

## Translating Music and Supplanting Tradition: Reading, Listening and Interpreting in *Tristan*

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*Considered as an artistic force, Wagner is something almost without parallel, probably the most formidable talent in the entire history of art.*—Thomas Mann, “Wagner and the Present Age,” 1931 (*Pro and Contra Wagner* 88)

In *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), 43-year-old Thomas Mann looked back on his early works, notably his novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901). Reflective yet ardent, Mann ruminated about his artistic formation and the three German spirits who constellated his artistic cosmos—Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Wagner:

In an artistic and literary way, my love for German tradition begins exactly where Europeans find it credible and valid, where it can influence Europeans, where it is accessible to every European. The three names I must acknowledge when I search for the basis of my intellectual-artistic development—Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner—are like a triple star of eternally united spirits that shines powerfully in the German sky. (*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* 48)

Mann recalled reading Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea* as a “lonely, erratic youth, passionately craving the world and death” and discovering “the spiritual source of the music of *Tristan!*” (*Reflections* 49). Intoxicated with Wagner’s music and with Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s philosophy, Mann experienced an aesthetic communion. He recognized his own pessimistic “psychological mood” in “Schopenhauer’s morality” and observed that Nietzsche’s “ethical atmosphere” was “also to be found in Wagner” (*Reflections* 54).

Philosophy and music inspired many of Mann’s creations. Drawn by music’s effect on listeners, Mann admired its mystical, intangible qualities that stirred the soul, created yearning, blurred ethical and moral lines, and led to acts of passion. Enticed by the beauty of the world portrait philosophy granted, by the authority it invested in art, and by the ethical demands it placed on the artist, Mann understood philosophy’s concern with value, morals, virtue, and the welfare of the State. From the twin arts, Mann, the

intellectual and artist, wove narrative forms, granting them an open-endedness, a delicate irony, an in-between mode about which so much has been written. Lured by ideas and sounds, Mann responded with religious zeal, crafting musical narrative forms that raised ethical concerns and at the same time expressed a desire to transcend them. His works often include harmonically rich and chromatically ambiguous music and frequently include the music of Wagner; Mann's works often draw upon Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's philosophy as subjects for narrative exploration.

Schopenhauer's lyrical meditations describe "life as an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness" (*Essays and Aphorisms* 48). "Life," for Schopenhauer, "presents itself first and foremost as a task," yet this task is also a "kind of mistake" in which our needs are never satisfied: "nothing but a painful condition" (53). The resulting boredom or weariness "is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence" (53). To understand the world, Schopenhauer insists that "you start from the thing in itself": the will to live (63). At "its kernel, its point of greatest concentration, is the act of regeneration" (63-64). Life is flux, with the will to live animating our restlessness and fueling our sexual desires. Only from time to time can we step "out of life so as to regard it from the outside, like spectators at a play" (54). Stepping aside, in moments of artistic reflection, brings us to rest. Schopenhauer's aesthetic philosophy remains super-historical, inviting one to step out of the world's rushing motion, and, as an aesthetic contemplative, let the world go by. For Schopenhauer, aesthetic contemplation also facilitates an awareness that the temporal world in which we suffer is merely a temporary absence, consciousness itself a survival tool for navigating the field of time, and life, ultimately a dream:

All this means, to be sure, that life can be regarded as a dream and death as the awakening from it: but it must be remembered that the personality, the individual, belongs to the dreaming and not to the awakened consciousness, which is why death appears to the individual as annihilation. In any event, death is not, from this point of view, to be considered a transition to a state completely new and foreign to us, but rather a return to one originally our own from which life has been only a brief absence. (*Essays and Aphorisms* 70)

Consciousness, heightened by aesthetic reflection, traverses the inner nothingness of the dream we dream, the one we originate from and return to, and the outer appearance of struggle we confront in the field of time. But what would it mean to combine Schopenhauer's aesthetic contemplation with historical possibility? Nietzsche explores this potentiality in *The Birth of Tragedy*, tracing the ideal aesthetic synthesis to Ancient Greece.

Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, sees art as a dialectic between two poles: the Apollonian (the realm of restraint, measure, and harmony) and the Dionysian (the realm of restlessness, passion, and destruction). Art becomes a medium through which the two fuse. In this dialectical movement art redeems. As *The Birth of Tragedy's* dedication implies and the later sections of the book make clear, at this point in his life Nietzsche greatly admired Wagner's music and his thinking. Nietzsche, later in life, will rethink the ideas he presents in *The Birth of Tragedy* and will eschew dialectical thinking altogether, attacking the dialectical mode of reasoning from its Socratic foundations to Hegel to Wagner. While Mann, the intellectual and essayist, sees beyond Nietzsche's early dialectical synthesis, this synthesis remains a source of inspiration, an artistic muse.<sup>1</sup> It is not only compelling, it is also beautiful, inspiring works of art, and empowering the artist with a "magical role as broker between the upper and lower world, between idea and phenomenon, spirit and sense" ("Schopenhauer" *Three Essays* 376). But Mann also senses that it is dangerous. While as a young man he was enamored with Wagner's aesthetic creations, in *Reflections* Mann questions his naive enthusiasm for the Bayreuth master.

Although he would later call Wagner "the most formidable talent in the entire history of art," in *Reflections* Mann is divided about Wagner's "extremely modern art" that places great demands on the listener. Complex, this art fuses intricate compositional techniques with Dionysian energy. According to Mann, Wagner's music, like a drug, can

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s Mann's wrote extensive essays on Schopenhauer, Wagner, Goethe, and Tolstoy. Mann's command of philosophical thinking and its relation to aesthetics is unparalleled among artist-thinkers. By this time Mann, as a thinker, understood philosophy's limitations. Yet, beyond the limitations that he clearly identified in Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophy and in Wagner's music, Mann was haunted by the beauty of their ideas, their aesthetic charms.

be all consuming. By exploring the limits of expression and by requiring a “reckless ethical dedication” from those who listen to it, Wagner’s art “becomes a vice”:

Wagner’s art, no matter how poetic and how “German” it may seem, is in itself, of course, an extremely modern art that is not quite innocent: it is clever and deliberate, yearning and cunning; it can combine stupefying and intellectually stimulating techniques and qualities in a way that is in any case demanding on the listener. But involvement with it almost becomes a vice, it becomes *moral*, it becomes a reckless ethical dedication to what is harmful and consuming when it is not naively enthusiastic but fused with an analysis whose most malicious insights are finally a form of glorification and again only the expression of passion. (*Reflections* 51)

As he questions his own youthful love of Wagner and talks about Wagner’s dangerously modern aesthetic, Mann reveals his lifelong obsessions. In *Reflections* Mann examines these obsessions from a mid-life perspective, observing the formative role that philosophy and music have played in his development. For Mann, Schopenhauer and Wagner are complementary temptations, thinkers whose ideas Nietzsche seductively joins.

To understand Nietzsche’s and Mann’s attraction to Wagner, one need only turn to Wagner’s writing on art and religion. In “Religion and Art,” an article that originally appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* in October 1880, constituting all of the material for that issue of the journal, Wagner wrote on the mythic power of art, opening with a quote from Schiller that points out a dichotomy between Christianity’s high and noble aims and its “vapid” and “repugnant” manifestations in life (Religion and Art 212). For Wagner, art reawakens the symbolic power of religion, and, in its dramatic modes of representation, brings them back to life:

One might say that where Religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion by recognising the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation. (*Religion and Art* 213)

For Wagner the historic moment, the present, becomes the field of action in which to counter “degeneration of the human race” (237). Without action mankind falls short of “Constant Progress” (237). Unlike Schopenhauer’s ahistorical, aesthetic resignation, Wagner adopts a concrete plan of artistic action to enact historical change. In bombastic language, Wagner describes the fall of modernity and places himself as a modern

prophet, calling himself the one who hears the great redemptive prophecies of the poetic past: “the great Cassandra of world history” (248).

Elated with the historical moment, Wagner fuses Germany’s mythic past with an idealized vision of the art of Antiquity, combining drama, music, and poetry in grandiose stage productions. He attempts to resurrect the power of Greek drama, fulfill the nationalistic vision given by Hegel in *Philosophy of Right* (1821), and achieve the dream of progressive enlightenment, the movement from barbarism to culture (*Bildung*), given by Kant in the late essays “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent” (1784), “Speculative Beginning of Human History” (1786), and “To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (1795).<sup>2</sup> Wagner wants to redeem not only the present but also all of human history. With this exalted vision he stakes an aesthetic claim, becoming a model for the critic of modernity’s spiritual sickness: Friedrich Nietzsche.

In his late work, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche sees before him a world in the grips of a “new Buddhism”: nihilism (19).<sup>3</sup> The expression “new Buddhism” describes a darkened, demoralized world where man lives without grounding or purpose. Nietzsche describes modern man as isolated, helpless in the grip of forces he does not understand, prey to inner conflict, tension, anxiety, and fear. Lost, modern man perceives life as an inescapable labyrinth of pain, where constant pressures and ceaseless activity weigh down upon him, pressing him out of life and into nothingness. According to Nietzsche, modern man is chained to the rock of nihilism by the Western philosophical

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<sup>2</sup> These essays are collected in the *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. by Ted Humphrey.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche critiques a world burdened by the weight of existence, suffering under a “dreadful heaviness” brought on by a society which suppresses man’s forgetfulness, his own “unconsciousness,” and reduces him to a “thinking, inferring, reckoning” creature who forever “co-ordinat[es] cause and effect” (84). Society binds man to a dark world of “consciousness” in which all instincts that have previously enabled man to be happy have disappeared, and in which man has retreated to [a] darkened inner world” (84). Nietzsche believes that the modern world suffers under a curse and, in its overly-conscious, inner world reality, views life as a task, a drudgery, a pain-ridden existence in which only a blind “will to live” based on a fatal ascetic ideal remains, the most recent incarnation of which is Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*.

and theological tradition, whose core centers on an “ascetic ideal.”<sup>4,5</sup> Nietzsche posits this ideal, the practice of rigid self-denial and self-sacrifice, in which suffering not only forms the “what” but also the “how” of existence. Instead of mediating life and enabling man to achieve ultimate happiness, however, this ideal places him before a pool of inner reflection and the unfathomable specter of guilt. Nietzsche’s enterprise in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is, therefore, to trace the societal origins of the ascetic ideal and to dismantle it. After effectively dissolving the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche presents an aesthetic ideal based on art and a massive re-creating of the world that would be accomplished by a Master Artist, an *Übermensch*, who might deliver the world from nihilism.

Nietzsche calls for a poetic re-making of the present ascetic-bound reality that he believes will come about through the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche speaks of the coming of this new, creative man:

But some day, in a stronger age than this decaying, self-doubting present, he must come to us, the *redeeming* man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit whose compelling strength will not let him rest in any aloofness or any beyond . . . when one day he emerges again in the light, he may bring home the *redemption* of this reality: its redemption from the curse that the hitherto reigning ideal has laid upon it. This man of the future, who will redeem us, not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness—*he must come one day*. (96)

Thus Nietzsche holds art and the artist as a way out of nihilism. He yearns for a redemptive artist who will come and re-create the world, delivering it from its present

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<sup>4</sup> On the *Genealogy of Morals* posits three ascetic ideals through which modern Europeans try to find meaning: 1) Christianity, 2) Science, and 3) History. Christianity, according to Nietzsche, focuses on “other worldly” ideals, lauding the ascetic and denying the goodness and beauty of human life, thus leading to nihilism. Similarly, science, especially positivism and utilitarianism, diminish man according to Nietzsche. He calls the scientific conscience “an abyss” that “has absolutely no belief itself, let alone an ideal above it” ...“the latest form of [the ascetic ideal]” that leads man to nihilism (147). Finally, Nietzsche states that history or a notion of history as progress, a notion of history as moving towards a destination and as advancing towards some goal, leads man to nothingness. In fact, Nietzsche labels Kant’s categorical imperative as “smel[ling] of cruelty” (65) and criticizes Kant, one “heavier with future” (96), as bringing the weight of existence to bear upon humanity.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Willey, in *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism In German Social and Historical Thought, 1860—1914*, comments that both Nietzsche and the neo-Kantians shared “the incipient crisis in values and the search for ethical ideals beyond the accommodating bourgeois values of the era” (27).

nauseated state and restoring the hunger for life that mankind presently lacks. While he desires a new man to free the world from the deadly plague of nothingness brought on by the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche also writes of the artist's distinct otherness, his eternal "separation from the 'real,' the actual" (101). Nietzsche presents the aesthetic as not being anchored in history. According to Nietzsche, history is always open to re-creation. It is not the linear-bound reality described by Kant.

Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche offer Mann aesthetic and philosophical temptations. The three laud artistic expression and give it an ethical justification, each addressing the world and offering aesthetic solutions. Each presents an intersection between aesthetics and morality; each attempts to deal with this intersection without slipping into relativism or nihilism and without eclipsing the world. Yet positing aesthetics as a way of stepping away from the world (Schopenhauer), as a way of recovering the mythic aspects of religion (Wagner), or as an escape from the adamant chains of asceticism (Nietzsche) is dangerous and uncertain. This uncertainty haunts Mann. Although in *Reflections* Mann glances back over his early works, this backward glance locates pivotal moments from which to examine his corpus. One such defining moment is Mann's novella, *Tristan*, in which the three German idols intersect. In *Tristan* a German legend supplies the story over which the narrative is written, Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophy and aesthetics become part of the narrative's subject matter, and Wagner's music takes center stage. *Tristan* helps define the narrow course between aesthetics and ethics that Mann's musical narratives chart. A story of the modern aesthete, *Tristan* presents a modern artist in exile, although he is an unsuccessful writer. He follows a self-enclosed aesthetic, placing value on ambiguity and exalting art as a new religion capable of seeing beyond the social values and beyond organized religion and traditional philosophy. This artist, Detlev Spinell, is, however, more of an impersonator or conniving dissembler than a Nietzschean superman.

Like many Modernist texts, Mann's *Tristan* pays homage to tradition. Just as Joyce's *Ulysses* honors Homer's *Odyssey* and the tradition of epic, so Mann's *Tristan* honors a long-standing legend that already has sustained many powerful readings, transformations, translations, and adaptations. Like Joyce, Mann acts as a modern scribe, translating the legend of Tristan and its many textual and musical readings. The

narrative, itself a writing over or commentary upon the Tristan legend, brings the previous versions of the legend to be re-read. Not only does the work pay homage to the past, it also inscribes the process of creating from a palimpsest<sup>6</sup>. Behind *Tristan's* outer narrative framework, which is a story of “heart cases” in a secluded asylum, lies Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

A palimpsest is generally thought of as writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased. This material often contains evidence of the ideation process: stray marks, marginalia, sketches, and allusions. The initial writings and rewritings form layers of the creative process that are ultimately erased and written over. The term may be applied to any of the arts. Thus Ravel’s orchestration of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* turns the original Mussorgsky composition into a palimpsest, as do the variant forms of William Blake’s *Four Zoas* turn the original manuscript of *Vala*, still visible underneath several layers of sketchings, into a palimpsest. As in the restoration of art works, questions of authenticity arise. Should the original work be allowed to influence the interpretation or understanding of the palimpsest? Will the latter work supplant the earlier? If more than one layer can be viewed, as in the case with *Tristan*, it is difficult to dismiss any of the visible layers, whether they are the French, German, or Irish versions of the Tristan legend or Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Study of works that contain prior, palimpsest versions, therefore, necessitates the study of other layers, other forms upon which the work draws. *Tristan* is not, however, simply a parody of Wagner. It is an artful reworking of the Tristan tradition. An abridged form, *Tristan* does not destroy the tradition on which it draws; it becomes an inseparable part of that tradition, a piece of the legend that causes readers to re-read the Gottfried von Strassburg legend and Wagner’s opera.<sup>7</sup> Mann’s novella is a trace of the legend that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. *Tristan* is an intertextual form in the strongest sense of the term. Without references to the legend and

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<sup>6</sup> “Palimpsest” is the term Gérard Genette uses to describe transtextuality or intertextuality in Proust. Genette’s works *Seuil* and *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* contain extensive information on palimpsests. Part of *Palimpsestes* exists in English translation: “Proust Palimpsest” from Genette’s *Figures of Literary Discourse* translated by Allan Sheridan.

<sup>7</sup> As the *New Grove* notes, “The ancient Tristan legend, probably of Celtic origin, achieved its first literary form in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The version used by Wagner as the basis for his drama was that of Gottfried von Strassburg” (Sadie 815).

the Wagner opera, the narrative is almost indecipherable. Thus, terms such as “primary” and “secondary,” used in discussions of a dialogue between texts, cannot easily be applied because *Tristan* is superimposed over other works. It cannot be understood without understanding the thing over which it is written, the legend it supplants and from which it differs.

In *Tristan* Mann creates a subtle form that presents aesthetics as alluring and seductive. Music becomes a metaphor for the role of the aesthetic in artistic creation. The novella’s music caricatures the struggle that the modern artist undertakes with the outer world and the relationship between art and society, which is often fraught with complications. The encounter between Gabriele Klöterjahn and Detlev Spinell at the narrative’s center is a pathetic portrayal of the modern artist. Mann places the reader of the novel in the position of Gabriele Klöterjahn,<sup>8</sup> the Isolde figure, the figure seduced by the modern aesthete. The theme of seduction encompasses the narrative’s many themes and forms a shifting commentary on the narrating of the novella. *Tristan* is a seduction narrative. Its content is filled with *pathos*. Yet the act of seduction in the story is not only pathetic but also parodic. The narrative’s form, the way it is narrated, mocks not only the seduction of a woman, but also the seduction of the listener or receiver in an aesthetic experience, the one who willingly participates in his or her own seduction. While the narrative’s content affects the reader, bringing him or her to see the story as a pathetic, heart-wrenching tale of a woman wronged, the narrating process mocks both Gabriele Klöterjahn’s seduction and the reader’s response to her seduction as *pathos*. Just as Spinell pre-supposes Klöterjahn’s knowledge of Wagner and Chopin, so too does the narrative suppose that its reader will be familiar with the Tristan legend, the nocturnes of Chopin, and Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The reader must come to the text with a considerable musical knowledge before the text can be conceived of as music, knowledge that draws upon musical repertory and music theory. Thus the narrative insists that the reader become a co-creator, one who supplies the portion of the text that is not written. A good example of this occurs in the sixth narrative division of *Tristan*, during which Klöterjahn renders a piano reduction of Act II of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Gabriele plays a piano reduction, a form that makes the original Wagner score a palimpsest. Yet

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Heilbut notes that “Klöterjahn” is a “local idiom denoting ample testicles” (158).

the opera itself is a work written over the Gottfried legend and over the philosophy of Schopenhauer. The Gottfried legend is text that supplants an oral form told throughout the ages, each time making its previous version a palimpsest. By transforming Wagner's world of sound and drama into a textual form, Mann presents the drama of the modern artist, Spinell, who, as a sickened parasite, feeds off others.<sup>9</sup>

The sixth narrative division of *Tristan* opens on a cold February day as the doctors of the Einfried asylum prepare to take all of the institution's "heart cases" on a sleigh ride.<sup>10, 11</sup> It corresponds to Act II of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, in which the two lovers are left alone while the royal company of King Mark goes on a hunting excursion. The *New Grove* describes the mystical, erotic ambiance that the music sets at the beginning of the opera:

The curtain rises to reveal a garden with high torch stands at the open door. A volley of horn calls gradually receding into the distance signifies the departing hunt of King Mark and his courtiers. The cautious Brangäne warns her mistress that the horns are still audible, but all Isolde can hear are the sounds of the balmy summer night: the horn calls are transmuted into a shimmering orchestral texture by clarinets, second violins and violas, a sweet sound to the lovers ("Nicht Hörnerschall tönt so hold"). (818)

Unlike the setting Wagner creates at the beginning of *Tristan und Isolde*, Mann's setting is parodic. He places the young aesthete in an asylum, a place of instability, a location that mocks Wagner's tonal instability in the opera, a tonal instability formed around highly ambiguous melodic lines and unstable harmonies. Spinell, the Wagnerian and Tristan figure of the story, appears as a "dissipated baby," the product of an unnatural ideology (336). As the sleighing party departs, leaving Frau Klöterjahn and Herr Spinell and the "serious cases" at the asylum, the couple rendezvous in the inorganic realm of the bourgeois, the salon (336). There, in a fabricated environment, they gaze out at the garden. As they look through the window, a mysterious cloud comes over the sun in the

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Winston points out that "spinell" is the German word for an oxide of magnesium and aluminum. "It has a red variety which resembles and is often found with a ruby." Thus, the "writer looks like, but is not, a precious stone" (150).

<sup>10</sup> Einfried, as Anthony Heilbut points out, is "a pun on Wagner's Bayreuth residence, Wahnfried" (157-158). As "Wahn" means "madness," the name also fits the sanatorium.

<sup>11</sup> Mann numbered the narrative divisions of the original German edition. The standard English edition translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter has unmarked narrative divisions.

middle of the day, creating an artificial night that echoes Wagner's lovesick couple meeting at midnight under the moon. Removed from the outer world, Spinell, whom the narrator describes as having unnatural "carious teeth," tries to mythopoeticize the disappearance of the sun. In doing so, his language—"when there is no sun one becomes more profound" (338)—echoes Macbeth: "I 'gin to be weary of the sun / And wish th' estate of the world were now undone" (V. 5. 55-6). Spinell spins a poetic yarn, equating "the lovely and the commonplace" united by nature and then remarks that he "is grateful" for the sudden eclipse. He finds the grayness of the sky comforting, a symbolic sign of his own love of ambiguity. Thus, the external world reflects the unnatural setting and the manner in which Mann emulates the *Tristan und Isolde* story.

A man who is in physical stature an anti-Tristan, Detlev Spinell has "great feet . . . a beardless face, and greying hair" (339). The narrator describes Gabriele Klöterjahn as a passive vessel, one who is lost, like Gretchen in *Faust*, in a romantic world of sewing. Consumed by an Emma Bovary-like Romantic imagination, Gabriele is prey to her own fantasies. But while Emma is the victim of the romantic aesthetic as she cultivates it by reading, Gabriele becomes the victim of the aesthetic in its pure, seductive, and sensual form: music. Spinell manipulates her, playing with her fears and desires: "If you are afraid it will do you harm, then we shall leave the beauty dead and dumb that might have come alive beneath your fingers. You were not always so sensible; at least not when it was the opposite question from what it is today, and you had to decide to take leave of beauty" (339). Tempting her with Romantic visions that he has been cultivating for quite some time, he convinces Gabriele to play. Spinell appears as a music master, an orchestrator, a conductor. He provides the music with which she brings about her own demise.<sup>12</sup> Spinell presents music in a printed form, a form that necessitates a reader, an interpreter.<sup>13</sup> Both Gabriele Klöterjahn and the reader of *Tristan* encounter an aesthetic

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<sup>12</sup> Klöterjahn mirrors the reader of an aesthetic literary experience; she also mirrors the reader of this chapter who, especially on the first reading, is likely to take the narrative on the literal level and not pick up the underlying ironic narrative lines.

<sup>13</sup> As John Fetzer observes, "the lush, romantic spectrum of sound associated with Chopin's emotionally charged nocturnal music is followed . . . by the progression to the even darker sonorities of the *Tristan* score (the binding of which is black)" (16).

world of their own choosing, entering an abyss of ambiguity. Spinell's first choice of music is Chopin.

As with all of the music to which he alludes, Mann's use of Chopin is symbolic. The *Nocturnes* are intense, brooding, intimate, and passionate pieces that are just the opposite of what Klöterjahn's doctor has prescribed. As Ignace Feuerlicht points out, "it is characteristic not only of Mann's musical taste, but also of the antithesis night-day that she plays three Chopin nocturnes before *Tristan*" (116). Further, Chopin originally borrowed the Nocturne form from the English composer John Field; Tristan is himself an English import in Ireland, a non-native thing introduced into foreign soil. The *Nocturnes* contain long, seductive, operatic lines that resound over string-like flowing left-hand accompaniments. Frau Klöterjahn's seduction begins with a musical form that can be compared with the lyrical, seductive quality of Act II of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in which the lovers sing the famous love duet, enfolding in the raptures of passionate bliss and the longing for death. Even the sound of the music is symbolic, like the setting, for Chopin's music is broadly considered to be the beginning of the deterioration of tonality and thus serves as the perfect accompaniment to a mental and physical breakdown.

As Gabriele gains more momentum, Spinell asks her to play Act II of Wagner's *Tristan*. Thus the chromatic music of the night leads from one composition's seductive harmonies to another composition's harmonic and textual evocations of Eros and the darkness of death. The narrative discloses the very thing that it mimics, as Spinell and Gabriele perform a bourgeois, salon imitation of a grand Wagner moment, creating the music's erotic force in their overly active imaginations.

Thomas Mann, in a letter to Emil Preetorius, some forty-five years after writing *Tristan*, disparages the emotional and sexual power of Wagner's Act II:

The second act of *Tristan*, I find now, with its metaphysical ambiance of ecstasy, is more suited to young people who don't know what to do with their own sexuality. (*Pro and Contra Wagner* 210)

While late in life Mann was critical of his own youthful adoration of this famous scene, in *Tristan* he captures the yearning of the "Sehnsuchtsmotiv" to which the text directly

refers.<sup>14</sup> The text asks the reader to recreate the suddenly loud bursting-forth, heart-throbbing sections of the opera, the erotic rendered in music by “that marvelous muted *sforzando*” (341).<sup>15</sup>

The narrator describes the *Sehnsuchtsmotiv* rendered by Gabriele Klöterjahn as “roving lost and forlorn like a voice in the night” and lifting “its trembling question,” followed by periods of silence and a “lonely answer” that is broken by the ecstatic *sforzando* of “mounting passion” that “rear[s] and soar[s] and yearn[s] ecstatically toward its consummation,” only to sink back in a half resolution as “the cellos take up the melody to carry it on with their deep, heavy notes of rapture and despair” (341). As Feuerlicht indicates, “There is a complete change in atmosphere and a break in style when Mrs. Klöterjahn plays *Tristan*. Mann has always been a master in knowingly analyzing, as well as poetically suggesting, music. The style becomes rhythmical, exalted, and contains exclamations, apostrophes (‘O night of love’), alliterations, onomatopoeia, rhymes, questions, repetitions, and metaphors” (116). Yet there are no cellos or mountains of strings playing in the asylum: only a lone piano in the salon. Detlev Spinell and Gabriele Klöterjahn administer the love-philter to themselves. They lose themselves in the piano music. By supplanting their present experience with the memory of Wagner’s music, they lose all awareness of where they are and enter a distant, unreal world, a world of beauty that has no genuine correspondence. The aesthetic with which Spinell tempts Gabrielle becomes the love-philter of Tristan and Isolde.

As Gabriele nears the end of the prelude, the narrator again alerts the reader that Wagner’s opera is to be superimposed: “she stopped at the point where the curtains part, and sat speechless, staring at the keys” (341). While it is unlikely that even an excellent pianist could do a good job of sight reading the *Tristan und Isolde* orchestral score, with its 21-different musical staves—many of which contain difficult transpositions and

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Heilbut remarks that “As the Vinteuil theme trails Proust’s lovers, so Wagner’s *Sehnsucht* motif haunted Mann” (157).

<sup>15</sup> In an intriguing although far-fetched reading of the narrative, James Northcote-Bade’s “Thomas Mann’s Use of Wagner’s ‘Sehnsuchtsmotiv’ in *Tristan*” attempts to prove that the novella’s narrative structure is patterned around the *Sehnsuchtsmotiv*. Northcote Bade applies the idea literally, detailing how “*Tristan* in its action and forms follows Wagner’s ‘Sehnsuchtsmotiv’ note by note, each chapter in the nouvelle representing a musical symbol in the motif” (57). He makes each of the novel’s twelve chapters correspond to what Paul von Wolzogen defines as the twelve notes of the *Sehnsuchtsmotiv*.

obscure clefs associated with the various families of orchestral instruments—a piano reduction of the opera could be played by a skilled pianist. And yet part of the narrator's play is to insist that what Gabriele is looking at is the orchestral score itself, complete with stage directions or that she and Spinell are remembering memorable details, such as the parting of the curtains. Although Spinell is both the Tristan and the Wagner figure of the story, Gabriele renders the signs on the score. Spinell translates what the signs mean and insists that Gabriele not be content with the prelude to the opera but that she actually play Act II, the scene in which Tristan and Isolde rendezvous at midnight. In another one of the novella's metanarrative moments, Gabriele renders the scene that she and Spinell have already been acting out. While the parallel between the Einfried couple and Wagner's Tristan and Isolde is clear at the beginning of the chapter, the playing of *Tristan und Isolde* in the middle of the chapter is a bold moment in which the text calls attention to itself through the very seductive, musical, philosophical, and aesthetic elements it mocks.

In *Tristan*, Mann creates a musical burlesque. Filled with musical allusions and imitative voices given in the form of a labyrinthine maze of Spinell's impressions and associations, it is a written work that, when realized in the reader's imagination, becomes a musical composition. The voices of the musical drama come from a limited perspective, that of Herr Spinell. He is the strange director/conductor of a musical drama filled with longing and pathos, isolation, loneliness, humiliation, and determination. Yet we recreate Spinell's musical drama from a tenuous interpretive position, realizing his limited perspective, his solipsistic nature, and the absurdity of the artificial musical moment he engineers. Spinell remains an uncomfortable representation of Dionysus, the ironic interpreter capable of evoking a prelogical, prephilosophical, and mythic world. This poet-creator is a pathetic incarnation of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, a Wagner character and perhaps even a wish-fulfillment for Mann, at this early point in his career. Here interesting self-reflexive considerations arise.

Interjecting a moment where the narrative's artist himself renders the events, Mann's *Tristan* raises questions about art and interpretation, the increasing awareness that what accounts for aesthetics is the interpretive stance that art works impose. And part of this developing modern aesthetic is indeterminacy, a dizzying play of intertextual

and self-referentiality leaving the reader wondering what is significant: the narrative event itself or the superceding appropriation of the narrative? In this dichotomy we encounter *Tristan's* significance, its importance in Mann's literary career and in modern narrative. The narrative, as John Fetzer describes, establishes a bridge or path between the past and the fragmented present, one that parallels Wagner's groundbreaking opera:

Just as Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* inaugurated a radically new trend in music away from traditional tonality and paved the way for the demise of the harmonic "center" which had held sway for many centuries, so Mann's *Tristan* stands as a milestone on the road leading from thought patterns of the past to the disinherited mind of the present. (19)

Here artifice and theory collide in an early narrative designed to be a quick and comic work after writing the tragic *Death in Venice*.<sup>16</sup> The novella surfaces fundamental concerns, increasing anxieties that Mann harbors about aesthetics and ethics and about the role of the artist. Spinell's evasive translations reveal how the artist is capable of employing linguistic systems that conflate fiction and reality. To Nietzsche the great artist is an ironic interpreter, one who spins the reader into an experience of vertigo from which no one meaning can be derived, a Dionysian figure. Yet here, early in his career, Mann parodies the Dionysian qualities of artistry. While Mann critics often praise Mann's masterful use of irony, *Tristan* calls into question the shifting mode that Spinell and Mann invent.

*Tristan* presents the aesthetic world's limits as well as its anti-rational paradoxes. If creating artifice means working within limits and seducing readers into projecting presence, then reading always brings dissolution, a radical split between the thing that is being woven (the text, the thing woven to seduce) and the one who unweaves it (the reader, the one seduced). The novella presents the aesthetic experience's moral ambiguities and ethical conundrums—the "what ifs" and possibilities that poetry evokes. In the aesthetic world it is possible to imagine different ways of being and even to imagine the loss of being. It is possible to step outside of the given social reality, but that also may mean encountering difficulty in further social transactions. Herein lies the inside/outside dichotomy of aesthetics. It increases Gabriele Klöterjahn's sense of

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<sup>16</sup> In a 13 February 1901 letter to Heinrich, Mann states that he intended to create a "thin volume" that is "meant to yield no more than a quick refreshing of [my] name and some pocket money" (210).

dislocation, her radical disjunction from reality. Aesthetics affords Frau Klöterjahn a vertiginous experience, one that threatens loss of stability yet also affords radically new possibilities: becoming what she has never been before, someone who refuses to accede to the ethical obligations and philosophical temptations that have made her interactions with the world so difficult. But Gabriele Klöterjahn is also a passive vessel through which the world of aesthetics (Spinell) and the world of Bourgeois ethics (Klöterjahn) meet. Spinell and Herr Klöterjahn commune through Gabriele. She is a text they both weave, a fictive creation that, on the one hand, is fraught with Mann's repressed homosexual desire. On the other hand, like Mann's narrative, Gabriele is used in the manipulation of desire.

Gabriele Klöterjahn, reader, and writer (Mann) intersect, three fuzzy dimensions of a narrative hologram beyond the printed page, ghostly demarcations outside of reason's reach (or beyond which, just off the printed page, reason's ever-present eye watches). If, as Quentin Crisp tells us, "health is having the same diseases as one's neighbors," then the reader shares Gabriele Klöterjahn and Mann's sense of wellness, their "rational" maladies (*The Naked Civil Servant* 143). But what would it mean to step not beyond reason's demarcation and to simply refuse its primacy, to admit ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox? In *Tristan* the move not yet beyond presents an encounter with the ultimate instability and uncertainty: death. Here the danger of art and the danger of ideas are most real. To stand neither inside nor outside is to be without freedom, for freedom imposes a need for order, the necessity of constructing boundaries within which the liberated self creates. But what happens if there are no bounds?

The utopian dream of stepping outside the political world's ethical norms, ridiculously reflected in Detlev Spinell and then described in *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, haunts Mann for the remainder of his writing career. While many critics remark on his use of corrective irony, Mann's narrative genius creates a mode, facilitated by music, that is not simply corrective or dissolving. To juxtapose pathos and parody is to stand in an uncanny position, one that is neither inside nor outside. Detlev Spinell seduces Gabriele Klöterjahn with self-presence, that alluring temptation aesthetics so often presents. Her confusion over how to render Wagner's score parallels the confusion the reader faces in deciphering the narrative's posture—pathetic, comic, and

absurd are all viable possibilities. The narrative evokes an acute awareness that philosophy—the world of ideas, the world of universal understanding and belongingness—derives its efficacy, its power, from our desires, our loneliness, our inadequacy, our curiosity, and our inability to understand. To step beyond these desires would be to step away, to let the outer world of thoughts and ideas go by, to be released from the influences of the past and the tyranny of the present.

But is stepping away really possible? It certainly is tempting to think that we can step outside the world when we read, but even the most fantastic aesthetic creations confront the world in the reader's gaze. There they meet our difficulty in transcending what is given, the impossibility of breaking away. Stepping aside means confronting life's absurdities and delving into aesthetic and moral ambiguities. These possibilities aesthetics affords. Yet *Tristan* locates another narrative tension, another ghostly idea that plagues Mann. To delve into aesthetics one must have at one's disposal what for Mann was a bourgeois commodity: leisure, the time to contemplate. The Einfried sanatorium's structural, bourgeois routine affords moments to contemplate life's absurdities. Similarly, Camus' Sisyphus lives an orderly routine that affords moments to "pause." In these moments Sisyphus, as the stone he has pushed to the height of a steep incline descends, "thinks" (Camus 121). As Camus does with Sisyphus, it is possible to imagine one can be happy contemplating absurdity. But happy at what cost? And is this contemplative aestheticism, like Emma Bovary's adulterous escapades, simply a bourgeois game, another form of imitative desire?

A parody of art for art's sake, *Tristan*, with its recreation of Wagner's love-duet, is unresolved, uncomfortably pathetic and comic. As the tale's modern artist tries to escape at the novel's close, pursued by "the youthful Klöterjahn's joyous screams," questions for the modern artist remain: is the retreat into the inner world and away from the outer world something laudable—is it part of a process of new creation from which, as with Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, a new moral norm may be established in which it is possible again to say "yes" to human life— or is it a retreat from the political world that will have horrible consequences, a cowardly "running away" that is the abandonment of morality and social responsibility? (357). Far from simply satirizing Wagner's appropriation of the Tristan story, *Tristan* seduces the reader into interpreting the

novella's relationship to the other Tristan textualities. To meet the seduction of philosophy, the seduction of bourgeois aestheticism, and the seduction of morality is to know Gabriele Klöterjahn's overwhelming experience, one where interpretation negotiates aesthetics and ethics, the space that *Tristan* occupies and the radical disjunction that Mann's musical narratives explore. In exploring this space, Mann, in *Tristan*, and then later in *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*, uses music. With sound Mann draws readers into his texts, creating and commenting upon the ambiguities one encounters when interpreting Modernist creations: the necessary yet often uncomfortable intersection between aesthetic ambivalence and moral obligation. As Mann's disparate, always seeking and shifting narrative forms demonstrate, moral equivocation remains both the blessing and the curse of reading, listening, and understanding. To read his works listening for music is to move toward the space where writing attracts us, encourages us to disappear from ourselves, and seduces us to step not beyond.

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