

Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner*: A Translation for Modern Times?

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In *Doctor Faustus* (1947), Thomas Mann examines the failure of Christian ethics and of Goethean humanism to prevent the evils of National Socialism and the devastation of war. The conclusion points out mankind's desperate need for redemption. For his next novel Thomas Mann sought renewal and redemption for a morally devastated humanity in a happier tale.¹ This he found in *Gregorius*, a medieval story of redemption and grace by Hartmann von Aue, written c. 1190. Hartmann presents Gregorius's redemption within an Augustinian framework, while Mann transposes Hartmann's account into a Lutheran story of grace for a modern audience.²

¹Christoph Schwöbel has characterized the transition to the new story as a transition from the "paradox of grace" that concludes *Doctor Faustus* to the "grace that is the sole determiner of reality" (72-73) in *The Holy Sinner* (1951).

²Both the text itself of *The Holy Sinner* and the fact that Mann had been considering the impact of Martin Luther on Germany even before he wrote *Doctor Faustus*, discussing his views on Luther in a number of lectures from 1948-51, the very period in which he wrote *The Holy Sinner*, justify this thesis. The development of his interest in Luther and his preliminary work on a play, *Luther's Hochzeit* (1996), are carefully outlined by Schwöbel.

Mann's novel, *Der Erwählte* or *The Holy Sinner*, was not well received in 1951 nor later. Although Mann never gave up the traditional novel genre, scholars find this text to be fragmented because it contains many incomplete or insufficiently developed myths and themes.³ Certainly, Mann's technique of montage supplies additional evidence for this argument.⁴ In addition, many consider the story of redemption as Mann tells it unchristian and even monstrous.⁵ The entire work has also been seen as a satire, thus further supporting the idea that Mann did not take the possibility of man's redemption seriously, even though he himself had claimed that the central concern of the novel is indeed grace. In his notes while working on *Doctor Faustus*, Mann wrote of his next project: "Es ist eine fromme Groteske, bei deren Conception ich viel lachen muß, handelt aber eigentlich von der Gnade" (It is a pious grotesque; in laying out the frame, I have to laugh a lot, but it is actually about grace) (qtd. in Wysling 157). There seems little reason to doubt his remark, since the text itself supplies ample evidence for a consistent treatment of grace.

The Gregorius legend tells of the son and daughter of a wealthy duke whom the devil tempts to commit incest. To avoid disgrace and damnation, the brother does penance on a pilgrimage and dies. Meanwhile, the sister gives birth in secret and sets her baby boy afloat on the ocean with gold coins and an inscribed tablet explaining his origins. Found and reared by a fisherman and the abbot of a mon-astery, the child is baptized Gregorius and eventually becomes the best pupil in the monastery school. When he learns of his high birth, he becomes a

³The novel has been much criticized for creating a parody without unity, one riddled with sacrilegious irony. See Alois Wolf in particular. More recently, however, medievalists have rejected such views. Christoph Cormeau and Wilhelm Störmer, for example, point out that critics have overlooked Mann's ironic distancing and have misunderstood the parody by means of which he looks for a new moral foundation or regenerating force for mankind (238).

⁴Hans Wysling has shown in great detail the sources Mann used and the process by which he created his narrative.

⁵Wolf thinks Mann's non-Christian thinking influenced his reworking of at least one scene in the novel. He claims the entire scene on the rock is mon-

knight and rescues a beleaguered land and its duchess from a tyrannical suitor. Recognizing the need for a warrior-protector, the duchess marries the young victor but discovers only too late the tablet she had written and, thus, her second, even more shameful act of incest. Appalled and full of anxiety, both hurry to do penance. While she finds a hospital and cares for the sick and needy, Gregorius becomes a hermit on an isolated island, surviving marvelously on water and consolation from God. When seventeen years have passed, God reveals to two Romans in a dream that Gregorius shall be the next pope. The Roman ambassadors find him and bring him to Rome. Once pope, Gregorius absolves his parents' sins.

But such a seemingly pat theme of redemption and absolution creates aesthetic literary problems for a modern writer such as Mann. First, how is it possible to make tangible and comprehensible in human experiential terms those transcendent and invisible concepts that define mankind's relation to God? In other words, how does one recognize grace or God's will? Since Mann attempts to make visible the invisible, he requires the plot to be credible.⁶ Second, the happy ending turns the story into a fairy tale, a narrative construct not credible to modern readers. Mann's solution is to transform the narrative into a comic literary parody as he places the reader into the long-past, exotic world of the Middle Ages, a world in which the reader may be inclined to entertain the unbelievable. He introduces archaicisms and medieval names and describes castles, tournaments, and customs in detail to create a vivid panoramic setting. This barrage of motifs forces the question of purpose: parody for its own sake is shallow, and parody of salvation is cynical. The reader is expected to recognize that Gregorius is a composite of all the important medieval heroes—Parzival, Iwein, Tristan, Sigfried, and Lohengrin—and that the novel also follows fixed narrative conventions and topoi. For example, the elderly abbot's giving advice to the youth Gregorius, the knight's winning the duchess by means of combat, and the peni-

⁶The problem is that one normally does not believe what one cannot see. When Mann's characters face the unexpected and, therefore, not easily seen, one asks, "Sollten wir als Christen Unsichtbarkeit gleichsetzen mit Nicht-sein?" (Should we

tent's moving into the wilderness derive from several well-known literary antecedents.

Yet parody allows Mann to present tangibly and seriously the key to mankind's redemption. It offers a double perspective as the reader recognizes the parody and at the same time views what lies behind it. Thus, by reading about the material-temporal reality and recognizing it as a construct, one finds the ethical or transcendental realm that gives the novel its meaning, that is, a human being's relationship to God. Closely connected to parody is the technique of irony that mediates or throws into relief the human intentions and actions at the plot level so that their transcendental and ethical significance can be articulated.

In his novel Mann faithfully follows the medieval story with all its motifs. At the same time parody and irony allow him to reinterpret it completely. The primary shift from medieval to modern tale lies in the central character's relationship to God. Where Hartmann's Gregorius atones for his sins through his acts of penance, Mann's Gregorius receives unmerited grace, a shift from justification by deed to justification by faith, or from Augustinian to Lutheran understanding.

The first indicator of this Lutheran framework occurs with Mann's title. Hartmann refers to his hero as the "good sinner," whereas Mann entitles his novel, *Der Erwählte*, which Mann's translator, Helen Lowe-Porter, somewhat misleadingly translated as "the holy sinner." Mann's title actually means "chosen" or "elected" one, implying that Gregorius is one of the elect before God, a recipient of undeserved yet freely given grace.⁷ The four stages of Gregorius's life illustrate the process of redemption he undergoes and demonstrate the meaning of several key concepts in his life: original sin, free will, faith, and grace.

In the first stage, his boyhood, Gregorius's origins define the original sin that burdens him his entire life. When Gregorius discovers his incestuous origins, he immediately recognizes that his nature is informed by original sin. The concept of original sin is not significant in the medieval version, nor is the second act of incest sinful in intention

⁷In fact, Mann also considered another, equally meaningful title, *Der Beg-*

but only in deed. In fact, Hartmann's subtle narrative never actually identifies the sin, if any, of which Gregorius is guilty. For Mann, however, both original sin and the second incestuous relationship are important. The incest between brother and sister, no matter how shameful, makes comprehensible the concept of original sin as it affects their son. The original act is not his own, but Gregorius inherits the wicked nature of his parents, just as all mankind inherits the disobedient nature of Adam and Eve. In this way Gregorius's birth makes concrete what normally remains abstract. When his sister discovers her pregnancy and in her anguish comments ironically "Ich habe es nicht gewußt, daß Sünde so furchtbar fruchtbar ist" (I didn't know that sin is so terrifyingly fruitful), she finds herself in Eve's position as she suddenly realizes (and forces the reader to realize) that every human act has consequences for future generations (38). Worse yet, since her words suggest God's command to be fruitful (Gen. 1:28), the horrific irony of her situation faces the reader: it is sin that now follows God's command, thereby putting mankind's helpless nature into stark perspective.

An even clearer indication of the inherited sinful nature of man becomes evident in the prelude to the second incestuous act. When Gregorius discovers he is not the fisherman's child but a foundling, he views this revelation as liberating: "es war ein Schlag der Befreiung gewesen, ein sprengender Schlag gegen das Tor, das nun weit offen stand: das Tor aller Möglichkeiten" (it was a blow of liberation, a blast breaking open the gate that now stood wide open: the gate of possibilities) (102). He explains to the abbot that he wants to leave the island out of shame and that he harbors a secret will and desire to become a knight errant to discover his identity. When he will not be dissuaded from this path, his abbot finds him willful. After reading of the incest on his tablet, Gregorius sees himself as a monster; he wants to find his parents in order to forgive them, for only by forgiving can he become human. This compassion or human love may be an early sign of his having been chosen, since it is analogous to divine love.

Thus, Gregorius is determined to become a knight in God's service. In so doing he obeys the parental advice on the tablet to help others as

a knight. However, he is also following his own mind. The irony here is that his considered decision, based ostensibly on his own free will and compassion to serve his fellow man, leads directly to his marriage to his mother, a second occasion of incest even more monstrous than the first. No matter how laudable and justifiable Gregorius's intentions, then, his decisions lead to sin. Hence, one must question the validity of human judgment: it would seem that no one can presume to have free will and the ability to make decisions on one's own.⁸

When Gregorius begins his errantry, he is successful beyond expectation: he saves a duchy from famine and war by conquering its besieger in single combat, tenaciously dragging his opponent into the castle and forcing him to surrender. He then marries the duchess and rules the land with a generous and just hand for three years. The land prospers, and the marriage is harmonious and full of joy. Based on his success in his roles in society as peacemaker, just judge, and husband, he appears to be the perfect hero. And yet, what people can see and evaluate is far from the truth. Sin continues to be fruitful when his incest is discovered. To make the tragedy of this marriage of son and mother even more poignant, in Mann's version, though not in Hartmann's, Gregorius and his mother produce two daughters. Try as he might, Gregorius is unable to live in society and make decisions about his own life without falling into egregious sin. Gregorius apparently cannot help himself, for he commits the same evil act as his parents: he has become husband to his mother, sister, and aunt and father to his sisters and nieces, who are also sisters of their grandfather. Gregorius's attempted good deeds thus result in a very complicated and horrifying set of family connections. All his achievements in this second stage point to the conclusion that he is not, nor can he be, master of

⁸Wolf also supports this interpretation of Mann's novel in his analysis of the dialogue between Gregorius and the abbot in Hartmann. Hartmann subtly allows the abbot to give the standard arguments for taking monastic vows that require giving up one's own will (*voluntas propria*) to God. Gregorius's decision to venture into the world, to follow his own mind (*Gesinnung*), Wolf interprets as

his own actions. It is truly tragic that someone with his extraordinary talents, good will, and compassion commits such unintentioned sin. Mann's lesson is clear: one cannot judge anyone by his or her material and social success, nor by his or her contribution to the community. The concept of intentionality, so important for the definition of sin in the Middle Ages, does not absolve Gregorius here. However, his condition can be understood in the context of Luther's doctrine of bondage. According to Luther, "the human will is like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes whence God wills. . . . If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills . . . the riders themselves contend who shall have and hold it" (578). If one applies Luther's tenet to Mann's novel, then Gregorius has no free will of his own.

Gregorius himself appears to draw this very conclusion when he attempts to comprehend his defilement and that of his wife and mother. He sets her to nursing the sick so that she and her daughters may "das Wasser der Demut zu trinken" (drink the cup of humility) and admonishes her to have faith in God's grace and repent deeply (176), but he does not speak of acts of atonement explicitly, although in Hartmann the mother's caring for the sick is the pious activity that atones for her sins. For his part, Gregorius declares that he, his entire being, both flesh and bones, consists solely of sin. He does not speak of deeds but, rather, states his sin in the passive, saying he has been submerged in horrible sin: "in solche Sünde getaucht wurde" (182). He assures his mother he will find in the fog a place for extraordinary penance, just as his ship found his mother's land in the fog. The fog metaphor becomes the means by which he acknowledges his own lack of direction, a condition he did not recognize earlier. If Luther had felt the excruciating burden of sin and failed to find help in Church-approved methods of atonement, so too is Gregorius desperately in need of redemption which he cannot attain by himself. The omniscient narrator informs the reader that Gregorius entrusts himself completely and unconditionally to God's disposition and will. This relinquishing of self is a hopeful sign, a turning point, since he no longer assumes he has free will or control of his own decision making.

Gregorius, then, withdraws from society, and not to a simple island

as in Hartmann's tale. Instead, a fisherman takes him to a bare rock in the middle of a lake. Mann transforms the usual severe form of penance acknowledged by the Catholic Church into a previously unknown miraculous story that recapitulates all of human civilization. As in Hartmann's story, the fisherman places leg irons on Gregorius and throws the key into the water.⁹ What happens next, however, is far more extreme, perhaps even utterly unbelievable.

To explain what sustains Gregorius on his barren rock, Mann introduces an ancient Epicurean myth told by Lucretius. The womb of mother earth bore the first humans. Since they could not yet feed themselves, the pores and veins of the earth opened and exuded a liquid resembling milk (Lucretius 5.11 806–26).¹⁰ Crawling on all fours “almost without knowing or willing” (186–87), Gregorius finds that same milky nourishment as it seeps upward from the earth into a depression in the rock.¹¹ As time passes, Gregorius regresses even more. His hair grows matted and bristly, his skin hardens, his shirt rots away, and he shrinks to the size of a hedgehog, enabling his leg irons to fall off. He loses all sense of time, hibernates through the winter, and is aware only of the cyclical return of the seasons. Thus, he is reduced to a primitive, uncivilized creature. He has no desires, no will, no sense of self. Underscoring his loss of identity is the fact that he left his tablet behind at the fisherman's lean-to. But, more im-

⁹In Hartmann, the miracle of finding the lost key in the belly of a fish performs the double function of physically releasing Gregorius from the island and tangibly proving to the Roman prelate that God did indeed choose him as the next pope.

¹⁰Mann had read Karl Kerényi's discussion of the Epicurean myths in his “Urmensch and Mysterium.” See also Mann's letter to Kerényi, dated March 9, 1951, in which he reports that he goes far beyond Hartman's depiction and interpretation of Gregorius's penance (Gelley 181).

¹¹Mann's text reads: “als Hunger und Durst ihn nicht länger ruhen ließen und er, fast ohne Wissen und Wollen, auf allen vieren . . . auf der Plattform umherzukriechen begann” (186–87). See also Wolf's discussion of this passage in which he claims Gregorius is reduced to a rude animal lacking all re-

portantly, he has lost man's likeness to God. All this he endures for seventeen years, devoid of all mercy, "bar aller Gnade" (186).¹²

How is the reader to understand this ultimate form of degradation and humiliation? While a civilized man and integrated into society, Gregorius was not able to turn away from sin, since his condition was iniquitous. Ironically, however, Gregorius's primitive state marks a significant turning point in his return to humanity and makes visible and tangible his total dependence on God's grace. As Luther explains, the doctrine of bondage is given "for the sake of the elect, that they may be humbled and brought down to nothing and so be saved" (577). Gregorius hibernates because he is "nothing." In this state his bodily functions come to a standstill; he is barely alive. The key element connecting his physical status to the process of redemption is the idea that the proper seat of God's image lies in the soul.¹³ Thus, even though he falls into a subhuman state, his virtues of faith and perseverance make true contrition possible. By clinging to the rock, even when not restrained by leg irons, Gregorius demonstrates his unrelenting, tenacious faith in God's grace and in so doing receives grace himself.

Mann's account is nevertheless unbelievable: a human must be turned into a hedgehog in order to make visually and experientially comprehensible the impotence of human beings in the matter of salvation! If Gregorius's complete destitution and reduction to nothingness prepare him and the reader for his elevation, how then can one accept God's granting His grace to Gregorius freely and giving him new life? Calvin offers a clue: "it is the privilege of the elect to be regenerated by the Spirit of God and then placed under his guidance and government" (131b). To make his regeneration visible, Gregorius must first regain the human form that is God's image and then be reintegrated

¹²Wimmer also recognizes that Gregorius's condition of sin reflects the plight of mankind in general. Nevertheless, he understands the extreme form of penance as *superbia*, claiming that Mann's use of myth places Gregorius in a situation through which he can challenge or dare God to absolve him (106).

¹³John Calvin explains what is meant by man's being created in God's image: "For though the divine glory is displayed in man's outward appearance, it cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is in the soul" (74).

into human society with a new, exemplary status. In Mann's version he fulfills both of these requirements.

The tangible evidence of the magnitude of Gregorius's redemption comes from two miracles. The first is a dream in which Christ as bleeding lamb of God appears to two Romans, one a nobleman and one a cardinal. The lamb proclaims that Gregorius shall be the new Pope and instructs the two emissaries to find him in the wilderness and bring him to Rome. This represents Gregorius's return to human society, and his elevation should then give evidence that he is now under God's guidance. The addition of the lamb motif is an unmistakable reminder of God's love for Gregorius and mankind.

When found, Gregorius still resembles a hedgehog. The visible evidence of grace occurs in the second miracle when the Roman emissaries remove Gregorius from the island. Once placed in the boat, he says "mich hungert und dürstet" (I hunger and thirst), echoing John 19:28 (226). Next, by eating the bread and drinking the wine, like the mythic Enkidu in *Gilgamesh*, he becomes human and civilized and, like the enslaved human will, partakes of God's grace. The metaphor of bread and wine here unites the long, historical process of human civilization with the bonding force of the Lord's Supper, the gift of God's love. With this meal, Gregorius regains his former manhood, beauty, and eloquence. From a tiny creature God raises and recreates him in His own image. Receiving God's image again, he gains a new identity, meaning that his relationship to God is secured in humility and love. This process, especially the scene in the boat, thus presents tangibly the religious paradox that forms the foundation of mankind's redemption.

The fourth stage in Gregorius's life is his papacy. But how, one may ask, does it fit into a Lutheran framework? In Hartmann, the papacy is the direct human link to God. The pope, like all priests, has the power to absolve sins. But Mann's parody of the medieval world, of society in general, and of human institutions in particular forms the narrative strategy in the entire novel, so it is not surprising that the papacy and those who uphold it are also parodied. This portion of the novel reveals more clearly than any other that human society and its institutions are often ineffective and fallible.

For example, the Roman cardinal who receives instruction from the lamb is horrified to find a tiny creature instead of a wealthy man

clothed in regal garments. The prelate is not convinced by his vision but, rather, needs proper appearances. When the creature says his name is Gregorius, the cardinal refuses to listen, saying, "Wir sind des Teufels Narren! Gott hat kein borstiges Tier des Feldes zu Seinem Bischof erwählt, und legte es sich hundertmal des Erwählten Namen bei!" (The devil has made fools of us! God did not select a bristled animal for His bishop, even if it claims the name of the chosen one a hundred times!) (223). The poor cardinal is not aware that his own words discredit his credibility, for they ironically reveal that the highest prelates, the men of God, are so caught up in maintaining the rules and dignity of their institution that they fail utterly to recognize or even believe in God's will.

In his description of Gregorius's papacy, Mann again amasses parodic details. Just as Gregorius, the knight, was a composite of all the heroes of medieval literature, so are Gregorius's actions as pope a composite of the actions of many popes in history: he prays Emperor Trajan out of hell, shows mercy to all, resolves schisms, forgives mortal sins, and even invites Muslims to convert without giving up their polygamy. But there is opposition to his papacy. Prelates are appalled at his leniency and unwillingness to apply the letter of the law. As a result of its many irregularities, Gregorius's papacy parodies the papacy itself and those who would adhere strictly to its law. To be sure, Gregorius's own elevation came without need of sacraments instituted by the Church, for he is not even ordained, meaning that, technically, he does not have the power to absolve sins. Hence, his own nonadherence to the sacraments is perhaps the greatest irony of his papacy. By breaking down the boundaries and proscriptions of Church laws through his forgiving leniency, he is actually changing the Church itself.

Most importantly, however, Gregorius's own life undercuts the hierarchy of the Roman Church and demonstrates instead the direct relationship every human being has with God. His actions as pope reveal the underlying principle of mercy built on love. His earlier failures were, in part, caused by the fact that he cared for his fellow humans and felt sympathy for and brotherly compassion toward them, even toward a foster brother who hated him. In his marriage to his mother, he deeply loved her as his wife and the mother of his children.

Although he repented daily, he had not understood the extent of his iniquity and was not adequately contrite. Now, as a consequence of both his abasement and elevation, he learns a higher state—God’s love. Calvin in explaining this state cites Augustine of Hippo: “Love so follows knowledge, that no man can perfectly love God who has not previously a full comprehension of his goodness” (157). Having received grace, Gregorius is far more willing to forgive than to punish. Therefore, his papacy demonstrates clearly the frailty and fallibility of human society and all its institutions; at the same time his life as a whole portrays not only every human being’s legitimate and desperate need for redemption but also the paradoxical process by which God degrades and then regenerates those He has chosen.

In conclusion, one must ask how a story can describe God’s grace if not by outward signs, when at the same time Thomas Mann demonstrates how misleading these outward signs can be? The short answer is that the religious paradox is mirrored in the narrative paradox. The author must destroy belief in the story by parody and irony in order to illustrate the importance of having faith in the spirit of the story. Parody thus forces the reader to reevaluate everything that happens in the novel, and irony brings a unity to the narrative from which can follow Mann’s exploration of humanity in the history of civilization and in its relation to God. The irony of Gregorius’s success points the way. If he can misread signs and achieve high status as duke when so deeply mired in sin, then the reader can also miscalculate. If signs can be unreliable, then, ironically, the most reliable signs may be the least credible. What this means for the reader is that one must believe and have faith in the narrator and in the spirit of the story. Hence, the requirement of faith is as necessary for the reader as it is for the main character. When the narrator prepares the reader for the events on the rock, he shifts suddenly to sermonic tone and form, addressing the reader directly: “Kristlicher Leser! Höre und glaube mir! Großes und Eigentümliches habe ich dir zu berichten” (Christian reader! Listen and believe! I have a great and exceptional event to report to you) (185). He exhorts the reader by saying that if he can find the courage to relate these things, then the reader can surely find similar courage to believe them.

Next, he adjures his reader to have as much faith as he does. In this short sermon-preface the term “Glauben” (faith) occurs five times. Its significance cannot be underestimated because without faith the reader will not accept the spirit of the fairy tale and, consequently, without faith cannot understand its message of redemption.

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