

²⁵³ A, 248-49.

The goal of eliminating the distinction between the aesthetic and socio-political realms is another aspect of *Der Arbeiter* that places it within the sphere of twentieth century avant-garde thinking. I will refer back to Peter Bürger's study of the avant-garde here. Bürger has argued that the absorption of art into the "praxis of life" was the movement's defining characteristic.²⁵⁴ Eliminating the art/life distinction was conceived as an act of negation aimed not at a previous artform that could then be replaced by Dada or surrealism or any other "movement," but at the status of art in bourgeois society and the model of individual creative genius that supported it: "When the avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society."²⁵⁵ *Der Arbeiter* has a similar aim vis a vis art. When he claims that art must represent the Gestalt of the Worker, Jünger argues for its subordination to a collective will, which necessarily changes how we conceive of what art is. For Jünger, art in the liberal state is individualistic, "ceremonial" and "ungefährlich": "Uns ist die Handbewegung wichtiger, mit der ein Straßenbahnschaffner seine Klingel bedient."²⁵⁶

The reason Jünger believes art has to change has to do with how he conceives of human subjectivity. If there is no individual, in the symbolic sense, then there can be no individual creative expression either. For this reason, he praises expressions of the typical and ordinary and denounces unusual or individualistic artforms, which do not reflect the new human subject. The avant-garde aspect of *Der Arbeiter* is inseparably linked to the deindividualization of the subject, as Jünger understands it.

²⁵⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

²⁵⁵ Bürger, 49.

²⁵⁶ A, 245.

I want to provide a few examples now to help draw Jünger into dialogue with avant-garde aesthetics. The link between Jünger and the avant-garde has been underexplored and this brief account cannot serve as a complete picture, but even a brief excursus can help to dispel common misconceptions while giving a more nuanced account.

Several critics have drawn comparisons between Jünger and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, but I would suggest there are stark differences between *Der Arbeiter* and *The Manifesto of Futurism*.²⁵⁷ Both thinkers are drawn to modern technology, especially the speed on modern life, but Marinetti employs a language of beauty and, ultimately, of individuality that Jünger has set about abandoning. Point 7 of the *Manifesto* reads: “Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man.”²⁵⁸ Art, he continues, “can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice.”²⁵⁹ The need to chain the unknown forces of life and to “reduce” and “prostrate” them is the opposite of Jünger’s central premise: that the human subject must be the conduit for these forces. In Jünger’s thinking, the elemental is what controls the human subject, not the reverse. For him, history has arrived at the point when “das Elementare wieder mächtig in den Lebensraum dringt und an den Menschen seine unzweideutigen Anforderungen stellt.”²⁶⁰ That violence, cruelty and injustice could be desirable in the name of beautiful or even great art is outside the realm of Jünger’s thinking. Hence, in

²⁵⁷ Thomas Weitin, for example, writes that “Marinettis berühmter Aufruf zur Verherrlichung des Krieges und zur Würdigung des ästhetischen Potentials seiner technischen Kampf- und Destruktivkraft antizipiert eine Betrachtungsweise der Materialschlacht, wie sie durch Jünger eingelöst wird.” Weitin also points to both authors’ interest “im Bild des neuen Menschen.” Weitin, *Notwendige Gewalt: Die Moderne Ernst Jüngers und Heiner Müllers* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2003), 47.

²⁵⁸ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Marinetti-Selected Writings*, eds. and trans. R.W. Flint, and Arthur A. Coppotelli (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1972), 41.

²⁵⁹ Marinetti, 43.

²⁶⁰ A, 211.

order to better understand what sort of avant-garde Jünger belongs to, we need to look to an aesthetics that highlights the deindividualization of the human subject.

Jünger demands art's permanent subordination to the needs of the worker-state and there are close parallels to this among Russian avant-garde movements, especially constructivism. Like Jünger's aesthetics, constructivism is not primarily, or not only, about art. As one study suggests, this movement needs to be understood as "an approach to working with materials, within a certain conception of their potential as active participants in the process of social and political transformation."²⁶¹ This resulted in a highly anti-individualistic practice, as the Soviet constructivist artist Aleksei Gan wrote: "The fact that so-called art is permeated with the most reactionary idealism is the result of extreme individualism, which impels it towards pointless new frolics with experiment to refine subjective beauty."²⁶² He followed this up by calling for "death to art!"²⁶³ The "Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists" declares that its aim is "the task of finding the communistic expression of material structures," which means mastering the creation of "practical structures."²⁶⁴ The manifesto asserts that "the artistic culture of the past is unacceptable" and invents three disciplines that make art useful to the present. If one were to remove the reference to "communism," these could have come from Jünger:

A Tectonics or the tectonic style is tempered and formed on the one hand from the properties of communism and on the other from the expedient use of industrial material.

B Fraktura [...] is material consciously worked and expediently used, without hampering the construction or restricting the tectonics.

C Construction should be understood as the organizational function of Constructivism [...] the construction reveals the very process of that structuring.²⁶⁵

²⁶¹ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1.

²⁶² Aleksei Gan and Christina Lodder, *Constructivism* (Barcelona: Editorial Tenov, 2013), 18.

²⁶³ Gan and Lodder, 18.

²⁶⁴ Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, "Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists, 1922," trans. C. Lodder in *Art in theory 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 341-342.

²⁶⁵ Rodchenko and Stepanova, 341-343.

The constructivist focus on the collective structuring of matter has a clear political aim: “The real participation of intellectual and material production as an equal element in the creation of communist culture.”²⁶⁶ Hence, the program gives a name to the higher values that underlie it. Bürger actually argues that the Russian avant-gardes may have been unique in Europe in managing to achieve the aim of integrating art into life, due to the social changes brought about by the October Revolution.²⁶⁷

The idea behind the Constructivists’ program, i.e., that a politically minded, intentional structuring of material on a grand scale enables new political relations, overlaps with Jünger’s understanding of the Gestalt as a structuring principle. Jünger was aware of many of the developments happening in the Soviet Union: *Der Arbeiter* makes reference to the USSR’s first five year plan and favorably mentions its work requirements; the idea of a *Planlandschaft* with “planetarisch-imperialen” possibilities that Jünger develops throughout this work hint at the Soviet worker state.²⁶⁸ It is therefore tempting to wonder why he does not embrace these similarities more enthusiastically. One reason has to be that Jünger sees himself as already aiming at something further along the evolutionary path than the Soviet Union and the constructivist approach to art and making, which he likely was not aware of in any case. Meanwhile, his *Planlandschaft* is itself only a transitional phase.²⁶⁹ But the more salient difference has to do with a certain resistance to application that his theory exhibits. Could we imagine realizing Jünger’s ideas about the representation of the Gestalt of the Worker on a large scale, as a result of revolution, for example? I would argue not, because his central concept never

²⁶⁶ Rodchenko and Stepanova, 342.

²⁶⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, endnote 21, 114.

²⁶⁸ A, 301, 216.

²⁶⁹ See A, 249.

attains a real-world definition. He does not present a program, which brings me back to a point I made in the previous sub-chapter: Jünger's theory cannot be equated with a political ideology, because his central principle remains formal and hence empty of content. This does not prevent us from reading a degree of perspicacity into aspects of his theory. Nearly one hundred years on, *Herrschaft* in the developed world seems increasingly to be connected to a capacity for mobilizing and standardizing resources, both human and material, on a global scale, but the metaphysical significance of such organization is lacking.

In the years after the publication of *Der Arbeiter*, Jünger abandons many of the positions he developed there. It is outside the purview of this chapter to follow the long aftermath of the *Gestalt of the Worker* and the author's developing ideas on the topic of nihilism, including his essay "Über die Linie," which deals with nihilism in a much more thematic and classically essayistic manner. Nor is there space to do justice to Jünger's fascinating dialogue with Heidegger on this topic. As already mentioned, Jünger's engagement with politics tapers off almost completely from 1932 and his ideas about how to address nihilism change as well. The author no longer promises the imminent appearance of a new historical phase, in which collective form-giving replaces a lost absolute. "Die Arbeitswelt erwartet, erhofft ihre Sinngebung."²⁷⁰ This quotation, published more than 30 years after *Der Arbeiter* in the "Adnoten zum 'Arbeiter'" or *Maxima-Minima* hints both at the continuity and the break in Jünger's thinking on this topic in the intervening years. While the idea of the Worker remains an important part of his interpretation of the twentieth century, the possibility of a union between form and the socio-political disappears from view.²⁷¹ The search for a meaning behind disparate

²⁷⁰ Jünger, *Maxima-Minima*, SW 8, 325.

²⁷¹ "In der von Spengler angekündigten Abenddämmerung sah ich die Erscheinung der Gestalt des Arbeiters in ihrer ganzen Macht." This statement from 1995 appears in a discussion of technology and progress and suggests that the

phenomena, especially technology, continues, but the language now is much humbler; the worker-state as the source of meaning is replaced by the hope that meaning will arise.

I began this chapter by suggesting that we could understand the Worker in relation to the *Übermensch*, as the ideal of a humanity that has overcome nihilism. The extent to which Jünger's model remains rooted to a metaphysics is debatable—Heidegger certainly thought it was—but in line with Nietzsche's thinking, Jünger aimed to anchor his theory within immanent reality, a variation on Nietzsche's conception of *der Übermensch* as the meaning of the earth.²⁷² But there is another way of understanding Nietzsche's idea: Thomas Mann's highly critical essay of 1947 describes Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, “das Ideal der ästhetischen Größe,” “das Maximum des Barbaren,” as “nichts anders [...] als die Idealisierung des faschistischen Führers.”²⁷³ Mann's interpretation is at least in part the product of Nietzsche's appropriation by the Third Reich and thinkers like Alfred Baeumler.²⁷⁴ But the core of his reading is an objection to the aesthetic absolutism of the interwar years, combined with his own aims as a writer and desire to preserve a place for art and for form within a humanistic ethics. When Mann comes to explore this middle ground between ethical art and aestheticism in his work, it takes the form of a fictional biography of an artist whose project is to create a radically new form concept.

term remained important for Jünger 63 years after writing *Der Arbeiter*. Antonio Gnoli, Franco Volpi with Ernst Jünger, *Die Kommenden Titanen: Gespräche*, trans. Peter Weiß (Wien, Leipzig: Karolinger, 1997), 20.

²⁷² Heidegger produced extensive notes on his reading of *Der Arbeiter*. See Heidegger, *Zu Ernst Jünger*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 90 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004). Cf. Kittler, “From Gestalt to Ge-stell,” esp. 90-91.

²⁷³ Thomas Mann, “Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung,” *Großer kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe: Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher*, vol. 19.1, *Essays VI*, ed. Herbert Lehnert (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2002), 213, 214.

²⁷⁴ I will discuss this point in greater detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Too much freedom, too much constraint—The intersection of nihilism and avant-garde form in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*

“Das Sehnen, Trachten und Suchen der Zeit, das Schlechterdings nicht auf Freiheit gerichtet, sondern die Begierde nach einem “inneren Tyrannen,” nach “absoluten Werttafeln,” nach Gebundenheit, nach moralischen Wieder-fest-werden ist, – es ist ein Trachten nach Kultur, nach Würde, nach Haltung, nach Form.”¹

One of the main questions of this study so far has been how writers and thinkers use aesthetic tools to address the social, ethical or political problems that nihilism seems to generate. There is a search not only for new values or objective goals as such, but for a different mode, a different way of measuring and asserting why something is good or worth pursuing and, in large part due to Nietzsche’s influence, this search is drawn to aesthetic form. Nietzsche suggested that the revaluation of values required an aesthetic capacity which he identified with the Dionysian. The Christian-moral interpretation of the world was, for Nietzsche, thoroughly wrong, in that it was life denying and ultimately nihilistic. An aesthetic interpretation, on the other hand, could be anchored in life as a corporeal, lived experience. The claim that only “als ästhetisches Phänomen” can “das Dasein der Welt” find justification was a dramatic redrawing of the relationship between art and life that helped to usher in a new historical understanding of form as something that could act as a stabilizing principle in response to nihilism.² Karl Heinz Bohrer suggests that Nietzsche’s aesthetics helped usher in an avant-garde art that sought to be “formstark.”³ Gottfried Benn grasped that this new conception of art could be useful in a program of overcoming nihilism. Nietzsche, he thought, had brought a new understanding of

¹ Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, *Große Kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 13.1, ed. Herbert Lehnert (Frankfurt Main: Fischer, 2009), 561. Hereafter cited as *Betrachtungen*. Unless otherwise noted, all Mann works cited are taken from this collected edition, cited as *GKFA* throughout.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München; Berlin ; New York: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; De Gruyter, 1999), 17. This edition cited as *KSA* throughout. *Die Geburt der Tragödie* cited as *GdT* hereafter.

³ Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Großer Stil: Form und Formlosigkeit in der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2007), 221.

“Artistik” to German art, a term he defines as “der Versuch der Kunst, innerhalb des allgemeinen Verfalls der Inhalte sich selber als Inhalt zu erleben und aus diesem Erlebnis einen neuen Stil zu bilden.”⁴ *Artistik* means “der Versuch, gegen den allgemeinen Nihilismus der Werte eine neue Transzendenz zu setzen: die Transzendenz der schöpferischen Lust.”⁵ Without reference to Thomas Mann, Benn offers an astute summary of the artistic program Mann critically engages with in his late work *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (1947). It has been observed that Mann was driven throughout his career to find “das rechte und wahre Absolutum.”⁶ It is in this vein that the opening quotation, taken from *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918), claims that people require *absolute Werttafeln*, which here appear in conjunction with culture and form. Mann believed that art had an ethical and political function. At the same time, he saw a certain danger in the search for transcendence based on *schöpferische Lust*. The present chapter aims to examine this tension within the context of the philosophy of art Mann develops in *Doktor Faustus*.

Doktor Faustus centers, however, on a somewhat different understanding of form to what the opening quotation refers to. This novel focuses on an avant-garde conception of form, represented by a method of composition called *der strenge Satz*, and how this form is tied to moral, ethical and political commitments and events. Mann does not put forward a revolutionary program of the revaluation of values in the style of Nietzsche or Jünger, but *Doktor Faustus* examines the paradigm shift they represent, offering a reflection on the possibility of objective form with a focus on art, music specifically. Mann’s novel suggests there are moral and ethical issues related to this development which, in his treatment, becomes a broad engagement with and

⁴ Gottfried Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik* (Wiesbaden; Limes Verlag, 1951), 12.

⁵ Benn, 12.

⁶ Børge Kristiansen, *Thomas Mann - Der Ironische Metaphysiker: “Nihilismus” - Ironie - Anthropologie in Thomas Manns Erzählungen und im Zauberberg* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 326.

critique of the early twentieth-century avant-garde project. *Doktor Faustus* is a study of the excesses of formal innovation, of form that becomes a kind of higher law. My central claim is that this novel is in part a critique of the notion that form can replace values as a response to the challenge of nihilism, either in art or in the socio-political sphere. At the same time, *Doktor Faustus* shows how art, when it is the authentic product of the human striving for perfection in an imperfect world, can attain a kind of secular transcendence. As such, the novel depicts not simply the struggle of the artist to express oneself, but the difficulty of making art that can represent the human condition in modernity.

To explore this theme, Mann draws on Arnold Schoenberg's compositional innovation, the "method of composing with twelve tones which are related only to one another," or twelve-tone technique, which I will discuss at length later in this chapter. Mann presents his own version of the twelve-tone method as a fictional invention of his main character, Adrian Leverkühn, called *der strenge Satz*. The *strenger Satz* is a formal concept that can be used to create an arbitrary but significant ordering of musical elements. In practice, its rules restrict the creative freedom of the individual artist in shaping the final work. Mann does not use the term "algorithm" to describe it, but he strongly implies the algorithmic quality of the *strenger Satz*, especially in comparing it to the magic square, a mathematical game of numbers in which the sum of the different rows is always the same.⁷ While Mann borrowed the essential features from

⁷ Schoenberg and other composers of the Second Viennese School did in fact develop twelve-by-twelve "row tables" as part of the process of composing, often referred to colloquially as a "magic square." As Joseph Auner informs us, "Schoenberg's row tables can be understood on the one hand as an attempt to represent the unrepresentable 'idea' at its most metaphysical, and on the other as a manifestation of the materiality and even tangibility of the row." Since neither Schoenberg, Berg, nor Webern published these visualizations containing all forty-eight possible rows, it is difficult to imagine how Mann would have known about these "magic squares." I am not aware of his clarifying the connection. It may have come up in the numerous discussions Mann had with Adorno, or it may have been a genuine intuition on Mann's part. See Auner, "Schoenberg's row tables: temporality and the idea," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*, eds. Jennifer Shaw and Joseph Auner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160, 161, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1080/00071773.2011.11006739.10.1017/ccol9780521870498.013>.

Schoenberg, he did not have a strong grasp of this innovation and what he knew of it he learned almost entirely from Theodor Adorno. The importance of Adorno's and Schoenberg's influence for *Doktor Faustus* cannot be overstated: much of what the novel has to say about musical form is indebted to them. Adrian's explanation of his mature style of composition, for instance, is based on Adorno's *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, sometimes even reproducing that text verbatim.⁸

However, Mann puts his own spin on Schoenberg's music and Adorno's theorization thereof. This was one reason that he was reluctant about attributing the *strenge Satz* to Schoenberg, although he eventually included a note in the novel to this effect.⁹ From his conversations with Adorno, Mann came to think of this music as a system that could have dark, mythological implications. In *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus: Roman eines Romans* (1949), he describes how, thanks to Adorno's input, he realized Schoenberg's relevance for his novel. "Was konnte sich besser fügen in meine Welt des 'Magischen Quadrats'?" he writes with regards to Schoenberg's twelve-tone method.

Die Schrift [Adorno's manuscript on Schoenberg E.M.] [übt]doch auch eine scharfblickende, tief schürfende Kritik an dessen System, indem sie in einem äußerst konzisen, ja überschärften, an Nietzsche und mehr noch an Karl Kraus geschulten Stil das Verhängnis erörtert, das die objektiv notwendige konstruktive Erhellung der Musik aus ebenso objektiven Gründen, gleichsam über den Kopf des Künstlers hinweg, in ein Finsteres, Mythologisches zurückschlagen läßt.¹⁰

⁸ Hans Rudolf Vaget writes that Adorno's contribution was much greater than Mann ever acknowledged but suggests that terms like *Mitautor* miss the complexity of their working together as well as the role of Schoenberg in the process. He also details how Mann's family prevented him from giving Adorno more credit. See *Seelenzauber: Thomas Mann und die Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006), 385-395, esp. 390.

⁹ In a letter to Schoenberg, Mann explains why he was reluctant to add the "author's note" that, in later editions of *Doktor Faustus*, would clarify the provenance of twelve-tone music: "Die Reihentechnik und die konstruktive Musik überhaupt haben in meinem Buch [...] eine Bedeutung, einen Sinn angenommen – sind eine Verbindung eingegangen mit der Vorstellung schwarzer Magie und der Teufelskälte, die Ihnen [Schoenberg E.M.] in Wirklichkeit ja nicht zugehört," Mann to Schoenberg, October 13, 1948, in *Apropos Doktor Faustus: Briefwechsel Arnold Schönberg - Thomas Mann, Tagebücher Und Aufsätze 1930-1951*, ed. E. Randol Schoenberg (Wien: Czernin, 2008), 128-129.

¹⁰ Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus: Roman eines Romans*, GKFA 19.1, 440-441. Hereafter cited as *Entstehung*.

This understanding of form is quite different to what Mann was working with in *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), which I discussed in Chapter 1. In that work, Mann suggests that even what could be called an Apollonian art—measured, harmonious and beautiful—was always already, inherently amoral and that the drive to attain formal perfection inevitably leads to some version of a demonic overreach that proves deadly for the artist. Now, after discovering Schoenberg's music, Mann identifies a specific style, a new style, schooled through contact with Nietzsche and Kraus, and suggests that this style is somehow not under the control of the artist, but reaches over and above the artist to make contact with something impersonal, with the dark myths of the past. This new version of form, a "system," expresses the elemental and there is something ominous about this development.

Despite the differences with *Der Tod in Venedig*, Mann believes that this new musical form is connected to the ideas of his earlier novella. In the same paragraph as the one quoted above, he describes a deep similarity between Schoenberg/Adorno and his own thinking as expressed in *Der Tod in Venedig*: "Ideen über Tod und Form, das Ich und das Objektive mochten dem Verfasser einer fünfunddreißig Jahre zurückliegenden venezianischen Novelle wohl als Erinnerung an sich selbst gelten."¹¹ Mann describes "eine unbedenkliche Bereitschaft zur Aneignung dessen, was ich als mein eigen empfinde, was zu mir, das heißt zur 'Sache' gehört."¹² In *Doktor Faustus*, this newly developed understanding of form is presented as a response to the threat that nihilism poses for art. *Der strenge Satz* is an experiment in reigning in the excess of freedom that enters composition once seemingly immutable laws around tonality and harmony lose their authority thanks to composers like Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler

¹¹ *Entstehung*, 441.

¹² *Entstehung*, 441.

and others. And, as I will discuss in section 3.6 of this chapter, it is likewise presented as a reaction to the broader effects that the event of nihilism has on social life.

Mann's novel has an extensive and daunting reception history and continues to produce new interpretations. It is reasonable to ask what any new study can offer. It is my view that an important element of the novel has been neglected, or perhaps not examined in the right light. While the form of Mann's novel has been much discussed, often in relation to the particularity of his modernism, the form that the novel's narrative centers on, *der strenge Satz*, has received little attention.¹³ While the relationship between Mann, Adorno and Schoenberg has likewise been the subject of recent scholarship, the meaning and significance of the compositional method Mann borrows and how he alters it to fit his novel has not been the focus of extended inquiry.¹⁴ This neglect is evident even in studies that investigate the role of music in the novel, such as Theodor Ziolkowski's imaginative and fascinating "Leverkühn's Compositions and Their Musical Realizations," which considers what Adrian's music would actually sound like if it could be played, or Shelly Hay's comparative study of Mann and Hermann Hesse.¹⁵ But the novel is, after all, not only about the development of German music and its relation to society: it is about a specific type of music. Mann's fictional *Tonsetzer* invents a new method of composition and he shares an enormous amount of information about the rules and intent behind it. Adrian wants

¹³ For a summary of Mann's "modernism" see Vaget, "Doktor Faustus" in *Thomas Mann Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Andreas Blödorn and Friedhelm Marx (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2015), 73.

¹⁴ One notable exception is Evelyn Copley's article in which the authors seeks "to foreground the ideological implications of Leverkühn's aesthetic theory by situating Mann's treatment of musical form within Adorno's dialectical thinking." Copley's study goes in a different direction however in that its focus is not on form or the Dionysian, but rather on politics and the relationship between art, capitalism and fascism. Copley, "Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Fascist Politics," *New German Critique* no. 86 (April, 2002), 44, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.2307/3115201>.

¹⁵ Theodore Ziolkowski, "Leverkühn's Compositions and Their Musical Realizations," in *The Modern Language Review* no. 107:3 (2012): 837–56. <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.107.3.0837>; Shelley Hay, "Metaphysical Mirroring: The Musical Structure of Society in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* and Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*," in *German Studies Review* 41, no. 1 (2018), 1-17.

music to represent a higher order by establishing a strict, objective principle for composition. This is a really crucial aspect of the philosophy of art that the novel develops. Not examining the *strenger Satz* at length also means that the degree to which Mann's novel is engaging with the avant-garde has been largely overlooked. Reading *Doktor Faustus* in light of the understanding of form that has emerged through an investigation of Nietzsche's and Jünger's aesthetics provides new insight into how the novel understands the relationship between ethics and art. As a side benefit, this chapter expands on how we see the role of Nietzsche and of nihilism in Mann's late work.

The novel is, of course, a veiled account of Nietzsche's life and a reckoning with his legacy and his work, a fact that has not gone overlooked.¹⁶ Mann made this connection quite clear in *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*: "Da ist die Verflechtung der Tragödie Leverkühns mit derjenigen Nietzsches, dessen Name wohlweislich in dem ganzen Buch nicht erscheint, eben weil der euphorische Musiker an seine Stelle gesetzt ist."¹⁷ The novel is riven by the difficult position that Nietzsche held for the author. Mann's reading of and response to Nietzsche show a deep affinity and influence mixed with criticism and reproach. He saw in Nietzsche many of the vices that inhere in creative greatness, which is always in danger of forgetting or ignoring socially necessary limits to its freedom. His post-war essay on Nietzsche captures this ambivalent attitude towards the philosopher. On the one hand, he claims that Nietzsche's was "ein Schrittmacher, Mitschöpfer und Ideensouffler des europäischen –, des Weltfaschismus" by virtue of his aestheticism and immorality.¹⁸ On the other hand, he appears to want to rescue

¹⁶ See for example Andrew Erwin, "Rethinking Nietzsche in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*: Crisis, Parody, Primitivism, and the Possibilities of Dionysian Art in a Post-Nietzschean Era," in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 78 (4), 2003: 283-99, <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1080/00168890309597478>.

¹⁷ *Entstehung*, 431.

¹⁸ Mann, "Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung," *GKFA* 19.1, 214-215. Hereafter cited as *Nietzsche*.

Nietzsche by claiming that he was misappropriated and misunderstood by the Nazis and that, actually, Nietzsche's philosophy and the posture of atheism he adopted were driven by "Menschenliebe."¹⁹ Directed by his love of humanity, Nietzsche took upon himself, according to Mann, "alles Wissen ums Untere und Dämonische [...] in seine Ehrung des menschlichen Geheimnisses."²⁰ "Er muß es sich gefallen lassen," Mann concludes, "ein Humanist genannt zu werden."²¹ On the one hand, Nietzsche raised human culture, broadly understood, to a new and previously explored level. On the other, he represents the "Verfallsgeschichte dieses Gedankens" i.e., the idea of culture.²² This description could apply to Mann's character, Adrian, too.

Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian also plays a role in how Mann represents Adrian's music. Mann in general believed there to be a link between Germany, music, and a kind of mythical *Dämonie*: "Musik ist dämonisches Gebiet" and the character of Faust should have been musical.²³ But the way Mann represents this Faustian music in his novel is indebted to Nietzsche's understanding of Dionysian art. The Dionysian originates from music, of course, as the full title of Nietzsche's famous work, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, makes plain. Mann's fictional music contains elements of Dionysian art and it encompasses the contradictions and complexities that Nietzsche invested in this concept:²⁴ futuristic and archaic,

¹⁹ Nietzsche, 217; 225.

²⁰ Nietzsche, 225.

²¹ Nietzsche, 225.

²² Nietzsche, 196-197.

²³ Mann clarified his belief that the German character was inextricably linked to German music on a number of occasions, including in a public lecture he gave in 1945: "Soll Faust der Repräsentant der deutschen Seele sein, so müßte er musikalisch sein: denn abstrakt und mythisch, i.e. musikalisch, ist das Verhältnis des Deutschen zur Welt." Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen," *Essays*, vol. 5, eds. Hermann Kurzke and Stephan Stachorski (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 265.

²⁴ I am relying on a specific but, I would argue, more productive interpretation of the Dionysian than what certain other readers have identified with it. Aschheim, for example, sees the Dionysian mainly in terms of the qualities that Nietzsche stressed in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, not taking his later writings into account. So, for instance, he equates the Dionysian concept with "ecstatic dynamism," "communitarian collective ecstasy," the "absorption of self," and "anti-cerebralism." Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 59, 60, 52, 67.

beautiful and terrifying, measured and dynamic, possessing “eine explodierende Altertümlichkeit.”²⁵ It is also a transgressive art that breaks with previous conventions and rules in order to assert a new musical form, a new way of making music, especially in terms of the role of the individual artist in this process. This can be linked back to Karl Heinz Bohrer’s idea that Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian brought about a new understanding of beauty, not as the “harmonisch-reizvoll im idealistischen oder hedonistischen Sinne” but as “formstark.”²⁶ This means a new relationship between the artist and form, which Mann’s novel also grapples with.

Although the avant-garde is generally associated with a political program, *Doktor Faustus* focuses more on the moral and ethical difficulties Mann sees as inseparable from the creation of a radical, formalist art. This is why the story’s central character, Adrian Leverkühn, is presented as a Faustian figure, whose invention of the *strenger Satz* comes at the cost of his soul. Certainly, Mann does not see the idea of art being *formstark* as either innocent or neutral. The way the novel engages with these ideas extends Mann’s long-time preoccupation with questions of art and form and especially how these relate to ethics and morality. His WWI-era essay, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, from which the opening quotation to this chapter is taken, exemplifies his early attempts to defend art, including his own art, from allegations of immoral decadence and nihilism.²⁷ Art is culture, he argues, and culture is the striving towards order, standards and dignity (Würde) by means of form. It is a moral exercise that can be likened to religion:

²⁵ Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde*, GKFA 10.1, 547. Hereafter cited as *DF*.

²⁶ Bohrer, *Großer Stil*, 221, 234; Bohrer also calls it “der Triumph der Form über den die Form gefährdenden Inhalt,” 233.

²⁷ “Ich gehöre geistig jenem über ganz Europa verbreiteten Geschlecht von Schriftstellern an, die, aus der *décadence* kommend, zu Chronisten und Analytikern der *décadence* bestellt [...] mit der Überwindung von Dekadenz und Nihilismus wenigstens *experimentieren*.” *Betrachtungen*, 220. The switch in Mann’s language here from the French to the German spelling of “decadence” is significant in light of his overall argument for the superiority of German culture when compared to French “civilization.”

Der wahre Glaube [...] ist nicht der Glaube an irgendwelche Grundsätze, Worte und Ideen wie Freiheit, Gleichheit, Demokratie, Zivilisation und Fortschritt. Es ist der Glaube an Gott. Was aber ist Gott? Ist er nicht die Allseitigkeit, das plastische Prinzip, die allwissende Gerechtigkeit, die umfassende Liebe? Der Glaube an Gott ist der Glaube an Liebe, an das Leben und an die Kunst.²⁸

Whereas decadent art can be recognized by its formlessness and life-denying tendencies–

“asketisch-orgiastischen Bourgeoisium” is how he describes it²⁹– “die größten Fälle” are a kind of “bildende Gerechtigkeit.”³⁰ These are strong statements that convey the serious ethical weight Mann places on the form-giving impulse that the individual acquires via the arts. “Ein Mensch der Bildung,” he writes, “ist zugleich ein Mensch des plastischen Sinnes.”³¹ All of which is to say, art is not only compatible with but even necessary for developing the moral qualities that civilized society requires. Art gives the necessary shape to life.

Mann’s early work embraces the role of the arts as an anchor for values. However, he is quite specific that only art oriented towards a humanistic, “bürgerlich” end-goal may serve this purpose, although the language he uses to express this tends to be imprecise.³² In the above example, “art” appears alongside “love,” which is closer in meaning here to neighbor love rather than eros, and “life” to replace “God” as things that should attract our commitment. Life, love

²⁸ *Betrachtungen*, 548.

²⁹ *Betrachtungen*, 113; Mann differentiates between “Bürgertum” and “Bourgeoisium” throughout *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*: the former is associated with Germanness and its positive characteristics–“das Deutsche und das Bürgerliche, das ist eins”– the latter is viewed as characteristically French and undesirable, its main representative for Mann is Flaubert. See *Betrachtungen*, 117.

³⁰ *Betrachtungen*, 545.

³¹ *Betrachtungen*, 545.

³² Humanism here refers to the view that human agency and the value of individual life are the starting points for questions regarding ethical, moral and aesthetic values. The way that Mann combines it with “Bürgerlichkeit” is not unproblematic: Georg Lukács wrote in 1942 about the particularly German iteration of the humanism concept in a critique that, despite Lukács’s primary focus on the humanism of the nineteenth century, could helpfully be applied to Mann: “Der klassische Humanismus hat eine gehobene und pathetische Konzeption von Mensch und Menschlichkeit, die er aus dem 18. Jahrhundert übernommen, aber seinerseits historisiert und dialektisch gemacht hat [...] Der pathetisch aufgefaßte Mensch, dessen Universalität, dessen allseitige Entwicklung aller seiner Fähigkeiten der klassische Humanismus propagiert, steht also für sie inmitten der Widersprüche der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft.” Lukács, “Der Humanismus der deutschen Klassik,” *Zur Kritik der faschistischen Ideologie* (Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1989), 281.

and art may or may not attract universal assent as absolute values, but it would be difficult to argue that they can simply replace the term “God.” More helpful perhaps would be to consider that the way Mann employs “God” in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* makes it interchangeable with another concept that proves crucial: *Geist*.³³ *Geist* serves as a kind of measure for other values in Mann’s view, both in this essay, where he defends the right of *Geist* not to take part in politics and democracy—a sentiment that was echoed around the same time by Hermann Hesse—but also in the much later essay on Nietzsche, where he claims for it the status of an absolute:³⁴ “Dieses humane etwas,” as he calls it, serves as “die Selbstkritik des Lebens.”³⁵ Regardless of the terminology Mann employs, the creation and reception of art is an essential component of his system of values. The humanizing process, understood as “geistige Bildung,” is synonymous with “Einbildungskraft.”³⁶

It should come as no surprise that Mann’s desire for the arts to serve an ethical function put him at odds with the radical changes that were taking place in the art of the 1910s and 20s. Mann’s favored model for the artist, what he calls “bürgerliches Künstlertum,” his focus on *Geist* and on *Bildung* come to seem outdated after WWI.³⁷ In part, this was due the explosive “event” of Nietzsche that continued to generate and inspire radically new responses and new ways of thinking in both the aesthetic and socio-political realms.³⁸ But it was also due to the war itself

³³ Even when he comes to reverse many of the political views he proclaims in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, Mann will continue to insist on the centrality of culture to both the idea of a state and the idea of the human. The idea of humanity, he writes, is “der Instinkt eines staatsbildenden Individualismus, die Idee der Gemeinschaft bei Anerkennung der Menschheit in jedem ihrer Einzelglieder”; “Ist nicht Republik nur ein Name für das volkstümliche Glück der Einheit von Staat und Kultur?” Mann, “Von deutscher Republik,” *GKFA* 15.1, 540, 532.

³⁴ Hermann Hesse, “Mein Standpunkt,” *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 15, ed. Volker Michels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 200.

³⁵ *Betrachtungen*, 535; *Nietzsche*, 208.

³⁶ *Betrachtungen*, 545.

³⁷ *Betrachtungen*, 119.

³⁸ While Heidegger called Nietzsche’s pronouncement “Gott ist tot” an event—“die Grunderfahrung eines Ereignisses der abendländischen Geschichte”—Karl Löwith argued that Nietzsche himself was the event: “Ohne diesen letzten deutschen Philosophen läßt sich die deutsche Entwicklung gar nicht verstehen [...] Er ist wie Luther ein spezifisch deutsches Ereignis, radikal und verhängnisvoll.” Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: Ein*

which, as I outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, had left behind a radically changed social, political and philosophical landscape. This shift favored art that was increasingly uninterested in combining itself with civilized *Bürgertum* and strove instead for radical gestures aiming to break with Germany's *bürgerliche* past.³⁹ Mann did not take part in the war and he did not involve himself with any avant-garde political program. We can consider him a modernist in virtue of his exploration of the formal boundaries of narrative as well as his self-conscious relationship to a literary tradition and his complex use of intertextuality, among other features.⁴⁰ However, his literary practice remained stylistically closer to a realist tradition than to the experiments with literary form undertaken by many of his contemporaries.⁴¹ It is worth noting that in Mann's extremely dense corpus of writing on art, music and literature, he never devotes space to any of the new artistic movements or their representatives. Neither impressionism, expressionism, fauvism, symbolism, futurism nor dada feature in more than a passing way.⁴² Nevertheless, Mann was clearly aware of a change taking place around him and grasped that whatever was happening in art in the 1910s and 20s was not simply the advent of new styles, but a shift in the

Bericht (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 6; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6.1, ed. Brigitte Schillbach (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 158.

³⁹ Steven Aschheim writes that "Nietzsche played a definitive role in the agenda of the avant-garde [...] The avant-garde found in Nietzsche sustenance for their alienation from the establishment's high culture and their desire to overcome the nineteenth century." Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 51.

⁴⁰ There is no universal agreement on Mann's literary style and some recent scholarship has actually claimed that *Doktor Faustus* shares features with the avant-garde. See for example Bernd Hamacher, "Zauber des Letzten – Zauber des Ersten?" in *Apokrypher Avantgardismus: Thomas Mann und die Klassische Moderne*, eds. Stefan Börnchen and Claudia Liebrand (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 29-50.

⁴¹ Georg Lukács, who wrote extensively on Mann's "realism," situated him in opposition to "bewusste und scharfdenkende Avantgardeisten" like Kafka, Benn and Musil. Lukács, "Weltanschauungsgrundlagen des Avantgardismus" in *Probleme des Realismus: Essays Über Realismus* vol. 1 (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971), 485; Gerald Izenberg writes that Mann was "no formal innovator" and describes *Doktor Faustus* as "structurally and stylistically conventional, even deliberately old-fashioned." Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 97-98. Cf. also Christopher Butler, *A Very Short Introduction to Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36-37. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11227568>

⁴² An overview of Mann's essays on art and literature reveal a strong inclination towards the nineteenth century. In one representative observation in his essay "Goethe und Tolstoi" Mann writes about "ein kunstphilosophisches Schlagwort [...] das heute in aller Munde ist oder gestern war, das Wort Expressionismus. Wirklich ist das, was wir Expressionismus nennen, nur eine späte und stark mit russischer Apokalyptik durchsetzte Form des sentimentalischen Idealismus." *GKFA* 15.1, 847-848.

understanding of what art was and that this could not be explained or analyzed using pre-Nietzschean models. *Doktor Faustus* is his most extensive meditation on these developments and the only work that seriously considers the nature and meaning of avant-garde art and especially the music that was being produced in the period leading up to the National Socialist takeover. This novel, then, addresses a void on the topic in Mann's non-fiction work.

The central relationship in *Doktor Faustus*, between the narrator and the main character, illustrates the tension between an older model of humanism supported by tradition and *Bildung* and an avant-garde gesture of creating the new that seems to ignore the humanist tradition entirely. The narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, who describes himself as "eine durchaus gemäßigte [...] Natur," is a classical philologist, teacher, family man and self-proclaimed defender of humanist, *bürgerliche* values who plays the viola d'amore and is wary of the new.⁴³ Zeitblom's humorless and old-fashioned views on the world as well as his persistent rejection of anything that seems to slight the humanist ideal render him an often comical figure in the novel, whose analysis is not always to be trusted.⁴⁴ These qualities also make him a useful foil for the beliefs and arguments of his friend and the novel's hero, Adrian Leverkühn.

The novel is a fictional biography of Adrian, written by Zeitblom during the final stages of WWII. It depicts Leverkühn's artistic development as he overcomes the bounds of existing, no longer sufficient musical forms only to voluntarily submit himself to a more rigorous and demanding method of composition that he develops early on in his relatively brief career. This

⁴³ DF, 12.

⁴⁴ James Campbell provides an extensive analysis where Zeitblom's observations and opinions are contradicted by other evidence within the novel and concludes that "Zeitblom is, beyond any reasonable doubt, an 'unreliable narrator'" and he is at "a considerable 'distance' [...] from the portrayal of Adrian Leverkühn available to the reader through and behind Zeitblom's testimony." Campbell, "Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus: Weighing the Testimony of Serenus Zeitblom," in *Doctor Faustus: Archetypal Subtext at the Millennium*. Edited by Armand E. Singer and Jürgen Schlunk (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 1999), 40; 41. Eckart Goebel simply takes it as a given that Mann's narrator is "unzuverlässig[] und nicht immer einsichtsvoll[]." Goebel, *Esmeralda: Deutsch-französische Verhältnisse in Thomas Manns "Doktor Faustus,"* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015), 78.

artistic breakthrough comes at a terrible human cost, but one that only gradually becomes evident. While the central motif of the narrative is the devil's bargain, there is a sense of fate and inevitability in how the story draws its character along, since he cannot foresee that his pursuit of a new art will lead to renouncing the possibility of love and succumbing to disease, syphilis to be precise. Adrian must turn away from ordinary human values in the pursuit of something beyond what modest human reason can provide, and this transgression has consequences. At the end of the novel, he slips into insanity, loses consciousness and lives out his final years in a vegetative state, cared for by his mother. And yet this series of events is presented as the product of Adrian's commitment to art as a higher pursuit. He does not set out to make Schoenbergian music for its own sake; rather, he is driven by a conviction that art has suffered as a result of its independence from social utility, such as it had when its main purpose was tied to the church. Adrian believes that music's secularization and elevation into the "Einsam-Persönliche" and "Kulturell-Selbstzweckhafte" has, paradoxically, encumbered it with irresolvable contradictions that have led to its stagnation.⁴⁵ He argues that art must once again be reigned into the service of something higher. Not, however, the church, but rather form itself, which is what the *strenger Satz* represents.

The novel invites us to read Adrian's life and the strict, rule-bound method of composition he invents as a comment on German society leading up to WWII. Mann claimed that the German character was drawn to servitude, which circumscribed the German understanding of freedom: "Ein vertrotzter Individualismus nach außen, im Verhältnis zur Welt, zu Europa, zur Zivilisation, vertrug er [der deutsche Freiheitsbegriff E.M.] sich im Inneren mit einem befremdenden Maß von Unfreiheit, Unmündigkeit, dumpfer Untertänigkeit. Er war

⁴⁵ DF, 91.

militanter Knechtssinn.”⁴⁶ For Mann, this unfortunate conception of freedom helped explain the course that German history took. Accordingly, the narrator of *Doktor Faustus* at several points draws an analogy between Adrian’s music and the political developments happening in the country. He also consistently disagrees with Adrian’s ideas about art and suspects that his friend’s compositions are the result of his being in league with demonic forces. Mann’s narrative retains a sense of ambivalence with regards to Zeitblom’s judgements.

The parallels between Adrian’s life and Germany’s political fate will need to be analyzed closely and I want to suggest that Mann’s depiction of *der strenge Satz* is one of the keys to understanding this connection. The formal qualities of Adrian’s music represent the union of two extremes: an initial act of excess, a state of *Rausch*, and submission to extreme limitations placed on the individual agency of the composer. These suggestively resemble the excesses of power and violence and the curtailment of freedom in the political sphere that take place in Germany in the historical period the novel covers.⁴⁷ The unfreedom of the music seems to suggest the unfreedom of life in an authoritarian state. *Doktor Faustus* continues to explore the idea, developed in *Der Tod in Venedig*, that aesthetic form is not a neutral term with a wide range of affordances, but can itself be inimical to ethics, life, love and the humanist ideal. Only now Mann also wants this narrative to provide an account of the course that history has taken, both in the arts and in politics. After the NS takeover and the appropriation of Nietzsche by prominent Nazi ideologues, the question of whether his philosophy of art could be made to apply to life was no longer theoretical.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Mann, “Deutschland und die Deutschen,” 270.

⁴⁷ Cf. Børge Kristiansen, *Thomas Mann - Der Ironische Metaphysiker: “Nihilismus” - Ironie - Anthropologie in Thomas Manns Erzählungen und im Zauberberg* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013): “Die Verknüpfung aller Einzelteile zu einer ästhetischen Totalität [widerspiegelt] den faschistischen und nationalsozialistischen Totalitarismus,” Kristiansen, 366.

⁴⁸ One of Mann’s major sources for “Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung” was *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker* (1946) by the philosopher and NSDAP member Alfred Baeumler. While Mann was highly

At the same time, though, Mann's fictional music achieves its desired result: it unlocks new forms of expressivity that correspond to the tragedy of the human condition in this historical reality. It is an expression of *Geist* and, as Mann asserts throughout his career, *Geist*, which is "die Selbstkritik des Lebens," is a necessary component of an ethical life.⁴⁹ Adrian describes music as "die Zweideutigkeit [...] als System."⁵⁰ My contention is that, via *Doktor Faustus*, Mann aims to assert the value of art as a system of ambiguity in response to European nihilism and the devaluation of values. Art as a system of ambiguity therefore remains essential to what is human, despite the dangers that pursuing it carries. This ambiguity is also reflected in the novel itself. In opposition to arguments for the structural consistency of *Doktor Faustus*, recent scholarship has increasingly sought to highlight its inconsistencies and structural ambiguities.⁵¹ The present chapter expands on these considerations.

3.1 Mann and Jünger—silently at odds

Mann and Jünger never met and in general seemed to avoid one another.⁵² Although Jünger was present on the infamous occasion when the writer Arnolt Bronnen and a group of followers disrupted a speech Mann was giving in Berlin, he apparently did not participate in the action and later claimed he was there "nur als Zuhörer."⁵³ While both writers could trace their roots to

critical of Baeumler's Nietzsche interpretation—calling him the "Nietzsche-Verhunzer"—he mistakenly attributed several quotes to Nietzsche in his essay that actually stemmed from Baeumler. See Mann, Baeumler et. al., *Mann und Alfred Baeumler: Eine Dokumentation* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989), 173, 183. For an analysis of how the Third Reich used Nietzsche see Max Whyte, "The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler's 'Heroic Realism,'" in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 43, no. 2 (April, 2008), 171-194. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30036502>

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, 208.

⁵⁰ *DF*, 74.

⁵¹ Cf. Eckart Goebel, for example, claims that it is highly doubtful whether the text allows the reader "eine übergreifende Intention des Werkes zu bestimmen" and refers to the novel's "potentieller Unlesbarkeit." Goebel, *Esmeralda*, 118.

⁵² Cf. Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk* (München: C.H. Beck, 1999), 365-366.

⁵³ Ernst Jünger, "Ein Bruderschaftstrinken mit dem Tod," interview with Rudolf Augstein, *Der Spiegel* (15.08.1982). <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/spiegel-gespraech-ein-bruderschaftstrinken-mit-dem-tod-a-f4e5ad78->

European decadence and the conservative revolution, they came to represent radically different political and aesthetic commitments.⁵⁴ In considering how they responded to the challenge of nihilism, I hope to provide a contrast but also to extend on the claims of the previous chapter. There, I argued that Jünger's interest in the Gestalt of the Worker was a way of affirming the historical transformation taking place with regards to the human subject. For Jünger, WWI made clear that the individual had ceased to matter in a convincing way and that the human was no longer a relevant category when thinking about issues of politics, ethics or aesthetics. We could call Jünger a post-humanist or anti-humanist thinker. In his view, the human subject is powerless against the unseen, metaphysical forces that control history, so that the individual has little agency outside of external forms of organization. But he is also a post-nihilist thinker. *Der Arbeiter* asserts that there are no "values" as previous eras understood these, there is only the impersonal movement of history and the different forms of being, such as the Worker, that it produces. In Jünger's view, so long as the human subject can adapt to the new era of technologically determined functionality and embrace relative insignificance, nihilism ceases to be an issue. This takes heroism, or "heroic realism" as he calls it, which means affirming the force of history and seeing oneself as "[ein] Träger des Schicksals."⁵⁵ The indifference this entails to what any individual person might inwardly desire or strive towards is an unavoidable component of Jünger's affirmation of the historical truth he believes to have identified.

Mann does not share this optimism for a post-nihilist future, in which the human subject becomes a functionary without a moral and spiritual core. That he had no first-hand knowledge

0002-0001-0000-000014347117; Kurzke provides an overview of this incident, which took place in apparent retaliation by Bronnen for a negative article that Mann had written. See Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk*, 363-364.

⁵⁴ Cf. Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk*, 365.

⁵⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 8, 70.

of the trenches and almost no military experience may be relevant in this regard.⁵⁶ But while biographical differences between the two authors may go some way in explaining their differing perspectives, the reasons are not as important as the results: Mann holds to the necessity of maintaining a certain model of humanism and the centrality of human agency in political and moral life. For Mann, as for Jünger, the decline of dogmatic religion and the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy leave behind an intolerable void of values and authority. However, in Mann's view, "humanity" and, as I argued in the previous section, *Geist*, must remain the touchstones in any system of values that people live by. Yet Mann is sensitive to the weakness of this model in the post-WWI period. Here is how he captures this ideological impasse in *Doktor Faustus*:

Es wurde sehr stark empfunden und objektiv festgestellt: der ungeheure Wertverlust, den durch das Kriegsgeschehen das Individuum als solches erlitten hatte, die Achtlosigkeit, mit der heutzutage *das Leben über den Einzelnen hinwegschritt*, und die sich denn auch als allgemeine Gleichgültigkeit gegen sein Leiden und Untergehen im Gemüte der Menschen niederschlug [...] wie in manch anderer Hinsicht hatte auch hier der Krieg nur vollendet, verdeutlicht und zur drastischen Erfahrung gemacht, was längst vorher sich angebahnt, einem neuen Lebensgefühl sich zugrundegelegt hatte [emphasis added E.M.].⁵⁷

The individual subject suffers not only due to the devaluation of values, the personal response to which might be a loss of direction or purpose, but because the life of the individual, his or her own life, has ceased to be a grounding, inviolable value in itself. Jünger recognized that trench soldiers did not matter as individuals. Mann's novel records the same phenomenon affecting society more broadly, but its author recoils at the prospect of a deindividualized subject crushed by "life." *Doktor Faustus* acknowledges that the model of humanism that treats the individual

⁵⁶ Mann was released from military service due to "Magenschwäche und Nervosität." Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk*, 244.

⁵⁷ *DF*, 529-530.

subject as an absolute value is under strain and needs to change if it is to survive.⁵⁸ This is why the self-identified humanists in Mann's fictional works—Serenus Zeitblom in *Doktor Faustus*, Lodovico Settembrini in *Der Zauberberg*—are treated with such comic irony. Part of Mann's aim is to initiate a rethinking of humanism and the idea of the human post-Nietzsche.

Alain Badiou, whom I discussed in the introductory chapter, articulates the ripple effect of this particular side of Nietzsche's philosophy in a way that is relevant for Mann as well. Badiou argues that Nietzsche's pronouncement, "God is dead," is more significant as a claim about the status of the human subject in modernity: "The essence of classical metaphysical humanism is the construction of a predicate which is undecidable between the human and the divine. The single stake of Nietzsche's desperate intervention is to undo this predicate, to decide at the very point of the undecidable. God must die, and Man must be overcome."⁵⁹ Badiou argues that some of the most exemplary cases of early twentieth century art, and especially avant-garde art, were attempting to come to terms with and to overcome the disappearance of the human subject, or what he calls the "joint disappearances of Man and God."⁶⁰ It is one of my claims in this chapter that Thomas Mann registers this problem and critically considers the "solution" provided by avant-garde art, which would include a work like Jünger's *Der Arbeiter*, although Mann never read it.⁶¹ In *Doktor Faustus*, the synecdoche for avant-garde art is the *strenger Satz*, a principle for determining the formal qualities of a musical work that enacts a radical break with preceding conventions. In my discussion of Jünger's use of the Gestalt

⁵⁸ Frances Lee also sees attitudes towards individual freedom as central to *Doktor Faustus*: "The novel does not describe traditional German cultural values as the cause of fascism, but rather it describes their rejection as the cause of fascism, particularly the rejection of individualism as the basis of German cultural and ethical values." Lee, *Overtaking Dr. Faustus: Rereading Thomas Mann's Novel in Light of Observations of a Non-political Man* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), 7.

⁵⁹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 168.

⁶⁰ Badiou, 165.

⁶¹ Hermann Kurzke writes that Mann never read Jünger directly but was familiar with his work through secondary sources. Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Das Leben als Kunstwerk*, 366.

concept, I suggested that it should be understood as an absolute principle of effective functioning, a way of mobilizing and ordering matter in a metaphysically significant way. This chapter should make clear that there are parallels to be drawn between the two concepts. I will begin by returning to my previous discussion of the avant-garde in order to highlight the relevant aspects for this chapter.

3.2 The post-humanism of the avant-garde

The avant-garde has already proven important for the present study but, before I continue to discuss Mann's novel, I want to make clear why I consider this movement relevant for the present chapter, since Mann's narrator does not apply the label "avant-garde" to Adrian's music.⁶² I am also not aware of Mann employing this term with reference to Schoenberg. Nevertheless, if we consider what the avant-garde was independent of Mann's reflections, it becomes evident that there is good reason to view Adrian's fictional music as an example of some, though not all, of the elements that define the historical avant-gardes.⁶³ *Doktor Faustus* clearly addresses the most significant features, the common denominator, so to speak, of the new art that emerges in the first quarter of the twentieth century and in particular the new music of Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. Mann's broad interpretation of this music sees it as an art in which a formula or formal principle takes precedence over the subjective creativity of the individual artist. The artist commits to a system that restricts his or her

⁶² Mann does employ the term avant-garde elsewhere in the novel where it usually carries negative connotations. He uses it with reference to the Kridwiß circle, for example, which I will discuss further on. Mann's narrator calls this group of anti-humanist intellectuals who incline towards authoritarianism and dictatorship "dieser kulturkritischen Avantgarde." *DF*, 531. The music agent Saul Fitelberg also uses this term when he describes himself as "ein[] angesehen[er] Vorkämpfer[] avant-gardistischer Kultur." *DF*, 580.

⁶³ It is also true of Schoenberg that he shared some aspects with the avant-garde artists of the time and not others. For instance, Schoenberg maintained that his art was the work of genius and that it had divine aims. This view actually put him at odds with many younger artists who identified themselves as avant-garde. See Walter Bailey, *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 5.

expressive freedom, thereby entering a new creative paradigm, in which a concept like genius has no place in the process of composition, while subjectivity has a diminished role. It is therefore an anti-individualistic approach to composing music. The formal principle becomes the essential component of the artwork while the individual, as artist, recedes into the background. This is central to what the avant-garde does, as Peter Bürger claimed in his influential study, which I discussed in the introduction.

Bürger argues that the central premise of the avant-garde is “self-criticism.” The avant-garde is a movement that forces the institution of art to come to a critical, “objective understanding” of its own development within modern bourgeois society, which it consequently attempts to break free from.⁶⁴ Art in bourgeois society has developed into its own institution, existing in a state of hermetic isolation from the rest of life, which constitutes its separate ontological status as “art.” The defining characteristic of the historical avant-garde, with Dada as its quintessential instantiation, lies therefore in its shared aim of overcoming this situation and reintegrating art into what Bürger calls “Lebenspraxis.”⁶⁵ Dada, writes Bürger,

[...] no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society [...] Only after art, in nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop “purely.” But the other side of autonomy, art’s lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michel Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

⁶⁵ For Bürger, this aim is what separates the avant-gardes both from other modernisms and from the radical art movements that followed the avant-garde of the 1910s, 20s and early 30s, what Bürger terms the neo-avant-garde: “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.” Bürger, 58.

⁶⁶ Bürger, 22.

In Bürger's view, nineteenth-century aestheticism is the final stage of a much longer process that saw art become increasingly independent of any kind of social utility. The downside of this freedom is that aestheticist art cannot be socially consequential because it cannot produce material changes in the socio-political domain, it is simply *l'art pour l'art* taken to its logical conclusion.⁶⁷ Bürger also places both aestheticism and *l'art pour l'art* under a general banner of "autonomous" art, which is the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society. According to this argument, the extreme level of autonomy that aestheticism attains is a necessary precursor to the avant-garde, which emerges in reaction to it.

In order to reintegrate art into *Lebenspraxis*, by which Bürger means something very similar to what I have referred to elsewhere as the socio-political realm, the avant-gardes seek to alter or overturn those aspects of the art-making process that constitute its isolation.⁶⁸ This means first of all rejecting the external circumstances that an autonomous artwork requires: the mode of its production, function and reception.⁶⁹ For Bürger, "the autonomous work of art is the act of an individual. The artist produces as individual, individuality not being understood as the expression of something but as radically different. The concept of genius testifies to this."⁷⁰ The autonomous artwork is one made by "radically different" individuals for consumption by other individuals, who pass judgment on the artwork by exercising taste.⁷¹ In contrast, the avant-garde produces works that aim at "the radical negation of the category of individual creation."⁷²

⁶⁷ "In bourgeois society, it is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art became a fact, and it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond"; "In this respect also, Aestheticism turns out to have been the necessary precondition of the avant-gardiste intent"; "The break with society (it is the society of Imperialism) constitutes the center of the works of Aestheticism." Bürger, 17, 49, 33.

⁶⁸ Some critics have suggested Bürger's definition of *Lebenspraxis* is too vague and therefore creates confusion about what the avant-garde is. See Jost Hermand, "Das Konzept 'Avantgarde,'" in *Faschismus und Avantgarde*, eds. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980), 6.

⁶⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

⁷⁰ Bürger, 51.

⁷¹ Bürger, 51.

⁷² Bürger, 51.

Bürger's example is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), in which the artist signs his name on the most common object possible—a mass-produced urinal—and places it on display, thereby challenging “the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”⁷³ The individual as consumer of art is also called into question via, for instance, the “recipe” for poetry published by Tristan Tzara and the instructions for producing “automatic texts” created by André Breton, which blur the division between producer and consumer while also making the artwork a result of nothing more than an algorithmic process: follow the rules, make the poem.⁷⁴ Suggesting that the consumer of art can easily become its producer should challenge the model of creative genius that marks the artist out as different. Constructivism, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is another helpful model here.

This program is not, however, without its contradictions and Bürger understands the avant-garde project as only partially successful. For one thing, if art were to be reintegrated into life praxis, then it would lose the capacity for self-criticism gained at the height of aestheticism, thereby reversing its evolution.⁷⁵ But there is an even greater contradiction that Bürger pays less attention to, which pertains to the status of the individual creator within the process. Jost Hermand aptly articulates this issue when he writes that one reason for the avant-gardes' failure to achieve their aim was that “[es] steckte in vielen ihrer Vertreter [...] noch zuviel bürgerlicher Subjektivismus, der sich immer wieder als solipsistischer Freiheitssehnsucht, als bloßes

⁷³ Bürger, 52.

⁷⁴ Bürger refers to Tristan Tzara, “Pour faire un Poème dadaïste,” in Tzara, *Lampisteries precedées des sept manifestes dada* (place of publication not given, 1963), 64; and André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), esp. 26. Breton also wrote that “pure psychic automatism” was the “guiding principle” of early surrealism. Breton, 298.

⁷⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50

Revoluzzertum oder Epater-le-bourgeois-Gesinnung manifestierte.”⁷⁶ This may be a tendentious dismissal, but it is based on a simple observation that the initial act of avant-garde artists, such as Duchamp signing his name on a urinal or Tristan Tzara writing the instructions for poetry, requires precisely the kind of individual originality, or whatever the term “genius” applies to, that the movement seeks to negate.

Nevertheless, I would still agree with Bürger to the extent that this model of creativity is based on a reduced role for the individual as artist: It suggests that art is no longer the product of an individual interiority that controls the process of formation generating the work from start to finish, nor even that the individual is a conduit for the muses, for some kind of ideal world beyond, for nature or some similar notion that we would usually associate with romanticism. In contrast, the avant-garde model these examples represent could and, according to some, did eventually lead to intentionally formulaic artworks.⁷⁷ Schoenberg maintained that he was always in control of his technique, which is the main reason he preferred “Komposition mit zwölf Tönen” to the term “Zwölftonmusik” for his method; he believed that the latter term suggested that the system had mastery over the composer, whereas he saw himself as always in control of his method of composition.⁷⁸ Yet, once the possibility of making music using a formula was introduced, it was not long before some composers pushed the method to extreme lengths.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Jost Hermand, “Das Konzept ‘Avantgarde,’” in *Faschismus und Avantgarde*, eds. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980), 6.

⁷⁷ Stanley Cavell calls this “total organization” and identifies it with later composers, Ernst Krenek and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who both employed composition techniques that built on Schoenberg’s innovation. Cavell is critical of this approach, which also incorporates chance and randomness into the process. See Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 196, 202.

⁷⁸ Schoenberg expressed intense frustration that his method had been misunderstood, arguing that it in no way diminished the role of the composer. He affirmed that twelve-tone music resulted from “inspiration” and railed against being called a “constructor” or “mathematician.” Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950) 113, 48. See also Vaget, *Seelenzauber*, 387.

⁷⁹ Cavell argues that by relying on chance and deliberately avoiding inspiration, “total organization” is a way of denying not only convention and tradition, but also “the value of shared meaning”: “in their total organization, Krenek and Stockhausen have chosen nihilism.” Cavell argues that, in contrast, Schoenberg attempted to “re-invent convention.” Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” 202.

Bürger does not broach the issue of how much individuality remains within the avant-garde artwork, but it does not undermine his overall argument. His definition does contain a gap though in that his focus on the intent behind the avant-garde movement overshadows any consideration of the formal qualities of the works that it produced. Indeed, Bürger devotes a chapter of *Theory of the Avant-garde* to the way that avant-garde art attempts to negate the category of “work” in art.⁸⁰ I want to turn therefore to Alain Badiou to help fill this gap. The avant-garde, he writes, “presents itself as the bearer of a power of destruction directed against the formal consensus which, at a given moment, defines what merits the name of art.”⁸¹ Badiou argues that this power of destruction, which undoes “those great formal devices that had slowly become hegemonic during the course of Europe’s artistic history: tonality in music, the figure in painting, humanism in sculpture, the immediate intelligibility of syntax in poetry, and so on” is carried out with the aim of creating a radical break with the past that will, in turn, mark the point of a new beginning not only in art, but in the socio-political sphere.⁸² “The artist of the avant-garde is neither heir nor imitator, but rather the one who violently declares the present of art [...] only the vital *intensity* of artistic creation allows the recognition of a beginning.”⁸³ For the avant-gardes, the imposition of the new in the aesthetic sphere goes hand in hand with the achievement of the new in other spheres of life. Because these two aims are mutually dependent, the avant-garde artist enacts a formal rupture that corresponds to a radically new arrangement within the socio-political sphere. The point I have made repeatedly now is that in Germany, the need for a

⁸⁰ “Generally speaking, the work of art is to be defined as the unity of the universal and the particular [...] The avant-gardiste work does not negate unity as such (even if the Dadists had such intentions) but a specific kind of unity, the relationship between part and whole that characterizes the organic work of art.” Bürger, 56. Bürger also does not mention Schoenberg in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. He does mention twelve-tone music, but only in the context of discussing Adorno and the role of chance in avant-garde art. See *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 68.

⁸¹ Badiou, *The Century*, 132

⁸² Badiou, 133

⁸³ Badiou, 135-136

new arrangement comes with the event of nihilism and its theorization by Nietzsche. Whatever relationship specific artists or thinkers had to the philosopher, they had to contend with a post-Nietzschean intellectual landscape.

This is Badiou's understanding as well and I will refer back to the introduction here, where I discussed his summary of this issue: "'God is dead' means that man is dead too. Man, the last man, the dead man, is what must be overcome for the sake of the overman. What is the overman? Simply man without God."⁸⁴ WWI demonstrates the consequences of this new arrangement: It is the end of a previous understanding of humanism, the end of the individual as a marker of value, as an end. Hence, the artwork that captures the new is anti-individualistic and post-humanist. But while avant-garde art affirms this circumstance, its orientation remains utopian. As Badiou phrases it, the purpose of art's "new beginning" is to make itself relevant again to "[collective] existence and life itself."⁸⁵ This necessarily entails a political awareness. "An avant-garde is a group," writes Badiou, whose "organized and often vigorously sectarian dimension already forges a link [...] between artistic avant-gardes and politics."⁸⁶ So, the avant-garde asserts a new historical truth and draws its consequences within the realm of art and, this is the hope at least, within the realm of politics.

I want to summarize the important points to take away from Badiou and Bürger: The avant-garde attempts to break with both the exterior circumstances of the artwork, how, why and for whom it is made, and with the qualities that have thus far appeared as internal to it: tonality in music, three-dimensional space in painting, linguistic intelligibility in writing and so on. In doing so, the art of the avant-gardes attempts to be more than simply an aesthetic object. Its way of

⁸⁴ Badiou, 168.

⁸⁵ Badiou, 134.

⁸⁶ Badiou, 133.

being acknowledges that a disruption has taken place which makes it impossible to continue to create art as it was. Importantly for my analysis of Mann, this entails a radically altered role for the individual in the artistic process.

Is there something morally dubious about this? This question occupies Mann. As we will see, these definitions of the avant-garde apply to Adrian Leverkühn's music in some but not in all respects. Adrian can without doubt be said to destroy the formal consensus on how to write music with the aim of declaring, perhaps violently declaring, a new beginning, but he does not intend to change socio-political reality. Firstly, he works in isolation and not as part of a group and he does not take any interest in politics. He avoids direct contact with many of the characters in the novel who represent the ideologies that lay the groundwork for the Nazi seizure of power, such as the Kridwiß circle, as I will discuss towards the end of this chapter. Secondly, his character seems undecided on whether art can or should be reintegrated into life. Although he complains about art having too much independence, he argues against the idea that aesthetics necessarily impacts other areas of life, whether ethics or politics. When Leverkühn outlines his views on musical form and says, "[der] Akkord ist kein harmonisches Genußmittel, sondern er ist Polyphonie in sich selbst, und die Töne, die ihn bilden, sind Stimmen. Ich behaupte aber: sie sind das desto mehr, und desto entscheidender ist der polyphone Charakter des Akkords, je dissonanter er ist," Zeitblom sees in this more than a theory of music and the two argue.⁸⁷ Here is Zeitblom's account of the conversation:

"Du kannst gut werden," sagte ich endlich.

"Ich?" erwiderte er ... "Ich spreche ja von der Musik, nicht von mir, – ein kleiner Unterschied."

Er hielt gar sehr auf diesen Unterschied und sprach über Musik nur wie über eine fremde Macht, ein wunderliches, ihn aber persönlich nicht berührendes Phänomen, sprach von ihr kritisch distanziert.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ DF, 112.

⁸⁸ DF, 112.

When Zeitblom then compares Adrian's music to "die aus der Revolution geborene Diktatur," Adrian disputes this and labels Zeitblom's critique a "political song," quite different to what art is about.⁸⁹

Zeitblom is suspicious of Adrian's radical aesthetics because he believes they must have another meaning. But the closest that Adrian comes to suggesting that art could influence the socio-political sphere is when he shares his belief that perhaps the art of the future will once again serve a communal function: "Sie selbst [die Kunst E.M.] wird wieder in sich die Dienerin sehen an einer Gemeinschaft, die weit mehr als 'Bildung' umfassen und Kultur nicht haben, vielleicht aber eine sein wird."⁹⁰ This is a suggestive statement, but it is hardly radical or politically engaged. It is not nearly as political as some of the statements about art that Mann's narrator will make throughout the course of the novel, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. So, the argument about the moral danger of dissonance, for instance, captured in the ominous statement "du kannst gut werden" has to do not with the intent of the artist but with the power of analogy. It suggests something like the idea that dissonance in music either causes or promotes dissonance—perhaps discord is a better word here—in society. It would be difficult to take this argument seriously if that were all there was to it. However, the anxiety Mann expresses here is one that remains active in discussions of the historical avant-garde. Many critics both before him and since have likewise maintained that the aesthetic and the political cannot be separated, meaning not only that artists cannot separate themselves from politics, but that the formal features of a work have ethical and political implications. This was the point made by

⁸⁹ *DF*, 278.

⁹⁰ *DF*, 469. Zeitblom rejects this idea: "Eine Kunst, die 'ins Volk geht,' die Bedürfnisse der Menge, des kleinen Mannes, des Banausentums zu den ihren macht, gerät ins Elend." *DF*, 470.

Uwe Hebekus, whose work I discussed in Chapter 1, and similar arguments have been put forward with regards to Ernst Jünger.⁹¹

I wish to push back on readings that accept the suggested link between aesthetics and politics without question.⁹² Mann's depiction of Adrian's artistic career suggests it is possible for an artist to enable or, at the very least, to model a political program, in this case the program of National Socialism, without intending to do so. This is already a departure from the radical art of the early twentieth century: The avant-gardes discussed by Bürger and Badiou were aware of their aim. Mann seems to be suggesting a more essential link between art and life, but in order to understand why and how he insists on this connection it is necessary to focus on the specifics of Adrian's method of composition as the novel presents these.

3.3 The definition and significance of the *strenger Satz*

Adrian Leverkühn's great innovation, his "Durchbruch," is a method of composing based on an ordered row that uses every pitch of the chromatic scale:

Man müßte [...] aus den zwölf Stufen des temperierten Halbton-Alphabets größere Wörter bilden, Wörter von zwölf Buchstaben, bestimmte Kombinationen und Interrelationen der

⁹¹ Hebekus claims that many prominent works of German modernism, the "klassische Moderne," in other words, "nicht oder allenfalls nur sekundär wegen ihren manifesten Aussagegehalte, sondern vor allem aufgrund ihrer *ästhetischen Struktur* eine Tendenz der Moderne eröffnen, wie sie für den politischen *Diskurs* und das politische *Imaginäre* des Nationalsozialismus konstitutiv gewesen ist [original emphasis]." Hebekus argues that these works aim to be political precisely as autonomous works of art. Uwe Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung: Zum Politischen Ort der Literatur im Zeitraum der Klassischen Moderne* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 10-11.

⁹² The idea that Adrian's music is an analogy for Nazism is fairly uncontroversial within many prominent readings, although there are some differences when it comes to considering what it is about this music that lends itself to such a resemblance. Vaget, for instance, simply accepts the metaphor on the basis of its own logic. Leverkühn's *Durchbruch* brings forth "das Phantom einer welterobernden, weltbeherrschenden Revolution der musikalischen Sprache [...] es ist Führerschaft in der Musik, die aber Führerschaft in einem allgemeinen Sinne meint, im Kulturellen und Politischen [...] Leverkühn [...] antizipiert darin jenen anderen 'genialen' Führer, der seine Barbarei nicht bloß in Töne setzen wird, sondern sie in Blut und Eisen übersetzt." Vaget, *Seelenzauber*, 234. Cobley has a similar understanding, but explains it in terms of Adrian's apparent isolation and the formal qualities of his music: "It appears [...] that the organic principle of counterpoint is being reconfigured into a totalizing system which Mann presumably wants us to associate with fascist totalitarianism." Cobley, "Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Fascist Politics," 66. Cobley ultimately argues that Mann's narrative inadvertently undermines the liberal-humanism he hopes to promote.

zwölf Halbtöne, Reihenbildungen, aus denen das Stück, der einzelne Satz oder ein ganzes mehrsätziges Werk strikt abgeleitet werden müßte. Jeder Ton der gesamten Komposition, melodisch und harmonisch, müßte sich über seine Beziehung zu dieser vorbestimmten Grundreihe auszuweisen haben. Keiner dürfte wiederkehren, ehe alle anderen erschienen sind. Keiner dürfte auftreten, der nicht in der Gesamtkonstruktion seine motivische Funktion erfüllte. Es gäbe keine freie Note mehr. Das würde ich strengen Satz nennen.”⁹³

As mentioned, this description is based on Schoenberg’s method of composing with twelve tones and I will discuss this in greater detail in the following sub-chapter. In *Doktor Faustus, der strenge Satz* emerges out of Adrian’s faith in the absolute truth of mathematical order, something he was attracted to as a student when he spoke of it as “das Wahre.”⁹⁴ The necessity for a new method, based on a higher order, follows from Adrian’s conviction that art is too free and can no longer do what it is supposed to do.

Leverkühn’s search for a *Durchbruch* develops in response to his conviction that contemporary art has reached an untenable impasse: It is no longer possible to make anything new that is not a parody of existing forms. Such parody is worthy of laughter, but it does not live up to art’s vocation, which involves the fulfillment of a metaphysical need. Writing to his mentor, Wendell Kretzschmar, Adrian cites Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger* (1867), which seems, at first, to achieve this by means of the composition: “Die Celli intonieren allein, ein schwermütig sinnendes Thema, das nach dem Unsinn der Welt, dem Wozu all des Hetzens und Treibens und Jagens und einander Plagens bieder-philosophisch und höchst ausdrucksvoll fragt.”⁹⁵ And yet, Adrian confesses that he cannot take it seriously: “Lieber Freund, warum muß ich lachen? [...] Warum muß es mir vorkommen, als ob fast alle, nein, alle Mittel und Konvenienzen der Kunst heute nur noch zur Parodie taugen?”⁹⁶ Adrian’s distaste for what he terms the

⁹³ DF, 280. This definition is taken verbatim from Adorno. Cf. Adorno, *Philosophie Der Neuen Musik*, 63.

⁹⁴ DF, 71.

⁹⁵ DF, 196.

⁹⁶ DF, 197.

“Abgeschmacktheit [...] die ermöglichende Fertigkeitssubstanz auch des genialen Kunstwerks” and the “Gepflogenheiten in der Erzielung des Schönen” should not be understood as the result of personal preference, but an insightful interpretation of the state of contemporary art, as testified not only by the backing of his teacher, but also by the critical acclaim he eventually earns.⁹⁷ Adrian’s critique of the staid conservatism, the *biederkeit* of this music, exemplifies the rejection of romanticism and the *bürgerliche* values of the nineteenth century that were central to the avant-garde project. That even the conventions used by a genius like Wagner (Adrian uses “genius” in this context) now seem incapable of anything new is testament to the need for a radically different musical form.

Adrian’s views on what a breakthrough would entail are explored in the novel at length, especially in the “dialogue” he holds with the devil. One recurring theme is the necessity for art to recover a sense of *Schein*, appearance, and *Spiel*, playfulness, so that it can once again be “heiter” and, recapturing a youthful “Unschuld,” speak once again to humanity, “eine Kunst mit der Menschheit auf Du und Du,” as Adrian puts it.⁹⁸ But it is also clear that both music’s necessary role in human life and its inability to fulfill it are presented in parallel with the changing role of dogmatic religion in society. Adrian frequently compares art, and music especially, to religion and sees the composer as an imitator of the original “creator.” Commenting on the “Klassizismus” of Beethoven’s Third Symphony, Adrian describes the music as “[eine] Bekundung höchster Tatkraft – nichts weniger als abstrakt, aber gegenstandslos, einer Tatkraft im Reinen, im klaren Äther [...] solche Musik ist die Tatkraft an

⁹⁷ *DF*, 195.

⁹⁸ *DF*, 469; *Schein* and illusion were essential for art in Nietzsche’s philosophy and constituted its capacity for a different truth to the truth of morality: “Die Wahrheit gilt nicht als oberstes Werthmaß, noch weniger als oberste Macht.// Der Wille zum Schein, zur Illusion, zur Täuschung, zum Werden und Wechseln gilt hier als tiefer und ursprünglicher “metaphysischer” als der Wille zur Wahrheit, zur Wirklichkeit, zum Sein: – letzterer ist selbst bloß eine Form des Willens zur Illusion.” Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Frühjahr 1888, KSA 13, 229.

sich, die Tatkraft selbst, aber nicht als Idee, sondern in ihrer Wirklichkeit. Ich gebe dir zu bedenken, daß das beinahe die Definition Gottes ist. Imitatio Dei – mich wundert, daß das nicht verboten ist. Vielleicht ist es verboten.”⁹⁹

To model the artist on God as Adrian does here implies an ability to create something original, just as “Tatkraft” is the power of God to make something out of nothing. But Adrian believes that an artist like Beethoven, who was able to generate a work by means of the free exercise of his subjectivity, would no longer be possible.¹⁰⁰ After the conversation that the above passage is excerpted from, Adrian makes the decision to study theology, not music. Part of the reason, as he later confesses, is the need to place binding limitations on his subjectivity: “Weil ich mich demütigen, mich beugen, mich disziplinieren, den Dünkel meiner Kälte bestrafen wollte, kurz, aus contritio.”¹⁰¹ But his decision is also driven by a sense that there is something wrong with the model of musical production that has preceded him, exemplified by figures like Beethoven and Wagner. In Mann’s account, something is happening in the artistic sphere whereby older models of individual creativity, those of classicism and romanticism, no longer produce art that is metaphysically significant, that provides an answer to the question “wozu?” in the way Wagner’s music attempts to do, but falls short of achieving. This development runs in parallel to changes taking place the relationship between God and the human subject. We could phrase this as the problem of genius. Great art, the art of genius, is nourished by a shared belief in a creator God, whom the artist imitates.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ DF, 119.

¹⁰⁰ This contrast between the music of Beethoven and Schoenberg is taken from Adorno: “Beethoven hat den Sinn von Tonalität aus subjektiver Freiheit reproduziert. Die neue Ordnung der Zwölft löscht virtuell das Subjekt aus.” Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 70.

¹⁰¹ DF, 192.

¹⁰² Bernd Hamacher argues that fears of epigonality also drove Mann in his own work, but that he overcame them by adopting a “kombinatorische[], postgeniale[] Kreativitätspoetik”: “das genaue Gegenteil dessen, was der Teufel verkündet, der sich und Adrian die Durchbrechung der “Epoche der Kultur und des Kultus” als Programm auf die Fahne schreibt und sich zu einer “Barbarei” bekennt.” Hamacher. “Zauber des Letzten – Zauber des Ersten?”

Theology, however, proves to be a disappointment, because it too fails to outline a purpose to human existence, as opposed to simply teaching a set of rules and tenets for people to follow. Even these, in fact, prove unconvincing. To demonstrate this, Mann's narrator transcribes at length the conversations of the so-called Winfried circle. Adrian befriends this group of theology students while he is studying religion in Halle, before he makes the decision to give up those studies in favor of music. The narrator highlights that, in spite of their evident commitment to a dogmatic faith, these young men cannot consistently apply religious principles to life, so that they seem to have no faith in any particular ideology; instead, they engage in long debates that never reach any conclusion. The conversations of these students hint at opposing world views, from a "Studenten- und Burschenromantik," to socialism, to something resembling *völkischer Nationalismus*—"Die deutschen Taten geschahen immer aus einer gewissen gewaltigen Unreife"—as one of the circle's members claims.¹⁰³ Underlying their debates however is a general sense of indeterminacy and a lack of direction. As one of the students phrases it, neither nationalism nor socialism provide answers to society's problems. The nationalist idea is undermined by "eine gewisse, so häufig vorkommende nominalistische Hohlheit und personale Substanzlosigkeit des völkischen Bekenntnisses."¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, "wenn im ökonomischen Raum alles bestmöglich reguliert ist, die Frage nach der Sinnerfüllung des Daseins und nach würdiger Lebensführung noch genau so offen bleibt, wie heute [...] Man fragt sich, wozu dann noch leben."¹⁰⁵ The students are therefore resigned to something like a performance of opposing points of view.¹⁰⁶

Epigonalität, Avantgardismus und das Problem der Kreativität – in der Moderne und bei Thomas Mann," in *Apokrypher Avantgardismus: Thomas Mann und die Klassische Moderne*, eds. Stefan Börnchen and Claudia Liebrand (Paderborn, Germany: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 47.

¹⁰³ *DF*, 170, 174.

¹⁰⁴ *DF*, 181.

¹⁰⁵ *DF*, 181.

¹⁰⁶ We can recall here that Nietzsche predicted that one of the consequences of nihilism would be a reduction of politics to performance. See Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1885-Herbst 1886, KSA 12, 127.

These conversations, which Zeitblom describes with some sarcasm as examples of “‘doppelpoliger Haltung’ und ‘geschichtsbewußter Analyse,’ mit ‘überzeitlichen Qualitäten,’ ‘ontischer Naturhaftigkeit,’ ‘logischer Dialektik,’ gelehrt, bemüht und uferlos,” never come to any conclusion.¹⁰⁷ That even theology students cannot articulate a purpose to life, or a unifying social goal seems not only an indictment of the state of religious discourse, but suggests that there is no authority competent enough to answer these questions.¹⁰⁸

Although Adrian’s contribution to the above debate is to say that he sees the church, even in the present historical moment, “säkularisiert und verbürgerlicht” as “eine Burg der Ordnung, eine Anstalt zu objektiven Disziplinierung,” he comes to see this as insufficient.¹⁰⁹ Not only does he find “eine Menge entsetzlicher Komik in ihr [die Theologie E.M.],” he is convinced that dogmatic religion cannot provide either a goal or structure to the lives of individuals.¹¹⁰ What he says on this matter is perhaps the most revealing statement as to what Mann wants the *strenger Satz* to represent. Adrian believes that what prevents music from progressing and developing new forms is that the artist has too much freedom. “Freiheit,” he says, “ist ja ein anderes Wort für Subjektivität, und eines Tages hält die es nicht mehr mit sich aus, irgendwann verzweifelt sie an der Möglichkeit, von sich aus schöpferisch zu sein und sucht Schutz und Sicherheit beim Objektiven [...] Sie erkennt sich selbst sehr bald in der Gebundenheit, erfüllt sich in der Unterordnung unter Gesetz, Regel, Zwang, System.”¹¹¹ When Leverkühn begins writing music he finds that the conventions of composition fail to provide the necessary limitations to subjective creativity just as his theological studies failed to provide the kind of strict limitations

¹⁰⁷ DF, 184.

¹⁰⁸ Goebel makes a similar argument: “Das Versprechen Martin Luthers einer Erneuerung des Glaubens wirkt nicht mehr, nicht einmal bei angehenden Pastoren.” Goebel, *Esmeralda*, 164.

¹⁰⁹ DF, 176.

¹¹⁰ DF, 197.

¹¹¹ DF, 277-78.

he was hoping for. Such limitations seem necessary not simply because Adrian possesses certain innate qualities that leave him open to dangerous influences, as the narrator suggests, but because of historical circumstances and how they affect the subject.¹¹² This builds on Mann's general understanding of freedom as a paradoxical concept, a good that needs to be managed and curtailed in the right way. This was the case in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*—"die Negativität des Freiheitsbegriffes ist durchaus grenzenlos, es ist ein nihilistischer Begriff und also nur im geringsten Dosen heilsam, ein offizinelles Gift"—but also in much later essays that argue for a necessary balance between freedom and constraint.¹¹³ Note that "freedom" is also viewed with suspicion in the Winfried circle, where it is discussed in terms of politics, not art. As the theology student Deutschlin puts it, "die Freiheitsphrase [lockt] keinen Hund mehr vom Ofen."¹¹⁴

Adrian comes to realize that the answer is to establish a general ordering principle as the basis for a new art. "[Einen] Systemherrn brauchen wir," he tells Zeitblom, "einen Schulmeister des Objektiven und der Organisation, genial genug, das Wiederherstellende, ja, das Archaische mit dem Revolutionären zu verbinden."¹¹⁵ The eventual solution to this problem, the *strenger Satz*, must therefore be understood as a way of placing objective constraints on subjective creativity, which has reached a state of despair without the necessary support of binding limitations. Adrian comes to believe that, at least in the sphere of art, the subject must cede

¹¹² Zeitblom frequently attributes the direction of Adrian's art as stemming from his arrogance, or his pride. See for example the scene where Zeitblom and Kretzschmar agree that "es ist Sache seines [Adrians E.M.] Stolzes, der ihn hindert, epigonenhafte Musik in die Welt zu setzen." *DF*, 188.

¹¹³ *Betrachtungen*, 560; see for example Mann's "Das Problem der Freiheit": "Ist es nicht bemerkenswert und symptomatisch, daß heute ein Künstler, gewohnt, sich in seiner Heimatsphäre um das Rechte, Gute und Wahre zu mühen, sich verbunden fühlt, dies auch im Politisch-Sozialen zu tun [...] weil er glauben würde, der Totalität des Humanen etwas schuldig zu bleiben, wenn er sich dessen weigerte? Ist diese politische Bemühung des Geistes [...] nicht ein Beispiel für jene soziale Selbstbindung der Freiheit, von der ich sprach, und die eine moralische Bindung ist?" Mann, *Essays*, vol. 5., eds. Hermann Kurzke and Stephen Stachorski (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 73.

¹¹⁴ *DF*, 181.

¹¹⁵ *DF*, 276.

authority to something external, which is the meaning of “objectifying the subjective.” Mann’s narrator wants to identify this to the freedom of the individual within society, which is why he responds to Adrian’s statement by comparing the kinds of formal limitations proposed to “[eine] aus der Revolution geborene Diktatur.”¹¹⁶ Adrian disagrees with this point, but the way in which he places music alongside religion suggests that he is not thinking only of art in the limited sense.

Adrian’s project is therefore one of revolutionary restoration whereby authority over aesthetic values is shifted from the individual to an objective principle. Subjectivity, which Leverkühn understands in terms of freedom, “hält es nicht mehr mit sich aus.” For this reason, a “Systemherr” appears as a logical necessity. I would argue this term is not meant ultimately to refer to an individual, but a set of rules that come not only to aid the creative process, but provide instructions that curtail at least some of the composer’s creative freedoms. In Adrian’s view, submission to a system is the only way forward for art: “Es könnte [...] etwas zeitlich Notwendiges ausdrücken,” he says, “in einer Zeit der zerstörten Konventionen und der Auflösung aller objektiven Verbindlichkeiten, kurzum einer Freiheit, die anfängt, sich als Meltau auf das Talent zu legen und Züge der Sterilität zu zeigen.”¹¹⁷ He believes that freedom has exhausted itself and become a burden on talent, preventing the artist from producing anything new. The way forward is to recognize the *Herrschaft* of the system, as the word *Systemherr* implies.

The practical path to achieving this is initially a renewed focus on organization, because organization captures the essence of both mathematics and dogmatic religion: “Organisation ist alles,” says Leverkühn at one point, “[ohne] sie gibt es überhaupt nichts, am wenigsten

¹¹⁶ *DF*, 278.

¹¹⁷ *DF*, 277.

Kunst.”¹¹⁸ Another important line is his statement that “[die] Ordnung ist alles. Römer dreizehn: Was von Gott ist, das ist geordnet.”¹¹⁹ For Adrian, music occurs at the intersection of mathematics and religion, but manages to heighten the strengths of both, so that it can be described as “immer eine magische Verbindung aus Theologie und der so unterhaltenden Mathematik.”¹²⁰ It follows that Dürer’s magic square becomes an important model for Adrian’s composition style, suggesting that the music is a play of numbers or values, the outcome of which is predetermined.

However, Adrian’s initial interest in mathematically inspired order proves insufficient for propelling art towards the new, which leads him to seek out “Esmeralda,” a prostitute he encounters during a fateful trip to a brothel. It is from Esmeralda, as he calls her, that Adrian contracts syphilis, which will cause his eventual madness and death, but will also provide a superhuman boost to his creativity. Symbolically, this encounter is his invitation to and acceptance into himself of the demonic, the meaning of which within the logic of Mann’s novel will require further consideration. One way to think about it would be to say that Adrian turns to the Dionysian, which is the key that helps him achieve his creative *Durchbruch*. The Dionysian provides the necessary Rausch that elevates mathematical order to a kind of ultimate expressivity. Before coming to this point, I want to diverge briefly in order to consider the real-world sources for the *strenger Satz*: Schoenberg and Adorno. Since Mann’s novel is responding to historical events and making implicit claims about the relationship between politics and art, it is only fair to consider how he engages with the historical material made available to him by these two figures. His depiction of the *strenger Satz* is a comment on the new music. In a way, I

¹¹⁸ *DF*, 278.

¹¹⁹ *DF*, 72.

¹²⁰ *DF*, 193.

want to provide Adorno and Schoenberg with a right of response—distinct from the real responses that they had to the novel—that will make clear where Mann makes his intervention.

3.4 Not quite Dionysian—an excursus on Schoenberg and Adorno

Although Mann based the *strenger Satz* on Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, "Zwölftonmusik" in German, he never claimed to have a firm grasp of this music.¹²¹ In *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus* he described his knowledge of contemporary music as "meine initiierte Ignoranz" and stated that his true home was the music of Wagner.¹²² But this is not as telling as the absence of any in-depth discussion of Schoenberg's music in his writings.¹²³ It is therefore not immediately clear why he would use the work of a Viennese Jewish composer as the model for Adrian's music. "Mir schwebt etwas Satanisch-Religiöses, Dämonisch-Frommes, zugleich streng Gebundenes und verbrecherisch Wirkendes, oft die Kunst Verhöhnnendes vor," he writes in relation to Adrian's compositions.¹²⁴ Did Mann actually believe that Schoenberg's music combined the pious and the demonic in this way and that this art had something authoritarian to it, as the novel suggests? Several studies have sought answers in Mann and Schoenberg's correspondence, which tells the story of respect followed by misunderstanding and eventually overtaken by bitterness on Schoenberg's part. This outcome was likely the result of

¹²¹ Schoenberg was convinced that neither Mann nor Adorno correctly understood his creative process: "He [Adorno E.M.] who [...] needs an eternity to compose a song, naturally has no idea how quickly a real composer writes down what he hears in his imagination [...] He seems to believe that the twelve-tone row, if it doesn't hinder thought, hinders invention," Letter to Joseph Rufer of December 5, 1949, quoted in James Schmidt, "Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann and Schoenberg," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 164.

¹²² *Entstehung*, 519.

¹²³ Mann's diaries record multiple instances of hearing Schoenberg's music performed with little or no comment, although it is clear Mann does not like the music. This entry from February 7, 1947 is representative: "Die Verklärte Nacht von Schönberg ist sehr klangschön, aber zu lang, zu formlos, oft gar zu tristanisch und zu substanzarm. Das einzige Thema liebt man vielleicht nur, weil es eines ist." *Apropos Doktor Faustus*, ed. E. R. Schoenberg, 94.

¹²⁴ *Entstehung*, 520.

both Mann's seeming appropriation of the twelve-tone method and his response to an essay Schoenberg had written about the threat to Jews in Germany and sent to Mann in the hope that it would be published.¹²⁵ While Mann's ideas about avant-garde music are not based only on Schoenberg –Hans Rudolf Vaget's reconstruction of Mann's musical sources suggests Richard Strauss and Hans Pfitzner as more pertinent models for the demonic composer type Mann constructs – the artistic breakthrough that the novel narrates is Schoenberg's own.¹²⁶ As I will argue, Mann misinterprets Schoenberg, but he does so in an interesting and illuminating way for the present discussion.

Schoenberg's development of "Zwölftonmusik" took place gradually. Musicologists tend to agree that an early breakthrough to atonality occurred in 1908 or 1909, while the composer was setting poems by Stefan George to music, specifically from *Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten* (1893/94), but the systematization that became the twelve-tone method did not evolve until 1921.¹²⁷ When following Schoenberg's method, a composer foregoes employing traditional keys, that is, tonic notes or chords. Instead, he or she must devise a tone row containing all twelve pitch classes on the chromatic scale with each note appearing only one time. Once this basic pattern is laid down, it will be repeated throughout the composition, often in a variety of closely related permutations. Ways to vary the tone row while keeping to the basic principle

¹²⁵ I will refer here to a letter from Mann to Schoenberg, in which the former expressed his "Bestürzung" that Schoenberg's essay, "Vier-Punkte-Programm für das Judentum," displayed "eine oft etwas gewalttätige Allüre, und zwar sowohl im einzelnen, polemischen Ausdruck wie auch in der geistigen Gesamthaltung, die ja ohne Zweifel ein wenig ins Faschistische fällt." *Apropos Doktor Faustus*, ed. E.R. Schoenberg, 36.

¹²⁶ Vaget, *Seelenzauber*, 223.

¹²⁷ Both Alexander Ringer and Egbert Hiller highlight the importance of George's poetry for Schoenberg's "farewell to tonality." Egbert Hiller, "«Im heiligen Feuer einer neuen Werdung»: Mit seiner Vertonung von Stefan George spiegelt Arnold Schönberg am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkriegs die Ambivalente Haltung der Avantgarde," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 175, no. 4 (2014), 48; Alexander Ringer, *Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Jew*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1990), 38; 1921 was the year Schoenberg made the famous proclamation to his students, "I have made a discovery thanks to which the supremacy of German music is ensured for the next hundred years," quoted in Willi Reich, *Schoenberg: A Critical Biography*, trans. Leo Black (New York: Praeger, 1971), 130.

would be to reverse it, invert it, or reverse and invert it, therefore permitting four different ways of arranging the row without changing the relation of the notes to one another, as the following image from Schoenberg's *Style and Idea* (1950) demonstrates.

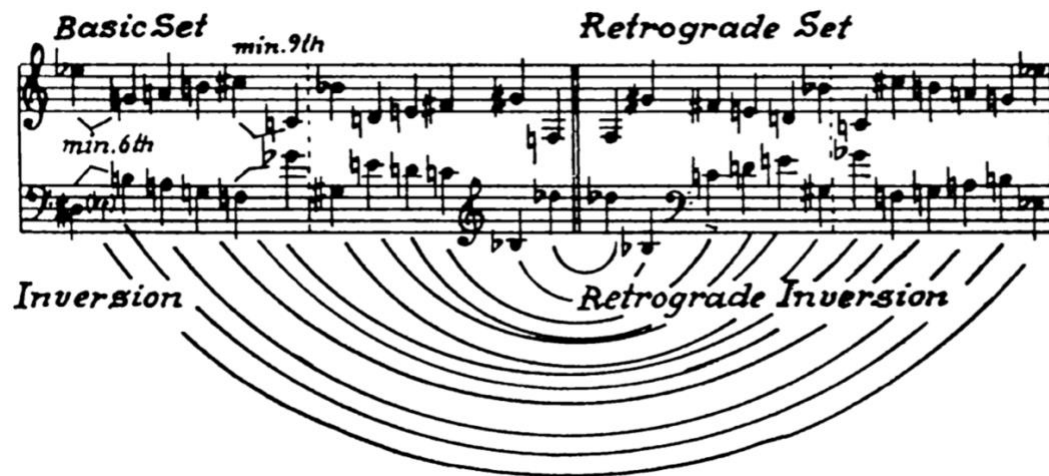


Figure 1: Example of a twelve-tone row from Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 115.

We can see that the system, while allowing for variation, nevertheless introduces an element of pre-determination into a composition, including regarding the variation itself. In the diagram, the first three notes of the basic set are Eb, G and A. Their inversion in the second bar produces A, G, Eb, which is permissible. At no point in a strictly twelve-tone composition should A follow Eb. The composer is bound by the initial set he or she creates.

Like Mann's fictional composer, Schoenberg too believed that composition had arrived at an impasse around the turn of the century. He insisted that "the method of composing with twelve tones grew out of a necessity."¹²⁸ Aesthetic forms, in his view, had to respond to prior

¹²⁸ Originally delivered as a lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles, March 26, 1941. Published in Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 103.

developments and progress beyond these in order to be able to present the new: “There is no great art which does not convey a new message to humanity; there is no great artist who fails in this respect.”¹²⁹ The innovations introduced by many of the most important nineteenth century composers, in particular Wagner, Richard Strauss, Mussorgsky, Debussy, Mahler, Puccini and Max Reger had led to what Schoenberg called the “emancipation of the dissonance.”¹³⁰ These composers had already experimented with introducing pitches that were foreign to traditional diatonic scales, a method called “chromaticism.” In Schoenberg’s view, chromaticism had accustomed listeners to dissonance in music, so that to simply copy the formal methods used by these composers would mean foregoing the possibility of expressing *new* ideas and, for Schoenberg, music was ultimately about the expression of an idea. The idea, which he defined as the “totality” of what a piece of music attempts to convey, was the element “most important in a work of art.”¹³¹

Schoenberg’s music garnered strong responses from the start, both positive and negative. While some hailed the mostly self-taught composer as the new Mozart, others wrote that what he made was “überhaupt keine Musik, sondern ein Attentat gegen den Klang, ein Verbrechen wider die Natur, doppelt verdammenswert, weil der ‘Tondichter’ nicht bloß alte Begriffe über den Haufen rennen, sondern auch den natürlichen Entwicklungsgang der Musik verleugnen will.”¹³² The idea that there was something not “musical” about the music was a frequently repeated one. To some, twelve-tone music was too intellectual and calculated to fit with the model of “art.” Other critics argued that, on the contrary, Schoenberg was too much of a Romantic and that the

¹²⁹ Schoenberg, 39.

¹³⁰ This list of composers is Schoenberg’s own. See Schoenberg, 104-105.

¹³¹ Schoenberg, 48-49.

¹³² Paul Stauber, “Konzerte,” *Montagspresse* (January 30, 1905), http://www.schoenberg.at/scans/Clippings/C19050125_d.pdf; Cf. Bailey, *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion*, 3.

concept of genius that remained central to his understanding of method was outdated.¹³³ This was especially true from the 1920s onwards, when artists increasingly rejected the notion of “inspiration” and its metaphysical connotations.¹³⁴

Mann read Schoenberg selectively, but he relied primarily on Adorno’s interpretation of the composer’s music.¹³⁵ The text on Schoenberg that Adorno later published as part of *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949) as well as conversations with the philosopher were Mann’s main resources for understanding the “new music,” as Adorno called it. Mann used several of Adorno’s texts verbatim in the novel: the latter’s essays on Beethoven’s sonata form, for example, appear in *Doktor Faustus* as the contents of a lecture by Wendell Kretzschmar while the descriptions of some of Adrian’s compositions were drafted by Adorno at Mann’s request.¹³⁶ The famous characterization of the *strenger Satz* as leaving “keine freie Note” is likewise taken from Adorno.¹³⁷

¹³³ Schoenberg’s *Style and Idea* is replete with references to the abilities that only an artistic genius possesses. Here is one striking phrase from his essay on Gustav Mahler: “Genius already possesses all its future faculties from the very beginning. It only develops them; it merely unwinds, unrolls, unfolds them. While talent, which has to master a limited material (namely, what is already given) very soon reaches its apex and then usually subsides, the development of the genius, which seeks new pathways into the boundless, extends throughout a lifetime,” 31.

¹³⁴ See Bailey, *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion*, 5.

¹³⁵ Mann obtained a copy of Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre* in 1943, as evidenced from Mann’s diaries and his correspondence with Schoenberg. See *Apropos Doktor Faustus*, ed. E.R. Schoenberg, 60-63.

¹³⁶ The disputes between Mann and Schoenberg, and Mann and Adorno that followed the publication of *Doktor Faustus* are well documented and I will not delve into them here. Briefly, Adorno felt that he deserved some credit for having actually written sections of Mann’s novel, including the details of Adrian’s most famous composition, the “Weheklag Doktor Fausti.” Schoenberg, meanwhile, was furious with what he perceived as intellectual misappropriation. Mann attempted to correct these disputes with the publication of *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus* (1949), but the neither the antagonism with Adorno nor with Schoenberg was ever fully resolved. In 2009 Schoenberg’s grandson, Eric Randol Schoenberg, published a collection of Mann’s diary entries and letters between Mann and Schoenberg as well as several scholarly articles under the title *Apropos Doktor Faustus: Briefwechsel Arnold Schönberg - Thomas Mann, Tagebücher Und Aufsätze 1930-1951*. See also Hans Rudolf Vaegt, “Eine ‘scheußliche Geschichte’? Nachträgliches Zum Streit Arnold Schönbergs Mit Thomas Mann,” in *Musik und Ästhetik* 19, no. 73 (2015), 65-74. <https://research-ebsco-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=7f20c0a3-b27e-34a4-80dd-8a171168e3eb>.

¹³⁷ “Jeder Ton der gesamten Komposition ist durch diese ‘Reihe’ determiniert: es gäbe keine ‘freie’ Note mehr.” Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 63.

Given the centrality of Adorno's interpretation, I want to provide a summary of its most prominent features. Firstly, Adorno defends Schoenberg against many of the garden-variety complaints that his work gave rise to, especially in relation to its so-called incomprehensibility.¹³⁸ He is especially scathing when describing the motivation of aesthetically conservative listeners who would have preferred to hear the familiar musical forms of previous eras. But the philosopher nevertheless had severe objections not only to Schoenberg's compositions but to the "new music" generally, which meant Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Stravinsky and the many followers they produced.¹³⁹ Adorno argues that the weaknesses of the new music are consequences of its strengths. Whereas many listeners believed post-tonal music to be a hermetic and abstract artform, Adorno writes that, on the contrary, these compositions reflected social conditions only too well. "Die Isolierung der radikalen modernen Musik rührt nicht von ihrem asozialen, sondern ihrem sozialen Gehalt her, indem sie durch ihre reine Qualität und um so nachdrücklicher, je reiner sie diese hervortreten läßt, aufs gesellschaftlichen Unwesen deutet."¹⁴⁰ For Adorno, art necessarily reflects the social conditions surrounding its creation by means of its form, but it should aim to do more.¹⁴¹ He argues that artworks should serve as the site for answers to "den Rätseln, welche die Welt aufgibt, um die Menschen zu verschlingen," and that the formal qualities of works—"künstlerische[] Technik"—

¹³⁸ "Die Wut über die Avantgarde ist so unmäßig, geht so weit über deren Rolle unter der späten Industriegesellschaft [...] weil das verängstigte Bewußtsein in der neuen Kunst die Pforte verriegelt findet, durch welche es der totalen Aufklärung zu entfliehen hoffte: weil Kunst heute [...] ohne Konzession all das reflektiert und zum Bewußtsein bringt." Adorno, 22

¹³⁹ Adorno was initially enthusiastic about the new music and even studied under Alban Berg. See Manfred Füllsack, "Adornos Ästhetische Theorie von Fortschritt und Reaktion: Fünfzig Jahre nach Erscheinen der 'Philosophie der neuen Musik,'" *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 44, no. 1 (1999), 42.

¹⁴⁰ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 124.

¹⁴¹ "Die ungelösten Antagonismen der Realität kehren wieder in den Kunstwerken als die immanenten Probleme ihrer Form. Das, nicht der Einschluß gegenständlicher Momente, definiert das Verhältnis der Kunst zur Gesellschaft." Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 16.

need to be employed towards that end.¹⁴² But the new music does not achieve this eudaimonic function. Adorno puts forward several reasons for this, but I will consider the two that are most relevant for the present discussion.

Firstly, he argues that this music lacks internal cohesion and meaning and is instead based on a contingent but empty system. This system imposes an absolute order that has no purpose apart from its own exposition: “In der Realität soll die Technik Zwecken dienen, die jenseits ihres eigenen Zusammenhangs liegen. Hier, wo solche Zwecke entfallen, wird sie zum Selbstzweck und surrogiert die substantielle Einheit des Kunstwerks durch eine bloße des ‘Aufgehens.’”¹⁴³ Consequently, this music is a kind of “Zahlenspiel” and “kündet dafür eine Art Leere höherer Ordnung sich an.”¹⁴⁴ He further notes:

Die Zwölftontechnik ersetzt die ‘Vermittlung,’ den ‘Übergang,’ die triebhafte Leittonigkeit durch die bewußte Konstruktion. Aber diese wird erkaufte durch Atomisierung der Klänge. Das freie Kräftespiel der traditionellen Musik, welche das Ganze von Klang zu Klang produziert, ohne daß gleichsam von Klang zu Klang das Ganze vorgedacht wäre, wird durch den ‘Einsatz’ der einander entfremdeten Klänge ersetzt. Es gibt kein anarchisches Zueinanderwollen der Klänge mehr, bloß ihre monadische Beziehungslosigkeit und die planende Herrschaft über alle [...] Hatte vordem die Totalität hinter dem Rücken der Einzelereignisse sich verwirklicht, so ist die Totalität nun bewußt. Aber die Einzelereignisse, die konkreten Zusammenhänge werden ihr geopfert.¹⁴⁵

Adorno claims that the new music seeks to recover “das verlorene Ganze, die verlorene Macht und Verbindlichkeit” of Beethoven’s music by means of organizing itself into a “totality.”¹⁴⁶ But in actuality it achieves the opposite, because submitting the composition to a pre-determined plan means foregoing the possibility of producing the sense of meaningful wholeness that

¹⁴² Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 125, 126.

¹⁴³ Adorno, 70.

¹⁴⁴ Adorno, 63, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, 83.

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, 69.

Beethoven's music was able to achieve. "Sinn," writes Adorno, is the product of an individual mind: "Beethoven hat den Sinn von Tonalität aus subjektiver Freiheit reproduziert. Die neue Ordnung der Zwölftontechnik löscht virtuell das Subjekt aus."¹⁴⁷ Instead of subjective meaning and purposeful connections, the new music is a "construction" that functions by means of "plannende Herrschaft."

Although there is no direct relation here to Jünger's writing, I would argue that it is no accident that Adorno's description of the new music shares features with Jünger's planned society, especially in the way that the concepts *Herrschaft* and *construction* are applied once the idea of "das Ganze" is undermined. This points us to the second issue Adorno identifies, which is the way that this music negates the role of individual subjectivity within the creative process and what this means for the freedom of the individual generally. In Adorno's interpretation, the twelve-tone method means that the "composition" is already in place, in a sense, once the act of composition proper begins.¹⁴⁸ Let us keep in mind that twelve-tone music is based on the principle that the composer creates an ordered row of all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, which is repeated with variations that nevertheless preserve the relationship of the notes to one another. Now, in Adorno's view, this process can only be arbitrary since "jeder Ton ist so gut Reihenton wie jeder andere [...]. Jeder Reihensatz ist 'die' Reihe so gut wie der vorherende."¹⁴⁹ In Adorno's reading this means that the composer becomes secondary to the formal method thus employed: he or she has submitted the self to the method. Since "[keine] Regel erweist sich als

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, 69-70.

¹⁴⁸ This was a major point of disagreement between Adorno and Schoenberg, as indicated by my previous references to *Style and Idea*.

¹⁴⁹ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 96.

repressiver denn die selbstgestellte,” Adorno believes this music exercises a kind of violence upon the individual subject.¹⁵⁰

These are strong claims and it is not my aim here to analyze their plausibility. What is interesting for the present discussion are the parallels between Mann’s fiction, Jünger’s *Der Arbeiter*, and Adorno’s politically inflected engagement with the new music, which offer a revealing terminology. Adorno writes that Schoenberg found “ein Generalnenner für alle musikalischen Dimensionen,” which he argues achieves a kind of flattening or streamlining of essential differences between musical forms.¹⁵¹ He believes the demand for musical elements to submit to a single form or set of rules has a totalizing effect not only on composition but on the human subject, which brings us close to what Jünger’s idea of the Gestalt of the Worker attempts to theorize. Jünger sees his task as discovering the hidden key that can explain historical events and make seemingly disparate elements fall into a meaningful organization. A similar drive is at work when Mann’s Adrian claims that a *Systemherr* is needed. Although he uses this term in reference to the composer and religious mystic Conrad Beissel, I would argue it goes beyond the idea of an individual and is replaced in Adrian’s own method by the *strenger Satz*. Mann’s fictional version of the twelve-tone method is responding to a historical, social as well as artistic need for a higher order, which in this case takes the shape of an authoritative formal method. Adorno’s view that artistic form always reflects its social circumstances is important to bear in mind for considering how Mann attempts to link artistic form to the socio-political realm. But Mann also interprets both his sources, Schoenberg and Adorno, in ways that better fit with his concerns.

¹⁵⁰ Adorno, 69; Adorno adds: “Die Gewalt, die die Massenmusik den Menschen antut, lebt fort am gesellschaftlichen Gegenpol, bei der Musik, die den Menschen sich entzieht.” Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Adorno, 56.

3.4.1 What Mann does and does not take from Adorno

Adorno and Mann's critiques of twelve-tone music diverge in several important ways. One of the major differences is that, for Adorno, there is nothing amoral or politically dangerous about the new music. He is more concerned with the dismal possibilities left open to culture within the capitalist economic system, of which this music is a symptom. Like popular songs, avant-garde music (Adorno does use this term to describe it) has the characteristics of a fetish. Adorno had already analyzed the fetishistic nature of popular music in "Über den *Fetischcharakter* in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens" (1938). But whereas popular musical styles trade on recognizability, with the new music, technique becomes a kind of revelation of its own success, the laying bare of method as an end in itself. Hence, *technique* acquires a *Fetischcharakter* just as melodies do in popular tunes.¹⁵² Mann's novel is not interested in questions of political economy. If it were, he may have painted Adrian's breakthrough quite differently. Instead, Mann is concerned with the moral implications of the new music.

Mann incorporates two important arguments from Adorno's interpretation of Schoenberg, but his analysis adds a moral dimension that relegates any interest in the aesthetic quality of this music to the background. The first argument Mann reinterprets concerns the regressive quality of the new music, which Adorno identifies in the following way:

Der Ursprung der Atonalität, als die vollendete Reinigung der Musik von Konventionen, hat eben darin zugleich etwas von Barbarei. Sie läßt in den kulturfeindlichen Ausbrüchen Schönbergs immer wieder die kunstvolle Oberfläche erzittern. Der dissonante Akkord [...] klingt auch wiederum, als habe das zivilisatorische Ordnungsprinzip ihn nicht ganz gebändigt, gewissermaßen, als wäre er älter als die Tonalität [...] Fortschritt selber hat im Aufbegehren gegen die Konventionen etwas vom Kind, ein Regressives.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Adorno argues that this "fetish" character is linked to the lack of purpose (Zweck) behind the twelve-tone method, it has only a "Selbstzweck. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 70.

¹⁵³ Adorno, 46 (footnote).

Adorno does not put a moral emphasis here on the word “barbaric.” What he means rather is that formal rigor in music cannot negate the need for artistic convention because the limitations that convention demands are what make it music in the first place. In Adorno’s view, Schoenberg has abandoned the conventions inherent to composition to such an extent that his music can be compared to a child that refuses to play a game by the established rules. Following such rules is not a moral necessity, but an aesthetic one. Without rules, the game is meaningless. In Schoenberg’s pieces, nothing remains “von den Konventionen [...] welche die Freiheit des Spiels garantierten.”¹⁵⁴ *Schein*, which disappears in the same instance as *Spiel*, is part of what an artwork is and the new music fails to produce it: “Mit der Negation von Schein und Spiel tendiert Musik zur Erkenntnis.”¹⁵⁵ An artwork that takes no interest in appearance gives up its identity as art and becomes something more like a pronouncement, or a representation of knowledge.

This is not how Mann understands the new music’s regressive quality. His narrator reacts with shock and annoyance when Adrian suggests that music should attempt to revive the conventions of previous eras, when art still enjoyed a cultic function in the service of organized religion, as opposed to its present “Befreiung und Erhöhung ins Einsam-Persönliche und Kulturell-Selbstzweckhafte.”¹⁵⁶ For Zeitblom, and in this instance I would argue he represents Mann’s views directly, “die Alternative [...] zur Kultur ist die Barbarei.”¹⁵⁷ Zeitblom means here that culture, understood as civilized behavior or as *Geist*, is inextricably linked to certain types of cultural products and ways of producing art. For this reason, he criticizes Adrian’s “Erneuerung kultischer Musik aus profaner Zeit,” especially polyphony, which reproduces musical forms that served not only the purposes of the Christian church but also those of “ein vor-kultureller, ein

¹⁵⁴ Adorno, 46.

¹⁵⁵ Adorno, 46.

¹⁵⁶ *DF*, 91.

¹⁵⁷ *DF*, 91.

barbarischer Zustand des Kultus.”¹⁵⁸ Zeitblom cannot entertain the suggestion that music may benefit from a return to past musical structures because he believes that these bring with them the non-aesthetic values of the past and he considers these values to be dangerous.

The second aspect of Adorno’s critique that Mann evidently finds useful is the claim that the twelve-tone system becomes a monolith the composer serves, making the composer its tool rather than the other way around. Adorno argues that the composer’s individuality must be forfeited to the rules of this new type of composition. When employing the twelve-tone method, the composer “ist kein Schöpfer. Nicht äußerlich schränken Epoche und Gesellschaft ihn ein, sondern im strengen Anspruch der Richtigkeit, den sein Gebilde an ihn stellt. Der Stand der Technik präsentiert sich in jedem Takt, den er zu denken wagt, als Problem: mit jedem Takt verlangt die Technik als ganze von ihm, daß er ihr gerecht werde und die allein richtige Antwort gebe, die sie in jedem Augenblick zuläßt.”¹⁵⁹ Adorno makes clear that this new way of composing changes the relationship between the subject as artist and what he or she produces: “Das Subjekt gebietet über die Musik durchs rationale System, um selber dem rationalen System zu erliegen,” he writes.¹⁶⁰ This understanding of the creative subject diverges from the previous ideal of the artist. As mentioned, Adorno contrasted this way of composing with Beethoven’s “subjective freedom.” Unlike a Beethoven sonata, “die neue Ordnung der Zwölft löscht virtuell das Subjekt aus.”¹⁶¹

The image Adorno creates of the subject disappearing behind “Technik” brings us back once again to Jünger, who understands technology as the expression of a new historical reality, which the human subject must learn to emulate in order to avoid being overwhelmed by it. Of

¹⁵⁸ *DF*, 541.

¹⁵⁹ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 42.

¹⁶⁰ Adorno, 68.

¹⁶¹ Adorno, 70.

course, what Jünger means by *Technik* is not the same as Adorno's use here, but there is still an instructive parallel to be drawn. Jünger's ideal worker is a subject learning to speak the "language" of the technological age, the same as the language of the machine. The worker thereby suppresses the individual, human element within the self. This is similar to what Adorno believes is happening to the composer of twelve-tone music who, in taking on the restrictions of the method, surrenders subjective creativity to the rules of the system. Adorno's theorization of the composer's new, radically altered role is analogous to Jünger's observations on the role of the subject *in general* in the modern, technologically advanced age.

Both Adorno and Mann make the case that the subject should not simply give in to this historical development. Adorno writes of "der Jubel" of twelve-tone music's adherents "daß man einen Ersatz für die Tonalität gefunden habe, so als ob man es in der Freiheit nicht einmal ästhetisch aushalten könnte."¹⁶² Note how similar this is to the already mentioned expression from Leverkühn that "Freiheit ist ja ein anderes Wort für Subjektivität, und eines Tages hält die es nicht mehr mit sich aus, irgendwann verzweifelt sie an der Möglichkeit, von sich aus schöpferisch zu sein."¹⁶³ Mann's narrator also echoes Adorno when he claims that a composer adhering to the principle of the *strenger Satz* will be a secondary figure to the material: "Denn diese Zubereitung des Materials geschähe ja durch Variation, und die Produktivität der Variation, die man das eigentliche Komponieren nennen könnte, wäre ins Material zurückverlegt – samt der Freiheit des Komponisten. Wenn er ans Werk ginge, wäre er nicht mehr frei."¹⁶⁴ But Mann goes beyond Adorno in drawing the connection between aesthetic freedom and political freedoms. We have already seen that Mann has his narrator compare Adrian's project to "die aus der Freiheit

¹⁶² Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 69.

¹⁶³ *DF*, 277-78.

¹⁶⁴ *DF*, 282.

geborene Diktatur,” but the entire overarching narrative structure suggests that the consequences of Adrian’s project reach beyond the sphere of art.¹⁶⁵ This is where the devil’s bargain comes in.

The preceding discussion has attempted to give an overview of what Mann is reacting against in his depiction of the new music: This music manifests and accelerates the demise of the individual as the creative center and generator of art. It replaces meaning with construction and individual creativity with a plan imposed from above. It is not a humanist artform, which is why the narrator, partly representing Mann, views it with deep suspicion. But Mann aims not only to record these issues, he attempts to resolve them in his novel so as to restore the philosophical significance of the subject by injecting personal, moral responsibility into the aesthetic problem. For this reason, Mann links Adrian’s artistic breakthrough to a devil’s bargain, which, as a deal made by an individual, asserts the importance of personal responsibility and choice. But it also allows for an idea of sacrifice, in a spiritual and physical sense, to enter the conversation. By connecting the formal rigor of Adrian’s music to a transgression, Mann imbues this seemingly amoral artform with moral import, which also brings with it the possibility of redemption.

To bring this back to the issue of nihilism, we can see that part of Mann’s solution to the challenge it presents is to assert the ongoing relevance of morality, even in the absence of a divine absolute. This means asserting the continued importance of the individual subject as a free agent and a grounding value in both art and the socio-political realm, an agent who owes a debt to other human beings and to him or herself. It also means exposing the danger of what Mann, in agreement with Adorno, views as the anti-individualistic, system-oriented way of making art and especially music that Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method represents. Mann understood religion as a way of communicating human principles and not as a way of accessing a transcendent

¹⁶⁵ *DF*, 278.

absolute.¹⁶⁶ His adoption of the narrative of Faust for Adrian's life is a way of bringing together the problems of formal aesthetic excess and questions of morality, transgression and redemption.

3.5 The moral consequences of the new: Adrian's devil

"Naturen wie Adrian haben nicht viel 'Seele'" ¹⁶⁷

Adorno compared Schoenberg's music to a number game.¹⁶⁸ Mann's innovation is to represent it as much more than that. The prerequisite for the invention of the *strenger Satz* is an act of love and a fall from grace, so that even though Adrian's story is set against the backdrop of an "ungeheurer Wertverlust" it nevertheless takes place within the coordinates of a moral, religiously defined universe.¹⁶⁹ Mann presents Adrian as a precocious student, but his initial compositions remain tied to parody, they are not the breakthrough to something new.¹⁷⁰ The need for a new direction is what drives Adrian into a symbolic, or perhaps literal, devil's bargain. The bio-chemical explanation of Adrian's syphilis is less important than what it symbolizes: his willingness to accept the consequences of transgression in order to go beyond normal human possibilities and limitations. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is a sense of necessity here, the need for art to move forward, to be expressive, to speak once again to humanity, "eine Kunst mit der Menschheit auf Du und Du," yet the impossibility of achieving this with existing tools.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ In a letter to Jonas Lesser in which he addresses Doktor Faustus specifically, Mann had this to say on the topic of the novel's representation of religion: "Ich sehe [...] im Religiösen etwas sehr Menschliches und in der Theologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen und nicht – von Gott. Wie sollte man von dem auch wohl Wissenschaft haben. Und doch stehe ich zum Religiösen [...] nicht so, daß ich mich gern entscheidend ungläubig nennen hörte. Scherz mit dem Heiligen kann eine Form der Bescheidenheit sein und eine behutsame Art sich ihm zu nähern." Mann, *Thomas Mann: Briefe 1937-47*, ed. Erika Mann (Reutlingen: Fischer, 1963), 410.

¹⁶⁷ *DF*, 216. This is Zeitblom's assessment.

¹⁶⁸ See Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, 63.

¹⁶⁹ *DF*, 529.

¹⁷⁰ *DF*, 221-222.

¹⁷¹ *DF*, 469.

Mann's devil does not predict an end to human limits for everyone, he only makes it available to Adrian. In the chapter devoted to Leverkühn's Faustian bargain, the narrator reproduces a document written by Adrian that details an encounter with the devil, "Sammael", who confirms that he was the one who orchestrated the infection that will provide the state of *Rausch* necessary for true inspiration. Referring to Bismarck's adage about the German character— "daß der Deutsche eine halbe Flasche Champagner braucht, um auf seine natürliche Höhe zu kommen"¹⁷²— Sammael promises creative release from the repetition of the same: "Wir entbinden nur und setzen frei. Wir lassen die Lahm- und Schüchternheit, die keuschen Skrupel und Zweifel zum Teufel gehn."¹⁷³

Sammael's critique of the state of contemporary music, which borrows much from Adorno, claims that art has become too self-conscious to produce anything bearing the characteristics of *Schein* or *Spiel*: "Gewisse Dinge sind nicht mehr möglich. Der Schein der Gefühle als kompositorisches Kunstwerk, der selbstgenügsame Schein der Musik selbst ist unmöglich geworden und nicht zu halten."¹⁷⁴ The reason, just as Adrian claimed earlier, has to do with the seeming impossibility of producing anything original. Serious composers, claims Sammael, recognize their "Ohnmacht" and art today is "[eine] Wallfahrt auf Erbsen."¹⁷⁵ Too much has now been written, "der Kanon" weighs on creativity, rendering previously popular musical forms as "falsch" or as "verbrauchtes Cliché."¹⁷⁶ As a consequence, musical production threatens to come to a halt: "Wo Werk sich nicht mehr mit Echtheit verträgt, wie will einer

¹⁷² DF, 334; The original Bismarck quote actually mentions wine rather than champagne. Eckart Goebel offers an interpretation of why Mann adopts "champagne" instead in *Esmeralda*, 61; see also Ruprecht Wimmer, *Doktor Faustus: Kommentar*, GKFA 10.2, 546.

¹⁷³ DF, 345.

¹⁷⁴ DF, 352.

¹⁷⁵ DF, 348.

¹⁷⁶ DF, 349.

Arbeiten?“¹⁷⁷ The artist is therefore left with the possibility of parodying existing forms in ways that seem original, which Adrian attempts at the beginning of his career: “Man könnte das Spiel potenzieren, indem man mit Formen spielte, aus denen, wie man weiß, das Leben geschwunden ist.”¹⁷⁸ But Sammael calls Adrian’s parody “aristocratic nihilism.”¹⁷⁹ There is something to this characterization that echoes Schoenberg’s conviction that there is “no great art which does not convey a *new* message to humanity.”¹⁸⁰ To experiment with forms one knows to be empty is an admission that art has no deeper vocation, and it leads, according to Sammael, but also implicitly to Adrian, to the end of art: “Kunst wird Kritik.”¹⁸¹ The way out is to invent new forms, and this is what the devil claims he can assist with.

Sammael promises not simply great new works, but a new type of creativity founded on rapture and the surrender of the self. The message that Sammael conveys and with which Adrian seems to agree is that “[eine] wahrhaft beglückende, entzückende, zweifellose und gläubige Inspiration, eine Inspiration, bei der es keine Wahl, kein Bessern und Basteln gibt, bei der alles als seliges Diktat empfangen wird [...] die ist nicht mit Gott, der dem Verstande zuviel zu tun übrig läßt, die ist nur mit dem Teufel, dem wahren Herrn des Enthusiasmus möglich.”¹⁸² Inspiration is likened to a command one receives. It is linked to enthusiasm and implicitly to a narrowing of reason’s sphere of influence. But the twist is in the weight given to such enthusiastic production by decree; it is not for its own sake. Rather, Adrian’s *Rausch* will enable him to make an art that is *true* once more, and in a different way to classical art: “Was der in seinen klassischen Läufen allenfalls ohne uns haben konnte, das haben heutzutage nur wir zu

¹⁷⁷ *DF*, 349.

¹⁷⁸ *DF*, 353.

¹⁷⁹ “Die Parodie [...] könnte lustig sein, wenn sie nicht gar so trübselig wäre in ihrem aristokratischen Nihilismus.” *DF*, 353.

¹⁸⁰ Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 39.

¹⁸¹ *DF*, 350.

¹⁸² *DF*, 347.

bieten. Und wir bieten Bessres, wir bieten erst das Rechte und Wahre, – das ist schon nicht mehr das Klassische, mein Lieber, was wir erfahren lassen, das ist das Archaische, das Urfrühe, das längst nicht mehr Erprobte.”¹⁸³ This is the promise of a pre-enlightenment, perhaps even a pre-Christian art that recaptures the cultic value of creativity as that which has a genuine relationship to the divine, only that here there is no difference between the divine and the demonic. There are parallels here to Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, which similarly elevated a pre-Socratic, pre-Christian understanding of art and music as belonging to a sphere beyond reason. Since nihilism, for Nietzsche, begins with Socrates and with the Christian will to truth, the devil is implicitly promising an art that will not lose its vitality through devaluation and decadence. But making such art involves an act of surrender. We can therefore read Adrian’s driven, calculated submission, despite his usual “Stolz” and “Keuschheit,” to the sexual encounter that provides the necessary ingredient to his creativity as a sacrificial surrender to cultic principles that draw their legitimacy from something that lies beyond the grasp of modern human reason.¹⁸⁴

This relationship between an act of transgressive freedom and submission helps explain one of *Doktor Faustus*’s many paradoxical features: The devil’s bargain leads Adrian to write music in which the composer, despite his newly discovered inspiration, is restricted by the formal method he has created. The *strenger Satz* represents a system that subordinates the individual composer to its demands, just as Adorno claimed twelve-tone music removed subjectivity from the process of composing. However, there is another way of interpreting this. When Adrian tells Zeitblom in response to the latter’s criticism that the composer is “[gebunden] durch selbstbereiteten Ordnungszwang” this means, for him, that the subject remains free.¹⁸⁵ As

¹⁸³ *DF*, 346.

¹⁸⁴ *DF*, 216.

¹⁸⁵ *DF*, 282.

discussed in section 3.3, Adrian perceives the problem of making new artistic forms that promote *Schein* and *Spiel* as related to the problem of artistic freedom. Art that has no purpose except itself has too much freedom and this hampers its ability to develop. This was also Bürger's critique of aestheticism. He claimed that art's independence from the socio-political sphere had led finally to an impasse which avant-garde art attempted to break. In *Doktor Faustus*, the artist who wishes to create the new must turn this freedom into submission to something external to the self, in this case to a system.

However, Adrian's is an enthusiastic, passionate submission, which is the reason that Mann depicts the encounter that leads to his infection as an act of love and an act that defies regular human logic, which the character Zeitblom represents so well, that tells us no one should willingly infect themselves with syphilis, nor seek out such excesses and extremes of freedom and of constraint. In the novel, extremity is presented as belonging characteristically to hell.¹⁸⁶ And yet, Adrian's transgression does achieve its desired effect, because the formal system he creates is able to successfully fill the void left in the absence of individual genius. "Das Absolutwerden der Dissonanz" codifies a new relationship between musical elements that can ensure the meaningful position of "jeden Zusammenklang [...] der sich vor dem System legitimieren kann" without reliance on either harmony, or on judgements of taste. Adrian's music, much like Schoenberg's, initially receives negative and outraged reviews.¹⁸⁷ Leverkühn's system breaks with previous models of composition by systematizing musical form, making it more like a game of numbers. I will reiterate that Zeitblom's analysis of the *strenger Satz*, which echoes Adorno's critique, is that the act of composition happens not according to the will of the composer, but by virtue of the process: "Diese Zubereitung des Materials geschähe ja durch

¹⁸⁶ Sammael says "wir liefern das Äußerste." *DF*, 336.

¹⁸⁷ See *DF*, 282.

Variation, und die Produktivität der Variation, die man das eigentliche Komponieren nennen könnte, wäre ins Material zurückverlegt – samt der Freiheit des Komponisten.”¹⁸⁸

The way Mann imagines the twelve-tone method to work is that the row of twelve notes and the four possible permutations structure the composition. His narrative does not really consider whether and how the composer decides on the initial row. Deliberately so, I would suggest, because it fits with his portrayal of the artist who subscribes to such a method. Adrian rejects both the terms “artist” and “inspiration” because his music enthusiastically, rapturously liberates itself from the model of creativity in which the work emanates from the artist.¹⁸⁹ He turns this logic on its head. As I have pointed out, this was not how Schoenberg understood the twelve-tone technique he had created. Mann’s *strenger Satz* succeeds at filling the void left by a no longer possible individual genius and, at the same time, it opens up new avenues to art and new forms of expression. But it accepts the retreat of the subject as a free agent from the sphere of artistic production, submitting individuality to an external principle.

The novel provides extensive and varied indications that we are meant to read Adrian’s artistic and personal development as an analogy for the historical events happening around him. Sammael says forebodingly that “der Künstler ist der Bruder des Verbrechers und des Verrückten,” and Leverkühn’s biography acts as a mirror of Germany.¹⁹⁰ The narrator tells us that he cannot help seeing “symbolische[] Parallele” between Adrian’s health and the health of the country.¹⁹¹ Little wonder then that his descent into a vegetative state, the final stage of neurosyphilis, at the end of the novel is presented in parallel to Germany’s doomed experiment with National Socialism and world domination: Adrian loses consciousness in 1930 and dies in

¹⁸⁸ *DF*, 282.

¹⁸⁹ *DF*, 42-43.

¹⁹⁰ *DF*, 345.

¹⁹¹ *DF*, 497

1940.¹⁹² The years are suggestive of course and we know from Mann's other statements on the issue that he saw Germany's political misadventure as a devil's bargain too, yet the analogy is imprecise, deliberately so, I would argue.¹⁹³ I largely agree with Günter Niggel's conclusion in his account of the symbolic relationship between Adrian and Germany. Niggel emphasizes "dass Zeitblom die Entwicklung Leverkühns hinsichtlich seines Charakter, seiner Kunst und seines Schicksals im Positiven wie im Negativen wesentlich komplexer und differenzierter darstellt als den von ihm einseitig ausgewählten rein negativen Gang der deutschen Geschichte. [...] Aus allem ergibt sich: Eine allegorische Deutung greift zu kurz, um den Sinn dieses vielsichtigen Romans zu erfassen."¹⁹⁴ Niggel does not address the likewise inconclusive similarities between the formal structure of Adrian's music and political authoritarianism, or dictatorship, suggested by the narrator, an argument Adrian disputes anyway, as already mentioned. But the real question is what would it mean for music to be like an authoritarian political program. How would we assert a correspondence between human beings and musical elements or between aesthetics and politics? The actual aesthetic program of the Third Reich was generally against the avant-garde, as the "Entartete Kunst" and "Entartete Musik" exhibitions testify. The following sub-chapter will examine this in greater detail and it will be clear that the equivalences between Adrian and Germany and Adrian's music and inhumane authoritarianism remain ambivalent and

¹⁹² "Die letzten Jahre des geistigen Lebens meines Helden, diese beiden Jahre 29 und 30 ... sie gehörten ja schon dem Heraufsteigen und Umsichgreifen dessen an, was sich dann des Landes bemächtigte und nun in Blut und Flammen untergeht." *DF*, 698-9.

¹⁹³ "Der Teufel, Luthers Teufel, Faustens Teufel, will mir als eine sehr Deutsche Figur erscheinen [...] ist es nicht ganz der rechte Augenblick, Deutschland in diesem Bilde zu sehen, heute, wo Deutschland buchstäblich der Teufel holt?" Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen," 264.

¹⁹⁴ Günter Niggel, "Zum Verhältnis von Künstlerleben und deutscher Geschichte" in *Thomas Manns Doktor Faustus-Neue Ansichten, Neue Einsichten, Thomas-Mann-Studien* vol. 46, ed. Heinrich Detering et. al. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2013), 46.

latent, which is one of the reasons for widespread disagreement among critics about the nature of the analogy and the extent to which Mann shares the views of his narrator on this matter.¹⁹⁵

The indecisiveness built into the structure of *Doktor Faustus* tells us something useful not simply about Mann's own position, but about the general difficulty of drawing a link between aesthetic values and ethical or political ones. The mark of ambiguity hangs over not only Adrian's music, it defines Mann's novel generally. Certainly, introducing the character of the devil and the motif of the devil's bargain seems like a strong indication that Mann simply disapproves of the avant-garde artistic project. Yet, the novel provides many counter examples as well. Adrian appears to be more in control of his destiny than other characters so that just as Mann shows the dangers of his art, he depicts few alternatives to the general *Wertverlust*. I want to look now at just how Mann depicts German society and how the issues that Adrian and Sammael identify as issues facing art seem to affect other areas of life. This will help explain why the demand not simply for order, but a higher order, such as the *strenger Satz* represents, appears as something of a necessity.

3.6 Nihilism and society: Mann's microcosm of interwar Germany

Mann's novel grasps that there is a problem with contemporary art: It needs to move forward but is hampered by conventions that no longer serve their purpose. However, the novel also suggests that these issues mirror concerns that affect the moral and ethical life of German society. I have made the point several times now that Adrian does not believe that his art is tied to these concerns, he wants to suggest that society and art run on parallel tracks. Art may not be

¹⁹⁵ Frances Lee provides both a good summary of the different perspectives on the relationship between author and narrator in her "Introduction." Lee also argues that the *strenger Satz* is supposed to represent liberal democracy. Lee, *Overtaking Dr. Faustus*, 1-20, 61, 91.

completely divorced from society, but it has its own values and these do not need to reflect back into the socio-political realm. This is not Mann's position, either in the novel or in other works that consider this issue. *Doktor Faustus* presents a portrait of its time and the extensive depiction of the lives of characters other than Adrian serve that aim. The most significant of these are the narrator, Zeitblom, the members of the Rodde family and the characters around the artist and art collector Sixtus Kridwiß. These characters reflect the dilemmas of their historical moment, the main one being how to establish values for oneself and for society in the absence of a guiding absolute. Just as Adrian claims that the subject as artist cannot bear the excess of freedom and "sucht Schutz und Sicherheit beim Objektiven," Mann's novel depicts a general desire in Germany for authority in the spheres of politics and morality and these supporting characters express this general need in ways that correspond to their personalities and roles in the novel.¹⁹⁶ They therefore function as a counterweight to Adrian's biography that helps to highlight its significance and reveal its wider meaning.

The seeming lack of objective values that attract genuine commitment has made it impossible for characters to engage with historical reality in a purposeful and authentic way. What they are left with are traditional norms and social structures that bear little connection to reality. This has created a situation where people do not know what to strive for or what to believe in and look instead for either distraction or something external that can provide the semblance of meaning, even if this is superficial. For the novel's supporting characters, these issues culminate at best in a pessimistic submission to established patterns of behavior and cultural norms. At worst, they lead to moral capitulation, whereby characters seemingly give up hope of establishing a moral and ethical framework for themselves and instead come to support

¹⁹⁶ *DF*, 277.

the decisionist tendencies of the historical moment. This is one of the reasons that Mann devotes so much space to the conversations of the Winfried circle, which I discussed briefly in section 3.3. The Winfried group of theology students is generally in agreement that the breakdown of “vorgefundene Ganzheitsordnungen, die eine bestimmte Intentionalität auf die geoffenbarte Wahrheit hatte” has led to “Resignation und Verzweiflung.”¹⁹⁷ They likewise agree that liberalism is a dying system that will not provide “Ansätzen zu neuen Ordnungskräften,” nor promote new “Ganzheitsordnungen.”¹⁹⁸ The point of depicting these conversations, which take place during weekend-long nature walks in an idyllic landscape, is to suggest that German youth are stuck between different possibilities, unable to choose the correct way forward and that even traditional religion fails to provide a concrete answer because nihilism has crept into traditional religion. But it is not only religion that can no longer provide a way forward. *Doktor Faustus* suggests that bourgeois conventionality provides no escape from this state of affairs either.

We can see a character like Ines Institoris, nee Rodde, as an example of this. Ines enters a marriage of convenience in search of an escape from her family’s “Entwurzelung” and her mother’s society of artists and bohemians, preferring a return “zum Väterlichen, Bürgerlich-Strengen und Würdigen.”¹⁹⁹ Zeitblom observes that “dieser Konservatismus” was “eine Schutzvorrichtung” “gegen Spannungen und Gefährden ihres Wesens” and, as it turns out, these traditional structures fail to provide the safety and security from the modern world that she craves.²⁰⁰ Ines finds herself confronted more and more by the emptiness of life in Munich high society, as she confesses to Zeitblom:

Ob ich nicht fände, fragte sie, daß dieses ganze aufgeräumte und schmuckhafte Künstlerwesen hier am Ort [...] in einem quälenden Kontrast stände zu der Traurigkeit

¹⁹⁷ *DF*, 183.

¹⁹⁸ *DF*, 183, 179.

¹⁹⁹ *DF*, 287-88.

²⁰⁰ *DF*, 288.

und Verdächtigkeit des Lebens. Ob ich es nicht auch kenne, das Grauen vor der geistigen Leere und Nichtigkeit, die bei einer durchschnittlichen ‘Einladung’ herrschten, in grellem Gegensatz zu der damit verbundenen, fieberhaften Erregung infolge des Weins, der Musik und des Unterstroms von Beziehungen zwischen den Menschen. Manchmal könne man mit Augen sehen, wie Einer sich mit Jemandem unter mechanischer Wahrung der gesellschaftlichen Formen unterhalte und dabei mit seinen Gedanken völlig abwesend sei, nämlich bei einer anderen Person, die er beobachte.²⁰¹

Ines’s character illustrates the banal horror of everyday existence and the way that the individual becomes a kind of social machine that continues to function without personal input. Ines searches for a way out of this predicament, but the exit she takes leads to a disastrous affair and a morphine addiction. In the end she murders her lover and is committed to an institution.

Then there is the novel’s narrator who, like Adrian, encapsulates a particular set of beliefs and commitments. Zeitblom’s morality and worldview, which I have touched on briefly, are bound up with formal structures of religion and family life that are often presented as the performance of pre-established social roles. Zeitblom sees marriage as a sacrifice to convention that separates him from his artist friends: “In meiner Eigenschaft und Lebensweise als Ehemann, welcher dem, was wir halb entschuldigend, halb verherrlichend ‘Natur’ nennen, seinen Tribut entrichtete [...] bildete ich [...] eine etwas komische Ausnahme.”²⁰² A somewhat comical admission Zeitblom makes is that he chose his wife partly because of her classical name, Helene. Zeitblom is Catholic, but the novel consistently suggests that his faith is not the product of personal conviction but rather of his desire to conform combined with his fear of disorder: “Der Glaube an absolute Werte, illusionär wie er immer sei, scheint mir eine Lebensbedingung” he tells the reader.²⁰³ One of the ramifications of this is that Zeitblom takes almost no interest in his own life. He tells us that his own happiness relies on proximity to his childhood friend, Adrian,

²⁰¹ *DF*, 427.

²⁰² *DF*, 321.

²⁰³ *DF*, 71.

“an dem ich hing, ja dessen Sein, dessen Werden, dessen Lebensfrage mich im Grunde mehr interessierte, als meine Eigene. Diese war einfach; ich brauchte ihr nicht viele Gedanken zu widmen, sondern nur durch treue Arbeit die Voraussetzungen für ihre vorgegebene Lösung zu schaffen.”²⁰⁴

While Zeitblom serves to illustrate humanist ideals, he often fails to defend them against challenges, or to adjust them for the historical present. His assertion, when arguing with Adrian, that the end-goal of human life should be “ein religiös tingierter Humanismus [...] bestimmt von dem Gefühl für das transzendente Geheimnis des Menschen, von dem stolzen Bewußtsein, daß er kein bloß biologisches Wesen ist” develops into a rationale for avoiding modern art and modern science.²⁰⁵ Zeitblom disapproves both of Adrian’s interest in astrophysics–“die Daten der kosmischen Schöpfung sind ein nichts als betäubendes Bombardement unserer Intelligenz mit Zahlen”²⁰⁶–and of his cosmically inspired composition “Die Wunder des Alls.” Zeitblom attempts unsuccessfully to have the title changed to “Symphonia cosmologica” before concluding that the work is a mathematical “grotesk,” which only confirms his belief “daß die Beschäftigung mit dem Maßlos-Außermenschlichen der Frömmigkeit keine Nahrung gebe.”²⁰⁷ Adrian rebuts his friend’s critique and offers his own, which points to the limits and contradictions of the narrator’s view of the world:

Die physische Schöpfung [...] ist unstreitig die Voraussetzung für das Moralische, ohne die es keinen Boden hätte, und vielleicht muß man das Gute die Blüte des Bösen nennen – une fleur du mal. Dein Homo Dei ist doch schließlich [...] ein Stück scheußlicher Natur [...]. Übrigens ist es amüsant, zu sehen, wie sehr dein Humanismus, und wohl aller Humanismus, zum Mittelalterlich-Geozentrischen neigt, – mit Notwendigkeit offenbar.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ *DF*, 130.

²⁰⁵ *DF*, 397.

²⁰⁶ *DF*, 395.

²⁰⁷ *DF*, 400.

²⁰⁸ *DF*, 398.

Regardless of whether the reader finds Adrian's argument convincing, Zeitblom produces no response to it, except to assert its impiety and lack of respect and to reiterate his belief that art's main purpose is to promote "Frömmigkeit." Zeitblom is of course a complex and, in many ways, sympathetic character, but this conversation leaves us with the feeling that he misses something essential about art, despite the theoretical detail in which he later describes Adrian's compositions. Of course, in real life much of this detail came from Adorno, a figure entirely unlike Zeitblom.

Zeitblom's adherence to humanism also does not prevent his character from enthusiastically supporting WWI. Like Mann, Zeitblom becomes caught up in the initial enthusiasm for the war: "In unserem Deutschland," writes Zeitblom, "wirkte er [der Krieg E.M.] ganz vorwiegend als Erhebung, historisches Hochgefühl, Aufbruchsfreude, Abwerfen des Alltags, Befreiung aus einer Welt-Stagnation [...]. Überhaupt will ich nicht leugnen, daß ich vollauf teilhatte an den volkstümlichen Hochgefühlen."²⁰⁹ Mann had already presented the enthusiasm for WWI as the result of a general malaise plaguing European society, the lack of an answer to the question "wozu?," in *Der Zauberberg*.²¹⁰ *Doktor Faustus* repeats this motif, but instead of focusing on an indecisive and malleable patrician like Hans Castorp, Mann illustrates how the humanist ideal embodied in Zeitblom has become weakened, making it a poor defense against some of the most unpalatable arguments in favor of militarization.

There is a real way in which Zeitblom, too, gives in to the temptation to rely on form over value, but he does so in a very different way to Adrian Leverkühn. Zeitblom, who is conscripted and must briefly serve on the front line, identifies the war as "das Mittel eines Volkes, zu einer

²⁰⁹ DF, 436.

²¹⁰ Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, GKFA 5.1, 54.

²¹⁰ Mann, 54.

höheren Form seines Gemeinschaftslebens durchzubrechen,” something he sees as unfortunate only because the proper means for this kind of form-giving should be a civil war.²¹¹ Form, the central feature of Adrian’s project, has a place in Zeitblom’s worldview too and I agree with critics who suggest that Adrian’s artistic “Durchbruch” has a kind of inverse relation to Zeitblom’s, and Germany’s, failed military breakthrough at the beginning of the war.²¹² In the event of the war, Zeitblom is willing to suspend the ordinary rules of humane conduct in support of social and political form-giving. Adrian, on the other hand, turns out to be the representative of a clear-sighted humanity, which grasps the war as a folly from the beginning: “Wer leugnet denn, daß so ein rechter Durchbruch das schon wert ist, was die zahme Welt ein Verbrechen nennt,” he tells Zeitblom.²¹³ Adrian rejects Zeitblom’s claim that Germany is justified in its “Durchbruchsbegierde aus der Gebundenheit und Versiegelung im Häßlichen.”²¹⁴ For Adrian, the desired breakthrough should be aesthetic, not political.

Zeitblom’s claim that “ästhetische Erlöstheit oder Unerlöstheit, das ist das Schicksal” suggests an entirely different model of aesthetic form from Adrian’s.²¹⁵ Compared to the model represented here by Zeitblom—a will to give the *Volk* a beautiful form, combatting ugliness on a national scale—Adrian’s artistic experimentation with mathematical and human-less artforms as in “Die Wunder des Alls” suggests a more productive way forward. Zeitblom’s belief that what is unformed is ugly belongs to a different aesthetic tradition and recalls the arguments put forward by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Uwe Hebekus that I related in the introduction. Both

²¹¹ *DF*, 438.

²¹² “Während der Komponist Adrian Leverkühn 1914 eine ehrenvolle Einladung nach Paris erhält, die seinen [...] mühelosen ‘Durchbruch’ zu einer internationalen Karriere bedeutet hätte, will der deutsche Erzähler Zeitblom gleich und grobianisch mit einer ganzen Heeresgruppe ‘mit aller Gewalt’ nach Paris durchbrechen.” Eckart Goebel, *Esmeralda*, 185.

²¹³ *DF*, 449.

²¹⁴ *DF*, 450.

²¹⁵ *DF*, 449.

writers identified a specifically German impulse to unite aesthetics and politics. This was Germany's way of "finding its identity and acceding to existence," meaning its aesthetic formation as a people and a nation.²¹⁶ Mann's depiction of two distinctly different ways of thinking about aesthetic form deserves a deeper investigation than what I can provide here. It is important that Zeitblom appears to move past these earlier judgments and come to critically examine Germany's fraught relationship with its neighbors, much like Mann did. Nevertheless, his narrator continues to see Adrian's art and his commitment to it at the expense of other pursuits as the greater danger.

When the novel introduces authoritarian, proto-fascist political ideas, they are linked to Adrian's avant-gardism, not to the narrator's stated beliefs regarding socio-political form. The radical ideas under scrutiny appear in the narrator's observations of the social circle around the Munich art collector Sixtus Kridwiß. The members of the "Kridwiß-Kreis," mostly artists and intellectuals, anticipate a more violent, harder future of racial hygiene and the manipulation and oppression of the masses. They believe, according to the narrator, in "ein instinktives Sich-in-Form-bringen der Menschheit für harte und finstere, der Humanität spottende Läufe."²¹⁷ Zeitblom connects this fascist political ideology, which in addition proposes replacing truth with "mythischen Fiktionen," to Adrian's compositions, in particular to his oratorio, "Apocalipsis cum figuris."²¹⁸ This work, according to Zeitblom, possesses an "eigentümlicher Korrespondenz" to the ideas expressed in Kridwiß's salon regarding "[die] Lage des Individuums und alles Individualismus in der Welt."²¹⁹ Why? Because this music, "am

²¹⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 68.

²¹⁷ *DF*, 538.

²¹⁸ *DF*, 532.

²¹⁹ *DF*, 539, 540.

Psychologischen nicht länger interessiert [drang] auf das Objektive, auf eine Sprache [...] welche das Absolute, Bindende und Verpflichtende ausdrückte und sich folglich mit Vorliebe die fromme Fessel prä-klassisch strenger Formen auferlegte.”²²⁰ Adrian’s music and the circle’s discussions both stem from “eine revolutionär rückschlägige Welt, in welcher die an die Idee des Individuums gebundenen Werte, sagen wir also: Wahrheit, Freiheit, Recht, Vernunft, völlig entkräftet and verworfen waren.”²²¹ These qualities render Adrian’s composition a form of “aestheticism” and aestheticism is “[der] Wegbereiter der Barbarei.”²²²

Zeitblom makes a number of statements in his criticism of the work that even a sympathetic reader will find hard to comprehend. I will not list them in detail here but, to take one example, could anyone earnestly agree that the glissando inherently displays an “anti-humane Dämonie?”²²³ Should composers then avoid it? Would that protect the humanist ideal? And yet, I would argue that many of Zeitblom’s points are meant to be taken seriously. The first thing to note is that they are well developed and presented at length. Secondly, Zeitblom repeats arguments that Mann made in speeches and in his non-fiction works. For example, Mann and his character both claim that Germany’s disaster can be tied to the country’s ambition to give itself a political form: “Es ist wohl mehr als eine Frage, daß dieses geschlagene Volk jetzt eben darum irren Blicks vor dem Nichts steht, weil sein letzter und äußerster Versuch, die selbst eigene politische Form zu finden, in so gräßlichem Mißlingen untergeht.”²²⁴ Form appears at multiple

²²⁰ *DF*, 540.

²²¹ *DF*, 535.

²²² *DF*, 541.

²²³ *DF*, 543.

²²⁴ *DF*, 698. This can be compared to Mann’s reflections on Germany’s pursuit of nation building: “Warum muß immer der deutsche Freiheitsdrang auf innere Unfreiheit hinauslaufen? Warum mußte er endlich gar zum Attentat auf die Freiheit aller anderen, auf die Freiheit selbst werden? Der Grund ist, daß Deutschland nie eine Revolution gehabt und gelernt hat, den Begriff der Nation mit dem der Freiheit zu vereinigen.” Mann, “Deutschland und die Deutschen,” 270.

levels in response to a lack of something essential, whether genius in the arts or the identity of a people. It promises meaning and significance, but always in a fraught way.

This brief outline of how Mann's novel depicts society and how the problem of nihilism is felt in social life should indicate why the author's implicit views on Adrian's music remain ambiguous.²²⁵ *Doktor Faustus* depicts German society in the early twentieth century to be in a state of inner decay, precisely because of the diminishing role of individual will and the value of individual subjectivity. And yet, there is no external authority to guide or organize society either. Traditional structures and ideologies—organized religion, bourgeois social conventions, humanism—are too weak to provide a resilient and convincing purpose to collective life.

Despite the criticism noted so far, the novel's final analysis of Adrian's artistic project paints it in a positive light. His art seemingly escapes past Zeitblom's concerns and attains something essential in spite of the cost associated with it. Mann's attitude may be summarized by the narrator's admission regarding Adrian's "Oratorio": "Ich hasse, liebe, fürchte es."²²⁶ Zeitblom ends his analysis of the "Apocalypse" oratorio by claiming to see in it "ein solches Verlangen nach Seele."²²⁷ I will conclude this chapter by considering the reasons for, and consequences of, this paradoxical attitude.

3.7 Conclusion: Final thoughts on avant-garde art and Faust's lament

In my discussion on the avant-gardes (section 3.2), I argued that the defining feature of avant-garde art was the way in which it attempted to close the gap between art and life with the aim of radically transforming the latter. This is a controversial point. Many of the avant-garde's most

²²⁵ Mann described Adrian as "eine Idealgestalt, ein 'Held unserer Zeit'" adding that he had never loved another one of his characters as much, with the possible exception of Hanno Buddenbrook. See *Entstehung*, 473

²²⁶ *DF*, 548.

²²⁷ *DF*, 548.

prominent critics have argued that whatever its aims, avant-garde art's main achievement was to create elitist and hermetic art that bore no relation to real life and failed to provide ideological resistance to the threat of Nazism. Georg Lukács was one of the most prominent exponents of this point of view. Lukács treated all the self-proclaimed avant-garde movements as one, making no distinction between expressionism, surrealism or naturalism. In his view, all art and literature was either realist or anti-realist.²²⁸ In a famous debate with Ernst Bloch that was published in *Das Wort*, Lukács attacked avant-garde, anti-realist art for not having any content, not being *about* anything: "Als notwendige Folge einer wirklichkeitsfremden oder gar feindlichen Einstellung entsteht in steigendem Masse in der "avantgardistischen" Kunst eine immer größere Inhaltsarmut."²²⁹ He further described avant-gardism as "formalistisch[]," "inhaltslos[]," and "von großen Strom der gesellschaftlichen Gesamtentwicklung abgerissen[]." ²³⁰ Consequently, such art could have no role in society and no utility. In Lukács's view, the truly great works of literary art are politically progressive and promote society's evolution by portraying that society accurately and making visible the developments to come. ²³¹ They educate because people can understand and appreciate them. Lukács believed that Thomas Mann's work was a great modern example of such writing, whereas any kind of avant-garde literature could not teach the public anything new.²³²

Another critic of the avant-garde worth mentioning is Carl Einstein. The author, who wrote the proto-expressionist *Bebuquin* (1912) and the influential *Negerplastik* (1915), eventually turned away from the avant-garde, recording his disillusionment in *Die Fabrikation*

²²⁸ Georg Lukács, "Es geht um den Realismus," in *Das Wort: Literarische Monatsschrift* 6 (June 1938), 113.

²²⁹ Lukács, "Es geht um den Realismus," 123.

²³⁰ Lukács, 130; In the same essay, Lukács writes: "Der konsequente Expressionismus leugnet jede Beziehung zur Wirklichkeit, sagt allen Inhalten der Wirklichkeit eine subjektivistischen Krieg an," 123.

²³¹ Lukács, 136.

²³² Lukács, 137.

der Fiktionen, written in 1933/34 but only published posthumously after WWII. It is a scathing critique of avant-garde artists, whom Einstein accuses of employing art as a way of escaping reality and distancing themselves from the greater part of humanity: “Die Künstler flohen von der gegenständlichen und konventionellen Fakten in die abgetrennten Bezirke erträumter Formen.”²³³ Einstein thought that by ignoring the socio-political realm, these artists neglected a moral duty. Instead of participating in the creation of “kollektiven Werten,” they escaped into a hermetic and hallucinatory world that could have no impact on reality.²³⁴

Mann seems on the surface to be in agreement with critics like Lukács and Einstein, who argue the avant-gardes were elitist and not able or not willing to connect their artistic practice with life. This would explain why Adrian Leverkühn never attempts to translate his art into a *Lebenspraxis*, nor to involve himself in politics. The novel suggests that his focus is mistaken and that he fails to address the decline of humanism in his work. At the same time, Adrian’s insistence on the *strenger Satz* provides, however unwittingly and unknowingly, the aesthetic groundwork for the more nefarious, politically engaged ideas that presage the Nazi takeover. At least, this is what the novel intimates by way of its narrator. Mann therefore simultaneously asserts the hermetic quality of avant-garde art *and* its necessary relationship to society, as though nothing that happens in the realm of art can remain sealed from the socio-political sphere. This has to do, I would argue, with Mann’s own pre-existing notion of the role of the artist as an educator and improver of society.²³⁵

²³³ Carl Einstein, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen*, eds. Sibylle Penkert and Katrin Sello (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1973), 23.

²³⁴ Einstein, 185, 17.

²³⁵ Mann also characterized himself and his own work in this way: “Meine Bücher [...] sind für Deutsche geschrieben [...] Sie sind, diese Bücher, das Produkt einer wechselseitigen erzieherischen Verbundenheit von Nation und Autor”; “Das Geheimnis der Sprache ist groß: die Verantwortlichkeit für sie und ihre Reinheit ist symbolischer und geistiger Art.” Mann to the philosophy faculty at the university in Bonn of 1937 in *Thomas Mann: Briefe*, both quotes from 11.

Much has been written about the form of Mann's novel: whether it is like a composition, whether it contains elements of avant-gardism itself.²³⁶ Some have argued that Mann's creative appropriation of other sources is a conscious response to the burden of past greatness, the anxiety that, as Mann once phrased it, "[es] ist eben schon zuviel Gutes gemacht worden!"²³⁷ There is clearly merit to these studies. For my reading, it is important to note that Mann is conscious of form and of its power to serve as a measure or as a value, if not in an absolute sense then at least very convincingly. But the measure must remain open and ambiguous. Form itself should be a site of ambiguity and *Doktor Faustus* exemplifies this in its own ambivalent conclusions. There is a way in which Mann's novel attempts to take back what it has otherwise conveyed. Although Mann claimed that he understood his novel as "der Roman pathologisch-illegitimen Inspiration," his narrative nevertheless sympathizes with Adrian's project, representing it as a heroic, necessary sacrifice.²³⁸ I agree with readings that interpret the differing perspectives represented by Leverkühn and Zeitblom as two sides of Mann's own worldview.²³⁹ *Doktor Faustus* retains elements of the author's earlier belief that "das Sehnen, Trachten und Suchen der Zeit, das Schlechterdings nicht auf Freiheit gerichtet, sondern die Begierde nach einem 'inneren Tyrannen,' nach 'absoluten Werttafeln,' nach Gebundenheit, nach moralischen Wieder-festwerden ist, – es ist ein Trachten nach Kultur, nach Würde, nach Haltung, nach Form."²⁴⁰ Writing during and after WWII, Mann wants to highlight the dangers of this point of view, but he does

²³⁶ Mann to Arnold Schoenberg, October 13, 1948 in *Apropos Doktor Faustus*, 129; Hans Rudolf Vaget writes that attempts to interpret "die Struktur dieses Musikromans in Analogie zu der Komposition mit zwölf Tönen [...] haben zu keinen überzeugenden Ergebnissen geführt." Vaget, "Doktor Faustus" in *Thomas Mann Handbuch*, 71. It is difficult to see how such a connection would help us to interpret the novel even if the case for it could be made.

²³⁷ This is the argument put forward by Bernd Hamacher in "Zauber des Letzten–Zauber des Ersten?," *Apokrypher Avantgardismus: Thomas Mann und die Klassische Moderne*, esp. 47-50. The quote is originally from a letter to Agnes E. Meyer, cited in Hamacher, 39.

²³⁸ Letter to Bruno Walter from May of 1943 in *Thomas Mann: Briefe*, 311.

²³⁹ Frances Lee, *Overturning Dr. Faustus*, 19.

²⁴⁰ *Betrachtungen*, 561.

not let go of the idea that art serves as a generator and measure of value in the socio-political sphere. He wants to retain something of his earlier claim that God is “das plastische Prinzip, die allwissende Gerechtigkeit, die umfassende Liebe.”²⁴¹ It is for this reason that there is a redemptive quality to Adrian’s music that it would not have had had he not paid such a high price for it.²⁴²

Adrian is presented as a tragic figure who focuses too much on the power of art and of form to the detriment of the other value Mann believes in, “die umfassende Liebe,” since part of the devil’s bargain means forgoing human love and companionship. This has terrible consequences, not only for Adrian but for those around him: the death of his friend Rudi and of his nephew in the closing sections of the novel are presented as a sacrifice to the non-human ideal he pursues. At least, he believes this to be the case. A commitment to artistic rigor is therefore shown to necessarily come into conflict with other values. And yet, the willing submission of the self that leads to the creation of his system of composition is presented as a sacrifice in the religious sense of that term, which is why Adrian is often compared to Christ in the novel’s final sections.²⁴³ Adrian’s transgression carries with it a certain nobility that asserts the worth and importance of an individual’s moral actions. By introducing a moral dimension into the pursuit of artistic perfection, Mann’s novel suggests the possibility that the music Adrian composes can generate meaningful and life-affirming values as it reaches towards the divine. It should therefore serve not as a testament to the decline of man as an absolute value, but to the

²⁴¹ *Betrachtungen*, 548

²⁴² This fits with Adrian’s claim that “Abtrünnigkeit ist ein Akt des Glaubens, und alles ist und geschieht in Gott, besonders auch der Abfall von ihm.” *DF*, 193

²⁴³ *DF*, 700, for example. See also Baier, “Die ‘Vita Adriani’ des Dr. Serenus Zeitblom: Hagiographische Elemente in Thomas Manns Roman *Doktor Faustus*.” *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch* 25 (January, 2012), 75-98.

resilience of the humanist ideal that leaves space for the new. This is the conclusion to be drawn from Zeitblom's analysis of Adrian's final work, the "Dr Fausti Weheklag."

Despite all that the novel has had to say about the decline of the individual subject as a value and the impossibility of a creative genius like Beethoven, the conclusion suggests that Adrian's music, at the end of WWII, offers what Beethoven's music no longer can. Introducing his description of Adrian's final musical work, Zeitblom tells the reader, "es gab Jahre, in denen wir Kinder des Kerkers uns ein Jubellied, den 'Fidelio,' die Neunte Symphonie als Morgenfeier der Befreiung Deutschlands – seiner Selbstbefreiung – erträumten. Nun kann nur dieses uns frommen, und dieses nur wird und aus der Seele gesungen sein."²⁴⁴ Adrian has created a music that speaks to the yearning and desperation of its time. It also represents the possibility that the human subject can still be the center of art and of objective value. The "Weheklag Dr. Fausti" is the "Klage des Höllensohns" that begins "vom Subject" but ends by encompassing "den Kosmos."²⁴⁵ Crucially, it achieves this not by way of its subject matter, the Faust story, but because of its formal features:

Bedeutet es nicht den "Durchbruch," von dem zwischen uns [...] so oft als von einem Problem, einer paradoxen Möglichkeit die Rede gewesen war, – die Wiedergewinnung [...] die Rekonstruktion des Ausdrucks, der höchsten und tiefsten Ansprecherung des Gefühls auf einer Stufe der Geistigkeit und der Formenstrenge, die erreicht werden mußte, damit dieses Umschlagen kalkulatorischer Kälte in den expressiven Seelenlaut und kreatürlich sich anvertrauende Herzlichkeit Ereignis werden könne?²⁴⁶

In effect, Adrian's music achieves what seemed impossible for the art of his time: It touches the deepest part of human feeling and understanding and finds a way to express the inexpressible center of being that the word "soul" serves as a placeholder for and it does so through its

²⁴⁴ *DF*, 702.

²⁴⁵ *DF*, 702.

²⁴⁶ *DF*, 703.

calculated surrender to formal principles. This is the path by which the subject comes to encompass the whole of creation.

Mann's narrator repeats in different formulations the point that whatever the music does, it does by means of the *strenger Satz*: "Dieser Stil, diese Technik, so hieß es, ließen keinen Ton zu, nicht einen, der nicht in der Gesamtkonstruktion seine motivische Funktion erfüllte, –es gäbe keine freie Note mehr."²⁴⁷ By a process of reversal that results from its formal qualities, the music transforms and transcends its limitations. The narrator describes it as "der dialektische Prozeß, durch welchen auf der Entwicklungsstufe, die dieses Werk einnimmt, der Umschlag von strengster Gebundenheit zur freien Sprache des Affekts, die Geburt der Freiheit aus der Gebundenheit, sich vollzieht."²⁴⁸ Finally, the form of the music realizes a utopia of human feeling and sensation: "Da ist, zum mythischen Schrecken des Bemerkenden, eine formale Utopie von schauerlicher Sinnigkeit verwirklicht."²⁴⁹ Adrian's "Formveranstaltung, [...] in der die Ordnung des Materials total wird, [...] dient jedoch nun einem höheren Zweck, denn, o Wunder und tiefer Dämonenwitz! – vermöge der Restlosigkeit der Form eben wird die Musik als Sprache befreit."²⁵⁰

It is worth noting that these descriptions contain several allusions to Nietzsche. The word "Schrecken" encodes the Dionysian, while the necessity of "Gebundenheit" is almost certainly a reference to the role that this term has in Nietzsche's idea of great natures, as in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*: "Es werden die starken, herrschsüchtigen Naturen sein, welche in einem solchen Zwange, in einer solchen Gebundenheit und Vollendung unter dem eigenen Gesetz ihre feinste

²⁴⁷ DF, 704.

²⁴⁸ DF, 704.

²⁴⁹ DF, 705.

²⁵⁰ DF, 706.

Freude genießen.”²⁵¹ We know that Mann uses Nietzsche as a partial basis for the character of Adrian and it goes without saying that examples of intertextuality like this serve the purpose of making the philosopher’s presence felt without naming him. What interests me here though is what Mann’s ambiguity achieves. Remember that Adrian describes music as “Zweideutigkeit als System.” Mann wants a pared down humanism, in which the human individual is still the start and end goal of political, ethical and creative activity, but he does not want a humanism as absolute as Zeitblom’s, with its suspicious rejection of the new and of science, its lack of humor, and its inability to make space for paradox and ambiguity.

Mann’s message is that absolutism of this kind, whether aesthetic or moral, should be avoided. The human subject does not need to disappear because God has, but the idea of the human must be porous and open to ambiguity, so long as it does not forget that being human means living side by side with others. This is the reason Mann clings to the importance of irony, as the endless play of possibilities and ambiguities that avoids calcification into an absolute position.²⁵² Music serves a similar purpose because it is capable of ambiguity and can enact the kinds of reversals that Zeitblom details. But pursuing the “new” means having to live with the unintended consequences of the initial act of transgression. Perhaps, as some critics have argued, Mann succeeded in solving this dilemma in his own life as an artist.²⁵³ *Doktor Faustus* is less conclusive on this point: The novel praises new beginnings, but not radical breaks. Yet, the artist

²⁵¹ Nietzsche, KSA 3, 530. For examples of Nietzsche’s use of “Schrecken” see “Versuch einer Selbstkritik” in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, KSA 1, 22.

²⁵² Kristiansen argues that Mann’s use of irony is part of how he responds to radical uncertainty, unleashed by Nietzsche’s “Nihilismusdiagnose,” through his writing: “[Mann] muss, um nicht seine ‘hoffnungslose Unwissenheit’ zu verraten, seine Texte nach dem Paradoxon der Ironie gestalten, sich also einer Erzählstrategie bedienen, in welcher ‘Rede’ und ‘Gegenrede’ in jedem Erzählmoment gleichzeitig vorhanden sind.” Kristiansen, *Thomas Mann-Der ironische Metaphysiker*, 20.

²⁵³ This is Bernd Hamacher’s claim in “Zauber Des Letzten – Zauber Des Ersten? Epigonalität, Avantgardismus und das Problem der Kreativität – in der Moderne und bei Thomas Mann,” 48-49.

after Nietzsche must will the creation of the new and such a project cannot happen without the criminal and the madman.

Chapter 4. A Utopia of Abstraction–Hermann Hesse’s Glass Bead Game as a form concept

In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954), the philosopher Ernst Bloch develops the idea of the “utopian function” (*die utopische Funktion*) of the imagination and its importance for human life. Perhaps more than any other thinker of his time, Bloch devoted himself to theorizing hope and utopian longing as essential features of the spirit. Writing in exile during WWII, he argued that “Träume von einem besseren Leben” need not be *Fluchträume*:¹ “Solche Wirklichkeitsflucht ist mit Billigung und Unterstützung des bestehenden Zustands oft verknüpft gewesen: wie am stärksten aus den Vertröstungen aufs bessere Jenseits erhellt.”² In contrast to deceptive visions of an afterlife, Bloch believed that the act of reasoned hope could reach a point “wo gerade die Hoffnung, diese eigentliche Erwartungseffekt im Traum nach vorwärts nicht mehr nur [...] als bloße selbstzuständige Gemütsbewegung auftritt, sondern *bewußt-gewußt* als *utopische Funktion*. Deren Inhalte repräsentieren sich zunächst in Vorstellungen, und zwar wesentlich in denen der Phantasie.”³ A utopian fantasy in Bloch’s sense differs from the everyday understanding of fantasy because it has “ein Noch-Nicht-Sein erwartbarer Art für sich [...] das heißt, nicht in einem Leer-Möglichen herumspielt und abirrt, sondern ein Real-Mögliches psychisch vorausnimmt.”⁴ Bloch’s theory is deep and complex and I can only provide a limited summary of it here. In essence, he suggests that visions of utopia represent the truth of collective anticipation so that they model genuine goals towards which people may strive. Utopia is both transcendent and real, but it does not exist in a metaphysical realm; rather, its peculiar form of being is as a shared, real possibility. Bloch argues that utopia, as real hopefulness, answers to an

¹ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 85.

² Bloch, 85.

³ Bloch, 163.

⁴ Bloch, 164.

essential human need: “die utopische Funktion als begriffene Tätigkeit des Erwartungsaffekts, der Hoffnung-Ahnung hält die Allianz mit allem noch Morgendlichen in der Welt.”⁵ Matei Călinescu, whose theorization of modernism we encountered in the introductory chapter, interprets Bloch’s idea of utopia as “not only authentically religious in nature but also the sole legitimate heir of religion after the death of God.”⁶ This conception of utopia as something that contains a possible actuality may come across as mystical or fanciful, but it helps contextualize the work at the center of this chapter: Herman Hesse’s *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943), or in its full but seldom used title: *Das Glasperlenspiel: Versuch einer Lebensbeschreibung des Magister Ludi Josef Knecht samt Knechts hinterlassenen Schriften*.⁷

Hesse admired Bloch greatly and while I have no evidence that he was directly influenced by the philosopher’s ideas about hope, it is noteworthy that both writers took utopia to be a central part of their response to the events of the 1930s and the war that followed.⁸ Hesse frequently described his late novel as “so etwa als Utopie, als Zukunftstraum ... obwohl es auch in der Vergangenheit an Versuchen zur Verwirklichung solcher Träume nicht fehlt.”⁹ While he never claimed it could be brought about as a social reality, he did assert that it was a realizable ideal, a *Wirklichkeit*, “denn Orden, platonische Akademien, Yogaschulen und all das hat es

⁵ Bloch, 166.

⁶ Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 65.

⁷ The similarity of Hesse’s work to Bloch’s conceptualization of the *Noch-Nicht* has been noted before. See Christian Schärf, “Hermann Hesse und die literarische Moderne,” in *Hermann Hesse und die literarischen Moderne: Kulturwissenschaftliche Facetten einer literarischen Konstante im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Andreas Solbach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 88.

⁸ “Obwohl ich nicht Marxist bin und nie es war, schätze ich diesen Autor hoch.” Hermann Hesse, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 20, *Die Welt im Buch*, ed. Volker Michels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 94. This edition cited hereafter as *Werke* followed by volume number. Hesse also wrote reviews of several works by Bloch.

⁹ Hesse to Rosa Muggli-Isler, June 12, 1943 quoted in Rudolf Probst, “Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Hermann Hesses *Das Glasperlenspiel*,” in *Der Grenzgänger Hermann Hesse*, ed. Henriette Herwig and Florian Trabert (Freiburg: Rombach, 2013), 386.

längst und oft gegeben.”¹⁰ The utopia of *Das Glasperlenspiel* should therefore be understood as a literary representation, a fantasy in Bloch’s sense, of real potentiality, real goals towards which human life may be directed. My intention in this chapter is to show that Hesse’s novel, which he worked on for over ten years, from 1933-1943, thereby presents a response to the challenge of nihilism and the devaluation of values. But what makes it especially interesting from the point of view of the present study is the way that this utopian vision centers on an imagined game, one that functions surprisingly similarly to the two form concepts discussed so far. The Glass Bead Game, more an abstract composition or formal arrangement of symbols than a “game,” acts in the novel as a replacement for an absolute, filling the empty void left in the absence of God and thereby underpinning the values and principles along which Hesse’s imagined society is organized. The Glass Bead Game becomes the object of belief and faith in this society.

Hesse’s game shares several features with the form concepts already discussed. Like the *strenger Satz* in *Doktor Faustus*, it has a strongly musical component as well as a dangerous, demonic element. And, just as Jünger’s *Gestalt* and Mann’s *strenger Satz* were shown to be limited in terms of their applicability for the socio-political realm, Hesse understands the Glass Bead Game to be only part of a solution to the ethical, philosophical challenge of nihilism, more a necessary point of transition on the way to a new higher ideal than an end-goal. Additionally, the social structure the game generates is excessively restrictive, much as the *strenger Satz* was, and it results in rebellion. There are also differences: The Glass Bead Game is a way of organizing knowledge and information by means of abstraction; it appears as a systematization of *Bildung*. It is also an elite pursuit.

¹⁰ Hesse to Rolf von Hoerschelmann, February 22, 1944 in Volker Michels, *Materialien zu Hermann Hesses Das Glasperlenspiel*, vol. 1. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 241. Hereafter cited as *Materialien*.

Despite the uniqueness of Hesse's invention, reading *Das Glasperlenspiel* in light of these other form concepts will provide a stronger understanding of what the novel is actually about and how its central metaphor should be understood. It can also clarify important aspects of Hesse's humanism and his sense of the limitations of asserting humanist values in a post-nihilist age. So far there has been only limited consensus on these points. I will argue that Hesse's novel suggests nihilism cannot be overcome in any sort of programmatic, lasting way. Since Hesse was such a prolific writer, the present chapter cannot replace a wholistic study that takes into account how he addresses nihilism in general. However, since *Das Glasperlenspiel* is one of his most important works, his final novel, in which many of the themes of his previous works return and are pushed towards resolution, this analysis can serve as a starting point for further research in this direction.

Many of the themes, motifs and questions that were central to *Der Arbeiter* and to an even greater extent to *Doktor Faustus* reappear in *Das Glasperlenspiel*. The latter point may be unsurprising: Mann and Hesse were good friends and maintained a close correspondence in the interwar years and after. Mann recognized the similarities immediately after reading Hesse's novel, as he recalled later in *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*:

Des Ganzen nun ansichtig, war ich fast erschrocken über seine Verwandtschaft mit dem, was mich so dringlich beschäftigte. Dieselbe Idee der fingierten Biographie – mit den Einschlügen von Parodie, die diese Form mit sich bringt. Dieselbe Verbindung mit der Musik. Kultur- und Epochenkritik ebenfalls, wenn auch mehr träumerische Kultur-Utopie und -Philosophie, als kritischer Leidensausbruch und Feststellung unserer Tragödie [...] Die Beziehung in Großen verblüffend. Das meine wohl zugespitzter, schärfer, brennender, dramatischer (weil dialektischer), zeitnäher unmittelbar ergriffen.¹¹

It will be clear throughout this chapter that there are both superficial and deep similarities between *Doktor Faustus* and *Das Glasperlenspiel*, but not so many as Mann's statement might

¹¹ Thomas Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus: Roman eines Romans, Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe: Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher*, vol. 19.1, ed. Herbert Lehnert (Frankfurt Main: Fischer, 2009), 461-62, 463.

suggest. Hesse's novel is different both in its form and its underlying philosophy, including how it theorizes the formal response to nihilism. The comparison I make with Jünger may seem surprising. Hesse had little engagement with Jünger: Aside from a negative remark in a letter from 1939, the only published reflection I am aware of is a positive review Hesse wrote in 1960 of Jünger's *An der Zeitmauer*.¹² Jünger, for his part, claimed to be a passionate reader of Hesse and knew most of his major works, including *Das Glasperlenspiel*, and in the 1920s read *Siddhartha* and *Der Steppenwolf*.¹³ Aside from this, the authors had very little in common. All the more reason that the similarities between the theoretical and philosophical aspects of their work are so revealing, suggesting an important affinity in how they thought about nihilism that transcends their differing political and philosophical views. Much like Jünger, Hesse imagines a society whose central organizing principle is a formal system and whose purpose is to represent it. Mastery of this system is what grounds the authority of the society's highest representative, the Magister Ludi. Like the state that Jünger outlines in *Der Arbeiter*, Hesse's collective society is hierarchical and discourages the expression of individuality; the purpose of the individual is to fit into the established system in an effective way and to function so as to fulfill a given role.

I will examine reasons for these features of *Das Glasperlenspiel* in detail throughout the chapter, but the central points were already outlined in my introduction. There are two main historical influences that lead all three authors towards a similar configuration of the problem and solution to nihilism: Nietzsche's philosophy and the artistic climate of the interwar period,

¹² The letter, in response to a reader, expresses Hesse's views regarding the future of humanity after the events of the 1930s, but its ending, which mentions Jünger, is somewhat ambiguous: "Öffnen Sie erst einen Moment die Augen für das namenlose Elend, das die Welt erfüllt, über das unsägliche, auf Gewalt und Gegenwehr verzichtende Leiden [...] Aus diesem Leiden, aus dieser Wahrheit, aus diesem Abgrund ohne Phrase, ohne Jünger, ohne Steiner, ohne Hitler, wir das neue Menschentum [...] kommen." Hesse to H.B., London, January 10, 1939 in Hesse, *Die politische Schriften, Werke* 15, 557. See also Hesse, "Nach der Lektüre von Ernst Jüngers Buch 'An der Zeitmauer,'" *Werke* 20, 350-54.

¹³ Gnoli, Antonio and Franco Volpi with Ernst Jünger, *Die Kommenden Titanen: Gespräche* (Wien, Leipzig: Karolinger, 1997), 96-98.

characterized by the dominance of radical, avant-garde art. Hesse's novel does not address the avant-garde directly, but he was very much aware of the new art and had developed a strong position in response, as I will discuss shortly. Hesse understood that artists who sought the radically new were addressing a historical need, but in *Das Glasperlenspiel* he adopts a different approach, one which suggests that the way forward may be a return to the archaic that combines it with something radically new, not unlike Adrian Leverkühn's project in *Doktor Faustus*. Hesse's imagined society exists in a distant future, and yet its members communicate in Latin.

Before coming to this point, I want to take a brief look at the development of Hesse's ideas regarding nihilism and the influence that Nietzsche had on his work prior to *Das Glasperlenspiel*. I will then provide a summary of Hesse's complicated novel as well as the critical responses to it before looking closer at the nature of the "game." I will make the case that the Glass Bead Game can be profitably viewed in relation to the form concepts I examined in the previous chapters. In doing so, I aim to provide an answer, or at least the outline of an answer, to one of the most puzzling and disputed aspects of the novel: what the Glass Bead Game is and how it should be interpreted. I argue that the game functions like a content-less form that nevertheless stands in for an absolute. As such, the novel dramatizes a now familiar problematic: how to assert the existence of the highest values in the absence of transcendence. But the game is not just this; it attempts to address questions regarding the organization of knowledge and culture and how the weight of past greatness can hamper the creative spirit. Hesse's characters value *Heiterkeit*, but their game is neither childish nor light; rather, it is a serious attempt to organize the complexity of humanistic inquiry into a manageable totality that allows for vast possibilities of rearrangement and recombination according to its rules, no unlike Adrian Leverkühn's music. It is a formalized play of forms, but it is not playful in the sense of being free or light-hearted, so

the *Heiterkeit* associated with it comes from finding the most satisfying arrangement. His novel therefore adds to the understanding of form I have been working with. I will end by considering how this newly gained understanding of the game Hesse invents reflects the author's wider concerns with the relationship between ethics and aesthetics as well as the possibility of establishing meaning and purpose in both individual and collective life. These aims are central to Hesse's novel and underscore its utopian function.

In devoting the final chapter of this project to Hesse, I want to make the case for his continued relevance to studies of German modernism. The few recent scholarly collections on Hesse often take the dwindling critical interest in the author as their starting point, but Hesse's reception was always split between admirers and harsh critics, although the latter have tended to dominate.¹⁴ The reasons for this are worth reflecting on briefly. Contemporaries described his work as "harmless," "parochial," "regional," "unartistic."¹⁵ Robert Musil wrote that Hesse's regimented schedules and hypersensitivity to noise were the foibles of a greater writer than he actually was.¹⁶ Gottfried Benn had perhaps the most cutting summary: "Hesse. Kleiner Mann. Deutsche Innerlichkeit [...] Spezi von Thomas Mann. Daher der Nobelpreis."¹⁷ Such dismissal extended to the critical reception of his work. Hesse continues to be seen as first and foremost a writer for adolescents. One reviewer attributes this to his rebellious, introspective characters, whose status as outsiders appeals to the young: "Liking him is a good sign at age fifteen, a bad

¹⁴ Critics who have devoted research to Hesse include Siegfried Unseld and Ernst Robert Curtius. Recent collections that attempt to re-center Hesse include: Andreas Solbach, *Hermann Hesse und die literarische Moderne : kulturwissenschaftliche Facetten einer literarischen Konstante im 20. Jahrhundert : Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004) and Ingo Cornils and Osman Durrani, *Hermann Hesse Today/ Hermann Hesse Heute* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). Hereafter cited as *Hermann Hesse Today*.

¹⁵ Gunnar Decker, *Hesse: The Wanderer and His Shadow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 7.

¹⁶ "Das einzig Komische ist, daß er die Schwächen eines größeren Mannes hat, als ihm zukäme. Man ist heute Großschriftsteller ohne die schriftstellerische Größe." Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, 2nd ed., ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983), 973-974. Cf. Decker, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 7-8.

¹⁷ Gottfried Benn to F. W. Oelze 1945–1949 in *Briefe* vol. 2.1, ed. Steinhagen et. al. (Wiesbaden: Limes-Verlag, 1979), 58.

one by age twenty.”¹⁸ In a recent collection of critical essays, Jörg Drews puts forward a similar claim: “in der Tat steht [...] Hesses Werk als Forschungs- und Profilierungsgegenstand in der Germanistik nicht sehr hoch; dieses Werk wird, vielleicht gerade auch in Zusammenhang mit seinem Erfolg bei den Jugendlichen der Welt, seinem Rang nach eher skeptisch eingeschätzt.”¹⁹

Like many critics, Drews characterizes Hesse as a second-rate writer, but also seeks to address and explain his enduring popularity with the reading public both in Germany and outside of the German-speaking world.²⁰ “Daß Hesse an so vielen Orten und auch in Deutschland noch immer so viel Anklang findet, zeigt, daß seine Bücher offenbar eine Funktion erfüllen müssen; wenn auch die beiden Seiten nicht genau voneinander zu trennen sind, steht doch zu vermuten, daß es keine primär literarische, im genauen Sinn ästhetisch-erkenntnismäßige Funktion.”²¹

Drews is not alone in asserting that the function of Hesse’s texts lies in a sense of comfort and reassurance they provide to readers faced with instability and uncertainty:²² “eine Sehnsucht nach Anarchie – was immer das genau heißen mag – oder doch ein Schuß davon ist als Ingrediens beigegeben, viel Naturmystik und fernöstlich tangierte Religiosität, die aber nicht auf

¹⁸ Adam Kirsch, “Hermann Hesse’s Arrested Development,” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 12, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/19/hermann-hesses-arrested-development>.

¹⁹ Jörg Drews, “‘...bewundert viel und viel gescholten...’: Hermann Hesses Werk zwischen Erfolg und Mißachtung bei Publikum und Literaturkritik,” in *Hermann Hesse Today*, 27.

²⁰ A number of critics have pointed out that Hesse’s popularity outside of Europe and the US remains strong. For example, in the 2000s he was still one of if not *the* most popular European author in Japan and his books are still widely read in India. Volker Michels writes that of the 100 million plus copies of Hesse’s works sold worldwide only about a fifth are in German. Michels, “‘Auf den Einzelnen kommt es an!’ Zur Aktualität von Hermann Hesse,” in *Hermann Hesse Today*, 110, 117. Michels suggests Hesse’s popularity increases in times and places where young people feel the burden of authority and social control and decline in times of greater individual freedom. I would argue there are likely better explanations for his waning popularity in the west. Cf. Kamakshi P. Murti, “Hesse, Women, and Homoeroticism,” *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, ed. Ingo Cornils, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), 264.

²¹ Drews, “Hesses Werk zwischen Erfolg und Mißachtung,” 24.

²² In a similar fashion, Volker Michels believes Hesse’s popularity rests on the ease with which readers are able to access his “message”: “Was andere Autoren vorsichtig in Metaphern verbergen, spricht er direkt und unverschlüsselt aus. Das macht seine Bücher unabhängig von den Deutungen der Interpreten und nötigt mehr zu Beherrschung der Inhalte, um derentwillen sie geschrieben wurden, als zu Spekulationen über das möglicherweise Gemeinte.” Michels, “Auf den Einzelnen kommt es an!,” 117-118.

Forderung und Bindung abhebt, sondern eher Freiheit und Wohlsein bei ebenso hoher wie vager Verpflichtung als wünschenswert suggeriert.”²³

These and similar reflections suggest that Hesse’s fluctuating critical appeal may be explained by the consensus that has formed around his work: vague, bloodless, too focused on a message and not enough on style, language and form, a writer who simply lacks enduring appeal beyond the overly accessible answers he provides. Admittedly, Hesse is a very different sort of writer to those canonical Austro-German authors who anchor our understanding of modernism: Kafka, Döblin, Musil, Benn. Hesse’s language displays a clarity and linearity that sets it apart from the formal experimentation these writers made central to their work. At the same time, his output never reached the breadth and sheer complexity of the writer he is most often compared to: Thomas Mann. Additionally, Hesse lacks the kind of *radikale Großstadterfahrung* central to many modernist novels, both in Germany and America.²⁴ But while it is not my intention here to rehabilitate or revive interest in Hesse, the central argument of my chapter suggests that, at least as far as *Das Glasperlenspiel* is concerned, there are unexplored complexities to this author. Despite his seeming geographical isolation in Gaienhofen, Bern and finally Montagnola in Switzerland, Hesse was processing deep and significant modernist trends. This becomes even clearer once we understand the centrality of nihilism to his work. Even Drews acknowledges that Hesse had his finger on the pulse of his time: “Berührt von den Grundlagenkrisen des Lebensgefühls und der Künste um 1900” Hesse, like other modernists, exhibited “die Symptome für die Auflösung der Sicherheiten in den Künsten wie in den Wissenschaften.”²⁵ But, like many critics, Drews believes that in Hesse’s case “es werden keine radikalen Konsequenzen gezogen”

²³ Drews, “Hesses Werk zwischen Erfolg und Mißachtung,” 26.

²⁴ Cf. Drews, 28.

²⁵ Drews, 28.

from this state of affairs.²⁶ It may be true that Hesse was no radical in the sense meant here: Drews identifies Dada and the literary works adjacent to it as the actually radical manifestations of modernism.²⁷ But neither does Hesse provide us with easy answers to the crises in the arts and sciences that he identifies. The Glass Bead Game he invents as an experimental solution to these crises is mysterious, radical and very modern.

4.1 Der Untergang Europas: Hesse's understanding of nihilism

At first glance, Hesse does not seem like an author troubled by nihilism or the devaluation of values, but rather as a highly individualistic figure whose works were devoted to the pursuit of one's own purpose. At the same time though, he became increasingly aware that the pursuit of individual meaning and values could not serve society and humanity. His awareness of this conflict between individual liberty and social good can be traced back to his childhood. Hesse was born in a small town in Swabia, now Baden-Württemberg. His parents and grandparents were pietists; his father and maternal grandfather had both worked as missionaries in India, which spurred Hesse's later fascination with the east. The family operated a publishing house in the town of Calw that produced bibles and devotional literature, often for those engaged in missionary work.²⁸ His family was cultivated, educated and deeply spiritual. At 14, he was accepted to Maulbronn, one of Württemberg's four elite protestant church schools, under the assumption that he would pursue theology and languages.²⁹ However, Hesse's break with organized religion and with a prescribed professional course came early, and he quit Maulbronn

²⁶ Drews claims the same can be said of Thomas Mann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. See Drews, 28.

²⁷ Drews, 28.

²⁸ Barry Stephenson. *Veneration and Revolt: Hermann Hesse and Swabian Pietism* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 3, <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1433793&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁹ Hesse's break with the school, which formed the basis for the novel *Unterm Rad* is detailed by Stephenson in *Veneration and Revolt*, 23-38.

in his first year. His personal struggles with seminary life and later with the secular school system, from which he similarly absconded, became the basis for Hesse's early works of fiction: *Peter Carmenzind* (1903), *Unterm Rad* (1906), *Demian* (1919). Echoes of his formal education and the feeling of being at odds with authority can be registered in *Das Glasperlenspiel* too. Hesse's individualist, rebellious attitude stayed with him into adulthood and found expression in his critique of prevailing social and political attitudes. During WWI, he published multiple articles calling for an end to the war while at the same time criticizing the politicization of the arts, a theme that would return in *Das Glasperlenspiel*.³⁰ He also came increasingly to dislike the restrictions of family life and bourgeois society generally. Many of his works focus on characters who pursue an individual path in conflict with the society around them. In addition to the texts just mentioned, this would include *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Der Steppenwolf* (1927). He was also interested in secret societies devoted to obscure and secretive pursuits as in *Die Morgenlandfahrt* (1932) and again in *Der Steppenwolf*.

Hesse was critical of institutions, whether religious, social or political, but religion in its wider sense was important to him throughout his life. Reflecting on his childhood, he wrote of "ein nahes, inniges Verhältnis [...] zur Religion und zur Spekulation, im Sinn eines Suchens nach Unbedingtheit, nach direkter Einordnung in eine göttliche, überzeitliche Ordnung."³¹ This need for a higher order did not find satisfaction in the world of his parents' "pietistischer Frömmigkeit," which he saw "als etwas Ungenügendes, irgendwie Subalternes, auch Geschmackloses."³² But while he revolted against his family's religious beliefs, he could also write that "ich habe nie ohne Religion gelebt, und könnte keinen Tag ohne sie leben, aber ich bin

³⁰ Cf. Marco Schickling, "Hermann Hesse's Politics," in *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, 306.

³¹ Hesse, "Biographische Notizen," *Werke* 12, 18.

³² Hesse, 18.

mein Leben lang ohne Kirche ausgekommen.”³³ He described this private religion as a mixture of “einen mystischen Christentum” and “eine[] mehr indisch-asiatisch gefärbte[] Gläubigkeit, deren einziges Dogma der Gedanke der Einheit ist.”³⁴ Hesse was nevertheless conscious that private faith was not equivalent to the *Unbedingtheit*, the absolute, that he sought in his youth. It is part of my argument that *Das Glasperlenspiel* is in part an attempt to identify such an absolute and to imagine what a society that possesses it would be like. It is Hesse’s response to the collapse of collective values that occupied him at many points in his life, partly due to his intellectual encounters with Nietzsche.

Hesse read Nietzsche from an early age but, while the philosopher’s influence can be registered in many of his works, his views on the decline of higher values in European civilization carry their own unique stamp. In his study of Nietzsche’s influence on Hesse, László Szabó concludes that Nietzsche’s theorization of nihilism and his aesthetics gave rise to the philosophical questions that interested Hesse, but they did not direct his answers: “Mag sein, dass sich die Antworten Hesses von denen seines Vorläufers oft unterscheiden, doch die Fragen, die sie intensiv beschäftigten, wurzeln in einer geistesgeschichtlichen Situation, die von Nietzsche zutiefst begriffen und erhellt wurde.”³⁵ Unlike Mann, Hesse did not produce any work devoted solely to engaging with Nietzsche. Even his 1919 essay *Zarathustras Wiederkehr* is more inspired by than about Nietzsche’s famous character. However, Hesse’s thinking mirrors Nietzsche’s in many ways. Like Nietzsche, Hesse did not himself lack for higher values. He was deeply committed to and wrote often in defense of pacifism, *Ehrfurcht*, respect for life, the rejection of materialism and of dogmatic thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, the courage to

³³ Hesse, “Mein Glaube,” *Werke* 12, 133.

³⁴ Hesse, 133.

³⁵ László V. Szabó, *Der Einfluss Friedrich Nietzsches auf Hermann Hesse: Formen des Nihilismus und Seiner Überwindung bei Nietzsche und Hesse* (Veszprem; Wien: Universitätsverlag Veszprem, Praesens Verlag, 2007), 18.

be oneself and to follow an inner rather than a socially stipulated law. In a 1917 essay titled “Eigensinn,” for example, he writes the following:

Wir sind Menschen. Und für den Menschen gibt es nur einen natürlichen Standpunkt, nur einen natürlichen Maßstab. Es ist der des Eigensinnigen. Für ihn gibt es weder Schicksale des Kapitalismus noch des Sozialismus, für ihn gibt es kein England und kein Amerika, für ihn lebt nichts als das stille, unweigerliche Gesetz in der eigenen Brust, dem zu folgen dem Menschen des bequemen Herkommens so unendlich schwerfällt, das dem Eigensinnigen aber Schicksal und Gottheit bedeutet.³⁶

These sentiments echo Nietzsche’s imperative of self-legislation and the need to forge one’s own values, to find out “wie man wird, was man ist.”³⁷ Like Nietzsche, he was an unyielding critic of external authority in matters of belief and his major works reflect, in different ways, a concern with the sacredness of the individual’s ability to direct and give meaning to his or her own life. However, again in a similar way to Nietzsche, Hesse despaired of what he perceived to be a general cultural and ethical decline. Even before fascism came to dominate politics and thinking in Germany, Hesse believed that the society around him, and especially the youth, were on a dangerous path to nihilism.

One characteristic work that highlights this negative view of the surrounding culture is an essay on Dostoyevsky from 1920. “Die Brüder Karamasoff oder der Untergang Europas” is a charged, angry assessment of the German youth in the post WWI period, whose moral decline Hesse links to the popularity of Dostoevsky. In Dostoevsky’s works, and especially in the characters of the Karamazov brothers, “der Untergang Europas [ist] mit ungeheurer Deutlichkeit ausgedrückt und vorausverkündigt. Daß die europäische zumal die deutsche Jugend Dostojewski als ihren großen Schriftsteller empfindet, nicht Goethe, auch nicht einmal Nietzsche, das scheint

³⁶ Hesse, *Werke* 12, 106.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 6, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; De Gruyter, 1999), 293. This edition cited as KSA throughout.

mir für unser Schicksal entscheidend.”³⁸ Hesse argues that Dostoevsky’s characters represent a type of human subject taking over Europe, a type he labels, with regrettable racial overtones, “der russische Mensch,” qualifying this by adding “den wir längst auch schon in Deutschland haben.”³⁹ This “type,” according to Hesse, is made up of contradictions, a self that yields to relativism and the illogical coexistence of opposites: “Das ‘neue Ideal,’ von welchem der europäische Geist in seinen Wurzeln bedroht ist, scheint ein völlig amoralisches Denken und Empfinden zu sein, eine Fähigkeit, das Göttliche, Notwendige, Schicksalhafte auch noch im Bösesten, auch noch im Häßlichsten zu erfüllen, und auch vor ihm noch Hochachtung und Gottesdienst darzubringen.”⁴⁰ In a clear reference to Nietzsche, Hesse argues that this type is also lacking in form: “Er ist der Mensch, der im Begriff ist, sich aufzulösen und jenseits hinter den Vorhang, hinter das Principium individuationis zurückzukehren. Dieser Mensch liebt nichts und alles, er fürchtet nichts und alles, er tut nichts und alles. Dieser Mensch ist wieder Urstoff, ist ungestaltetes Seelenmaterial. Er kann in dieser Form nicht leben, er kann nur untergehen.”⁴¹

The ideal of self-legislation, or being who you are, inevitably comes into conflict with the need for moral and ethical standards. Hesse seems to want to say something like, “be yourself, but not if who you are is Dmitry Karamazov.” It is noteworthy that form as a positive construct in opposition to formlessness makes its way into this essay. Formlessness, thinks Hesse, is more difficult to overcome than evil because it destabilizes one’s ability to differentiate good from evil in the first place. A Karamazov is not evil, but is rather an expression of archaic *Triebe* and *Dränge* that “[können] mit so starker, mit so natürlicher, mit so unschuldiger Stimme sprechen

³⁸ Hesse, “Die Brüder Karamasoff oder der Untergang Europas: Einfälle bei der Lektüre Dostojewskijs,” *Werke* 20, 126.

³⁹ Hesse, 128.

⁴⁰ Hesse, 127.

⁴¹ Hesse, 129.

[...], daß alles Gute und Böse zweifelhaft wird und jedes Gesetz ins wanken kommt.”⁴² And yet, Hesse does not reject this state of chaos entirely, because it has the potential to become “die Wurzel zu einer neuen Kultur, einer neuen Ordnung, einer neuen Moral.”⁴³

The worry for Hesse at this time was that in the chaos of the post-WWI period, too many young people were willing to accept a prevailing relativism and formlessness, whereby all laws are questionable and there is no difference between good and evil, rather than attempt the difficult task of building a new culture, new order and new morals. Hesse believed that it was necessary to establish a new version of the “good” to replace the one that had become “alt und welk,” as he phrased it.⁴⁴ This problem extended to the arts, which he believed were subject to a similar decline.

Around the same time he wrote the Dostoevsky text, Hesse published a “dialogue” titled “Gespräch über die Neutöner.” In this imagined scenario, a wealthy patron of the arts asks an academic to explain contemporary, experimental poetry: “Ich will nun einmal wissen, was es auf sich hat mit all diesen Neuerungen und jungen Leuten in der Dichtkunst.”⁴⁵ The patron, presented as a sort of philistine who has made his money from the war and now employs the impoverished academic to explain culture to him, is angry that young poets have given up not only their commitment to “das Schöne und Ideale” but even to writing comprehensible German.⁴⁶ He wants to know why. His interlocutor gives a two-stage response and one that

⁴² Hesse, 133.

⁴³ Hesse, 134.

⁴⁴“Und ehe die alte, sterbende Kultur und Moral von einer neuen abgelöst werden kann, in diesem bangen, gefährlichen, schmerzlichen Stadium, da muß der Mensch von neuem in seine Seele blicken, von neuem das Tier in sich aufsteigen sehen, von neuem das Vorhandensein der Urkräfte in sich anerkennen, welche übermoralisch sind. Die dazu verurteilten, dazu auserlesenen, die hierfür reifen und vorbestimmten Menschen sind Karamasoffs. Sie sind hysterisch und gefährlich, sie werden ebenso leicht Verbrecher wie Asketen, sie glauben an nichts als an die wahnsinnige Zweifelhafteit jedes Glaubens.” Hesse, 134.

⁴⁵ Hesse, “Gespräch über die Neutöner,” *Werke* 9, 587.

⁴⁶ Hesse, 588.

serves as a model for Hesse's own attitude to the task of literature and art. The academic claims that a revolution has taken place:

Zu dieser Umwälzung gehört vor allem der Sturz des Glaubens an Macht und Autorität. Es ist mit den alten Mächten und Autoritäten nicht sehr gut gegangen, sie haben es zu Elend, zu Krieg, zu Hunger und tausendfachem Mord kommen lassen, ihre Geltung ist nun einmal erschüttert. Und ehe eine neue Welt mit neuen Autoritäten heraufkommt (denn die Trägheit der Menschen wird stets wieder solche fordern), vorher müssen wir eine Zeit erleben, in welcher alle Werte ausgelöscht, alle Namen geändert, alle Gegensätze miteinander vertauscht werden. Auch die Kunst gehört zu den Werten, welche in dieser Zeit stürzen und ausgelöscht werden. Nicht für immer, aber für heut und morgen. Der Dichter als verehrter edler Mann, der seine Leser auf bewährten Wegen zu Seelenadel und Erhebung geleitet, dieser Dichter existiert für die Jugend unserer Tage nicht mehr, nur als Karikatur.⁴⁷

The old system of values as well as the model of the poet as a figure of edification have disappeared. Therefore, the young poets “haben das Recht, zwanzigjährig zu sein und sowohl die Weisheiten wie die Dummheiten dieses frohen Alters zu begehen [...] Sie haben auch recht, wenn sie jeden dümmsten Einfall des Augenblicks, jede Laune an Stelle der Kunst setzen und ihre vollkommen kunstlosen Verse für ebenso schön halten wie die alten, wohlgeformten.”⁴⁸ As the irony of this passage suggests, the new poets are right to reject the hollow ideals and ideas of the past, but they miss something essential. Hesse ends the dialogue by claiming that while the new poets have understood enough to be able to criticize authority figures and to assert their own subjectivity, they lack the insight “daß man sich selbst als Teil der Menschheit erkennt, und daß man einsieht, die höchste Befriedigung auch des Persönlichen finde man nur da, wo man sich nicht gegen die Menschheit stemmt, sondern ihre Bahn willig mit beschreibt.”⁴⁹ Humanity moves in a particular direction and the task of the artist is to follow and express this via artistic means.

⁴⁷ Hesse, 594.

⁴⁸ Hesse, 595.

⁴⁹ Hesse, 597.

Although written much later, I would argue that *Das Glasperlenspiel* can be understood in light of this dual task of art and the artist after WWI, as Hesse sees it: on the one hand to assert the decline of an old order that no longer serves its purpose, or the other to build something new that keeps the whole of humanity and one's role as a part of it in view. The artist must simultaneously acknowledge the obsolescence of outmoded aesthetic forms and the imperative to create new ones that do not entirely abandon the aim of making art that is *wohlgeformt*. Both "Gespräch über die Neutöner" and "Die Brüder Karamasoff" identify cultural decline and the threat of nihilism as both worrying and an opportunity to build something new. However, neither essay attempts to systematize or clarify what any such new values, whether aesthetic, social or moral, might look like. This is also true of Hesse's novel *Die Morgenlandfahrt* (1932), which presages *Das Glasperlenspiel* in a number of ways. *Die Morgenlandfahrt* centers on a secret *Bund* which travels through Europe, ostensibly with the aim of reaching the east. The protagonist, H.H., used to belong to this order, but has become estranged from it. The plot focuses on his efforts to remember and record what happened along the journey, but these are hampered by the seeming inaccessibility of both his memory and the logic of the *Bund*, whose highest laws are kept hidden and whose leadership is anonymous, so that even the members seem to only be aware of "das Geheimnis des Bundes" without being in clear possession of this knowledge.⁵⁰

In contrast, *Das Glasperlenspiel* presents an order that is built around an identifiable central symbol. The novel begins with a critique of cultural decline that dramatizes some of the points made in the earlier essays, but it attempts to imagine and describe what reversing this

⁵⁰ When H.H. finally finds the order's *Bundesbrief*, a document he believed contained details of their journey, he realizes that it is unreadable, because it is written in a broken, "geheimen Adeptensprache." Hesse, *Die Morgenlandfahrt*, *Werke* 4, 577, 533.

decline would look like. *Das Glasperlenspiel* imagines a society that has re-discovered an absolute principle, a replacement for God, around which its members gather and the basic features of which they imitate. This is what I now wish to examine in detail.

4.2 The world of the Glass Bead Game—the restoration of values, at a price

The action of *Das Glasperlenspiel* takes place in the distant future. While the exact year is never given, Hesse's comments about this suggest that he imagined the narrator to be living around the year 2400, about 200 years after the death of the novel's protagonist.⁵¹ In terms of technology, this world does not appear very different from Hesse's own time, although there is little focus on place; aside from occasional mentions of radio and televised broadcasts, we are not given enough information to imagine what this world might look, feel and sound like. The point of setting the story in the future is not to envision the technological advances that might happen but to make plausible the radical social changes and developments the novel details. These are outlined in an "introduction" written by the fictional narrator.

Like *Doktor Faustus*, *Das Glasperlenspiel* takes the form of a fictional biography. While the narrator is unidentified, we know that he, she or they – the frequent use of "we" suggests the possibility that the story is being written by several people – belong to a province called Castalia (Kastalien), which is governed by the "order," also referred to frequently as "die Erziehungsbehörde." The subject of the biography is Josef Knecht, a former Magister Ludi, or Master of the Glass Bead Game (*Glasperlenspielmeister*). The "biography" is divided into three sections. The first is an introduction in which the narrator details the historical events that lead to the development of the Glass Bead Game and the order devoted to it as well as justifying the act

⁵¹ See Volker Michels, "Nachwort des Herausgebers," *Das Glasperlenspiel*, Werke 5, 713.

of telling Knecht's story. The second and longest section is a mostly linear account of Knecht's life, told with the use of "archival materials" from people who knew him as well as the mostly impersonal, official writings his character left behind. The final section, which I will not be able to consider in depth within the scope of this project but which should nevertheless be mentioned, contains three "Lebensläufe" that the character Knecht produced in the course of his studies at one of Castalia's elite schools as well as poems that he wrote in secret. These life stories are remnants of Hesse's original conception of the novel, which was to detail the journey of one soul through several different lives, but which he abandoned in favor of the final form that the novel achieved.⁵² The poems help add interiority to the character, who is otherwise observed from a distance. In order to maintain the realism of the biography, Hesse does not give his narrator any access to Josef Knecht's mind, although the narrative makes many suppositions regarding his thoughts and motives throughout.

The narrator's introduction provides a social and cultural critique of contemporary society—that is, Hesse's society—that highlights the nihilism at its core. Writing from the point of view of the future, the narrator describes the twentieth century, which is when the Glass Bead Game originated. The people of the future look back on this time, which they call "das feuilletonistische Zeitalter," as a strange and especially frivolous period. The conceit allows Hesse to introduce humor into this section as the narrator describes academic studies of the history of our own time, which read "diesen industriemäßig erzeugten Artikeln" published in the *feuilletons* as the representative texts of twentieth-century culture and life.⁵³ The narrator conveys the incomprehensibility with which people in his own time view the twentieth century's

⁵² Cf. Christian I. Schneider, "Hermann Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel*. Genesis, Structure, Interpretation," in *Hesse Companion*, ed. Anna Otten (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 223-224.

⁵³ Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, *Werke* 5, 16. Hereafter cited as *GPS*.

focus on scandal and trivial news and opinions, in addition to the *Kinder-Rätselspielen*, the *Kreuzworträtsel* for example, that occupy people. But the narrator also claims that there was a serious side to all of these distractions, which belies their seemingly “lächerliche” and “verrückte” aspects: The people of the twentieth century had gone through “eine Anzahl von schauerlichen Kriegen und Bürgerkriegen” and “ihre kleinen Bildungsspiele waren nicht bloß holde sinnlose Kinderei, sondern entsprachen einem tiefen Bedürfnis, die Augen zu schließen und sich vor ungelösten Problemen und angstvollen Untergangsahnungen in eine möglichst harmlose Scheinwelt zu flüchten.”⁵⁴ The accusation of childishness will return in the main part of the story with regards to the Glass Bead Game as well. In relation to the twentieth century, the narrator supposes that it was the fear of living in a time of spiritual decline and devaluation that explains the era’s escapist character. In this, the narrator explicitly echoes Nietzsche. This introductory section is important for understanding the function of the Glass Bead Game, so I will quote from it at length here to illustrate what Hesse’s imagined society has apparently managed to overcome:

Die Unsicherheit und Unechtheit des geistigen Lebens jener Zeit, welche doch sonst in mancher Hinsicht Tatkraft und Größe zeigte, erklären wir Heutigen uns als ein Symptom des Entsetzens, das den Geist befiel, als er sich am Ende einer Epoche scheinbaren Siegens und Gedeihens plötzlich dem Nichts gegenüber fand: einer großen materiellen Not, einer Periode politischer und kriegigerischer Gewitter und einem über Nacht emporgeschossenen Mißtrauen gegen sich selbst, gegen seine eigene Kraft und Würde, ja, gegen seine eigene Existenz [...] Soeben nämlich hatte man entdeckt (eine seit Nietzsche schon da und dort geahnte Entdeckung), daß es mit der Jugend und der schöpferischen Periode unsrer Kultur vorüber, daß das Alter und die Abenddämmerung angebrochen sei, und aus dieser plötzlich von allen gefühlten und von vielen schroff formulierten Einsicht erklärte man sich so viele beängstigende Zeichen der Zeit: die öde Mechanisierung des Lebens, das tiefe Sinken der Moral, die Glaubenslosigkeit der Völker, die Unechtheit der Kunst.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ GPS, 17-18.

⁵⁵ GPS, 19.

Critics have noted echoes of Hermann Broch in Hesse's novel and there are definite parallels in this passage to Broch's more extensive meditation on nihilism in *Die Schlafwandler*, titled "Der Zerfall der Werte."⁵⁶ I will only note in passing that Broch situates this essay in the very last section of his trilogy, in part as a way of leading up to the triumph of the final novel's antagonist, the amoral Huguenau, the personification of the *Nullpunkt* the novel suggests becomes a logical necessity after the collapse of values.⁵⁷ In contrast, Castalia and the Glass Bead Game are what emerge from this state of decline, of "Nichts," in order to give the spirit purpose and direction once again. This new state of affairs has necessarily brought about changes to how society functions.

Josef Knecht lives in a collective society where individuals must fulfill specific roles and where the highest values are those of the Castalian order. The narrator is apologetic about producing a "biography," explaining that this is a problematic genre in their society, because "gerade das Auslöschen des Individuellen, das möglichst vollkommene Einordnen der Einzelperson in die Hierarchie der Erziehungsbehörde und der Wissenschaften [ist doch] eines der obersten Prinzipien unsres geistigen Lebens."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the narrator believes that writing about Knecht is a service to "Wahrheit und Wissenschaft" since Knecht, rather than being an interesting individual, is representative of the order's highest values, which makes him a kind of hero.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See Theodore Ziolkowski, "The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia" in *Hermann Hesse*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 45.

⁵⁷ "Und fast scheint es Ausfluß der gleichen logischen Notwendigkeit, das der Übergang von einem Wertsystem zu einem neuen jenen Nullpunkt der Wertatomisierung passieren muß, daß er über ein Geschlecht hinweggehen muß, das, bar jeder Beziehung zum alten wie zum neuen Wertsystem, eben in dieser Beziehungslosigkeit, in dieser an Wahnsinn grenzenden Gleichgültigkeit gegen fremdes Leid, in dieser radikalsten Wertentblößung die ethische und damit die historische Legitimation für die grausame Nichtachtung liefert, der alles Humane in Zeiten der Revolution ausgesetzt ist." Hermann Broch, *Die Schlafwandler: Eine Romantrilogie, Kommentierte Werkausgabe* vol. 1, 2nd ed., ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 683.

⁵⁸ GPS, 8.

⁵⁹ GPS, 8.

Uns ist nur jener ein Held und eines besonderen Interesses würdig, der von Natur und durch Erziehung in den Stand gesetzt wurde, seine Person nahezu vollkommen in ihrer hierarchischen Funktion aufgehen zu lassen, ohne daß ihr doch der starke, frische, bewundernswerte Antrieb verlorengegangen wäre, welcher den Duft und Wert des Individuums ausmacht. Und wenn zwischen Person und Hierarchie Konflikte entstehen, so sehen wir gerade diese Konflikte als Prüfstein für die Größe einer Persönlichkeit an. So wenig wir den Rebellen billigen, den die Begierden und Leidenschaften zum Bruch mit der Ordnung treiben, so ehrwürdig ist uns das Andenken der Opfer, der wahrhaft Tragischen.⁶⁰

Castalia is a society built on the principle of deindividualization and service to *Geist*. While the narrator suggests Knecht was not a “rebel,” it is clear that his tragedy results from a breakdown in his ability to function within the order in the appropriate way, which stems not from a deficient character, such as someone driven by greed or passion, but from something that is at one with the largeness of his role. Knecht fulfils his function, but he is also seen as an *Opfer*. Later, the narrator will say Knecht is worthy of praise for “die stille, heitere, ja strahlender Art, mit welcher er sein Schicksal, seine Begabung, seine Bestimmung verwirklichte.”⁶¹ Knecht is not a rebel, but the narrator belies the degree to which his life ends in rebellion, not against the spirit, to which his character remains committed, but against the way in which Castalia binds the individual. It is possible to see this rebellion as the choice of one model of service over another, a desire to escape service to a worldly authority in favor of service to the idea of humanity. Knecht’s name reflects this struggle.⁶²

The narrative follows Knecht from early childhood when, as a gifted boy and an orphan, he experiences an awakening (*Berufung*) that leads him to Castalia. The province’s educational authorities recruit students from the non-Castalian schools in the rest of the country and it is in

⁶⁰ GPS, 9-10.

⁶¹ GPS, 39.

⁶² Critics have pointed out the connection between Knecht’s name and Goethe’s character “Meister.” See, for example, Ziolkowski, “The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia,” 41.

this way that Knecht comes to their attention. Although Knecht's *Prüfung* is based on music, it is not his knowledge or ability to play that is tested, but rather his potential "zur Begeisterung, zum Sicheinordnen, zur Ehrfurcht, zum Dienst am Kultus."⁶³ Knecht's is a type of spiritual awakening to the reality that music represents: "Er ahnte hinter dem vor ihm entstehenden Tonwerk den Geist."⁶⁴

Er hatte den Vorgang der Berufung erlebt, den man recht wohl ein Sakrament nennen darf: das Sichtbarwerden und einladende Sichöffnen der idealen Welt, welche bis dahin dem jungen Gemüt nur teils vom Hörensagen, teils aus glühenden Träumen bekannt gewesen war. Diese Welt existierte nicht nur irgendwo in der Ferne, in der Vergangenheit oder Zukunft, nein, sie war da und war aktiv, sie strahlte aus, sie schickte Sendboten, Apostel, Gesandte aus.⁶⁵

The scene of Knecht's "test" gives us an intimation of the source of Castalia's authority: an ideal world that can be accessed, in this case, through music. Later, when Josef is introduced to the Glass Bead Game, he will come to understand this as another way of accessing this ideal world; it is similar to a religious experience, but without a God and without traditional sacraments. While comparisons between religion and Castalia's belief system appear frequently, as in the reference here to apostles and messengers, the contrast with religion is maintained throughout.

Castalia provides what we would recognize as a classical humanities education, including both the arts and sciences, with a special focus on mathematics and music, but with several important differences. One is the complete separation between Castalian children and the outside world; those that have families will usually make a choice to distance themselves or sever contact in order to avoid conflict. Or they are orphaned, like Josef Knecht. Castalia also places a strong focus on meditation, which Hesse was familiar with from his study of eastern

⁶³ GPS, 47-48.

⁶⁴ GPS, 46.

⁶⁵ GPS, 47.

philosophy.⁶⁶ In *Das Glasperlenspiel*, meditation is an important aspect of life in Castalia, one that has both positive and negative associations. On the one hand, it serves as a way of achieving “die immer erneute Versöhnung von Geist und Seele,” but is also described as a kind of “seelische Hygiene.”⁶⁷ Those critical of it describe it as a way of controlling and eliminating “jede störende Lebensregung, jedes große Gefühl, jede echte Leidenschaft, jede Herzenswallung.”⁶⁸ Knecht suggests that meditation fulfils the role of religious practices designed to control the animalistic side of human nature: “Andere Jahrhunderte suchten Zuflucht bei der Vereinigung von Geist und Religion, von Forschung und Askese, in ihrer Universitas Litterarum regierte die Theologie. Bei uns ist es die Meditation, die vielfach gestufte Yoga-Praxis, mit der wir das Tier in uns und den in jeder Wissenschaft hausenden Diabolus zu bannen suchen.”⁶⁹ Meditation is essential to the moral core of Castalian society, as it promotes the discipline, *Selbstzucht* and “die Einordnung des Individuums” according to which the order functions.⁷⁰ In addition, students in Castalia are encouraged to learn and practice the Glass Bead Game, on which more later.

It is worth noting another peculiarity of Hesse’s imagined society: While all Castalians are in some way devoted to the study and preservation of the best examples of art and culture, they produce nothing new. There are many musicians, art historians and philologists, but there are no composers, artists or writers. The writing of poetry is viewed as “das denkbar

⁶⁶ Hesse read Buddhist, Hindu and Chinese philosophy. *Siddhartha* is his most famous work to fuse eastern and western ideas. One of the three *Lebensläufe* that appear after the main section of *Das Glasperlenspiel* is also set in an imagined past in India. See Friedrich Huber, “Zur Verarbeitung Indischer Traditionen in Hermann Hesses *Siddhartha*,” *Zeitschrift Für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 45, no. 2 (1993), 136–51.

⁶⁷ GPS, 91, 97.

⁶⁸ GPS, 285.

⁶⁹ GPS, 214.

⁷⁰ GPS, 246.

Unmöglichste,” which renders Knecht’s secret poems a kind of rebellion, as the narrator reports with perhaps a small degree of irony.⁷¹

Knecht encounters several challenges as a student, which return to play an important role in the novel’s conclusion. In addition to the inner rebellion represented by his poems, the main one is the encounter with a charismatic non-Castalian student named Plinio Designori, an outsider who visits the province as an auditor and acts as a harsh critic of its customs and education system. Knecht is moved by Designori’s critique, which unleashes an inner crisis. The narrator suggests that Knecht’s secret poems are a way of processing “eine tiefe Beunruhigung, ein grundsätzlicher Zweifel an sich selbst und am Sinn seines Daseins.”⁷² However, he eventually comes to defend Castalia in unofficial public debates against Plinio and, after their formal education comes to an end, Designori leaves the province to pursue a political career in the non-Castalian world. Knecht’s faith in the system is largely restored and he begins to pursue a path of independent study, specializing in the Glass Bead Game.

Castalia is a hierarchical and stratified society, in which a person’s role is generally determined by the order’s judgment of his abilities. I say “his” because it is clear in the story that all the students in Castalia are male. This is one of the story’s more bizarre aspects and I will return to consider it later in this chapter. When Knecht is summoned to take on a particular role in the hierarchy, he has no choice but to accept it. His first official role is as an ambassador to the Benedictine order, which serves in the novel as a counterweight to Castalia, one that is clearly religious in nature as well as more politically involved in the outside world. The contrast Hesse paints with religion is important, because it highlights the ways in which Castalia is not like the Catholic Church or any existing religion. It also allows the character of Knecht to be challenged

⁷¹ GPS, 93.

⁷² GPS, 93.

again through his encounter with one of the Benedictine Order's most senior and influential figures, an elderly historian named Pater Jakobus, modelled after the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, whose work Hesse held in high regard.⁷³ Pater Jakobus sees Castalia "als eine Nachahmung der christlichen Kongregation [...] und zwar im Grunde aus eine blasphemische Nachahmung, da ja der kastalische Orden keine Religion, keinen Gott und keine Kirche zum Fundament habe."⁷⁴ Knecht comes to agree in large part with Jakobus's criticism of Castalia as a place divorced from history. "Ihr Mathematiker und Glasperlenspieler [...] habt euch eine Weltgeschichte zurechtdestilliert, die bloß noch geistes- und Kunstgeschichte besteht, eure Geschichte ist ohne Blut und ohne Wirklichkeit," is how Jakobus phrases it, and his lessons in history come to play an important role in Knecht's development. But Knecht nevertheless maintains the value and importance of Castalia and of the Glass Bead Game, seeing in the game an ideal that is crucial to human life. As he later says, "der Gedanke der inneren Einheit aller geistigen Bemühungen des Menschen, der Gedanke der Universalität, hat in unsrem erlauchten Spiel seinen vollkommenen Ausdruck gefunden."⁷⁵

Knecht's passion for the Glass Bead Game remains and, after his diplomatic appointment ends, he returns to the province and joins the elite circle of the best Glass Bead Game players. After the death of the sitting Magister Ludi, Knecht is elected to the position, considered to be one of the highest offices in Castalia. Under the rules of the order, he is not able to refuse the appointment and since life in Castalia is so radically different from the outside world, leaving the province does not occur as a possibility at this stage: it seems more like death.⁷⁶ Knecht fulfils

⁷³ "Burckhardt [ist] nach unsrer Meinung der denkbar edelste Vertreter einer Geisteshaltung, der wir Heutigen viel tiefer verpflichtet und verschuldet sind, als wir meistens wissen und zugeben." Hesse, from a review in *Schweizer Journal* 2 (Easter, 1935) in *Materialien*, 113.

⁷⁴ *GPS*, 146.

⁷⁵ *GPS*, 210-211.

⁷⁶ Knecht is quoted as saying that whenever any student was expelled from Castalia, he perceived it "jedesmal wie einen Todesfall." *GPS*, 61.

the duties of his office in exemplary fashion, which means overseeing the study of the game, developing the annual festive presentation game that constitutes the main ceremonial event for Castalia, and instructing all levels of students of the game. However, as the narrator tells us, Knecht had serious misgivings about Castalia and the future of the Glass Bead Game, which he feared was in danger of falling into irrelevance and “reinen Selbstzweck” and that these doubts only grew over time.⁷⁷ Knecht appears to be the only member of Castalia who sees this as a problem. That the game is its own end is relatively uncontroversial, but he seems to believe early on that it can or should generate something additional.

Knecht’s criticism of the Castalian system provides an outward justification for his actions at the end of the novel, when he decides to leave his office. But he is equally driven by an inner desire for freedom that has survived the limitations on individual agency placed by the order, which ultimately leads to his defection: “Mehr und mehr auch wurde ihm [...] klar, daß der eigentliche Grund seines Fremdwerdens und Fortwollens wohl nicht das Wissen um die Kastalien bestehenden Gefahren und die Sorge um dessen Zukunft sei, sondern daß es einfach ein leer und unbeschäftigt gebliebenes Stück seiner selbst, seines Herzens, seiner Seele sei, das nun sein Recht begehrte und sich erfüllen wollte”⁷⁸ Although the novel has stated frequently that Knecht was able to derive purpose and meaning from pursuing the game, he becomes seized by the need to establish a life goal for himself and to find a purpose that is his own.

The catalyst for Knecht’s eventual defection is a chance encounter with his old friend and adversary Plinio Designori. Plinio, now married and with an adolescent son, has had an unhappy life away from Castalia and he both resents and envies Knecht and his fellow Glass Bead Game players. Convinced that his purpose is no longer to be *Glasperlenspielmeister*, Knecht makes an

⁷⁷ GPS, 250.

⁷⁸ GPS, 314.

unprecedented decision: he resigns from his office and leaves Castalia, planning to take on a position as a private tutor to Designori's son Tito, a spoiled and willful young man who Knecht believes would benefit from a Castalian education. But Knecht's motives are deeper: He wants to share the inner *Harmonie* and *Heiterkeit* that he has attained in his own being with ordinary people outside of Castalia, beginning by helping Plinio overcome his despair and then by educating the youth, rather than tutoring professional Glass Bead Game players. "Ich brauche," he tells his friend, "ein Zimmerchen und das tägliche Brot, vor allem aber eine Arbeit und Aufgabe als Lehrer und Erzieher [...] Was ich suche und brauche, ist eine einfache, natürliche Aufgabe, ein Mensch, der mich braucht."⁷⁹ Knecht's hopes are put to a sudden end when, on his second day with Tito, he attempts to follow the young man in an early morning swim in a mountain lake and drowns, leaving Tito with the feeling of responsibility for his teacher's death. Here the narrative of Knecht's life ends.

Although much has been left out from this necessarily abbreviated summary, there are already pressing questions that affect how we interpret the novel. *Das Glasperlenspiel*'s abrupt and inconclusive ending, the difficulty of interpreting its central symbol—the game itself—and the lack of cues as to how we should evaluate Hesse's imagined society, have led to profound disagreement about the meaning of the novel. I want to proceed then by addressing what I perceive to be the main difficulties in understanding Hesse's text: the first is how we should understand the Glass Bead Game and what its role in the novel is; the second is whether Castalia really is a utopian society; and, finally, the question of how to interpret Knecht's death. I argue that we can answer these questions in a satisfactory way by focusing on the nature of the Glass Bead Game in light of the problem of nihilism and the form concepts I have identified so far. In

⁷⁹ GPS, 308.

turn, this should help expand the understanding of modernist form concepts I have developed by examining Jünger's *Gestalt* and Mann's *strenger Satz*.

4.3 The Game Explained

To the first issue then, the definition of the game. What exactly is the Glass Bead Game and what is its role in the novel? The narrator provides us with several hints as to the nature of the game: We know that it can be played alone or with the input of others; different realizations of the game can be evaluated on merit but it is not competitive by design; it can be practiced in isolation or with an audience, who follow the visual representation of signs as they are written down. The narrator tells us that its primitive origin in the twentieth century involved the use of actual glass beads, but this version was quickly transcended and the game now involves no physical implements, except a means by which to reproduce its signs. In its simplest conception, the game is described as a system of signs that have developed over the course of centuries in order to identify and translate the formal elements of seemingly different cultural objects; it is a language, “nämlich eine[] Zeichen- und Formelsprache, an welcher die Mathematik und die Musik gleichen Anteil hatten, in welcher es möglich wurde, astronomische und musikalische Formeln zu verbinden, Mathematik und Musik gleichsam auf einen gemeinsamen Nenner zu bringen.”⁸⁰ It would be appropriate to think of this formula in light of Adorno's *Generalnenner*, which was how he described Schoenberg's twelve-tone method and which influenced Mann's idea of the *Systemherr* in *Doktor Faustus*.⁸¹ Equally, Jünger's attempt to identify “ein

⁸⁰ GPS, 32.

⁸¹ Theodor Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 56.

gemeinsamer Nenner” that represents “den Sinn dieser unserer Welt” after “die Zerstörung der alten Bindungen” emerges out of a similar historical impulse.⁸²

The Glass Bead Game player knows how to distill the central principles of, for example, a musical theme or fugue by Bach, an astronomical configuration, a passage from Leibniz or from the Upanishads and to then develop and recombine these essences into “unbegrenzte Kombinationen.”⁸³ The game has an almost spatial dimension: it seemingly creates its own world. The narrator describes, for example, “die abstrakte und scheinbar zeitlose Welt des Spiels” which reacts “in hundert Nuancen auf Geist, Stimme, Temperament und Handschrift einer Persönlichkeit” but “die Persönlichkeit” must be “groß und kultiviert genug, ihre Einfälle nicht für wichtiger zu halten als die unantastbare Eigengesetzlichkeit des Spieles.”⁸⁴ While a game can be private, there are also public games in which an audience follows as the player produces the different signs in their meaningful order. For the audience, this produces “geistigen Erlebnisse,” so that observing a game becomes a kind of religious ritual.⁸⁵ So, while the exercise is in practice an act of rule-bound play with formal elements, these have a deep significance:

Es bedeutete eine erlesene, symbolhafte Form des Suchens nach dem Vollkommenen, eine sublime Alchimie, ein Sichannähern an den über allen Bildern und Vielheiten in sich einigen Geist, also an Gott. So wie die frommen Denker früherer Zeiten etwa das kreatürliche Leben darstellten als zu Gott hin unterwegs und die Mannigfaltigkeit der Erscheinungswelt in der göttlichen Einheit erst vollendet und zu Ende gedacht sahen, so ähnlich bauten, musizierten und philosophierten die Figuren und Formeln des Glasperlenspieles in einer Weltsprache, die aus allen Wissenschaften und Künsten gespeist war, sich spielend und strebend dem Vollkommenen entgegen, dem reinen Sein, der voll erfüllten Wirklichkeit.⁸⁶

⁸² Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 8 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 65, 66.

⁸³ *GPS*, 34.

⁸⁴ *GPS*, 239.

⁸⁵ *GPS*, 31.

⁸⁶ *GPS*, 35.

While the game does not have any immediate aim other than the coherent play of signifiers—it is not a competition, but always played by one person—this act nevertheless reaches towards something divine. The narrator calls this something God, but Castalians have no God in any kind of traditional sense. The game has come to fill that role, a fact that Pater Jakobus, the Benedictine historian, accurately identifies and which he views as a serious problem, a type of blasphemy that attempts to elevate something profane to the status of the sacred.

The narrative leaves much about the game unsaid: we are not given enough information to understand how it works in practice or what its signs look like. But, as the above examples suggest, the quasi-religious importance of the game comes across quite clearly. Given its significance, it is interesting to note that many critics have chosen not to focus on the game in their analysis of Hesse's novel. Several studies of *Das Glasperlenspiel* have instead taken music to be the central element of the story, treating the game as essentially an extension of this. So, for example, one relatively brief comparative study of *Doktor Faustus* and *Das Glasperlenspiel* finds that, in the world of Hesse's novel, "phenomenal reality (and more specifically, Castalian society as a microcosm of this reality) is influenced, directed, and shaped by [...] organized music. Music actively determines the world around Knecht. It is this highly structured music of the past that acts as a model and mirror for the decidedly hierarchical order of the future."⁸⁷ The tantalizing similarity with Mann has produced other comparative studies, which likewise center on the use of music.⁸⁸ In a different vein, Barry Stephenson focuses on Hesse's pietist influences and, while he helpfully details the pietist mysticism that inspired Hesse's novel, he does not

⁸⁷ Shelley Hay, "Metaphysical Mirroring: The Musical Structure of Society in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* and Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*," *German Studies Review* 41, no.1 (2018), 10.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2018.0000>

⁸⁸ For example, Anni Carlsson, "Nachwort" to *Hermann Hesse-Thomas Mann: Briefwechsel*, ed. Carlsson (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1968), 203. Also G.W. Field, "Music and Morality in Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse" in *Herman Hesse: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Theodor Ziolkowski (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

discuss the nature or function of the game at all. Theodor Ziolkowski, who has written extensively on Hesse, addresses the question briefly and states that the game is a “symbol” that can be identified with “many aspects of contemporary thought and art:” “it is a common denominator, as it were, for the many attempts in modern times to achieve a new unity, a unified field, from the disintegrated values of our civilization. One could do far worse than to imagine the game as an exercise in symbolic logic.”⁸⁹ Ziolkowski sees the game as “another symbolic representation of the longing for simultaneity and totality that we have seen in every one of Hesse’s later books,” specifically *Die Morgenlandfahrt*. Ziolkowski suggests *Das Glasperlenspiel* is an extension of that earlier novel.⁹⁰ But what is notable is how different *Das Glasperlenspiel* is from that work, which focuses on a secretive order whose members travel as pilgrims to a mythical elsewhere that they never quite reach. *Die Morgenlandfahrt* does not develop a central symbol that explains the characters’ goals or system of beliefs. On the contrary, its secrets cannot be grasped in any codified manner. The order makes no claims about achieving a unity of knowledge or a second, symbolic language. The final image of *Die Morgenlandfahrt*, in which the main character H.H. experiences a moment of clarity, is a melting candle that the narrator observes.⁹¹ Ziolkowski’s explanation is not incorrect but incomplete because, as in the previous examples, the definition of the game does not play a central role in his analysis. This decision may be connected to his overall reading of Castalian society as aestheticist and his rejection of the label “utopia” for that society, as I will discuss in more detail in section 4.4.

However we interpret Hesse’s game, it has to be central to our reading of the novel since, as the title suggests, the story is as much about the game as it is about Josef Knecht. But we miss

⁸⁹ Ziolkowski, “The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia,” 44.

⁹⁰ Ziolkowski, 44.

⁹¹ Hesse, *Die Morgenlandfahrt*, 590.

the central point if we see it as only another way of thinking about music or musical forms.

While classical and baroque music, especially J.S. Bach, play an important role in the Castalian world, the narrative of *Das Glasperlenspiel* consistently explains that while music, along with mathematics, were essential to the Glass Bead Game's early development, it has become much more:

Diese Regeln, die Zeichensprache und Grammatik des Spieles, stellen eine Art von hochentwickelter Geheimsprache dar, an welcher mehrere Wissenschaften und Künste, namentlich aber die Mathematik und die Musik (beziehungsweise Musikwissenschaft) teilhaben und welche die Inhalte und Ergebnisse nahezu aller Wissenschaften auszudrücken und zueinander in Beziehung zu setzen imstande ist. Das Glasperlenspiel ist also ein Spiel mit sämtlichen Inhalten und Werten unsrer Kultur, es spielt mit ihnen, wie etwa in den Blütezeiten der Künste ein Maler mit den Farben seiner Palette gespielt haben mag.⁹²

The obscurity of this passage is characteristic of how the narrator describes it. So, while enthusiasts have attempted to construct a real game based on Hesse's hints, a realization of the Glass Bead Game will not help us to understand it in the context of Hesse's novel.⁹³ Like Jünger's *Gestalt of the Worker*, it cannot be visualized. Also, similarly to Jünger's *Gestalt*, we can take more from Hesse's novel if we see the way in which it foreshadows how twentieth-century advances in technology alter the nature of the human subject and the search for meaning and value. But where for Jünger the key to this was contained in industrial technology, which was changing the nature of labor and of warfare, Hesse's concerns are more closely aligned to information technology. In this vein, one critic has written that "essential to the Game is the

⁹² *GPS*, 11.

⁹³ Zimmermann and Wiedemann provide a detailed summary of online attempts to create a Glass Bead Game or something inspired by it. They also create their own version. See Rainer E. Zimmermann and Simon M. Wiedemann, *Kreativität und Form: Programm eines Glasperlenspiels zum Experimentieren mit Wissen* (Berlin: Springer, 2012), esp. 25-33, 99-111, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27521-0>.

problem of knowledge, and the Game can be understood as a tool to facilitate the organization of cultural knowledge in an age of information overload.”⁹⁴

Christian Schärf comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of *Das Glasperlenspiel*. Schärf argues that Hesse’s novel already anticipates our own time and the relationship between the individual and the organization of data. Schärf calls the Glass Bead Game “eine *suprasemantische Sinnmaschine*” and Castalia “ein Mandarinat,” which “rein zur Bewahrung und Verwaltung eines Wissensschatzes abgestellt ist und deren einzige Betätigung in der prinzipiell unanschließbaren Kombinatorik des Spiels selbst liegt.”⁹⁵ The language of the game becomes “eine heilige Sprache,” “das Individuum kann darin zwar seine Erfüllung finden, muß aber zugleich Knecht des Spieles werden, muß sich einer Welt unterordnen, hinter der eine mathematische Formel [...] und die Mustervorgaben eines unhintergehbaren Codes [steht].”⁹⁶ Schärf links Hesse’s game to the mystery of code that powers and organizes the twenty-first century’s information machines, a code “der um sich selbst kreist, um selber selbst Willen da ist.”⁹⁷ In Schärf’s analysis, the counterweight to this *Sinnmaschine* in Hesse’s novel is not an individual in the traditional sense, but a *Knecht*, as the main character’s surname signifies, whose service to the system forms the basis of a new ethics and a new understanding of the sacred. Schärf’s brief essay comes closest to the point of interest that *Das Glasperlenspiel* has for the present study, but there is room to expand on these insights by more closely considering the ethical and aesthetic challenges Hesse is responding to.

⁹⁴ Paul Bishop, “Hesse’s *Das Glasperlenspiel*,” in *Hermann Hesse*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 221.

⁹⁵ Schärf, “Hermann Hesse und die literarischen Moderne,” 97, 98.

⁹⁶ Schärf, 99.

⁹⁷ Schärf, 100.

As I have argued throughout this project, the event of nihilism undermines the possibility of a stable absolute that can be clearly grasped. But the need to posit such an absolute remains. Georg Lukács writes disparagingly about the “religious atheism” of modern writing, by which he means those authors who focus their hopes on the void left in God’s absence, directing their longing for comfort and salvation to a now empty beyond.⁹⁸ Lukács is critical of such writers who, in his view, continue to search for the absolute at the expense of “die gegebene Wirklichkeit [...] das Zusammenleben der Menschen.”⁹⁹ I do not believe that the label “religious atheism” should be applied to Hesse, and Lukács does not mention him in this context, but his analysis is nevertheless helpful because it explains why the theoretical gap left in the absence of dogmatic religion carries a certain power and authority. The absolute disappears, but many authors, including the subjects of this study, remain committed to the idea of an absolute ground to our highest values and seek to express it in a way that goes beyond ordinary language. The largeness of this task can help explain why it is so difficult, if not impossible, to fill the void that Lukács identifies. Schärf’s argument presents a coda to this point, only he suggests that, in the present moment, transcendence is being displaced not by a particular deployment of poetic language but by the authority of algorithms that no one actually controls, that the code, a “supra-semantic machine” that evades human understanding, has taken precedence over human subjects. In his reading, the Glass Bead Game is Hesse’s premonition that this is the direction civilization

⁹⁸ “Der heutige religiöse Atheismus hat seine ideologischen Wurzeln einerseits darin, daß der Unglaube sein gesellschaftliches, menschenbefreiendes Pathos verloren hat: der leergewordene Himmel als Gegenstand der Trauer ist nur ein projiziertes Bild der jede Hoffnung auf Erneuerung verlorenen Menschenwelt. Andererseits als Folge dieser Lage darin, daß die religiöse Sehnsucht nach Trost und Erlösung in der Welt ohne Gott unvermindert lebendig bleibt und ihre ganze Intensität in das so entstandene Nichts einströmen läßt.” Georg Lukács, “Die Gegenwartsbedeutung des kritischen Realismus,” in *Probleme des Realismus: Essays über Realismus* vol. 1 (Neuwied: Leuchterhand, 1971), 497.

⁹⁹ Lukács, 498.

is taking. This would be a particularly dark reading of the meaning of the game and one that does not sufficiently consider its positive aspects.

There is more to be said about how the game as a formal system relates to value and especially the highest values, which comes back to how it is defined in the novel. In the above quotation, the narrator tells us the game “spielt [...] mit sämtlichen Inhalten und Werten unsrer Kultur.” But it does so by reducing these to their formal qualities, abstracting them from their content and their context. It is via form and not by means of content that it maps their relations to one another. Through a process of isolating the formal features of the products of culture and knowledge, the game distills them into a system that can act to anchor and give purpose to Castalian society. We can say that the game actually makes forms and the play of forms into a value, replacing the need for any other content.

This is not, however, to say that the game does not represent something valuable that is worth striving for. On the contrary, Knecht believes the game has a significance that is simultaneously spiritual and philosophical. The game accurately represents the unrepresentability of its own truth and meaning, and in this it represents the impossibility of putting an absolute into words. In letters that the narrator reproduces, Knecht describes how he first came to recognize that the game was not “nur eine formale Kunst, eine geistreiche Fertigkeit, eine witzige Kombination” but rather “wirklich eine lingua sacra, eine heilige und göttliche Sprache.”¹⁰⁰ He realizes this “bei echter meditativer Betrachtung,” a process of meditative reflection that is an essential component of the game.¹⁰¹ But such meditation, he concludes, should never be a deliberate grasping after the game’s true meaning, as this would contradict the esoteric nature of the game:

¹⁰⁰ *GPS*, 105, 106.

¹⁰¹ *GPS*, 105.

Ich denke mir [...] daß man ein ganz guter, ja virtuoser Glasperlenspieler sein kann, ja vielleicht sogar ein recht tüchtiger Magister Ludi, ohne das eigentliche Geheimnis des Spieles und seinen *letzten Sinn* zu ahnen. Ja es konnte sein, daß gerade ein Ahnender und Wissender, wenn er zum Fachmann im Glasperlenspiel oder dessen Leiter würde, dem Spiel gefährlicher werden konnte als jene. Denn die Innenseite, die Esoterik des Spiels, zielt wie alle Esoterik ins Ein und All hinab, in die Tiefen.¹⁰²

Knecht's mentor and Castalia's master of music agrees and adds a fascinating point in his reply to Knecht. The music master claims that no art should be taught with a view to using it for the purpose of attaining a *Sinn*: "Mit dem Lehrenwollen des 'Sinnes' haben einst die Geschichtsphilosophen die halbe Weltgeschichte verdorben, das feuilletonistische Zeitalter eingeleitet und eine Menge von vergossenem Blut mitverschuldet," adding that "Sache des Lehrers und des Gelehrten ist das Erforschen der Mittel und die Pflege der Überlieferung, das Reinhalten der Methoden, nicht das Erregen und Beschleunigung jener nicht mehr sagbaren Erlebnisse, welche den Auserwählten [...] vorbehalten sind."¹⁰³

In reproducing this dialogue, Hesse conveys a central point about the game and the reason that it stands in for any other *letzter Sinn*, a term I would take to be synonymous with an unchanging truth or an absolute principle. The master of music believes that the perceived knowledge or possession of such a truth leads to conflict and violence, but training in the methods and means of acquiring knowledge in the arts brings one closer to truth without the danger of naming it, without becoming a dogma, in other words. This passage suggests that the wars as well as the cultural decline of the twentieth century were brought about, at least in part, by competing beliefs in an unchanging truth, the *last* truth, that could be grasped and taught to others. Here I would also raise the issue of the term *Spiel*. The game as a game resists a single meaning, which would signal an end to the play of its possibilities. It is rigorous, yet nuanced,

¹⁰² *GPS*, 107 (emphasis added).

¹⁰³ *GPS*, 108.

precise, but not commanding. It is, however, a deadly serious pursuit, not a naive or innocent game by any means. The game is such a valuable principle that it seems to those who play it to be worth any sacrifice. In addition to the sacrifice of one's individuality that Castalia generally requires, the story also contains at least one death that happens for the good of the game. In a relatively brief episode, one of the game's senior officials is forced into exile after organizing a particularly disastrous public game. The elite players, with the exception of Knecht, see this as a just and necessary outcome, as one player says: "Er weiß, daß sein Opfer notwendig war, und wird nicht versuchen, es rückgängig zu machen."¹⁰⁴ The disgraced official dies mysteriously after leaving the province.

We might consider these features against the backdrop of Jünger's claim that "das tiefste Glück des Menschen besteht darin, daß er geopfert wird, und die höchste Befehlskunst darin, Ziele zu zeigen, die des Opfers würdig sind."¹⁰⁵ After WWI, Hesse rejected the idea that someone can or should provide people with a reason to sacrifice themselves. The driving conviction of his anti-war stance, which garnered him a good deal of hate mail and public censure, was the need to appreciate the humanity of individuals.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, though, Hesse describes Josef Knecht's death as an "Opfertod," without specifying what the sacrifice was for. I intend to discuss this tension at length in the final section of this chapter, but the main difference to point out now is that Knecht dies while pursuing a purpose he has set for himself, rather than one that was given by an external authority.

¹⁰⁴ GPS, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Hesse wrote a short essay reflecting on the hate mail he received in and after WWI. See "Haßbriefe" in *Werke* 15, *Die Politischen Schriften*, 290-296. Marco Schickling has pointed out that at least some of the animosity towards Hesse was connected to his decision, made for practical rather than political reasons, to move his residence to Switzerland in 1912. "For years, 'traitor' and 'coward' were the favored terms in this diatribe [against Hesse E.M.]." Schickling, "Hermann Hesse's Politics" in *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, ed. Ingo Cornils (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), 304-309, esp. 306.

In his fiction and in his articles and letters, Hesse devoted himself to the idea that individuals must find their own purpose. Take, for example, the open letter he published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 1919 in response to a German soldier: “Sie schreiben mir, daß Sie verzweifelt sind und nicht wissen, was tun, nicht wissen, was glauben, nicht wissen, was hoffen. Sie wissen nicht, ob es einen Gott gibt oder keinen.”¹⁰⁷ In essence, the man’s problem is similar to the one Jünger tried in his own way to respond to. He had fought in the war, and the war had turned out to be for nothing. In Hesse’s view, the man has lost faith in God and the good because these were tied to the social structure that led to the war: “Der Gott [...] war vermutlich der Nationalgott unser Konstitutionalräte und Kriegsdichter.”¹⁰⁸ After similarly criticizing the churches and theologians for going against their teaching in supporting the war—“sie dienten der Liebe und predigten den Haß”—Hesse directs the man to accept that there are no authorities who have exclusive access to transcendence and argues that this is the first step to developing one’s own system of belief.¹⁰⁹ The man’s problem is nihilism, which Hesse, much like Nietzsche, believes must first be embraced before it can be overcome. He advises the man to read Nietzsche, but with a caveat: “Bleiben Sie nicht bei Nietzsche stehen und nicht bei irgendeinem Propheten und Ratgeber. Unser Amt ist nicht, Sie zu belehren, Ihnen Mühe zu sparen, Ihnen Wege zu zeigen. Unser Amt ist nur, Sie daran zu erinnern, daß es einen Gott gibt, einen einzigen, und daß dieser Gott in ihrem Herzen wohnt.”¹¹⁰ This religiously inspired model of inner transcendence is a recurring theme in Hesse’s writing and it plays a role for Knecht’s character as well. Knecht’s eventual apostasy, choosing to listen to an inner voice rather than the order,

¹⁰⁷ Hesse, “Brief an einen jungen Deutschen,” *Werke* 15, 258.

¹⁰⁸ Hesse, 259.

¹⁰⁹ Hesse, 259.

¹¹⁰ Hesse, 262.

can be read in this light. But the more interesting and pertinent aspect of the novel is its exploration of the possibility of externalizing a new higher principle in the form of the game.

It is noteworthy that this elevated status seems to require that the game remains mysterious and vacant of content. When readers asked Hesse to clarify the Glass Bead Game, his response would inevitably be to reinforce the impossibility of providing any additional information: “Es ist mir nahezu unmöglich, dir Auskünfte über das Glasperlenspiel zu geben [...] Ich halte nichts vom Erklären von Dichtungen, und wer nicht aus dem Buch selbst, wenn es einmal vorliegt, sich das ungefähre Bild des Glasperlenspiels erschaffen kann, den geht es auch nichts an.”¹¹¹ The author is applying the principle voiced by his characters in *Das Glasperlenspiel* with regards to the novel itself: his art acts to dissimulate the possession of meaning, or a clear answer as to what the game is in favor of the reader’s own exploration. This is much like what the Glass Bead Game does through its interplay of signs. But this is not to suggest that the game is a metaphor for the novel, or for art generally.

The Glass Bead Game is a system of signs with no determinate content that represents an open, dynamic system of forms, an organized practice, rather than a stable absolute. And yet it does attain an independent value. Hesse once wrote that the main aim of his book could be summarized by an epigram he wrote and had translated into Latin, so that it could be presented as an archaic quote: “Nichts entzieht sich der Darstellung durch Worte so sehr und nichts ist doch notwendiger, den Menschen vor Augen zu stellen, als gewisse Dinge, deren Existenz weder beweisbar noch wahrscheinlich ist, welche aber eben dadurch, daß fromme und gewissenhafte Menschen sie gewissermaßen als seiende Dinge behandeln, dem Sein und der Möglichkeit des Geborenwerdens um einen Schritt näher geführt werden.”¹¹² This suggestive passage brings to

¹¹¹ Hesse to Theo Baeschlin, 1943 in *Materialien*, 233.

¹¹² Hesse to his son Martin, 3.12.1943 in *Materialien* 232; *GPS*, 7.

mind a religious attitude and it is worth noting that Hesse was delving into the pietist and mysticist authors who were part of his family's spiritual heritage at the time he was writing *Das Glasperlenspiel*.¹¹³ It is a challenging passage to parse and to interpret, especially its promise of approaching *Sein* and *Geborenwerden*. For my interpretation, I take from this passage that the world of *Das Glasperlenspiel* has its ground in an absence that is present and the purpose of both the game and the novel is to approach this absence through a never-quite-complete attempt to represent it. There can be no question that Hesse treated his novel as more than a fiction, and yet it is not a teaching or a dogma. The Glass Bead Game he invents has an inner meaning or *Sinn*, which is the reason the novel compares it to a religion, but neither the game nor the novel spell out what this meaning is, they only draw nearer to it.¹¹⁴ Hesse's novel and the game are representations of this invisible meaning and both are open to interpretation. But the novel is nevertheless about something, whereas the game is an arrangement of formal elements; it does not communicate a message or a content that could be paraphrased.

At this point it is possible to consider how the game relates to the society devoted to it. The narrator tells us that, in Castalia, the game has taken over the role of art and of speculative philosophy, but it is clear that it does much more.¹¹⁵ The game is the central principle around which this imagined society has been organized; both mirror one another. I want to move on then

¹¹³ Stephenson notes that Hesse was intensely engaged with mysticist and pietist authors while writing *Das Glasperlenspiel*: "Woven into the narrative are Johann Albrecht Bengel, Christoph Friedrich Oetinger, the radical Pietist Friedrich Rock, Count Zinzendorf, the hymnist Paul Gerhardt, the aged preceptor Magnus Roos, the mystics Johann Arndt, Gottfried Arnold, and Jacob Böhme, and [Jakob] Spener and [August Hermann] Francke." Stephenson believes Hesse was especially drawn to Oetinger, "a restless seeker, a Faustian figure working his way through biblical hermeneutics, the Cabbala, alchemy, and science, attempting to integrate diverse areas of knowledge into a harmonious whole." Stephenson, *Veneration and Revolt*, 195, 196.

¹¹⁴ The narrator even pinpoints a moment in the distant history of the game when it came to acquire a religious significance: "Nun fiel allmählich dieses Virtuosität mehr und mehr unter strenges Verbot, und die Kontemplation wurde zu einem sehr wichtigen Bestandteil des Spieles, ja, sie wurde für die Zuschauer und Zuhörer jedes Spieles zur Hauptsache. Es war dies die Wendung gegen das Religiöse." *GPS*, 33.

¹¹⁵ *GPS*, 32.

to consider how this relationship between the game and Castalia is depicted in the novel. The game is an ideal and yet Knecht's story is about turning one's back on this ideal in favor of something else. This conflict is how Hesse works through the question of how the kind of value the game represents could be applied to the socio-political realm.

4.4 Castalia as Utopia—Formal rigor destroys desire.

The Glass Bead Game has no immediate purpose beyond the interplay of signs by which it functions. While it has an inner meaning, this can only theoretically be intuited by some and such intuition should not be its aim, as I have discussed. It could be helpful to compare it to Kant's identification of the beautiful as that which exhibits a purposiveness without purpose—"Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck"—in terms of how it affects the player or viewer following it, yet the play involved here has a cultic, religious value that cannot be neatly equated with an aesthetic experience.¹¹⁶ Additionally, the game gives shape to the society dedicated to it and it functions as the basis for the other values that all Castalians agree on. So, while it is not a transcendent absolute, it fulfills a similar function. It has been suggested that the relationship between the game and Castalia in Hesse's novel mirrors the relationship between the *strenger Satz* and Weimar Germany in *Doktor Faustus*.¹¹⁷ In the previous chapter, I discussed the difficulty of pinning down the exact nature of this relationship in Mann's novel. I contended that this link is more suggestive than concrete, which is symptomatic of the general difficulty of determining the connection between aesthetic and socio-political phenomena. Since Castalia is a non-existent

¹¹⁶ "Hieraus allein schon erhellt: daß das Schöne, dessen Beurtheilung eine bloß formale Zweckmäßigkeit, d.i. eine Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck, zum Grunde hat, von der Vorstellung des Guten ganz unabhängig sei, weil das letztere eine objektive Zweckmäßigkeit, d.i. die Beziehung des Gegenstandes auf einen bestimmten Zweck, voraussetzt." Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft, Gesammelte Schriften* (Akademie-Ausgabe), vol. 5 (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corp., 1999), §15, 226. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/8602899>

¹¹⁷ Hay, "Metaphysical Mirroring," esp. 6, 12.

place, Hesse is able to make this link much clearer in *Das Glasperlenspiel*, but a degree of ambiguity remains. The Glass Bead Game represents an absolute for this society and it brings about a particular social structure. But since the game has no content and its not in any way prescriptive, there is some mystery as to why Castalia is the way it is. This touches on the second difficulty of interpreting the novel, which is whether we should understand Hesse's imagined world as utopian. Having a grasp of this is important both for understanding how the game fits with the novel as well as interpreting the ending of *Das Glasperlenspiel*, which I will address in the final section.

One way to think about the similarities between the Glass Bead Game and the Castalian order is in terms of how they mirror one another in the way that they operate. Both the game and the order focus on maintaining a harmonious functioning of their elements. Just as the game distills artworks and other cultural artefacts to their formal elements so that they can be employed for the purpose of the game, Castalian society attempts as much as possible to reduce its members to their function within a hierarchy. In both cases, the aim seems to be to attain a harmonious order. I would even suggest that the order and the game are both form-giving or *ordering* systems. Knecht calls the game “das eigentliche Heiligtum Kastaliens, sein einzigartiges Geheimnis und Symbol.”¹¹⁸ But he also recognizes that both the game and Castalia have a tendency to pursue a single purpose to extremes. He compares this, significantly, to Faust's single-minded pursuit of knowledge, which turns into *Laster* and *Eigennutz*: “Auch das Glasperlenspiel [hat] seinen Diabolus in sich.”¹¹⁹ Knecht characterizes this *diabolus* as a tendency “zur leeren Virtuosität [...] zur Streberei, zum Erwerb von Macht über andere und damit zum Mißbrauch dieser Macht” and argues that it must be combatted by submitting oneself

¹¹⁸ *GPS*, 210.

¹¹⁹ *GPS*, 214.

to the rules and morality of the Castalian order.¹²⁰ “Darum bedürfen wir noch einer andern Erziehung als der intellektuellen und haben uns der Moral des Ordens unterstellt, nicht um unser geistig aktives Leben in ein seelischvegetatives Traumleben umzubiegen, sondern im Gegenteil um geistiger Höchstleistungen fähig zu sein.”¹²¹

Knecht believes that submission to the rules of the order is the way to avoid falling prey to the excesses of that inhere in the game. So while he states that “nur hier in unserer Elite ist es [the game E.M.] Selbstzweck und heiliger Dienst,” he and the order, which he is a representative of in this instance, believe that the attainment of maximum functionality, which I would suggest is a good way to think of *Höchstleistungen*, requires not just an ability to play the game but to submit oneself to other customs: regular mediation, fitting oneself into the hierarchy, and so on.¹²² Yet the novel shows how the order’s restrictions prove similarly excessive, which suggests that one type of excess—diabolic, Faustian overreach—is being replaced with another—excessive discipline, rigor, control. In addition to its hierarchical structure, the order places a premium on “die genaue Identifizierung von Person und Amt.”¹²³ The synthesis of person and office becomes the basis for his authority; it demands extraordinary strength to carry it out, but it also extinguishes something of an individual’s interior life and subjectivity.

There is a disturbing aspect to this process of transformation from individual to office bearer that the novel’s characters recognize. For Knecht, attaining the title of Magister Ludi is not enough to claim authority over Castalia’s elite players. He must successfully assert himself into the office, which means becoming one with it. The narrative describes how, while he was

¹²⁰ *GPS*, 214.

¹²¹ *GPS*, 214.

¹²² *GPS*, 214.

¹²³ *GPS*, 215; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 28.

still a student, he viewed his predecessor “mit einem ganz leisen Grauen vor der unpersönlichen Vollkommenheit und Zucht dieses Mannes” and intuited “wie Kastalien auch nach ihm selbst greifen und ihn an sich saugen wollte.”¹²⁴ After he becomes the Magister Ludi, he realizes that the province has succeeded in transforming him into “einen Meister, einen Regenten und Diener, ein vollkommenes Werkzeug.”¹²⁵ As *Glasperlenspielmester*, any feelings or affect necessarily disappear: “Er hatte sich so ganz zum Werkzeug gemacht,” the narrator tells us “daß so private Dinge wie Freundschaft ins Unmögliche entschwanden” and “er empfand sich nun wie das Gehirn, wie das Bewußtsein und auch wie das Gewissen dieser Gemeinschaft.”¹²⁶ The game is a perfectly ordered, perfectly functioning system and, while it offers itself as a sacred ideal, the application of this ideal to the realm of organic human individuals is inevitably damaging.

In the language of restriction and excess that has developed over the preceding chapters, we could say that the moral code and the rules of the order are an example of excessive form-giving. This impetus is connected to the nature of the game; its *diabolus* is in its capacity for formal perfection. There is a strong suggestion here of the central problem addressed by Mann’s *strenger Satz*, a form that is strict enough to rein in overly free musical elements and to organize them into higher order. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Adrian’s music achieves this higher order, also described as *das Generalthema* with regards to his final composition: “Es liegt zum Grunde allem, was da klingt, –besser: es liegt, als Tonart fast, hinter allem und schafft die Identität des Vielförmigsten, –jene Identität, die zwischen dem kristallinen Engelschor und dem Höllengejohle der ‘Apokalypse’ waltet, und die nun allumfassend geworden ist: zu einer Formveranstaltung von letzter Rigorosität, die nichts Unthematisches mehr kennt, in der die

¹²⁴ *GPS*, 209.

¹²⁵ *GPS*, 209.

¹²⁶ *GPS*, 206, 210.

Ordnung des Materials total wird.”¹²⁷ Of course, there are many ways of structuring a musical composition that suggest a thematic unity of different elements, yet Mann evokes something very specific here: a total organization of material that allows nothing to escape its logic and this is echoed in the depiction of Castalia and of the Glass Bead Game as a form that rigorously unites disparate ideas, objects, texts and so on. Just as Mann’s novel expresses reservation about what this means for culture, *Das Glasperlenspiel* suggests that being reigned into the service of a higher order may suppress something that is essential to the arts.

Knecht comes to see that the game is damaging to culture because it drains artworks of their content as well as their historical context. He argues that “alles, was wir Geistestat oder Kunstwerk oder objektivierten Geist nennen, sind Endergebnisse, letzte Resultate eines Kampfes um Läuterung und Befreiung, sie sind meinetwegen [...] Ausbrüche aus der Zeit ins Zeitlose.”¹²⁸ But the problem with the game is that artworks become abstractions: “Wir legen in unsrem Glasperlenspiel jene Werke der Weisen und Künstler in ihre Teile auseinander, ziehen Stilregeln, Formschemata, sublimierte Deutungen aus ihnen und operieren mit diesen Abstraktionen, als wären sie Bausteine. Nun, dies alles ist sehr schön, das bestreitet [...] niemand. Aber nicht jeder kann sein Leben lang ausschließlich Abstraktionen atmen, essen und trinken.”¹²⁹ This criticism can be extended to Castalian society, where an individual’s official function is abstracted from his person. This dual loss of feeling for the deep embeddedness of art within a social context and for individual creativity can explain Castalians’ inability to bring forth anything new. As Knecht tells another player, “die geistige Schöpfung [ist] etwas, woran wir nicht so eigentlich

¹²⁷ Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde*, Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe: Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher, vol. 10.1, ed. Herbert Lehnert (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2007), 706.

¹²⁸ *GPS*, 254.

¹²⁹ *GPS*, 254.

teilnehmen dürfen.”¹³⁰ Not only *geistige Schöpfung*: Castalia is also incapable of creating new life. It is a society where no one is born.

The issue is not only a lack of women in this all-male social order, but the absence of physical or sexual desire. The narrative does not speculate on whether such desires are suppressed, sublimated, or simply absent, but they clearly play no role in this society. Some younger students seem to enjoy short-term erotic relationships with women from the surrounding communities, but these tend to be temporary with no expectations from either side, part of one's *Bildung* for both the men and the women involved. The narrator tells us that “der kastalische Student [kennt] weder die Ehe mit ihren Verlockungen und Gefahren, noch kennt er die Prüderie mancher vergangenen Epoche [...] Da es für die Kastalier keine Ehe gibt, gibt es auch keine auf die Ehe gerichtete Liebesmoral.”¹³¹ And, since Castalians also have no property and no money, “auch die Käuflichkeit der Liebe [existiert] nicht.”¹³² This is more or less the limit of what we learn about the province's sexual economy.

This aspect of the novel is difficult to approach and the reason there are almost no studies of women in *Das Glasperlenspiel*.¹³³ Hesse bristled at questions regarding the absence of women from the novel and what he does provide by way of an answer hints at biographical reasons.

“Diese Frage ist mir in Briefen des öfteren gestellt worden, ohne daß ich Lust gehabt hätte, sie zu beantworten,” he writes, adding that the question “ist kaum zu beantworten.”¹³⁴ The reason, he

¹³⁰ *GPS*, 254.

¹³¹ *GPS*, 98.

¹³² *GPS*, 98.

¹³³ I am aware of only one study that looks at the role of women in *Das Glasperlenspiel*, and it focuses mainly on the third *Lebenslauf*, which does have a prominent female character, rather than the main narrative involving Knecht. See Monique Roeske, “Féminité et narcissisme dans Le Jeu des perles de verre de Hermann Hesse” in *Cahiers d'Études Germaniques* 9, no. 1 (January, 1985), 157-176.

¹³⁴ Hesse, open letter published in “Weltwoche,” 16.02.1945, in *Materialien*, 254. In the same letter, Hesse provides the following by way of explanation: “Je älter ein Autor wird, desto mehr hat er das Bedürfnis, genau und gewissenhaft zu sein und nur von Dingen zu sprechen, die er wirklich kennt. Die Frauen aber sind ein Stück Leben, das dem Alternden und Alten, auch wenn er sie früher reichlich gekannt hat, wieder fernrückt und geheimnisvoll

writes, is that *eine Dichtung* is not the product of conscious intent, but of deep impulses the author is not always aware of.¹³⁵ “Ein Leser mit Phantasie wird sich in mein Kastalien hinein alle klugen und geistig überlegenen Frauen von Aspasia bis heute schaffen und vorstellen.”¹³⁶

Hesse’s deflection of the question has led many readers to refer to his personal life and his relationships with women in order to explain his fiction. Gunnar Decker writes that “Hesse did not need a muse; indeed, he did not need any women at all in his life in order to write,” which comes through in *Das Glasperlenspiel*: “he could only conceive of the spiritual realm as a confraternity of men.”¹³⁷ We could take Hesse at his word when he presents the world of the novel as open to the presence of women, but that depicting this was somehow not within his power as a writer. This inability could, of course, be tied to the author’s private life and views, or not. Some critics have pointed to the importance of homosocial relationships for Hesse’s fiction to argue that what some read as a lack of women is actually the result of intense concentration on relationships between men.¹³⁸ This may or may not reflect the historical context of gender relations that goes beyond the author’s biography. Such speculation lies outside of what the present chapter can address. However, we can profit by reading the absence of desire and of women in *Das Glasperlenspiel* as a corollary to the abstraction and formalization of life that make up the world of the novel.

The asexual, erotically disinterested nature of the men who belong to Castalia echoes the depiction of sexuality in Mann and Jünger’s work. For this reason, I do not believe that Hesse’s

wird, worüber etwas Wirkliches zu wissen, er sich nicht anmaßt und traut. Die Spiele der Männer dagegen, soweit sie geistiger Art sind, die kennt er durch und durch, dort ist er zu Hause.” Hesse, 255.

¹³⁵ Hesse, 255.

¹³⁶ Hesse, 255.

¹³⁷ Decker, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 697.

¹³⁸ *Das Glasperlenspiel* is not the only work from which women are either absent or acquire masculine characteristics. For more on homosociality and the role of women in Hesse’s fiction see, for example, Kamakshi P. Murti, “‘Ob die Weiber Menschen seyn?’ Hesse, Women and Homoeroticism” in *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, ed. Ingo Cornils (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), 263-300.

all-male society can be attributed to his personal life alone. At the level of the individual characters, the Castalian attitude to sexuality, which avoids both prudery and desire, recalls Adrian Leverkühn's coldness in *Doktor Faustus*, what the narrator described, in an allusion to the gospels, as his "'Noli me tangere' [...] seine Abneigung gegen die allzu große physische Nähe von Menschen, das Einander-in-den-Dunstkreis-Geraten, die körperliche Berührung."¹³⁹ And neither the worker type nor the worker state that Jünger imagines in *Der Arbeiter* can be easily examined in terms of gender or sexual relations. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, while the Worker seems to be coded as masculine, the dimensions of sex and gender play no manifest role in Jünger's world. The Worker is completely abstracted from libidinal desires. These similarities may be a useful starting point for further research, but there are also important differences in how these three authors approach sexuality that we cannot discount. Jünger's text, for example, lacks the guiding interest in holiness and spirituality that helps explain the celibacy of Mann and Hesse's characters. I would nevertheless put forward the following hypothesis to explain the overlap: The form concepts these authors develop, and I treat the Glass Bead Game as such a concept too, are at odds with individuality, interiority and emotional attachment. They are therefore at odds with sexuality and desire. A society that mirrors the functioning of the Glass Bead Game has no capacity to either generate or manage desire, because it is abstracted from the reality of bodies.

Hesse saw *Triebe* in general as problematic and even referred to the Third Reich as "[eine] starke Art von organisiertem Triebleben."¹⁴⁰ "Es ist jede, ausnahmslos jede Form der Gewalt," he continues in the same note, "eine Angelegenheit der 'Welt' [...] ist Sache der Triebe

¹³⁹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 322.

¹⁴⁰ Hesse, diary from July 1933, in *Materialien*, 67.

und nie des Geistes.”¹⁴¹ And yet, he believed that passion and surrender to immaterial values were important. After writing of his admiration for people who can sacrifice themselves in the name of a concrete object, even if it leads to terrible consequences, he writes: “Ich habe diese Gewalt der Hingabe an ein geliebtes Objekt nicht, vielmehr für mich ist dies Objekt nie ein materielles gewesen, nie eine Person oder ein Volk, sondern immer etwas ganz Überpersönliches, Gott, oder das All, oder die Menschheit, oder der Geist, oder die Tugend, oder der Begriff ‘Vollkommenheit’.”¹⁴² The world of *Das Glasperlenspiel* answers to this complex of concerns by essentially uniting values like *Gott, das All, der Geist, der Begriff Vollkommenheit* in a way that also binds the *Triebleben*, producing virtue by means of self-control and submission. But note that the Glass Bead Game is not so successful at expressing Hesse’s other value: *Menschheit*. The exclusion of a practical humanism centered on the importance of the human individual combined with the elevation of the *humanities* in the name of *Bildung* is part of the tension that characterizes Castalia. It also forms the basis of how many readers have interpreted Hesse’s imagined society, which comes back to the second problem of interpretation that the novel presents us with: is Castalia really a utopia, or even a desirable symbol?

Hesse’s reflections on this question were often ambiguous, but lean towards employing the term “utopia” to describe it. On the one hand, he writes: “es will nur Dichtung sein, weder eine Philosophie noch eine politische Utopie.”¹⁴³ But then, in an exposition written to the writer and philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz, he states that the novel took shape as a spiritual retreat and quiet rebellion against the Third Reich, and not just Hitler’s government, but ignorance and

¹⁴¹ Hesse, 67.

¹⁴² In the same entry, Hesse writes of the *Bewunderung* with which he registers the passion of many writers who have thrown their support behind National Socialism: “Ich sehe vor allem in der Art, wie sie ‘ihr’ Volk und Vaterland lieben können, in der starken, blinden, bluthaften, unausrottbaren Art ihrer Liebe, die durch kein Leid, keine Macht, auch keine Vernunft zu beeinträchtigen ist, eine große Stärke und Tugend, obwohl sie zu sehr üblen Folgen führen kann.” Hesse, 71-72.

¹⁴³ Hesse to Cuno Amiet, 1943, in *Materialien*, 233.

barbarism generally. The novel had to be “[der] Widerstand des Geistes gegen die barbarischen Mächte [...] ich mußte, der grinsenden Gegenwart zum Trotz, das Reich des Geistes und der Seele als existent und unüberwindlich sichtbar machen, so wurde meine Dichtung zur Utopie [...] Zu meiner Überraschung entstand die kastalische Welt wie von selbst.”¹⁴⁴ This would suggest that Castalia is a utopia in Bloch’s sense of a “hopeful presentiment” that “keeps the alliance with everything dawning in the world.”

Despite this, critics have overwhelmingly read Castalia and the game as troubled and on the brink of calamity. Others, who do acknowledge the positive aspects of this world, nevertheless shy away from seeing it as an ideal.¹⁴⁵ Writing not long after the novel was published, Oskar Seidlin argued that utopia was not the right way to read Castalia and that “myth” was more appropriate: “Um eine Utopie, d.h. um eine Zukunftsvision einer höheren individuellen oder gesellschaftlichen Existenz handelt es sich durchaus nicht. Kastalien ist nicht Utopie, sondern Mythos: d.h. Konkretisierung eines Ewigen, eines Etwas, das war, das ist und das sein wird.”¹⁴⁶ More recently, Theodore Ziolkowski also argued against calling Castalia a utopia. Citing the province’s shortcomings and its impermanent nature, Ziolkowski prefers the term “realistic abstraction” to “utopia.” Ziolkowski understands the world of the novel as only an “aesthetic ideal” which Hesse wants ultimately to show as lacking.¹⁴⁷ “The Glass Bead Game, practiced only within the province, is the most endangered area of Castalia since it will be the

¹⁴⁴ Hesse to Rudolf Pannwitz, 1955, in *Materialien*, 295.

¹⁴⁵ One exception to this is Lawrence Wilde’s article, in which he calls Castalia an “alternative enlightened community” and a “flawed utopia.” “Hesse sets up his flawed Utopia in order to show that the values and knowledge which have been trampled on or distorted may yet be revived and enriched through collective effort.” Wilde, “The Radical Appeal of Hermann Hesse’s Alternative Community,” *Utopian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1999), 89, 95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718010>.

¹⁴⁶ Oskar Seidlin, “Hermann Hesses Glasperlenspiel,” *Germanic Review* 23, no. 4 (December 1, 1948), 264, <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/hermann-hesses-glasperlenspiel/docview/1290431967/se-2>.

¹⁴⁷ Theodore Ziolkowski, “The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia” in *Hermann Hesse*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 52, 41.

first to disappear if once the purely aesthetic values represented by the province should be questioned and outside support withdrawn.”¹⁴⁸ Ziolkowski believes that “the rejection of aesthetic abstractionism is the principal theme of the novel, culminating in Knecht’s defection.”¹⁴⁹ Seidlin’s perspective comes down to a difference in definition: if we appreciate that Hesse himself called Castalia a utopia and read the novel in light of Bloch’s theory of utopia, then the criteria of being a *Zukunftsvision* gives way to a broader understanding of utopia as an ideal that expresses people’s highest values. Ziolkowski’s critique is more challenging and, while not wanting to debate the definition of utopia, it is important to my argument regarding the meaning of the Glass Bead Game to make clear that the game is not based on “purely aesthetic values” or an “elaborate aesthetic structure,” as Ziolkowski puts it.¹⁵⁰ The issue here is not one of genre, but rather of interpretation. Is Hesse’s imagined society something worth aspiring to or is it deeply flawed, deliberately flawed as a criticism of what this society and its central organizing principle represent?

Castalia may not be a perfect society, but the narrative does not reject it outright, on the contrary, it remains an ideal. Castalia not only represents the overcoming of the *feuilletonistische Zeitalter*, with its deep pessimism and inability to address the meaninglessness at its core, its *angstvollen Untergangssahnungen* and *öde Mechanisierung des Lebens*. Unlike the games played in the twentieth century, the Glass Bead Game is not an escape “in eine möglichst harmlose Scheinwelt.”¹⁵¹ Castalia is also a necessary counterweight to the world outside, which does not seem to have evolved very much since the *feuilletonistische Zeitalter*. The narrative only provides a limited glimpse of this world, mostly through the eyes of Plinio Designori, the former

¹⁴⁸ Ziolkowski, 57.

¹⁴⁹ Ziolkowski, 52.

¹⁵⁰ Ziolkowski, 57, 61.

¹⁵¹ *GPS*, 18.

Castalian student who has spent most of his life there. When they meet again, Plinio confesses to Josef that his fiery speeches about “die Erheblichkeit und Gespreiztheit der Kastalier [...] dieser eingebildeten und verweichlichten Kaste mit ihrem Kastengeist und ihrem Elitehochmut” underwent a painful correction when he returned to ordinary society: “Die Weltleute waren auf ihre schlechten Manieren, ihre geringe Bildung, ihren derben lauten Humor, ihre dummschlaue Beschränkung auf praktische, selbstsüchtige Ziele nicht weniger stolz, sie kamen sich nicht weniger kostbar, gottgefällig und auserwählt vor in ihrer engstirnigen Natürlichkeit.”¹⁵² Plinio admits that he is not certain whether his own life has meaning, but that he tried to make it his goal to unite the Castalian world with the ordinary world within himself, something he did not succeed in doing: “Jedenfalls geschah das Natürliche, die Welt war stärker als ich und es hat mich langsam überwältigt und eingeschluckt.”¹⁵³ So, while Josef’s defection is linked to “ein brennendes Verlangen nach Welt, nach Menschen, nach naivem Leben,” this is shown to be a not-entirely realistic longing, one that might itself be naïve.¹⁵⁴

Knecht does not reject either the game or Castalia. He sees both as valuable and worthwhile, although he grasps their dangers and shortcomings. It is possible to conclude that his rebellion is driven by a rejection of the way the Castalian system regulates individual freedom and agency, the way in which it suppresses individuality in favor of effective functioning. Like Jünger, Hesse is implicitly reflecting on the changing nature of work and individual creativity. While Castalia and the game are ostensibly there to elevate *Geist*, there is a definite sense that they also function for their own sake, which Knecht comes to see as insufficient and unsustainable. We may, as Barry Stephenson does, choose to read Knecht’s flight from the

¹⁵² *GPS*, 270.

¹⁵³ *GPS*, 273.

¹⁵⁴ *GPS*, 252.

province in light of Hesse's own hasty departure from the Maulbronn Seminary and his rejection of the life of a scholar and theologian.¹⁵⁵ However, this would be an incomplete reading on its own.

The novel shows that the Glass Bead Game can successfully harmonize and bring order to cultural forms at a point past nihilism and, in a similar way, the society modelled after it is equally harmonious and ordered. Its members successfully manage and preserve the artefacts of human knowledge and creativity without having any other end goal or purpose except the continuation of all of these processes. But its members are not necessarily happy. Knecht realizes that the game cannot displace the need for higher values forever and it fails to give life meaning because it is built around an ethical void. By leaving the province, he attempts to succeed where his friend Plinio failed, that is, to synthesize the Castalian ideal with the world outside in order to improve both. His death represents the impossibility of this task. I want to argue that the ending undermines the potential of finally overcoming nihilism in anything but an individual way.

4.5 The Meaning of Knecht's death—is nihilism everyone's problem?

Throughout this project, I have considered the drive to unite aesthetics with the socio-political realm, which finds expression in modernist form concepts. While the Glass Bead Game is not a stand-in for art, nor simply aesthetic, the plot of Hesse's novel can be read in this light. Castalia represents a small section of society that sees its highest purpose in the game and this society in its turn represents this purpose through the organization of its members. However, this ideal is unattainable in the complex, more textured, more diverse world outside Castalia. The way that the novel makes this point is by having Knecht leave the province in an attempt to apply its

¹⁵⁵ Stephenson, *Veneration and Revolt*, 207, 209-10.

principles to the outside, that is, to humanize Castalia's formal order through contact with people who have not been raised in the cerebral, disembodied, controlled atmosphere of the province. His death represents the futility of such an attempt. But the impossibility of overcoming nihilism collectively is already hinted at in his defection, which is presented as a rebellion against meaninglessness as much as it is a rebellion of the individual against the excessive ordering of the system he belongs to. For Josef Knecht, the Glass Bead Game does not succeed in overcoming nihilism, but neither can this nihilism be resolved in a programmatic way by combining the ideals of Castalia with life in its unmanaged complexity. This is not the way that critics have generally understood Knecht's death, but the reading I put forward explains several otherwise mysterious details of the novel's ending.

Before he leaves Castalia, Knecht sends a circular letter to other senior members of the order in which he details the reasons for his decision. Importantly, this letter is not actually written by Knecht alone, but in secret collaboration with Fritz Tegularius, a rebellious anti-Castalian who wants to devote himself only to the game and resents the rules and hierarchy of the order. It is a curious and often overlooked detail that Knecht enlists this paradoxical and not altogether sympathetic character for his project, which undermines the degree to which the contents of the letter can be attributed to Knecht himself. The letter predicts that the outside world will undergo a new age of conflict and that Castalia, whose best days are behind it, will be ill-equipped to defend its interests. It also criticizes Castalians for taking an insufficient interest in the outside world:

Der Durchschnittskastalier betrachtet den Weltmann und Ungelehrten vielleicht ohne Verachtung, ohne Neid, ohne Gehässigkeit, aber er betrachtet ihn nicht als Bruder, er sieht in ihm nicht seinen Brotgeber, noch fühlt er sich im geringsten mitverantwortlich für das, was da draußen in der Welt geschieht. Zweck seines Lebens scheint ihm die Pflege der Wissenschaften um ihrer selbst willen oder auch nur das genußvolle

Spaziergehen im Garten einer Bildung, die sich gern als eine universale gebärdet, ohne es doch so ganz zu sein.¹⁵⁶

These claims echo other statements Knecht has made, but they are much more partial and categorical than his normally balanced views. Even if we concede that the letter more or less accurately represents Josef's own increasingly negative view of his situation, I would argue that these sentiments do not represent Hesse's own views on Castalia. At least, the letter's criticisms do not convey the entirety of how he conceived of this society. This view is supported by the odd naïveté of the letter and its striking tendency towards apocalyptic thinking, referring to imminent armament and the public's likely decision to sacrifice Castalia entirely. But these premonitions are nowhere supported in the novel and, since the narrator is living at a time after Knecht's death, we would likely know whether or not any of his predictions came true.¹⁵⁷

Hesse actually gives the Castalian order substantial space to challenge Knecht's assertions by including an official reply. The order's reply reasserts its belief in the value of hierarchy and effective functioning: "Was würde aus Kastalien, wenn jeder seine Person, seine Gaben und Eignungen selber einschätzen und sich seinen Posten danach aussuchen wollte!"¹⁵⁸ But it also makes a balanced argument against Knecht's prophesy of imminent demise. The order argues that Knecht cannot know what will happen, so his conclusions cannot have general relevance: "So verallgemeinernd jedoch und nihilistisch dem gesamten Orden, der gesamten Hierarchie eine angeblich nahe bevorstehendes Ende zu verkündigen, sei nicht nur eine unwürdige Attacke auf die Seelenruhe und Phantasie der Kollegen, es sei auch eine Gefährdung der Behörde selbst."¹⁵⁹ The order also points out that Castalia's cultivation of reason and culture

¹⁵⁶ *GPS*, 320.

¹⁵⁷ *GPS*, 327.

¹⁵⁸ *GPS*, 338.

¹⁵⁹ *GPS*, 337.

has served as a counterweight to “den Kämpfen um die materielle Macht” that happen outside of it.¹⁶⁰ Knecht fails to convince the order and its chairman that he has come to believe in a higher calling: “Hätte er doch, was ihm selber so klar schien, auch den andern klarmachen und beweisen können: daß nämlich die ‘Willkür’ seines jetzigen Handelns in Wahrheit Dienst und Gehorsam war, daß er nicht einer Freiheit, sondern neuen, unbekannten und unheimlichen Bindungen entgegenging, nicht ein Flüchtling, sondern ein Gerufener, nicht eigenwillig, sondern gehorchend, nicht Herr, sondern Opfer!”¹⁶¹ The order’s reply is that leaving such grave decisions to the individual cannot be the basis of a well-functioning society. The conflict between Knecht and the order presents a choice: either a functioning society built around a common but empty principle—the Glass Bead Game—or individuality, freedom to choose one’s own highest values, but the also social breakdown, conflict and so on. As the novel tells us later, Knecht’s defection continues to divide opinion in Castalia. By extension, Hesse leaves it to readers to decide how individual freedom could be balanced with the demands of a collective.

It is also worth considering the suggestive ending of Knecht’s official letter. He asks that the order release him from his duties “und mir draußen im Lande eine gewöhnliche Schule anzuvertrauen, eine große oder kleine, und mir zu erlauben, an diese Schule allmählich einen Stab von jungen Ordensbrüdern als Lehrer mir nachzuziehen, Leute, zu welchen ich das Vertrauen habe, daß sie mir treulich helfen werden, *unsre Grundsätze in jungen Weltmenschen zu Fleisch und Blut werden zu lassen.*”¹⁶² There is an undeniably an evangelizing spirit to this statement that is echoed elsewhere in Josef’s conception of his actions as a necessary sacrifice,

¹⁶⁰ *GPS*, 336.

¹⁶¹ *GPS*, 349.

¹⁶² *GPS*, 333 (emphasis added).

which Hesse affirmed in letters to friends and readers.¹⁶³ Knecht has chosen a path for himself that seeks to escape the order and the *ordering* of the Castalian world, which fits with Hesse's long-standing interest in being one's own authority, of listening to the God within oneself. Knecht even describes his step as "ein[] Weg des Eigensinns," perhaps in reference to the essay of that title that Hesse wrote when he was younger.¹⁶⁴ There is something undoubtedly beautiful about this gesture, which the novel presents as an act of overcoming deindividuation and discovering a unique human destiny within oneself. But the desired transubstantiation of idea into flesh is precisely what does not and cannot work according to the ideas of the novel. This is what Knecht's death represents.

As already mentioned, Knecht and Plinio Designori agree to an arrangement whereby Knecht will tutor Plinio's son Tito. As a first step, Knecht considers it necessary to temporarily separate Tito from the comfort of his parents' home. The teacher and pupil should therefore spend time in isolation in the family's summer house in the mountains. Unlike his father, who has struggled to combine the demands of *Geist* and *Welt*, Tito is entirely a creature of the latter. Uninterested in intellectual pursuits, he is more inclined to what the narrator describes as "[die] Pose des Naturburschentums."¹⁶⁵ On their first morning in the mountains, isolated and surrounded by the sublime alpine landscape, Knecht watches Tito perform a spontaneous, joyous dance as the sun begins to rise. For Knecht, the dance is both thrilling in its childlike sincerity and disquieting in its suggestiveness: "Stärker noch und bedeutender erschien ihm der junge Mensch, als er ihn sich bisher gedacht hatte, aber auch härter, unzugänglicher, geistferner,

¹⁶³ "Knechts Tod kann natürlich viele Deutungen haben. Für mich ist die zentrale die des Opfers, das er tapfer und freudig erfüllt. So wie ich es meine, hat er damit auch sein Erzieherwerk an dem Jüngling nicht abgebrochen, sondern erfüllt." Hesse to Rolf von Hoerschelmann, 22.02.1944, in *Materialien*, 241.

¹⁶⁴ *GPS*, 355.

¹⁶⁵ *GPS*, 389.

heidnischer. Dieser Fest- und Opfertanz des panisch Begeisterten [...] rückte ihn um manche Stufe höher, ließ ihn aber auch fremder, ungreifbarer, dem Anruf unerreichbar erscheinen.”¹⁶⁶

After the dance, the young man, somewhat embarrassed at the natural, pagan force his body has expressed, challenges his tutor to a swimming race. Knecht is, however, unprepared for the icy cold of the water and drowns while trying to keep up.

There are echoes here of the ending to Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig*: a sober intellectual, no longer young, drawn inadvertently to his death by an embodiment of youth, beauty, and a sensual aliveness to the world.¹⁶⁷ Like Gustav von Aschenbach, Knecht too may be deceived about the degree to which his actions are driven by a sudden awakening to eros, but his manifest purpose is important too. He believes he is fighting for the young man’s spirit and the possibility of bringing him to a state of enlightenment. There is also his concern for the future of the Castalian ideal and the possibility of uniting this ideal with life. It is significant in this regard that the Designori family are political agents, signaling that Knecht’s gesture is an attempt to connect the Castalian ideal with the socio-political realm. Similarly to Mann’s novella then, there is a conflict between *Geist* and *Welt* at work that Hesse attempts to resolve via his character, but with the addition of a socio-political dimension.

It is perhaps a sign of the strength of Hesse’s ending that it has led to productive disagreement between different readings. Nevertheless, almost all interpretations I am aware of see this death in a positive light. Oskar Seidlin remains a touchstone on this topic. Seidlin saw Knecht’s sacrifice as a victory and an achievement of final transcendence: “Durch seinen Tod nämlich erweckt er die Seele seines Zöglings;” “so ist denn auch der Tod nichts anderes als ein

¹⁶⁶ *GPS*, 391.

¹⁶⁷ Oskar Seidlin helpfully suggests “chthonic vitalism” as a rubric for understanding what “world” represents here for Hesse. Seidlin, “Hermann Hesses Glasperlenspiel,” 270.

letztes, höchstes Transzendieren, freilich ein Transzendieren über die eigene Körperlichkeit hinaus, das Erwachen einer neuen Existenz, eine Synthese in dem Hegelschen Sinne des ‘Aufgehobenseins.’”¹⁶⁸ Seidlin believes it is a foregone conclusion that Knecht’s death will succeed both as a lesson to Tito and as a way of uniting Castalia and the world, which the metaphor of the rising sun in the final scene helps cement: “Es wird ein Tag sein, in dem der Bruch zwischen Kastalien und der Welt [...] geheilt ist.”¹⁶⁹ Hilde Cohn likewise reads Knecht’s death as a moment of transformation, in this case via the symbol of water, as well as the realization of his goal of tutoring Tito: “Knecht, Tito’s teacher and friend, has reached his goal, the center towards which he wandered all his life. He is once more ready for a transformation. His end is at the same time a beginning, not only for Tito, but for himself as well.”¹⁷⁰ Ziolkowski provides a more radical reading, but one that likewise sees Knecht’s death optimistically: “Knecht’s death is the only act in the entire novel which has no exemplary significance, but a purely personal and existential meaning for him as an individual,” he writes.¹⁷¹ Ziolkowski believes that Knecht is an exemplary figure for criticizing and leaving Castalia and that his departure will succeed in improving the province. He bases this reading on several hints that the narrator is living in a time of greater tolerance of individuality and a general openness to the new. “The repeated implication that the Castalia of the narrator represents an advance beyond the endangered Castalia of Knecht’s life-time” suggests for Ziolkowski “that the meaning of Knecht’s life and defection must be sought in his life, not in his death. To put it most

¹⁶⁸ Seidlin, 269.

¹⁶⁹ Seidlin, 270.

¹⁷⁰ Hilde D. Cohn, “The Symbolic End of Hermann Hesse’s ‘Das Glasperlenspiel,’” *Modern Language Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1950), 347-57, 355. <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1215/00267929-11-3-347>

¹⁷¹ Ziolkowski, “The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia,” 71.

radically, what happens to Knecht after his defection is totally irrelevant as far as the central theme is concerned: the role of spirit in the modern world.”¹⁷²

The upbeat tone of these readings, none of which admit the possibility that we may also see Knecht’s death as a tragedy, has to do partly with the already mentioned consensus regarding the meaning of Castalia and the view that it should be interpreted in a negative light.¹⁷³ If Castalia is a place that must be transcended, then Knecht’s death must somehow be either a necessary antecedent to such transcendence, or an admirable sacrifice in the name of a better world. I have already discussed why I believe Hesse’s position is more ambivalent on this point: Both the positive aspects of Castalia and his frequent description of it as a utopia and an ideal that can and has been realized in the past suggest that he has not invented this society as a cautionary tale. Moreover, reading Knecht’s death as a triumph seems to go against the mood of the passage that describes it, which draws out both the hostility with which nature confronts this outsider and the suddenness of his death:

Der See, aus Gletscherwassern gespeist und selbst im wärmsten Sommer nur für sehr Abgehärtete bekömmlich, empfing ihn mit einer Eiskälte von schneidender Feindseligkeit. Er war auf einen tüchtigen Schauer gefaßt gewesen, nicht aber auf diese grimmige Kälte, die ihn ringsum wie mit lodernden Flammen umfaßte und nach einem Augenblick aufwallenden Brennens rasch in ihn einzudringen begann. Er war nach dem Absprung schnell wieder emporgetaucht, entdeckte mit großem Vorsprung vor sich den Schwimmer Tito wieder, fühlte sich von dem Eisigen, Wilden, Feindseligen bitter bedrängt und glaubte noch um die Verringerung des Abstandes, um das Ziel des Wettschwimmens, um die Achtung und Kameradschaft, um die Seele des Knaben zu kämpfen, als er schon mit dem Tode kämpfte, der ihn gestellt und zum Ringen umarmt hatte.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Ziolkowski, 70.

¹⁷³ The seeming pointlessness of Knecht’s death is so difficult to explain that one critic has even argued that the character Knecht does not die at all, but rather leaves Castalia in order to write his own biography. According to this reading, the narrator of *Das Glasperlenspiel* and Knecht are the same person and the work is to an act of “literary deceit” on the part of the narrator. See Nathan Drapela, “The Price of Freedom: Identifying the narrator of Hermann Hesse’s *Das Glasperlenspiel*,” *The German Quarterly* 89, no.1 (Winter 2016), 51-66.

¹⁷⁴ *GPS*, 393.

The way the waters transform into flames to consume Knecht is more suggestive of a journey into the underworld than *höchstes Transzendieren*. There is no surrender here, no conscious sacrifice, but rather a wager that has gone terribly wrong. Perhaps a better way to view Knecht's end is not as transcendence but transgression. Josef Knecht's biography portrays him as a truly exceptional and gifted person and a great Magister Ludi, but such achievements bring with them necessary limits and it is in attempting to overcome these that he founders. There are also larger limits to consider, ones that apply to all mortal beings. Knecht describes his mission as making the spirit flesh, which suggests an overreach of ordinary human limitations. In a wider sense, his project involves overcoming nihilism, which means not only establishing a higher value for himself in response to an inner emptiness and sense of resignation, but for the whole of Castalia. He wants to argue for a new collective goal towards which its members should strive: the goal of connecting their society with the outside world, making the spirit flesh.

I have sought to make the case that nihilism is undeniably at the forefront of Hesse's concerns. He deals with it extensively in the introductory chapter and the description of *das feullitonistische Zeitalter*, but the theme of overcoming meaninglessness, emptiness and the lack of something absolute to guide both individual and social life reappears throughout *Das Glasperlenspiel*. I have characterized the Glass Bead Game as a response to this problem, because it functions as the highest ideal in the absence of institutional religion. It provides an absolute foundation in a society without a God, one that resists naming itself or calcifying into a final answer (*ein letzter Sinn*). While this game is a form of play, the novel shows that it is a very serious type of play that comes with consequences and responsibilities not usually associated with games. Ultimately, this is shown to be an insufficient or incomplete ideal that cannot overcome nihilism in a lasting way. Knecht's final act is an attempt to reach out to life, to the

socio-political, to the complex world, but the two cannot be reconciled. In my view, this represents a suspicion on the part of the author that nihilism cannot be overcome in a programmatic way, that is, it cannot be overcome by an intellectual shaping of collective ends or a group commitment to a formal principle.

This is also a point where Hesse's humanism, his insistence on the importance of the individual human subject, comes into conflict with the need for collective values and order. I have mentioned Hesse's claim that he could imagine sacrificing himself for an abstract principle but not for anything concretely present, for *Menschheit* but not for a specific person: "Ich habe diese Gewalt der Hingabe an ein geliebtes Objekt nicht, vielmehr für mich ist dies Objekt nie ein materielles gewesen, nie eine Person oder ein Volk, sondern immer etwas ganz Überpersönliches."¹⁷⁵ Knecht believes that helping another individual will be the key to saving Castalia and uniting the Castalian ideal with the world. But his sacrifice is accidental rather than planned, suggesting that the values worked out in the rarefied atmosphere surrounding the Glass Bead Game cannot be extended to the socio-political realm, broadly understood. Knecht, at the end of his biography, has found something that gives his life a higher purpose: Tito. He is willing to at least risk his life for an individual, if not to consciously sacrifice it. Could this be the key to overcoming nihilism? Hesse's ending is suggestive, but to the extent that it is optimistic, it is also tinged with despair. Knecht's path is not for everyone to follow.

4.6 Conclusion

Where does this leave the project of overcoming nihilism? Perhaps a different but related way of asking this is what would it look like if the Glass Bead Game, or the *strenger Satz*, or the Gestalt

¹⁷⁵ *Materialien*, 71-72.

of the Worker could actually put an end to the relativism and disorientation associated with nihilism? If we treat these efforts as experiments, we could conclude that experiments never fail, because they always enlarge our understanding and add to our collective knowledge. Adorno wrote that acts of overcoming, including the Nietzschean one of overcoming nihilism, are often worse than what they try to overcome.¹⁷⁶ Some have suggested that projects like Nietzsche's, and like Jünger's in particular, promote a "vocabulary of nothingness and despair" that becomes part of "a masculinist philosophical jargon of resoluteness, decisiveness and hardness that ends up functioning as an apologia for immoral intolerance and political barbarism."¹⁷⁷ This project has sought to make the case that before the end of WWII, the nothingness and despair were very real, felt, lived, and the cause of well-intentioned investigations that sought to deal with these issues in a collective way, or at least to offer solutions that could be of use to humanity. That some of these solutions today come across as masculinist or jargon-filled does not discount the genuine struggle at their core, which sought to find the middle path between the radicalism of the avant-garde and the restorationism of groups or individuals who claimed that *der letzte Sinn* was with them. The point is not that the works I have investigated succeed in solving the issue that drives them, but that the struggle at their core results in significant and compelling literary manifestations, the form of which contributes to what we understand by "modernism." The real challenge that these approaches faced was not simply the quality of the aesthetic forms they developed, but the difficulty of reconciling the aesthetic and socio-political realms. The problem of nihilism has not gone away and neither has the urge to think through it by means of art. The

¹⁷⁶ "Überwindungen, auch die des Nihilismus samt der Nietzscheschen, die es anders meinte und doch dem Faschismus Parolen lieferte, sind allemal schlimmer als das Überwundene." Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), 371.

¹⁷⁷ Simon Critchley, *Very Little-- Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 25.

aesthetic realm is the only place in which it is possible to imagine perfection and truth in a post-nihilist time. This may be why it cannot be reconciled with life in the ordinary sense.

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