Diabolical Literature: Questioning the Morality of Modernism

by

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Note

A forthcoming book chapter has been drawn from Chapter Three of this thesis:

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Abstract

In my thesis I argue that there is a definite but previously unnoticed tendency for literary modernists to self-consciously contemplate the idea that literature is like the Devil, which offers insight into the relation between modernists and their world. These works—Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*—are discussed in the thesis as ‘diabolical literature’. Diabolical literature engages with an idea of the Devil that is drawn from both Christianity’s personification of evil and the literary tradition’s hero and rebel, rendering it fundamentally ambivalent. Through hermeneutic analyses, the significance of which is grasped within a Habermasian framework, I demonstrate that these works exploit the ambiguous potentials of diabolical symbolism to pose questions concerning the morality of literature under specifically modern conditions. In particular, they respond to the complex and contradictory expectations and judgements placed on writers from within the artistic sphere and outside of it. The ambivalence of the Devil in modernism, however, means that although diabolical literature poses the questions of literature’s role in society, of the responsibilities of writers and readers, and of whether modernism can be moral, it necessarily returns an equivocal answer to its own inquiries.
Introduction

Peter Thorpe’s contrarian text *Why Literature Is Bad for You* (1980) outlines the negative effects that he believes literature inflicts upon unsuspecting readers: a tendency towards pessimism, misguided expectations and self-centredness, amongst other vices. The vast majority of his argument is based on criticisms of his impressionable younger self, colleagues and students at American universities, but he emphasises that he is not simply criticising English or Literary Studies as a discipline. The danger is located in the book, for ‘[t]he evil that literary art can do is compounded by the subtlety of artistic language’ (Thorpe 1980, p. xii).

Thorpe’s choice of the words ‘evil’ and ‘subtlety’ recall Genesis 3:1–5 as expressed in the King James Bible:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.
And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:
But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.
And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

The passage, of course, refers to the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden by the beguiling and conniving serpent, which was identified as the Devil by the early Church Fathers (Kelly 2006).¹ Thus, there is an implicit suggestion in Thorpe’s book that literature is diabolical, an idea that possessed twentieth-century authors.

This thesis considers literary modernism in terms of twentieth-century novels informed by a broad culture climate and dominated by certain ideas and characteristics. It explores the significance of the characteristic, found in literary modernism and a work of aestheticism that pre-empts modernism, of representing anxieties surrounding

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¹ Henry Ansgar Kelly, however, asserts that the first identification of the serpent of Eden with the Devil was done by the second century theologian Justin Martyr, ‘casually, without explaining his reasoning’ (2006, p. 176), and argues that this has misled later Christians seeking to understand the history of the Devil.
the persuasive use of artistic language, the potentially dangerous freedoms awarded to ‘autonomous’ art and the role of the writer in modernity through the conceptual metaphor that literature is diabolical. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s landmark work on conceptual metaphors, Metaphors We Live By (1980), introduced the notion that the metaphors that are regularly used to express concepts—such as time is money, argument is war, happy is up—shape the way that we understand the concepts themselves. When critics such as Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1987) and Pamela K. Gilbert (2008) applied this insight to metaphors of reading, they found that the metaphors used for reading were split between hyperbolically positive or negative. Reading could be magical, divine, nourishing or a ladder for intellectual and moral advancement; but reading could also be akin to drug addiction, poison, sex or vampirism, and books trash. Both critics emphasise that the conceptual metaphor chosen is related to cultural judgement of the particular book, with high art and ‘good’ literature or ‘classics’ discussed positively, and popular or genre fiction disparaged.

In this thesis I explore how key modernist works engage with a conceptual metaphor that expresses ambivalence about the nature of any form of literature, with an emphasis on experimental literature. It is no coincidence that the nature of literature is explored in these works through a conceptual metaphor that simultaneously connotes religious belief and opposition to God (and thus, through metonymy, religion). I demonstrate that the subset of modernist literature that engages with the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical—what I denote ‘diabolical literature’—self-consciously explores the morality of literature. I propose that the key informing context is the overvaluing of literature renewed in the late nineteenth century, which popularised the idea that literature might take the place of religion in guiding ethical action as the latter’s influence deteriorates. The idea that literature or art had the potential to replace religion had also been held by early Romantics who ‘wanted to elevate the excitement radiating from [it] into an equivalent for the unifying power of religion’ (Habermas 1987a, p. 306)—a dream somewhat inconsistent with their claim for art’s autonomy—but the nineteenth-century proponents had a different vision. As Terry Eagleton (2008) observes, this entreaty is largely responsible for the growth of English or Literary Studies as a discipline in England, where it was thought that the

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2 As I explore in my chapter on The Master and Margarita, this text can be understood as the exception that proves the rule.
reading and study of literature would encourage docility amongst the lower classes, pride in the nation, and maintenance of the status quo. Literature ‘was admirably well-fitted to carry through the ideological task which religion left off’ (Eagleton 2008, p. 22), with texts dramatising experiences outside of the reader’s own that demanded his or her sympathy in order to reinforce culturally accepted values.

The key proponent of this view of the function of literature was critic Matthew Arnold, who asserted in 1880 that:

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. (1958b, p. 502)

Ten years after Arnold published this statement, The Picture of Dorian Gray was published by his contemporary Oscar Wilde. This novel, which was amended to include a preface outlining Wilde’s opposing aesthetic philosophy, began the subset of diabolical literature that would be continued by modernist writers. The fascination with the idea that literature might be ill-suited for the role that Arnold and like-minded critics proposed, evidenced by the use of the conceptual metaphor in these works, suggests that the idea that literature could be an adequate substitute for religion was entertained, analysed, and tested quite seriously.

Recent studies on the relation between modernism and religion, such as Jennifer Hardy Williams’ ‘Modernism’s Religious Other’ (2006), Pericles Lewis’ Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel (2010), Gregory Erickson’s Absence of God in Modernist Literature (2007) and Suzanne Hobson’s Angels of Modernism (2011) suggest that a reconsideration of the influential reading of modernism as ‘a sign of a disenchanted age’ (Hobson 2011, p. 4) is underway, bringing into question the view that modernism rejected religious understandings of the world in favour of secularism or mythopoeism. This thesis furthers the project of reconsidering the ways in which modernist writers engage with religious concepts by elucidating how the Devil symbol is used in key modernist works. Although the conceptual metaphor
literature is diabolical is without strict theological correspondence, it trails religious resonances.

In her recent study of the Devil and literature, Facing the Fiend: Satan as a Literary Character, Eva Marta Baillie proposes that the Devil is a marker for ‘our inadequacy to deal with evil’ (2014, p. 195) in modernist and postmodernist texts. I argue that Baillie’s analysis neglects the specifically modernist nature of certain twentieth-century devils. I maintain that understanding the significance of these devils must be done with reference to recent innovations in modernist studies that emphasise modernism’s suspicion towards its very medium, language. This includes the studies of Leigh Wilson (2013) and those collected by John Attridge and Rod Rosenquist (2013). I integrate these innovations with a return to the critical tradition of the 1970s and 1980s that highlighted the centrality of self-consciousness to literary modernism, such as Robert Alter’s landmark Partial Magic (1975) and Linda Hutcheon’s early Narcissistic Narrative (1984).

The conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical evokes the suspicion that literature is not fit to replace religion because it has qualities that have come to be associated with the Devil: it can manipulate the emotions and beliefs of an impressionable reader because language can be duplicitous; it is often opposed to the ethical order of the society in which it is written; and it tempts the reader to sympathise with alternate (perhaps unethical) points of view. The deceitful nature of the text means that its challenge or reinforcement of an established order might as easily be based on immoral grounds as moral grounds. This thesis does not seek to answer whether literature can take the place of religion; rather, it explores the ways in which works of diabolical literature have expressed differing levels of concern about the suitability of literature as a moral guide. The category of diabolical literature is comprised of texts that work through this issue by imbuing the narrative with a sense of the diabolical through the inclusion of a Devil character, the casting of the Devil as the narrator of the text, or an obvious logical gap in the text that can only be filled by the Devil. Some of the texts read as if brimming with anxiety over the idea that literature is like the Devil, while some openly celebrate it.

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3 The distinction between ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ is central to this thesis, and will be discussed in further detail in my theoretical chapter. Briefly, I use the term ‘ethics’ to refer to customary standards of right conduct and ‘morality’ in reference to the principles that follow a reflexive interrogation of ethics.
The reason for this divergence is that the Devil is an ambivalent symbol, with positive or negative aspects of the symbol highlighted by writers to suit their purposes. The Devil had long represented evil and opposition to God in the Christian tradition. Over time, though, there was ‘a fragmentation of the tradition’ (Russell 1986, p. 11), and as the church became divided and non-belief emerged as a possible choice, alternative understandings of the Devil arose in literature. When attention started being given to literary portraits of the Devil, the condemnatory theological accounts of the Devil were softened by his ambivalent and even positive representation by poets and novelists. This is best captured by William Blake’s claim that ‘[t]he reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it’ (2010, p. 12). To refer back to the biblical passage quoted at the beginning of this work, the Devil’s role in encouraging Adam and Eve to judge good and evil for themselves in the narrative of the Garden of Eden meant that the Devil is also associated with an interrogation of accepted values and the status quo. The Western literary tradition emphasised the rebellious quality of the Devil, and thus formerly ‘evil’ behaviours attributed to the Devil such as temptation and manipulation became excitingly transgressive for some. Fred Parker, in *The Devil as Muse: Blake, Byron, and the Adversary*, observes that ‘the Devil’s gift [is] a corruption which is also inspiration’ (2011, p. 6). Detached from its strict theological meaning, the Devil can be represented as a bearer of progress, rather than an instigator of sin. As such, it is not surprising that those writers who wished to push ethical and aesthetic boundaries often aligned with the Devil.

After all, religious faiths do not only ‘interpret life for us… console us… [and] sustain us’, as Arnold states, but provide a code of conduct and delimit the needs and desires that can be acknowledged and fulfilled in society. If literature (along with science) were to replace religion, how would its full breadth be integrated into society? Reinvigorating Arnold’s vision, the ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies is predicated on the belief that reading literature can shape an individual’s value system and relationship to the community. For example, in *Love’s Knowledge* Martha C. Nussbaum argues that certain forms of literature can be even more effective than moral philosophy in this regard, claiming that reading novels concerned with characters’ inner worlds can teach correct conduct and attentiveness to the needs of others (1990,
INTRODUCTION

pp. 148-67). Although this school rarely addresses the virtues of literature which does not subscribe to conventional ethical frameworks, from an outside perspective it is possible to suggest that transgressive works might point the way to a future in which suppressed needs and desires can be fulfilled. A writer in ‘the Devil’s party’ might show how ‘official morality and religiosized authority succeeds in making devils the repository of fully human qualities and freedoms that have been denied’ (Widmer 1965, p. 25). However, there is also literature that is not concerned with interrogating the legitimacy and suitability of the norms on which societies are founded, and literature that is written as a provocation, not as a thoughtful contribution to debates. Can literature that is transgression for transgression’s sake help to ‘interpret life for us’, and can it contribute anything to a code of conduct or console us? The idea that literature can be a substitute for religion is hard to defend, because the term ‘literature’ (or Arnold’s more limiting ‘poetry’) covers heterogeneous works that are didactic or simply intended as enjoyment, conservative or provocative.

This thesis does not consider modernist works that use or allude to the Devil symbol without the mobilisation of that symbol for a discussion of the morality of literature, such as Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes; or, The Loving Huntsman* (1926), or *Malign Fiesta* (1955). I discuss one text outside of the modernist movement, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, because there is critical consensus that the novel is a precursor to modernism and, crucially, it shares the key feature of the modernist texts I analyse: it is self-consciously concerned with art’s influence.

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4 A peculiarity of the works of diabolical literature is that all are by male authors. It is possible that there are lesser-known works that would fit my criteria that I have not discovered, but as none of the six key texts are written by female authors, it may not be coincidence. Devils do in fact appear in *Lolly Willowes*, Hilary Mantel’s *Fludd* (1989) and Muriel Spark’s *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (2006) [1960], though not her metafictional *The Comforters* (1974) [1957], in which devils are mentioned but are not integral to the novel’s light-hearted subversion of realism. Similarly, although Flannery O’Connor utilises some techniques associated with literary modernism and devils appear in works such as *The Violent Bear it Away* (1988) [1955], her work cannot be considered. As John D. Sykes Jr. explains, ‘because of her sense of Christian vocation, she sometimes chafed under modernist rules’ (2010, p. 125). The Devil is part of a collection of Christian symbols used to put forward views aligning with O’Connor’s faith, and is not related to modernist self-consciousness. I hypothesise that female authors are not averse to using the Devil symbol, but less interested in exploring the morality of literature through the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical. Unfortunately, this issue is not within the scope of the thesis.

5 *Malign Fiesta* does, however, thematise the optimal conditions for a writer.

6 Simon J. James, in ‘Marie Corelli and the Value of Literary Self-Consciousness: *The Sorrows of Satan*, Popular Fiction, and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Canon’ [sic], argues that Marie Corelli’s *The Sorrows of Satan* is a highly self-conscious exploration of the limits of what it is permissible to represent in fiction, of the power of the author in generating what kinds of meanings the reader might see in fiction, and of the
Given the context that informs this conceptual metaphor, I only consider texts from Europe and countries with European backgrounds, such as the United States of America, Australia, and Canada. For the sake of brevity, I refer to this group of nations as ‘the West’. My understanding of the Devil is consequently informed by the Devil of Christianity, rather than the Devil of Judaism, for this interpretation has had the most influence on earlier Western literary incarnations such as those appearing in Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* (1994) [c.1308-21], John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (2000) [1674], Daniel Defoe’s *History of the Devil* (2010) [1726] and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (2004) [1880],\(^7\) as well as Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (1994) [1604] and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust: Part One* (2005) [1808] and *Part Two* (2009) [1832], to a lesser degree. I consider the Devil of Islam, Shaitan, in my chapter on *The Satanic Verses*, however, in order to explicate how Rushdie’s understanding of the Devil is a hybrid of Shaitan and the Western literary Devil, which draws on the texts above.

Despite Arnold’s prediction that poetry, not narrative fiction, would become the ‘new religion’ of the future, I discuss novels in this thesis. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Arnold was not to know that the novel would arguably become the defining genre of the twentieth century as interest in poetry declined. By 1932 F.R. Leavis could authoritatively assert that ‘Poetry matters little to the modern world’ (cited in Whitworth 2010, pp. 3-4). Although the Devil appeared more frequently in poetry before the twentieth century—in the work of Blake (2010) [approx. 1793] and Charles Baudelaire (2010) [1869], for example—the appearances of the Devil symbol in twentieth-century novels is more important for an exploration of the role of literature in that period.

The Theoretical Chapter of this thesis is concerned with the intellectual framework for analyses and the historical context that produced diabolical literature. I

\(^7\) For a discussion of the reasons why I have not included *The Brothers Karamazov* under the rubric of diabolical literature, see the appendix ‘On Excluding Dostoevsky’.
begin with outlining the philosophical framework underlying my argument, which is
drawn from the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. This framework contextualises
diabolical literature in terms of its strained relation to both the artistic sphere to which
the writers belong and society beyond the artistic sphere, and provides a starting point
for understanding how literature might have an effect on society. I continue by
explaining how literary modernism reflects some of the major concerns of modernity,
and how critics since the twentieth century have drawn out these concerns through
supernatural metaphors. I then consider three subjects that define the boundary of
diabolical literature: the status of the Devil symbol in modernity, its relation to ‘evil’,
and the relationship between the artistic sphere and the rest of Western society. In
doing so, I suggest that the six diabolical texts considered are involved—
metaphorically speaking—in a loose dialogue that has shaped the way critics, writers
and readers discuss the responsibilities of literature and the political and social
engagement of modernism. Diabolical literature, I propose, encouraged the
interrogation of the assumptions of the Western literary tradition, including the
legitimacy of an intellectual elite determining the role of literature in society for
themselves.

To consider issues raised by these texts in detail, my succeeding chapters are
grouped under three subheadings: ‘The Morality of Being a Reader’, ‘The Morality of
Being a Writer’, and ‘The Morality of Secular Literature’. The texts are largely
grouped chronologically, with the exception being that the three mid-century texts—
Lolita, The Master and Margarita and Doctor Faustus—appear out of order. I argue
that the two texts that focus on ‘The Morality of Being a Writer’ do so as a consequence
of their historical contexts, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, and that the main focus
of this dialogue is how the text (and supposed contender for replacing religion) is
received by readers and society beyond the artistic sphere. Thus Lolita, not having to
contend with the question of the responsibilities of a writer under political pressure,
appears in the first section, ‘The Morality of Being a Reader’. The first category shows
that in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the majority of the twentieth
century, writers were concerned with how readers received their texts. The theoretical
innovations of the late twentieth century such as ‘the death of the author’ and
resurgence of religious belief amongst the world’s population modified the focus of
the texts in the third category, making them an exploration of ‘The Morality of Secular Literature’.

The first text in the category of ‘The Morality of Being a Reader’ is not from the twentieth century nor a work of modernism, but foreshadows the concerns of both. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2007f) [1891] is a retelling of the Faust myth with an absent Devil. In order to bridge the gap between the late nineteenth-century ambition for art and the self-conscious exploration of twentieth-century modernism, I show that Wilde’s novel is the clear antecedent of the line of diabolical modernist novels that I track in this thesis because Wilde’s reinterpretation of the Faust myth casts art as the Devil. Exploring Wilde’s theoretical and other literary texts, I show how the anxiety over the power and influence of artistic language palpable in the text is consistent with, rather than contradicting, Wilde’s allegiance to the ideals of aestheticism and ‘art for art’s sake’.

My exploration of ‘The Morality of Being a Reader’ continues in Chapter Two with an analysis of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), the modernist work used as a key example in every study of modern literary self-consciousness. Similarly to the previous text, *Lolita* suggests that literature can be diabolical by locating the Devil in language. As such, this chapter offers a close reading of the language Nabokov uses in order to direct the reader towards a particular judgment of Humbert Humbert. I pay particular attention to critics’ and the public’s responses to the novel, and conclude by looking at how Nabokov reframed the question of the morality of literature in both his literary and theoretical works.

The first focus text in the section on ‘The Morality of Being a Writer’ is Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (1995), which was written in the Soviet Union in the 1930s but not published until 1966-67 in a censored form and 1973 in full. Drawing on scholarship regarding the unique tradition of devils and demons in the Russian culture, I show how Bulgakov synthesised this with the (perhaps unintended) heroism of Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, to make the Devil a defender of the Russian people and particularly its authors. In this chapter I make the claim that Bulgakov saw writing subversive literature as a noble calling and the responsibility of all writers threatened with political repression and censorship.

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8 Russia is not always considered part of the West, but as *The Master and Margarita* is both Russian and a work of the largely Western literary movement modernism, I have included it here.
However, Chapter Four considers a novel that questions the morality of writing when one opposes the current political order: Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1997), originally published in 1947. In my reading of this text, I focus on the unreliable narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, and his eagerness to cast his friend and avant-garde composer Adrian Leverkühn as a scapegoat for the sins of Germany in the twentieth century. I then propose that Adrian—whose biography is based on that of Friedrich Nietzsche—can be understood in terms of Nietzsche’s theory of the Übermensch just as well as Serenus’ preferred interpretation of Adrian as a modern-day Faust. Continuing the novel’s thematisation of responsibility, I explore the implications of Serenus’ desperate attempt to characterise Germany’s actions as something supernaturally influenced rather than fundamentally human, and the concern expressed in the final pages that narrating rather than acting is an immoral choice.

The first of the texts in the section on ‘The Morality of Secular Literature’ focuses on Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983b) [1980]. Paying particular attention to Eco’s secondary work *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1984), I show how he draws out the relationship between reading and temptation, signalling that the genre of detective fiction is unavoidably diabolical. Playing with Gothic metaphors and the late twentieth-century concept of ‘the death of the author’, Eco insinuates that the reader has murdered the author and must face diabolic chaos alone. However, in this chapter I show that *The Name of the Rose* can be understood as the remedy for this situation.

Finally, in Chapter Six I consider Salman Rushdie’s postcolonial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and the ensuing ‘Rushdie Affair’. Asserting that that public response to the novel is irrevocably tied to the novel’s characterisation of literature as diabolical, I show that the controversy arose in part because Rushdie conflated the Devil of the Western literary tradition with the Devil of Islam in his retelling of the ‘satanic verses’ incident. In this chapter I explore the view held by many Western writers (and critics) that literature is both diabolical and divine, which had not been brought into the public sphere so boldly until *The Satanic Verses*.

As there has been significant opposition to all but two of my examples of diabolical literature—with one of the exceptions suggesting that writing literature can be an immoral act—my thesis not only shows how a focus on the Devil symbol can give insight into particular works, but also illuminates the antagonistic relationship
between modernism and those in society resistant to experimental literature. The ‘Rushdie affair’ demonstrated that while few might agree with Thorpe’s hyperbolic analysis in Why Literature Is Bad for You, nevertheless, in the West ‘literature has always had to defend its right to speak or exist’ and is often regarded ‘as frivolous, false, or dangerous’ (Sawhney 1999, p. 267), just as much as its virtues are praised. The ambitious program of modernism—to ‘make it new’, according to Ezra Pound—only heightened the danger. Rather than demonising or deifying literature, diabolical literature acknowledges its potential for improvement or corruption and makes an equivocal judgment on the morality of literature.
The Devil is in the Details: Diabolical Literature in its Literary, Socio-Cultural and Philosophical Contexts

Introduction

Diabolical literature exemplifies Edward W. Said’s claim that ‘texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted’ (1983, p. 4). Modernist novelists do not use the Devil symbol in the same way as the Romantic poets, for example, as their works reflect a particular understanding of the Devil symbol that tethers those works to the specific historical context of the twentieth century. In this Theoretical Chapter, after defining my key terms, I outline the philosophical framework that informs my thesis: namely, an understanding of the effects of secularism drawn from Max Weber and Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas’ proposal that ‘communicative action’ is required to validate norms and values in a secular society. I suggest that literary modernism’s self-consciousness is as integral to the movement as its privileging of experimentation, reinforcing my contention that modernist works of diabolical literature are responding to the nineteenth-century view that literature could be a secular substitute for religion. Having elucidated the historical context of diabolical literature and the reasons why its particular concerns are indicative of modernism, I offer further insight into the meanings that have accrued to the Devil symbol. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of why modernist writers might have used the Devil symbol to engage in a metaphorical dialogue about the morality of literature, thereby producing diabolical literature.

In this thesis, my understanding of the ‘morality’ of literature is in debt to Habermas’ view, informed by Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, of the difference between morals and ethics. Here, ‘ethics’ refers to the customary standards of right conduct that respond to an ideal of ‘the good life’ and based on teleological moral reasoning. Ethics are authorised by long-standing institutions such as the Church, which means that they are often relatively static and regulated by tradition. Habermas’ philosophy shows a clear preference for the concept of morality
or deontological reasoning, even though ‘morals’ can be in conflict with ethics. In morality, the validity of an ethical maxim or rule guiding conduct is interrogated in terms of their universal applicability. Morality is connected with matters of universal principle, for something can be ‘ethical’—a socially acceptable way to act in the context—but still offend one’s idea of right conduct because it is not universally applicable. This is informed by Kant’s attempt to establish the most basic guide to acting morally, the categorical imperative: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law’ (Kant 1948, p. 67).

Kant’s categorical imperative seeks to ensure that ethical principles are judged on the basis of their universal applicability and logical consistency.

Drawing from Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg’s studies of developmental moral psychology, Habermas also believes that ‘modern morality is postconventional’ (Ingram 2010, p. 120). In the postconventional stage of moral development, individuals have the capacity to question the legitimacy of long-standing norms and values to determine their own morality. As such, Habermas’ distinction between ethics and morality, and privileging of the latter, is an essential premise for a program of social change. His understanding of morals and ethics, unlike the neo-Aristotelian alternative, allows for a ‘concept of autonomous morality’ (Habermas 1993, p. 118) that legitimises differing opinions. This is essential in modernity when religion does not provide an unchallenged guide for how to live. A society that privileges autonomous morality over tradition is one that would consider moral alternatives to and corrections of ethical norms, seeking to ensure that its standards are just and not based on prejudices.

Consequently, literature that is self-consciously concerned with the morality of literature does not attempt to conform to accepted ethical standards through a mimetic or utopian representation of society. Instead, it struggles with the idea that if literature is to interrogate ethical standards in terms of their universal validity, the author must be a morally autonomous individual for whom writing unethical literature is surely as easy as writing ethical literature. Such works may also consider how the innovative aesthetic strategies of modernism or aestheticism might instigate new challenges to ethical standards based on moral principles or, worryingly, encourage immoral or amoral principles gleaned from reading or writing. The incommensurability of
aesthetic values and moral values might mean that a work of literature is morally problematic because of attitudes or behaviours it promotes in the reader, or alternatively, the writer.

To say that this anxiety is expressed in modernist literature through the conceptual metaphor ‘literature is diabolical’ or ‘diabolical literature’, it is also necessary to clarify what meanings have accrued to the symbol of the Devil from early Christianity to modernity. The Devil that appears in modernist literature would not have been possible without the historical centrality of Christian practice and belief, nor its replacement with secularism as the main belief system underpinning modern society. The Devil symbol that appears in modernist literature, then, is just as much a product of historical trends as it is of Christianity. As such, I do not discuss how the Devil is represented in scripture in any detail, particularly as the Devil is anomalous amongst Christian beliefs in that it is heavily influenced by popular and traditional beliefs (Russell 1986, p. 172). My understanding of the Devil is instead informed by works of such authors as Jeffrey Burton Russell (Russell 1977, 1981, 1984, 1986), Robert Muchembled (2003) and Philip C. Almond (2014), who are interested in providing a broad ‘history of the concept of the Devil’ (Russell 1986, p. 23), and those by critics who contend that the Devil is first and foremost literary: Neil Forsyth (1987, 2003), Fred Parker (2011), and to some degree, Eva Marta Baillie (2014).

As such, throughout my account of the relevant historical factors in this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how they not only shaped modern society and modernist literature, but the modern understanding of the Devil. Fundamentally, there is not one modern understanding of the Devil, for as scholars of the Devil demonstrate, ‘the Devil’ is a term that is used to represent contradictory ideas in modernity such as the source of all evil, heroic rebellion, provocation, enlightenment, temptation, and progress. When represented—overtly or covertly—in literature, these negative and positive connotations of the Devil linger even if one is emphasised. Furthermore, the tendency of writers since the Romantics to champion the Devil as a rebellious hero means that the terms ‘diabolical’ and ‘divine’ are not as adverse in the terms of literary modernism as they are in Christianity. Although ‘divine’ is not used by these writers in a negative sense, many of the writers discussed in this thesis imply that literature may be so diabolical that it is actually divine. Thus, to say that ‘literature is diabolical’
or that ‘literature is like the Devil’ is to say that literature’s pleasures might mask an insidious danger, or its questionable content might offer true enlightenment. In this view, literature may not be unavoidably diabolical, but does have diabolic potential.

**The Contribution of Literature to the Lifeworld in the Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas**

The proposal that literary modernism is responding to the nineteenth-century belief that literature is the heir of religion should not be surprising, for the history of Western modernity is dominated by the unfinished and often cautious move from religious worldviews to secularism. Habermas’ *The Theory of Communicative Action* [1981] is a key example of a philosophical response to the problem of gauging norms and values in a society where they cannot simply be validated through religious teachings. After giving an overview of the ways in which secularism has shaped Western society, I demonstrate that Habermas’ work reveals a suspicion of literature’s contribution to this project that is akin to diabolical literature’s self-conscious concern.

The modern world is in need of a system that will enable disparate groups to find common ground, now that religion has lost its hold over the entire population. The nineteenth century notably witnessed Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’, the introduction of the term ‘agnostic’, and increased acceptance of atheism as a legitimate option (Hyman 2010, p. 81). These innovations have been associated with secularism, but in fact, secularism does not refer to the eradication of religious belief, but the replacement of shared faith with personal conviction. Charles Taylor disagrees with Habermas on many issues, but does agree that in a secular age, ‘[r]eligion or its absence is largely a private matter’ (2007, p. 1). Although the Western world is multicultural and incorporates multiple religions, the hegemony of Christianity from as early as the Roman Empire meant that the move towards secularism was largely enacted by the gradual removal of Christian beliefs and rituals from the public sphere. Many people continue to hold religious beliefs in modernity, but as Taylor admits, ‘unbelief has become for many [others] the major default option’ (2007, p. 14). Although the idea that literature would replace religion was envisioned in the late nineteenth century, this has not come to fruition.
If it were possible, it likely would have kept the power to legitimise norms and values within the hands of a small group, as with the Christian Church before secularism began. The Renaissance began a process whereby the artistic sphere became detached from wider society, including religious, political and moral expectations (Heumakers 2004, p. 26). For Max Weber, this was intrinsically related to secularism, as the division of different spheres was only possible once the unified religious world view had begun to deteriorate (2009, p. 328). The trajectory of modern art was also determined by philosophical and economic factors, however. Kant’s proposal that aesthetic judgment is intersubjective and founded on taste in ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgement’ (2007) influenced the idea that moral judgement and aesthetic judgement could be divided. In addition, developing means of production and the move from patronage to a wider audience of readers meant that ‘[t]he autonomy of art in the [artistic] sphere is in some sense an idealistic reflection of art’s commodification, and the exalted creativity and originality of the artist are symptoms of market realities’ (Holub 2008, p. 285).

Until the deterioration of the unified religious worldview of the West enabled the development of the theory of the autonomy of art, the view that literature should uphold religious and moral values went largely unquestioned. The disagreement between artists, critics and the public regarding the responsibilities of literature in modernity is largely the result of ‘the distance [that] has grown between the culture of the experts and that of the larger public’ (Habermas 1981, p. 8). The professionalisation required in modernity means that the general public does not have access to the insights from which those within the scientific or artistic spheres, for example, benefit. Instead, issues relating to art and aesthetic judgment are presented as the concern of experts, disallowing egalitarian discussion incorporating those who do not subscribe to the values of the artistic sphere—‘claims to “artistic truth”, aesthetic harmony, exemplary validity, innovative force, and authenticity’ (Habermas 1987b, p. 207). Admittedly, the artistic sphere is not homogenous nor static, including those who believe art should be ethical and those who believe it is free to be amoral. These differing opinions are legitimated in a way that those outside the sphere are not, however. Thus, despite some backlash from wider society in the form of literary scandals, the artistic sphere has set the terms for the relation between it and wider
society, from taking on the mantle of religion to asserting its autonomy and lack of responsibility to society. In the Weberian view, the distance between the artistic sphere and society is only one example of the difficulty of attaining shared norms and values that adequately respond to human needs and desires in cultures that lack a shared world view, such as modern bureaucratic, secular and multicultural societies. Literature is not a suitable replacement for religion, therefore, because its values are detached from that of the rest of society.\(^9\)

Habermas’ *The Theory of Communicative Action* argues that secularisation has actually opened up a new way of validating norms and values that can be observed beginning to take place in the modern ‘lifeworld’. The ‘lifeworld’ in Habermasian theory is an abstract concept referring to a community in which its members presuppose that they all share the same background knowledge (Habermas 1984, p. 13). Members of such a community intervene in the lifeworld through speech, making action proposals with the expectation of consensus. However, this process of ‘communicative action’ can be suspended if consensus is not achieved. As such, communicative action incorporates a process of introspection, analysis and reasoning that a member of a community is invited to undergo in order to determine a claim’s worth, called ‘communicative reason’. Communicative reason allows claims about the objective world, social world and subjective world, to be judged on the bases of truth, rightness and truthfulness respectively (Duvenage 2003, pp. 53-4). Unlike a society in which norms and values are based on relatively static religious traditions and associated systems of ethics, one that requires dialogue and consensus would seek to be moral but always be provisional and open to change (Cohen 1988a, p. 318). In Habermas’ vision, the expert cultures (such as the artistic sphere) would engage with the rest of society to remedy the current asymmetry.

The necessary process for this ideal state to come about is the ‘linguistification of the sacred’. When ‘the sacred foundations of moral authority’ are questioned in a secular society, the foundations have to be reconceived in order to effect a move from ‘symbolically mediated to normatively guided interaction’ (Habermas 1987c, p. 77).

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\(^9\) This is a broad generalisation, in which ‘literature’ refers to high art or experimental literature. Some works of popular literature might actually align more closely with social values and fulfil more of the functions of religion, but exploring this possibility is beyond the scope of the thesis.
Thus, ethical standards that had been predicated on scripture have to be translated into defensible claims—via the medium of language—that can be understood by other members of the lifeworld. These and other claims can be ‘contested and criticized, defended and revised’ in order to ‘achiev[e] mutual understanding in communication that is free from coercion’ (McCarthy 1984, p. x).

Considering Habermas’ emphasis on communication and language, it would seem that literature would have a pivotal role in his theory of communicative action. However, David L. Colclasure observes that ‘[t]aken as a whole, Jürgen Habermas’s work displays a peculiar ambivalence toward literature’ (2010, p. 1). As Colclasure, Geoff Boucher (2011) and Nicholas Hengen Fox (2012) attest, Habermas’ works show an increasing suspicion of the usefulness of literature to the community, which contrasts sharply with his early emphasis on the role of the literary public sphere in the development of the political public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In his 1985 work *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Habermas already subscribes to the view that literary language confuses and reduces the impact of truth claims, implicit in his assertion that ‘[a]s soon as we take the literary character of Nietzsche’s writings seriously, the suitableness of his critique of reason has to be assessed in accord with the standards of rhetorical success and not those of logical consistency’ (1990, p. 188). However, Habermas’ ambivalence provides a starting point for the aforementioned critics to defend the contribution that literature can make to Habermas’ theory of communicative reason, attesting to its capacity to inspire and improve life.

In Fox’s reading of Habermas, the main reason why Habermas limits the role of literature (and other forms of art) in his theory of communicative action is that he believes that literature is not actually capable of communicative reason, only dramaturgical action (2012, p. 237). Furthermore, in its elucidation of a model of possible ways of living, literature can share a potential new set of values for the reader to consider. However, literature, like dramaturgical action, is one-sided. As Habermas observes:

> In everyday communicative practice speech acts retain a force that they lose in literary texts. In the former setting they function in contexts of action in which participants cope with situations and—let’s say it—have to solve problems. In the latter setting
they are tailored to a reception that removes the burden of acting from the reader; the situations that he encounters, the problems that he faces, are not immediately his own. Literature does not invite the reader to take a position of the same kind that everyday communication invites from those who are acting. (1992, p. 223)

Reading is not an interaction between subjects with equally valid truth claims, as in communicative reason, but is the presentation of the subjective world of the writer for an objectified reading audience (Colclasure 2010, p. 37). As such, for Habermas, the aims of literary language are not illocutionary—it cannot effect change or demand a response—but perlocutionary. In this reading, all literary language is capable of is suggesting, enlightening and inspiring—or perhaps misleading.

Fox proposes that the basis of Habermas’ exclusion of literature from his theory is an objection to the fact that it convinces without regard for rational discourse, reasoned consensus or even truth. Even more troubling,

in “dramaturgical” action, the writer is, in some crucial way, dissembling. Her self-presentation is not aimed at reaching understanding, but in moving the reader in some particular, preordained way. This process carries a hint of coercion and exists not at the equitable level of intersubjective communication, but rather at the level of ideology. (Fox 2012, p. 237)

The techniques and strategies of modern literature, therefore, can tempt the reader to sympathise with a viewpoint that would be considered repulsive if expressed in communicative reason, convincing on irrational rather than rational grounds or with reference to ethical norms rather than morality. Thus, Fox contends that in Habermasian theory, ‘Literature… would seem to infect (or vaccinate, depending on the text) its readers with certain values and beliefs without their notice’ (2012, p. 237).

Accepting the centrality of this view to the theory of communicative action, Fox’s rebuttal to Habermas’ exclusion of literature is to suggest that his theory should take into consideration ‘the dialogic processes that surround the texts in their moments of intersubjective use… attending carefully to not only what people say about a text, but the particular, material consequences of those discussions’ (2012, p. 250). Fox’s amendment to Habermas’ theory, consequently, alleviates the threat of the book on the
lone reader by focusing on the way it is mediated by critics, reviewers and group situations such as book clubs.

However, Habermas’ commentators do not charge him with being unequivocally critical of literature, but ambivalent about its utility for the lifeworld. Boucher draws on this in his reconstruction of Habermas’ aesthetic theory, which highlights that Habermas’ work shows traces of the early Frankfurt School position on the positive and liberating potential of art, the heritage of Habermas’ own association with the Frankfurt School. Boucher emphasises Habermas’ psychoanalytically-influenced work on the cognitive, moral and motivational development required for individuals to be able to participate in communicative action, such as ‘Moral Development and Ego Identity’ [1979]. In this essay, Habermas indicates that autonomous art has a crucial role to play in modernity: ‘In the medium of value-forming and normforming communications into which aesthetic experiences enter, traditional cultural contents are no longer simply the stencils according to which needs are shaped; on the contrary, in this medium needs can seek and find adequate interpretations’ (1991, p. 93). This admission of the positive contribution that only art (and especially literature) can make to the lifeworld means that Habermas ‘retreats from these claims at his own peril’ (Boucher 2011, p. 63).

While Fox believes that the limited role of literature in Habermas’ theory of communicative action is because of the coercive way in which literature affects the reader, Boucher believes that a reader’s engagement with a text can produce desirable changes in the reader. The act of reading would not be communicative reason, but potentially an engagement with critique. For Habermas, the social critic can only diagnose and speculate, not dictate the goals of a reasonable society (Ingram 2010, pp. 15-6). Optimally, reading enables an individual to be more informed and think creatively and independently when engaging in rational discourse with other members of the lifeworld. As Boucher explains,

[t]he knowledge that autonomous artworks provide is affective and non-propositional, but has the power to catalyse a shift in the motivational structures of individuals. By effecting transformations of individuals’ relationship to the cultural interpretation of human needs, artworks promote the maturation of the person’s subjectivity and
provide the motivational structures necessary for moral autonomy and scientific thinking. (2011, p. 62)

The expression of the subjective world of the writer or artist, in this reading, can give the reader new ideas that they may be able to translate into communicative reason, rather than just simply ‘vaccinating’ or ‘infecting’ the reader with ideology. Accordingly, Boucher’s question is, ‘why does Habermas not grant literature a larger role in his theory of communicative action when he believes that it can have a powerful effect on members of the lifeworld?’ He concludes that because literature is not directly engaged in communicative reason, Habermas is uncertain whether it can ‘generate intersubjective agreements that are either rationally binding or that extend beyond particular communities’ (Boucher 2011, p. 71)—the central issue at stake in the theory of communicative action.

Thus, in the intersection of these two readings of Habermas’ aesthetic theory is the same ambivalence towards literature that underpins diabolical literature. Both readings are predicated on the belief that literature can have a strong effect on the reader, but they diverge on whether these effects are likely to be positive or negative for the reader and the lifeworld. Fox’s and Boucher’s opposing readings of Habermas reinforce my contention that the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical captures the ambivalent moral status of literature, as diagnosed by the modernists and philosophers of the twentieth century.

In order to draw this out, I practice hermeneutic literary analysis, despite the Habermas-Gadamer debate giving many critics the impression that Habermas is averse to hermeneutics. Rather than a specific method for understanding a text, hermeneutics supposes that interpreting a text gives insight into past and present reality, and that the reverse is also true. Hans-Georg Gadamer has said that for hermeneutics, it is ‘a fundamental principle of understanding that the meaning of the part can be discovered only from the context—i.e., ultimately from the whole’ (Gadamer 2013, p. 196). Habermas’ concern is that by accepting tradition as a legitimate part of ‘the whole’, authentic communication may be impeded by the potentially oppressive frame of tradition which could limit the terms of discussion. Critical reflection is essential to prevent this ‘pseudocommunication’—communication that is limited by external
forces such as tradition—‘so that truth can be guaranteed only by *that* consensus which might be reached under the idealized conditions to be found in unrestrained and dominance-free communication’ (Habermas 1985, pp. 302, 14). Habermas does not disagree with the practice of hermeneutics, therefore, but with Gadamer’s belief that tradition forms the limit of hermeneutics. For Habermas, aspects of traditions—including the influential Judaeo-Christian religious tradition—can and should be considered objectively and evaluated. Accordingly, he praises ‘the capacity for decentering one’s own perspectives, self-reflection, and a self-critical distancing from one’s own traditions’ of the West (Habermas 2002, p. 154).

Consequently, the centrality of reflection or self-consciousness to Habermas’ understanding of hermeneutics means that it is appropriate to use in a study of diabolical literature within a Habermasian framework. Diabolical literature is acutely aware of the influence of the Western literary tradition on modernism and self-consciously reflects on certain aspects of that tradition, such as its assumption of literature’s relative autonomy and role as diabolical adversary. Hermeneutic analysis provides a means of situating diabolical literature within the twentieth-century process of ‘self-critical distancing’ from traditions, including literary traditions, and elucidating the dialogue in which it covertly engages.

I draw on both the public reactions to the novels (when they are of significance) and authors’ published comments on their novels in this thesis. This is done with the intention of elucidating ‘the rules and constraints of the discursive practice within which [the texts and the auxiliary texts reside]’ (Berger 2000, p. 232), rather than revealing the authors’ intentions. As Paul Ricoeur explains, ‘[w]hat the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; verbal meaning and mental meaning have different destinies’ (2008, p. 290). Consequently, while the authors of diabolical literature may not have been explicitly working with the conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical*, hermeneutic analysis demonstrates that this was a powerful unconscious means of comprehending literature in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century that appears repeatedly in modernist works. Karol Berger, speaking of texts as ‘artworlds’ in his discussion of hermeneutic approaches to art, contends that ‘an interpreted artworld is a metaphor’ (2000, p. 219). Hermeneutics is therefore an appropriate means of elucidating the complex way in
which conceptual metaphors are manifested in works of modernism, the literary movement that confronted the problem of tradition most directly.

**Why Modernism?**

This thesis focuses on literary modernism, which is both representative of the literature Habermas discusses and the movement that most directly confronts the question of the place of literature in modernity. The modernist project is not just a matter of aesthetic techniques, but has social, political and cultural ramifications. As Philip Tew and Alex Murray explain, since its inception modernism has promoted the idea of itself ‘as a new beginning, almost a cultural and aesthetic revolution’ (2009, p. 2). Modernism attempts to open up new semantic possibilities through its formal experimentation, making explicit its project of ethical reversal. Habermas contends that it ‘explores hitherto unknown territory, exposes itself to the risk of sudden and shocking encounters, conquers an as yet undetermined future, and must therefore find a path for itself in previously uncharted domains’ (1996, p. 40). However, there is another characteristic almost as central to modernism as its innovative tendencies: its self-consciousness. Habermas writes that ‘[t]his aesthetic consciousness continuously stages a dialectical play between secrecy and public scandal; it is addicted to the fascination of that horror which accompanies the act of profaning, and is yet always in flight from the trivial results of profanation’ (1981, p. 5). Literary modernism does not just reject the beliefs and values of the past and experiment with new alternatives, but self-consciously questions the suitability of literature as a medium for doing so, as I explore.

Historically, modernism developed out of a rejection of the earlier literary mode of realism and the values implied in its representation of reality. In the view of a large number of critics, modernism has now been superseded by postmodernism; however, I follow Habermas’ view that literary modernism is, like modernity, an ‘unfinished project’ (1996) and discuss texts written at the end of the twentieth century as modernist texts when they share the goals of the modernist project. ¹⁰ Late modernist texts—or, to use Rod Rosenquist’s terminology for modernists outside of ‘high

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¹⁰ Nevertheless, I speak of modernists and modernism in the past tense in this thesis, as I am only speaking of twentieth-century modernism.
modernism’, texts by ‘modernist latecomers’ (2009, p. 27)—continue to suggest alternative norms, values and visions of the world that might yield greater satisfaction to the members of the lifeworld, necessitated by the modernist radical questioning of the norms and values of Western society and art.

Peter Childs argues that the experimental aesthetic strategies of modernism are motivated by the perceived inadequacy of realism to represent reality and human experience (2008, p. 3). Despite the ostensible ‘death of God’ and hegemony of secularism, this also included religious or spiritual yearnings. However, ‘[b]ecause modernism grows out of doubt—in God’s existence, in artistic representation, in absolute knowledge’ (Erickson 2007, p. 6) the elements of religious experience are broken down and interrogated. Pericles Lewis, in his study Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel, observes that ‘[t]he modernists’ spiritual concerns include borderline states of consciousness, forms of the divided self, the process of conversion, the function of ritual, the magical potential inherent in words, moments of sublime experience, and the relationship between social life and sacred power’ (2010, p. 5). Rather than seeking a return to the organised religion that went unquestioned before secularism, the modernists looked for and sometimes suggested new ways of fulfilling human needs previously satisfied by religious experience. The aims of modernism, therefore, are in this sense highly optimistic about the possibilities of literature. However, the focus of certain modernists on what Lewis calls ‘the magical potential inherent in words’ speaks to a self-doubt about the validity of literary attempts to re-enchant the world, rendering modernism ambivalent about its own project.

Gabriel Josipovici’s claim in The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction (1971), that the defining feature of modernism is not its freedom from external constraints but its anxiety regarding that freedom, has been reinvigorated by contemporary critics. John Attridge and Rod Rosenquist’s edited collection Incredible Modernism: Literature, Trust and Deception (2013) is a recent exploration of the idea that modernism is preoccupied with the issue of trust, such as the trustworthiness of the author. Other critics have focused on the source of much modernist self-doubt: an anxiety regarding the nature of language.

Critics have demonstrated that for the modernists, the ‘magic potential’ of words was frequently assumed to be black magic. For example, in his discussion of
modernist ‘resistance to “grand narratives”’, David Punter contends that ‘[o]ne aspect of modernism was a radical scepticism in the face of received beliefs, coupled with a profound questioning of the powers of language’ (2007, p. 47); Rita Felski observes that ‘Modernism… announces itself as an art of disenchantment, initiating copious commentary on literature’s counterfeit status and its power to beguile and deceive’ (2008, p. 53); while Leigh Wilson states that ‘Literary modernism has been defined as a writing that is profoundly troubled by language’ (2013, p. 55). After all, language is the means by which an individual comprehends the world and their place within it. The dramatic cultural changes occurring in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant that many came to question the reliability of language and its capacity to represent the world, which is evident in the works of writers, linguists and philosophers (Wilson 2013, p. 45). Attridge reports that ‘modernism bore witness to a sundering of the referential bond between words and things’ (2013, p. 5). While some modernists continued to use language optimistically, untroubled by these philosophical innovations, others found literature to be contaminated by the suspicious character of words.

Such modernists often foregrounded their concerns even as they used words. As such, this thesis considers the key characteristic of this branch of modernism to be its self-consciousness (Alter 1975; Stonehill 1988), reflexivity (Boyd 1983) or metafictionality (Hutcheon 1984; Waugh 1984). While the centrality of this concept to modernism is widely accepted by critics, the matter of its significance lacks consensus. For Robert Alter, self-consciousness is integral to the novel as a genre, and took on a particular form under modernism. While each self-conscious novel ‘flaunts its own condition of artifice’ to some degree (Alter 1975, p. x), the modernist novel is self-conscious of the artificiality of its representation of its particular historical moment. In her 1984 introduction to Narcissistic Narrative Linda Hutcheon offers an alternative interpretation of the uniqueness of modernist self-consciousness—in her terms, narrative narcissism or metafiction—in which it is ‘the heritage of the modernist text’s formal complexity… an intense self-awareness regarding the process of artistic production itself’ (1984, p. xiii). Both interpretations of modernist self-consciousness are legitimate, for it is a mechanism that attempts to bridge the distance between the artistic production and the historical moment to which it responds.
Barbara K. Olson’s *Authorial Divinity in the Twentieth Century* (1997) is an insightful reference point here. She contends that a fascination with the analogy between artist and God pervades twentieth-century literature, and informs the technique of omniscient narration. This ‘pose of God’ is one that ‘most major authors seem to have recognized and not a few have fought’ (Olson 1997, pp. 34-5). Olson proposes that an author’s view of God can be deduced from the author’s texts after taking into consideration ‘the ways a text may deflect, distort, subvert, or more simply reflect’ the author’s own view (1997, p. 35). However, Jonathan Culler has criticised Olson’s focus, arguing that seeking to understand an author’s view of God does not ‘help us to understand how a narrative works or what is distinctive about it’ (2006, p. 348). He suggests that ‘the focus of the analogy of author and God should be questions of omnipotence, not omniscience: what authors can do, what they would be rash to do’ (Culler 2006, p. 348). If the analogy is understood in terms of omnipotence, not omniscience, aspects of the narrative outside narration such as symbolism, intertextuality and coincidences within the plot suddenly offer further insight into the degree of authorial presence in the text. Rather than illuminating the author’s spiritual beliefs, foregrounding the authorial God of the text demonstrates the self-consciousness of literary modernism. Moreover, as my reading of key modernist texts shows, it can also be a starting point for questioning whether literature is really ‘divine’—in either the sense of ‘uncorrupted’ or ‘sublime’—creation.

Although the vast majority of studies on the topic of literary self-consciousness were written in the 1980s, none in that period or since have considered the type of self-conscious questioning this thesis explores. Brian Stonehill’s *The Self-Conscious Novel* (1988) comes closest, arguing that self-conscious narratives are simultaneously capable of thematising literary responsibility while entertaining and persuading. He concludes that:

[b]y artfully displaying its own art, the self-conscious novel… acknowledges that its relation to the world is imaginary, or metaphorical, or problematic at best. The novel’s claim to truth is indeed a sort of honest dishonesty. By qualifying its own relation to life in a way that shows respect for its readers’ sophistication, the self-conscious novel remains playful while sustaining literature’s serious claim to ethical responsibility.

(Stonehill 1988, p. 188)
Given Stonehill’s oxymoronic description of self-conscious novels as *honest dishonesty*, it is not surprising that modernist writers similarly acknowledged the ambiguous nature of literature through the conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical*. Olson’s amendment to her claim that ‘modernist writers were remarkably forthcoming about having become gods’, that this might have been not only ‘a sign of arrogance but also a strategy of defense’ against the pressure placed on them as authorial gods (1997, pp. 104, 5), suggests that some modernists might have had qualms about metaphorically usurping God. Indeed, diabolical literature is evidence of the fact that modernism’s self-consciousness is often the consequence of an anxiety regarding the nature of language, its sense of responsibility for the effects of its usage, and its inability to determine whether its virtues outweigh its flaws.

While neither my understanding of the anxieties underpinning ‘diabolical literature’ nor Adam Weiner’s reading of ‘demonic novels’ are solely a matter of the duplicity of language, as I explore later in this chapter, it is pertinent that Weiner observes that ‘[t]he novel that explicitly thematizes the diabolism of its authorship shares something with the sensibilities of modernism’ (1998, p. 30). Certain examples of modernism foreground its uncertainty of the device through which it represents the world, language, insinuating that writing can be akin to a Devil’s pact. However, the positive associations of the Devil in the Western literary tradition meant that modernists also explored the positive outcomes of this morally questionable pact, often understood as simultaneously diabolical and divine. Through the use of the Devil symbol, these modernists attempted to gauge the risks of their literary experimentation. Diabolical literature, therefore, is a successor to Habermas’ ‘linguistification of the sacred’ in which the ethical assumptions of the artistic sphere, like that of religion, are questioned.

**Ghosts, Spectres and Demons: Supernatural Metaphors in Literary Studies**

This thesis belongs to the subfield of modernist studies that focuses on the movement’s relationship with religion and use of religious concepts. In this section, I explore the similarities between the subfield of my thesis and other domains of literary studies,
before focusing on studies of the Devil in the following section and public reactions to literature in the subsequent section. An interrogation of diabolical literature offers insights into the specific texts within that field, modernism in general, and the relation between modernism and society.

Interpreting literature and modernity through supernatural metaphors is exceedingly popular in late twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy and literary criticism. However, it is the metaphor of the ghost or spectre, not the Devil, which is dominant. In their collection *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren discuss the ‘spectral turn’ in criticism, in which unspoken political, social and ethical concerns are described as haunting works of literature or philosophical treatises. The ghost or spectre is ‘a conceptual metaphor capable of bringing to light and opening up to analysis hidden, disavowed, and neglected aspects of the social and cultural realm, past and present’ (Blanco & Peeren 2013, p. 21), highlighting the permeability of historical time. Fittingly, the first late twentieth-century use of this idea refers to a past usage, with Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994) framed as a response to the opening line of *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: ‘A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism’ (Marx & Engels 2008, p. 38). Derrida’s view that abstractions are not constrained by history and appear incessantly as ghosts—‘Marx had his ghosts, we have ours’ (Derrida 1994, p. 32)—soon competed with works of philosophers and literary critics that similarly conceived of philosophy or literature in terms of ghosts or spectres, such as those of Slavoj Žižek (1995), Jean-Michel Rabaté (1996), Julian Wolfreys (2001) and Luke Thurston (2012).

The ‘spectral turn’ has been accompanied by a renewed interest in ‘Gothic studies’ in literary criticism. In his introduction to *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012) Punter explains that the vast developments in Gothic studies since the publication of *Companion to the Gothic* in 2000 necessitated a dramatically revised edition. Although Gothic literature is usually associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those in Gothic studies maintain that there has been a resurgence of Gothic forms and motifs in the latter half of the twentieth century (Botting 2014, pp. 12-4). The continued interest in the Other, the unknown, psychological trauma and terror in such texts has resulted in scholarly works focused on modernist and
postmodernist incarnations of the Gothic. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace’s *Gothic Modernisms* (2001), John Paul Riquelme’s *Gothic and Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity* (2008) and Maria Beville’s *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (2009) all offer insight into the ways in which the Gothic has taken on new relevance for studies of modernism.

The Devil has been noted by these authors as a particularly Gothic figure, with Beville dedicating two chapters of her aforementioned work to texts that predominantly feature the Devil, *The Master and Margarita* and *The Satanic Verses*. Her analyses are notable because she not only focuses on the significance of the Devil characters to the concerns of the narrative, but explores how the boundary between the Devil character and the text’s structure becomes blurred in both texts. Consequently, there are similarities between these chapters and this thesis, but overall the two works are very different. I am not concerned with Gothic motifs beyond the Devil, and use different terminology to Beville (‘late modernist’ rather than ‘postmodernist’). Moreover, while Beville observes that these two texts engage with the idea that literature can be devilish, she does not analyse them in terms of a conceptual metaphor as I do, nor discuss their engagement with the question of the morality of literature.

The field of literary criticism that analyses modern literature in terms of the metaphor of the Devil is in fact quite limited. Most studies of the Devil in modern literature, such as Ewan Fernie’s *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* (2013), consider the Devil as a marker for transgressive desires or acts, a metaphor contained within the text. However, the long association between the Devil and literary creation is emphasised in Parker’s study, *The Devil as Muse: Blake, Byron and the Adversary* (2011). Parker explains that the association between the Devil, knowledge of good and evil, and reflective self-consciousness—owing to the narrative of the Garden of Eden—meant that the Devil played the role of ‘Muse’ for Romantic poets who were interested in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Rather than simply providing inspiration, the devilish muse shapes the poetic works by powering it with a transgressive energy with which the poet must negotiate. Although Parker considers *Doctor Faustus* and *The Master and Margarita* at the beginning and end of his text, his focus is mainly the poets of the Romantic movement, who are only briefly mentioned in this thesis as they predate the period considered.
Baillie’s recent study *Facing the Fiend: Satan as a Literary Character* (2014) follows Forsyth in ‘approaching [the Devil] as a narrative figure’, contending that ‘[h]is realm then, his dwelling place, is… not theology as such, but literature and art’ (2014, p. 3). Despite this apparently secular claim, however, ‘[her] work is situated in and feels committed to Christian theology’ (Baillie 2014, p. 12). Accordingly, she understands the literary Devil as a placemark for the modern inability to understand and deal with evil, modernity’s answer to the problem of theodicy. Baillie proposes that the Devil and literature are intertwined because reading promotes empathy and helps the reader navigate the challenge of evil. My analysis diverges from Baillie’s in that I think modernists’ use of the Devil symbol owes more to the Western literary tradition than its traditional religious meaning. Modernist devils do not conform to theology, but draw on the characteristics of earlier literary devils. Furthermore, I believe the Devil characters in modernist novels are part of a conceptual metaphor regarding the nature of literature, rather than the embodiment of the Christian concept of evil.

The only studies that have considered the way in which writers have engaged with the notion that literature has diabolical—or demonic—qualities, as I do in this thesis, have focused on Russian literature. Weiner and Pamela Davidson are the two major proponents of this line of thinking, which attribute the theme to the proliferation of demons in traditional Russian cosmology and the frequent explorations of the nature of evil in Russian literature. Davidson’s ‘Divine Service or Idol Worship? Russian Views of Art as Demonic’ (2000a) begins with a historical account of the aspects of Russian culture that underpin the view, frequently expressed in Russian literature, that literature is demonic. According to Davidson, the prohibition of idol worship in the Bible and the congruent suspicion against words used for secular purposes, as well as the apparent similarity between God the Creator and the artist, continues to influence Russian writers’ understanding of the nature of art. Unlike other Christian cultures, secular learning was a late innovation in Russia, and this, combined with the Russian folk belief in demons and possession, ensured the persistence of the view that literature is demonic, ‘deriving from evil forces which somehow possess the artist and obstruct
the pursuit of higher goals’ (2000a, p. 125). Adam Weiner’s *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia* (1998) has a similar assessment of the effect of Russian religious and folk traditions on the view that literature is demonic. His study explores how mid-twentieth-century writers have reinterpreted the anxiety of their predecessors, arguing that while the works of writers such as Gogol, Bely and Dostoevsky are contaminated by the novelists’ struggles with demonic or diabolical material, Bulgakov ‘culminates the line of demonic novels’ by invoking God even as he accepts the Devil’s role in creation, and Nabokov ‘attempt[s] to exorcise the whole tradition’ by having the godlike narrator overpowering the devilish characters (1998, p. 7).

I refer to both Davidson and Weiner in my chapters on *The Master and Margarita* and *Lolita*, emphasising the importance of specifically Russian understandings of art and demons to these novels. However, I break with some of the precedents they have set for this sort of study. I believe that the similarities between Bulgakov’s and Nabokov’s texts and non-Russian modernist texts that utilise the conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical* to discuss the morality of literature attests to their membership in this group. My analyses of these texts therefore diverge dramatically from Weiner’s because I read them as being modernist first, and Russian second. Consequently, while Davidson and Weiner discuss the ‘demonic nature of art’, I prefer the ‘diabolical nature of art’, because in other Western countries the concept of a singular Devil is more powerful (even if that Devil is Mephistopheles, not Satan or Lucifer). I also use the term ‘possessed’ in a different sense than Weiner, who supposes the ‘demonic possession’ of a narrative to be beyond the control of the writer. As I understand ‘the Devil’ or ‘demons’ to be metaphorical concepts, I do not grant the idea this much autonomy; instead, I assume that the evoked impression that a text is ‘possessed’ is a conscious artistic decision of the writer.

Given that the idea that literature is ‘possessed’, ‘demonic’ or ‘diabolical’ presupposes the applicability of ethical criticisms of the work itself or literary texts in

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11 Davidson suggests that one of the reasons why literature is thought of as demonic in Russia is that the country did not experience a Renaissance, resulting in its rigid orthodoxy (2000a, p. 139). This would suggest that demonic literature and diabolical literature are incommensurable. I propose, however, that the way in which Bulgakov’s novel challenges censorship and utilises Western modernist techniques marks his work as ‘autonomous’ and therefore part of the Western tradition, while his Devil protagonist indicates that the work is indeed ‘diabolical’.
In general, it is necessary to contextualise my analysis in terms of my view of literature’s responsibility to be either ethical or moral. Berys Gaut (2007) contends that there are three main perspectives on the relationship between literature and ethics or morality that have shaped the course of literature in modernity: the humanist perspective, the aestheticist perspective, and the transgressive perspective. Firstly, the literary scandal surrounding Lolita and the critics associated with the ‘ethical turn’ are representative of the humanist perspective. In this view, literature has a didactic purpose and should therefore put forward a moral schema that can be reconciled with the values of the society in which it is produced. It is because the humanist perspective values literature highly, therefore, that literature that pushes social, moral and aesthetic boundaries is treated with suspicion. Conversely, Wilde’s protestations at his trial and in his non-fiction works that it is inappropriate to criticise his work on account of its morality are central to the aestheticist position. This view is held by those who believe that art is under no obligation to be ethical and that, in fact, applying ethical or moral considerations in the artistic sphere is a categorical error. Art only needs to be aesthetically appealing. Finally, the Romantic poets held the transgressive position, which claims that literature should be challenging our assumptions and accepted attitudes. Like the humanist perspective, this view contends that we can speak of ethics and morality in the artistic sphere—the two positions differ only on whether social norms should be replicated or refuted.

Although this thesis is a descriptive account of diabolical literature, rather than a discussion of the normative function of literature, I align with a modified version of the transgressive position. The view that literature plays the vital role of introducing new interpretations of the relationship between humankind and the world, and the individual and society—which can then be integrated into society or rejected—is an interpretation of Habermas’ philosophy that allows for an understanding of diabolical literature as a dialogue surrounding the morality of literature. Thus, I do not think a text needs to be ethical, but believe that the most rewarding texts engage with questions of morality.

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12 I am not going to go into any further detail about the ‘ethical turn’, as this thesis looks at how literary works themselves contribute to the dialogue surrounding the morality of literature, not critics’ discussions of the morality of literature.
My intention is to reconstruct this unnoticed conceptual metaphor underlying much of modernism in order to demonstrate the significance of modernist use of the Devil symbol alongside an interrogation of the morality of literature. To explicate why the Devil is the symbol used by modernists, the next two sections of this chapter are dedicated to contextualising and explaining the symbol’s ambivalent nature through a discussion of topics on the borders of diabolical literature.

**The Personification of Evil?**

At first glance, Georges Bataille’s concept of ‘hypermorality’ seems to be a precursor to the definition of ‘morality’ as opposed to ‘ethics’ that I use in this thesis. Kenneth Itzkowitz summarises Bataille’s position that:

> We need to abandon the assumption that the rules of morality are absolute, productive in all contexts, and beyond dispute. We need to make it possible to employ so-called “immoral” values when these have life affirming effects, and to suspend or transgress “moral” values when these serve a sufficient life-affirming purpose. (1999, p. 22)

Furthermore, Bataille considers literature the means by which these challenges to established norms can be communicated, stating ‘[o]nly literature could reveal the process of breaking the law—without which the law would have no end—*independently of the necessity to create order*’ (1985, p. 25). However, he is the prime example of a transgressive critic and author; his text, *Literature and Evil* (1985) [1957], affirms that ‘Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so’ (p. x). Its suitability for exploring alternatives to the status quo means that it is ‘not so much cognate with the content or religion as it is with the content of mysticism… an almost asocial aspect of religion’ (p. 25). For Bataille, literature is desirable because it can inform hypermorality by giving insight into the aspects of evil which may ‘serve a sufficient life-affirming purpose’. Aligning the concept of evil with ‘an attraction towards death’ (p. 29), Bataille proposes—and accepts—that what may be life-affirming for an individual may be antithetical to the interests of society and one’s own survival. Hypermorality, though ostensibly universalised, does not require consensus. The essence of evil, of course, is that it is opposed to the common good, or at least someone else’s wellbeing.
Bataille’s sharp divergence from Habermas on the matter of prioritising dialogue and consensus is exacerbated by his insistence on using the term ‘evil’ to designate behaviour that transgresses social norms or ethical and moral values. Russell proposes a definition of evil as ‘the infliction of pain upon sentient beings’ (1977, p. 11), but there is an undeniable religious connotation to the term. Consequently, ‘evil’ is a problematic concept in modernity. As Peter Dews explains, many feel that there is no other term that adequately conveys the depth of the violation of ethics and morals behind events such as the Holocaust, but the concept itself, with roots in religious understandings of the world, seems inappropriate in a largely secular society (2005, p. 51). Rather than attempting to understand evil by personalising it, in the form of the Devil, some critics have held onto the word while offering a new explanation of its referent.

Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964) is an exploration of how the Holocaust occurred without recourse to a force of supernatural evil such as the Devil for explanation. She coins the phrase ‘the banality of evil’ to explain the crimes of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, arguing that his motives are not what we would typically call ‘evil’. He committed ‘evil’ acts (assisting in the extermination of Jews in the Holocaust) because he was simply following orders. This meant, for Arendt, that ‘evil’ is frighteningly banal. Truly destructive, dehumanising and monstrous acts can be committed because one aligns with rationality and bureaucracy. In her ‘Dedication to Karl Jaspers’ Arendt expresses the difficulty of confronting the harsh nature of reality and human capacity for evil in a pertinent analogy: she says she must ‘find my way around in reality without selling my soul to it the way people in earlier times sold their souls to the devil’ (2003, p. 477).

In the twentieth century, the emphasis on scientific and rational understandings of the world and the secular expectation that believers translate their metaphysical beliefs into publicly accessible beliefs for discussion in society meant that the Devil became an unfashionable way of explaining evil. Moreover, as Arendt showed, supernatural understandings of evil became inadequate in the aftermath of the Holocaust, which revealed the dark side of human potential. The problem of evil has not been solved by secular philosophers such as Arendt, but the exclusion of inappropriately metaphysical terms like ‘the Devil’ has allowed them to distinguish
between the rhetorical use of the word ‘evil’, used to vilify other people or acts; ‘natural evil’, or natural disasters; and ‘moral evil’, or human actions that cause suffering (Flescher 2013, pp. 6-7).\textsuperscript{13}

As a consequence of the interrogation of the concept of evil and its separation from the religious world-view in which it originated, some people began to reject the idea completely, and even refashioned it as something positive. ‘[T]he idea that evil is glamorous is one of the great moral mistakes of the modern age’ (2010, p. 120), Terry Eagleton argues. He explains that evil has been conflated with a watered-down version of ‘transgression [which] has become all the rage’ amongst certain groups, particularly within the artistic sphere (p. 121). As transgression might legitimately bring social norms into question it is not necessarily wrong, unlike evil. Some authors of diabolical literature can potentially be counted amongst those who enjoy depicting transgression, such as Nabokov and Rushdie, but all simultaneously question the responsibilities of literature.

While modernism rarely recommends the complete inversion of accepted values—and therefore does not encourage evil—it is often provocative in ways that may affect readers and consequently the real world. Self-conscious works that transfer the properties of the Devil onto the literary work itself through the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical ask whether modernism is inherently conducive to evil. After all, the novels discussed in this thesis depict or allude to human acts frequently considered evil, such as murder, paedophilia, genocide, torture and abuse, often represented for the reader’s pleasure or at a distance so that the reader does not have to acknowledge its seriousness. Can fictional representations be evil, though? Can literature represent evil to put forward a moral vision, rather than an immoral one? Rather than focusing on the literature of evil, this thesis is concerned with diabolical literature’s attempts to answer to these possibly unanswerable questions.

Crucially for this thesis, there is at least one notable exception to the twentieth-century preference for explaining evil without the Devil. Denis de Rougemont’s The Devil’s Share (1944) is, like Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem, a meditation on the problem of evil written in response to the events of the Second World War. Unlike

\textsuperscript{13} In Doctor Faustus Mann reflexively engages with this modern understanding of evil, as I explain in Chapter Four.
Arendt, however, he proposes that it cannot be understood without reference to the Devil. Considering the Devil a myth that continues to speak to the reality of human life, de Rougemont warns against foregoing belief in the Devil—and also against presuming that the Devil is the only source of evil. Essentially a call for his readers to recognise their own responsibility, de Rougemont emphasises the association between the Devil and the temptation to transgress social norms and morality, as the first step towards evil. For de Rougemont, after the mystic and theologian Jakob Boehme, the writer is one of the most susceptible to the influence of the Devil, owing to the hubristic nature of literary world-creation: ‘The Devil also wished to create his own Work… And this is why the artist and the writer are terribly exposed: no sooner do they take up brush or pen than the Devil is there to guide them’ (1944, p. 131). The writer, as well as the artist, is Faustian because the outcome of challenging aesthetic and normative boundaries is dangerously unknown. De Rougemont’s study establishes the Devil as a fruitful metaphor for interrogating the morality of literature.

This is in part because the Devil symbol is no longer contained to religious worldviews. Russell’s multi-volume study of the Devil begins, in the introductory chapter of The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity, with the clarification that it is actually a study of evil: ‘Evil is frequently and in many societies felt as a purposeful force, and it is perceived as personified. For the sake of simplicity and clarity I have called this personification “the Devil”’ (1977, p. 17). However, in the final entry of the series, Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World, Russell discusses the different devils to be found in modernity, such as the heroic Devil of Blake, the dandified Devil of Théophile Gautier and the Devil of late twentieth century Satanists—none of which are simply the means of representing the concept (or force) of evil. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then, the Devil is not just the personification of evil.

**The Paper Devil**

In this section, I give a brief overview of the mutability and durability of the Devil symbol. Muchembled opines that the Devil ‘has been… a dark shadow lurking in the background at every stage of the Western civilizing process’ (2003, pp. 1-2). However, even though belief in the Devil is grounded in the Old and New Testament, its
influence only began to be felt outside of the clergy in the Middle Ages. Previously, ‘the world was too enchanted for Lucifer alone to be the focus of dread, fear and anxiety’ (Muchembled 2003, p. 20), with the notion of the Devil as the supreme opponent of God not yet popularised. This idea—and the congruent fear of the Devil and Hell—came to be promoted by the increasingly powerful Church, Muchembled argues, in order to cement the social order and ensure obedience to the clergy and monarchy. Russell, conversely, maintains that the Devil became indispensable to Christianity when it broke from Judaism, as ‘[t]he saving mission of Christ can be understood only in terms of its opposition to the power of the Devil: that is the whole point of the New Testament’ (1977, p. 249).

Regardless of when the Devil’s influence began, beliefs about the Devil continued to develop throughout the Middle Ages. By its end, the Devil was thought of as a monstrous force that threatened each person (Russell 1986, p. 31). Although the Devil was considered to be outside the human sphere, people at this time were increasingly concerned with the possibility that the Devil could enter human bodies, revealing the bestial nature within and inspiring witchcraft. The Devil became progressively more immanent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continuing the trajectory towards an internalisation of the Devil as Western civilisation began to foreground the individual rather than the collective. The ‘personalization and internalization of sin was the foundation stone of the modernization of the West’, installing in each member of society a sense of guilt and self-responsibility, and was accompanied by belief in a ‘more present, more active and more menacing’ Devil who tempted and punished Christians under the authority of God (Muchembled 2003, p. 109).

The Devil can be used with flexibility in modernist literature because the Devil’s religious significance continued to reduce over the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was not entirely because of secularism, as the Devil fell out of favour within Christianity as well. Almond explains that Christianity along with wider society was disenchanted, so that while the idea of a personified Devil has not been erased, within Christianity the Devil is often recognised as ‘an objectification of

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14 Muchembled asserts that belief in the Devil has become unpopular in the majority of Western countries, with the exception of the United States of America (2003, p. 262).
the oft-times incomprehensible evil that lies within us and around us’ (2014, p. 221). This enabled the Devil to be reconceptualised as a symbol, rather than a supernatural entity. Russell notes that as educated people in the eighteenth century began to dismiss the idea of the Devil, ‘Romanticism revived the Devil as a powerful and ambivalent symbol: the Romantic Devil personified noble rebellion against autocracy or served at least as an ambivalent representative of both liberty and selfishness’ (1986, p. 12). Thus, by the twentieth century the Devil ‘survived only in literature, as a paper devil’ (Muchembled 2003, p. 217). After the century-long engagement with the Devil in literary modernism that I document in this thesis, the Devil became part of the twenty-first century ‘imaginary enchanted world’ made up of vampires, witches, werewolves, wizards and ghosts, pervasive in popular culture (Almond 2014, p. xiv).

The place of the Devil in the Christian belief system and the Devil’s existence or non-existence is not a concern of this thesis, but the reduction of emphasis on the Devil in Christianity supports my contention that the resurgence of literary devils in modernism is not related to a renewed interest in the Christian faith. The title of Russell’s final volume, Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World is an admission that the most influential idea of the Devil in modernity is the literary Devil, particularly in the guise of Mephistopheles, because of the ‘fragmentation of the tradition’ (Russell 1986, p. 11). The original narrative of Faust and Mephistopheles was ‘a fable for the nearly modern world’ because of its emphasis on Faust’s own responsibility for his predicament and the humanisation of the Devil (1986, p. 63). Over time, this ‘fable’ became more relevant than the idea that the Devil was an active force in the world.

As such, my study of the literary modernist uses of the Devil symbol is most closely aligned with the work of Forsyth, who argues:

that Satan is first, and in some sense always remains, a character in a narrative. For Satan is a character about whom one is always tempted to tell stories, and one may best understand him not by examining his character or the beliefs about his nature according to some elaborate and rootless metaphysical system, but rather by putting him back… into the narrative contexts in which he begins and which he never really leaves. (1987, p. 4)
Forsyth indicates that the Devil is a character that is transferable from Christianity into secular literature because the etymology of the Hebrew and Greek names for the Devil reveal that he is defined by his ‘narrative function. He is the Adversary, in much the same way that we talk of the Hero, the Donor, or the Companion, in the kind of narrative analysis pioneered by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp’ (1987, p. 4). For this reason, I capitalise the ‘the Devil’ as a proper noun throughout the thesis as I do not differentiate between different incarnations of the Devil such as Lucifer or Satan—except when a particular term is associated with a specific literary representation, such as Mephistopheles. I broaden Forsyth’s understanding of the Devil as a literary character slightly by including devils that are not fully formed as characters, such as diabolic narrators. Excluding the few discussions of theological devils, then, my thesis considers the symbol of the Devil, not the character of the Devil. Thus, both Forsyth’s analysis and my own are indicative of the secularising process in modernity that allows representations of the Devil in literature to be understood in terms of literary conventions, rather than theology.

It similarly informs the idea of the Devil used by the modernists in the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical. The ‘Western literary Devil’, as I refer to the concept, shares two of the three attributes of the early Christian Devil that Almond lists (2014, p. 22). The Western literary Devil is an accuser (particularly against the norms of society) and a tempter (towards transgressive desires), but is not an enemy of God in the sense that it does not presuppose the existence of God or the Devil as described in Christianity. ‘The depersonalization of Satan, his reduction to a symbol, and the unmooring of the symbol from Bible and tradition meant that the idea of the Devil could float free of its traditional meanings’ (1986, p. 169), Russell observes. As the term ‘Western literary Devil’ implies, this concept is influenced by the long-standing association between writing and the Devil in Western cultures.

The Devil’s Party

Despite the modern association between books and knowledge, and knowledge and social progress, writing and reading literature has often been treated as a dubious practice. Plato is perhaps the earliest proponent of this idea, with his Socrates character proclaiming in Republic that ‘[w]hat is truly terrifying about [poetry] is surely its
capacity to cause damage even to good people—all but a very few’ (2012, p. 354). The objects of his unease are the epics of Homer and the plays of the tragedians, which imitate life without the creator of the artwork having true knowledge of what he depicts. While concerning, the poets’ duplicitous use of imitation is not the ‘most important charge against this kind of poetry’ (Plato 2012, p. 354); that poetry engages the emotions rather than reason, undermining one’s civilised temperament. Socrates’ earlier claim that in the ideal community children will only be told approved stories, for stories ‘mould their souls’ (2012, p. 69) thus reverberates through his later demand that the only poetic works that should be allowed are those that venerate the gods, ensuring that the people of the republic are pious and rational rather than being easily swayed by their passions. ‘If you admit the seductive, saucy Muse, whether she works in lyric or in epic verse, you’ll find pleasure and pain kings in your city, in the place of law and that reasoning which is on any occasion by common consent agreed to be best’ (2012, p. 356), he warns.

Plato’s refusal to allow poets into his city heralds ‘a tradition of understanding literature in terms of its unnerving ability to persuade’, Alyson Miller contends (2013, p. 8). By late modernity, this had produced literary scandals from outside of the artistic sphere and self-conscious questioning from within. As this thesis is concerned with modernism’s place in the tradition, I only give a brief account of some of its relevant features, focusing on those that influenced twentieth-century views of literature as diabolical. I do not go into detail about the early Christian Church’s attitudes toward secular literature, as this is discussed in Chapter Five. Instead, I move from the fourth century BCE of Plato to twentieth-century modernism via the eighteenth century of the Romantics, where the idea that literature was diabolical began to emerge alongside increasing claims for the autonomy of art.

As already noted, the artistic sphere of writers, publishers, editors and critics began to ignore exterior standards and set their own criteria for evaluating art. The ‘good’ of aesthetics became the beautiful or the sublime, rather than the morally admirable, the useful or the pious. The apparent irrelevance of ethical or moral concerns in art was foregrounded by artists of Romanticism and aestheticism, with its doctrine of l’art pour l’art or ‘art for art’s sake’, before shaping literary modernism. Although art’s claim of complete autonomy has been refuted by contemporary
scholarship, Andrew Goldstone has recently argued that ‘ideas of aesthetic autonomy are nonetheless central to both the history of modernist literature and the discipline of literary studies’ (2013, p. 1). Significantly, modernists’ awareness of their relative autonomy gives insight into a particular characteristic of the literary movement: its self-consciousness of how it is embedded in the social world (Goldstone 2013, p. 10).

The modernists’ self-consciousness of their relative autonomy is not the only heritage of the Romantics, however. The idea that writing—or the written word—was not only dangerous but diabolical can be clearly traced back to the Romantics. Empowered by the emerging doctrine of aesthetic autonomy, Romantic ‘[w]riters and poets claimed and obtained room for transgression and the right to explore freely the dark side of human being and society’ (Altes 2004, p. 16). As Parker (2011) demonstrates, poets such as Blake and Byron self-consciously aligned themselves with the rebellious attitude of Milton’s Satan. This did not go unnoticed by their contemporaries. In the preface to his poem ‘A Vision of Judgement’ Robert Southey criticised (without directly naming) poets of his generation such as Byron—author of the parodic response ‘Vision of Judgment’ (Cline 1954)—who wrote on topics of rebellion and evil. Their work is, he asserted,

> infecting [readers] with a moral virus that eats into the soul! The school which they have set up may properly be called the Satanic school… they are… especially characterized by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied. (Southey 1893, p. 794).

Since the Renaissance, then, the association between the Devil and literature is based on the devilish and rebellious inclination of many writers to entertain ideas, emotions and desires proscribed in a Western society founded on Christian values. The writers who align with ‘the Devil’ and mimic Milton’s Satan’s vow ‘Evil be thou my good’ (2000, p. 76) do not necessarily advocate metaphysical or moral evil. As Parker explains, though the link between the Devil and literature may be unbreakable, ‘when Blake speaks of the Devil’, for example, ‘he is being provocative or ironic, and transparently speaking in code: it is only the repressed or reactionary consciousness that will find these values threatening or evil’ (2011, p. 22).
From the mid-nineteenth century, writers’ metaphorical allegiance with the Devil was often latent, discernible in their rejection of Christian demonisation of sexuality. Since the early years of the Christian Church, ‘desire and pleasure were constructed as an alien, non-human force representing danger and destruction to those who succumbed to temptation’ (Hawkes 1998, p. 111). Sexual desire—and often the female sex, as the supposed instigator of sexual desire—was associated with the Devil, for both were understood as taking advantage of human weakness to corrupt the relationship between a Christian and God (Denike 2003). From the nineteenth century, however, the Christian view of sex as sinful lost its hegemony as the increasingly scientific mindset of modernity approached sexuality as an essential part of human life and a legitimate object of enquiry. Scientific studies of sex by sexologists, theorisation of sexuality by philosophers and psychoanalysts, increased attention to female sexuality, greater acknowledgement and developing acceptance of different sexual orientations, debates around birth control and abortion, and a greater willingness to talk about sexuality meant that what had been viewed as private and shameful began to be discussed in the public domain. Writers were the harbingers of this process, attracting obscenity charges with their depictions of human sexuality while the public were still adjusting to shifting attitudes.

Notably, the dangerous effects of reading are explored in the first major literary work put on trial for ‘offending public morals’ in the nineteenth century: Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (2003) [1857]. Emma Bovary’s prolific reading of romance novels tempts her to recreate such passion in her own life through adulterous relationships. A case can be made for interpreting the novel in terms of its suspicion of the practice of reading novels (or at least a certain genre of novels). The elder Madame Bovary’s justification for cancelling Emma’s subscription at the lending library is her distaste for Emma’s preferred activity, described as something akin to devilry:

*Busy reading novels, wicked books, things written against religion where priests are made a mockery with speeches taken from Voltaire. It all leads to no good… and anyone with no religion always comes to a bad end.* (Flaubert 2003, p. 117)
Moreover, although her suicide comes when she is desperate to avoid the repercussions of her extravagant lifestyle, the ‘black liquid [that] streamed out, like vomit’ (Flaubert 2003, p. 310) from the mouth of her corpse recalls ink, creating a symbolic link with the books that led to her ‘bad end’. *Madame Bovary*’s place as a precursor to diabolical texts is fitting, as one of the complaints of the prosecutor was that the novel lacked a narrative voice that would indicate how readers should judge Emma’s actions (Haynes 2005, p. 4). The complex irony of the narration means that Emma’s destructive reading habits are treated with ambivalence; as Lloyd Bishop says, ‘[i]n attacking Emma’s romantic mentality Flaubert is desperately trying to disgorge the persistent vestiges of his own’ (1989, p. 122). Emma’s strategy for coping with life is ridiculed in the novel, but then so is everyone else’s.

Flaubert’s exploration of Emma’s rejection of Christian values outraged the French government for its ‘obscenity’. He was unconcerned with notions of the responsibility of the writer, in his letters asserting that ‘[t]he morality of Art consists in its beauty, and I value above all style, and, after that, Truth’ (cited in Ladenson 2007, p. 21). Elisabeth Ladenson highlights that Flaubert’s defence—that Flaubert depicted vice so that he could condemn it by having Emma die a miserable death—implicitly accepts that a defence founded on the philosophy of art for art’s sake would not exculpate Flaubert (2007, p. 26). For Christine Haynes, the fact that it was not only Flaubert, but also his editor and printer that were put on trial indicates that ‘the autonomy of the individual author was still of marginal importance… in the eyes of government… [and] wider civil society’ (2005, p. 2), revealing a cultural resistance to the idea that the artistic sphere is autonomous and free from ethical obligations. Diabolical literature would only be able to thrive once Flaubert’s legacy of ‘ambivalence, unclear conclusions, and the eschewal of closure’ (Bishop 1989, p. 126) became enshrined in literary modernism, enabling explorations of alternatives to ethical norms.

In her work *Dirt for Art’s Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, Ladenson explains that changing attitudes to sexuality, in particular, means that for modern readers a historically ‘transgressive’ book like *Madame Bovary* no longer resembles anything that might corrupt youth’ (2007, p. xvi). For Ladenson, this is because ‘ours is a culture that [reassures itself that it] has shed the pointless repressions
of the past and fully embraced transgression as an absolute—and therefore empty—value’ (2007, p. 236). However, Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins’ collection *Scandalous Fictions: The Twentieth-Century Novel in the Public Sphere* (2006b) focuses on the scandals that some transgressive novels have provoked, rejecting the notion that Western society has wholeheartedly embraced transgression.¹⁵ They argue that the world-wide increase in basic literacy and consequently novel-reading over the twentieth century prompted scrutiny of the responsibilities of writers and the possible effects of literary transgression. The unprecedented centrality of literature in the twentieth-century public sphere meant that it had to deal with ‘monumental ethical and public-historical responsibilities’ contrary to its ‘tendencies to insubordination, licentiousness and irresponsibility’ (Morrison & Watkins 2006a, p. 206). As many literary modernists were confronting the idea that language itself might be untrustworthy, self-consciousness became integral to literary modernism.

**Conclusion**

Diabolical literature recognises that modernism often brings out the diabolic potential of all literature, and foregrounds, explores and exploits this through its use of the Devil symbol. As such, diabolical literature looks deeply at its own nature as literature. A peculiarity of the diabolical texts analysed in this thesis is that their creation prompted secondary works which seek to explain, or even justify, the composition of each novel and the author’s view of its meaning. In some instances these are entire books, such as Eco’s *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1984) and Mann’s *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus* (1961); essays, such as Nabokov’s ‘On a Book Entitled Lolita’ (1956) and Rushdie’s ‘In Good Faith’ (1991b) and ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ (1991c); and letters to the editor, in the case of Wilde (1970). Even the possible exception of Bulgakov, who did not publish anything about his novel—in part because he could not even publish his novel in his lifetime—discussed *The Master and Margarita* in the letters and diary entries collected by J.A.E. Curtis (1991b). Diabolical

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¹⁵ As my hermeneutic approach primarily focuses on the texts themselves and only secondarily considers the insights that public reactions may give, this thesis is only peripheral to studies of literary scandal.
literature is about the nature of writing and literature and its effects, rather than, for example, sin or heresy.

Similarly giving credence to my view that these texts share a common concern despite their stylistic and thematic differences, some of these writers explicitly acknowledge their debt to other authors’ works located within my category of diabolical literature. Rushdie has said that *The Satanic Verses* was influenced by Bulgakov’s challenge to the Soviet authorities in *The Master and Margarita* (1991b, p. 403), while Eco shared that the model for Adso in *The Name of the Rose* was the narrator of Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, Serenus Zeitblom (1984, p. 33). More subtly, Thomas Mann discusses the similarities between the aesthetic philosophy of Wilde and of Nietzsche in ‘Nietzsche’s Philosophy in Light of Recent History’. ‘[T]hey belong together as rebels, rebels in the name of beauty’ (1970, p. 172), he proclaimed, and as Nietzsche is an admitted model for Mann’s protagonist Adrian Leverkühn, the proponent of art for art’s sake also casts a shadow over Adrian.\(^\text{16}\)

Because the modernist exploration of literature’s role in modernity is a reaction to nineteenth-century nostalgia for religion, epitomised by Arnold’s claim that poetry could replace religion, diabolical literature can be understood as contributions to a metaphorical dialogue. The recurring theme of the morality of literature—including the responsibility of the writer, the influence literature has on the reader, and the conflict between secular literature and religious communities—in landmark modernist works featuring or alluding to the Devil reveals that literary self-consciousness is not only an aesthetic strategy but a means of seeking connection between text and world. In this instance, the idea that literature may be devilish is a starting point for further discussion of the responsibilities literature should or should not have in modernity. Habermas may be uncertain about the contribution that literature can make to the lifeworld, but the examples of diabolical literature show that many twentieth-century modernist writers made a contribution with their works nevertheless. That contribution is an exploration of the unique characteristics of the literary form and the ways in which it might inspire positive or negative changes in readers and society.

\(^{16}\) Other authors of diabolical literature are also mentioned in a less than positive light: Nabokov describes Mann’s *Death in Venice* as ‘asinine’ and dismisses Wilde as a ‘dainty poet… in reality [a] rank moralis[t]’ (1973, pp. 49, 28), while Rushdie authored a highly critical review of Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* that is collected in *Imaginary Homelands*. 
The Morality of Being a Reader

Given that late-nineteenth century critics and academics such as Arnold were interested in how literature could benefit or improve readers, it is not surprising that the first two examples of diabolical literature are similarly concerned with the effect of literature on the reader. Wilde and Nabokov are particularly interested in how the complexity of experimental literature—aestheticist and modernist—obscures obvious ethical schemas. The primacy of aesthetic values rather than ethical or moral values means that a reader seeking moral guidance from experimental literature can be considered a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of aestheticism or modernism.

However, neither writer is satisfied with the transgressive position that the application of ethical and moral judgement to experimental literature is always inappropriate. As literature often depicts acts considered evil such as murder, rape and abuse, to read without any reference to ethical and moral standards is to overlook significant implications of the narrative. Although Wilde and Nabokov enjoy the freedom of relative aesthetic autonomy, the reader remains embedded in a world in which ethics and morality are relevant.

Consequently, although The Picture of Dorian Gray and Lolita depict transgression of the norms of the societies in which they were written, both can be interpreted as highly self-conscious of the effect this has on the reader. As I demonstrate, Wilde’s allegiance to individualism and Nabokov’s awareness of the persuasiveness of his prose prompts them to thematise the morality of being a reader.
The Devil in the Book: Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Introduction

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2007f) [1891] has no Devil character, and yet it is continuously cited as an example of the Faust myth by critics including Walter A. Kaufmann (1949), Houston A. Baker (1969) and Christopher Craft (2005). Observing the freshly-completed painting of himself, Dorian wishes that it ‘were I who was always to be young, and the picture that was to grow old’, confessing, ‘I would give my soul for that!’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 26). Without any formality, Dorian’s wish is granted, leaving him free to sin and remain physically flawless. Despite never explaining how this supernatural event occurs, the novel ends as one would expect of a Faustian narrative—Dorian recognises his error, but his attempts to make amends are not enough to save him from destruction. If there is a Devil to be found in the novel it has to be read through the metaphor that the Devil typically represents: the temptation to transgress societal norms and values. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, then, the Devil must be art. It is represented by the painting that inspires the wish; a ‘poisonous book’ (p. 111) that opens up Dorian’s mind to possible transgressive acts; and Lord Henry Wotton’s suggestive words, which are described as a form of art themselves: ‘[t]hey seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute’ (p. 20). Although some writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov have inverted the Devil symbol in order to suggest that literature that tempts the reader to sympathise with transgression can have constructive possibilities, as I explore in Chapter Three, Dorian’s tragic end indicates that Wilde is not manipulating the Faust myth in this way. Instead, Wilde’s synthesis of the Faust myth with his aesthetic philosophy promotes an interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the aesthete’s examination of—or warning against—the

17 Punter highlights that the closest Dorian come to making a deal is in his interactions with Henry, seemingly ‘an updated version of the legendary “deal with the devil”’ even though, he argues, ‘Lord Henry is no devil’ (2007, pp. 153-4). Accordingly, I have designated Henry’s words as a form of art in my reading of the novel, in part to reflect Henry’s pivotal role in Dorian’s corruption.
diabolic nature of art and particularly literature. In this chapter, I show how such an interpretation offers insight into how Wilde upholds the aestheticist position—as outlined by Gaut—in order to explore the morality of being a reader.

Those who are familiar with the art and life of Oscar Wilde might find it unlikely that he would propose that the consumption of literature could be a danger to the reader. After all, in ‘The Decay of Lying’ he stated that ‘the proper aim of art’ is ‘the telling of beautiful untrue things’ (2007c, p. 943). Wilde’s fiction and non-fiction works favour insincerity, superficiality, the appreciation of beauty and fulfilment of desires rather than respectability and moralism. Moreover, his famous proclamation at United States customs that ‘I have nothing to declare but my genius’, (cited in Goldman 2011, p. 20) was an early revelation that his carefully manufactured public persona was shaped around his artistic output. The commonly accepted interpretation of Wilde as self-confessed aesthete, wit and dandy—Jerusha McCormack notes that ‘[t]o talk about Wilde’s fiction, is to talk about everything, for Oscar Wilde was his own best work of art’ (1997, p. 96)—seems to suggest that art was the highest value for Wilde.

The discussion of art throughout Wilde’s oeuvre indicates that this supposition is correct. However, Wilde’s preference for seeing the world in aesthetic terms rather than confronting it as a realist does not have to negate the aforementioned interpretation of art as diabolical in Dorian Gray. The apparent discrepancy is resolved when one considers Wilde’s aesthetic theory in conjunction with his claims about the soul and perception of his own genius. Throughout this chapter I establish that Wilde’s sense of his own singular individuality is more than just an element of his character; it is key to understanding his only novel. Wilde’s claim during the libel trial that ‘I don’t pose as being ordinary’ (cited in Holland 2003b, p. 110) reveals his belief that others could not expect to follow his example. Instead, as I demonstrate, Wilde’s literary works put forward the view that people should respond to the desires of their souls and not mimic others or cultural conventions. Literature, therefore, is only dangerous when used incorrectly, as a guide.

That Dorian Gray might convey a warning that art is potentially diabolical is ironic, as the libel trial that Wilde brought against the Marquess of Queensberry

18 The Picture of Dorian Gray will hereafter be referred to as Dorian Gray.
resulted in Edward Carson, the Marquess’ counsel, shifting the emphasis during cross-examination to *Dorian Gray*. Carson rejected Wilde’s assertion that no book could be considered immoral and asked whether *Dorian Gray* was ‘open to the interpretation of being a sodomitical book’ (cited in Holland 2003b, p. 81). In Victorian England, ‘a sodomitical book’ might well be described as ‘diabolical’. Implicit in Carson’s accusation is a concern for what the book might inspire in the ‘ordinary individual’: ‘commission of the gravest of all offences’ (2003b, pp. 81, 26). If Carson represents the dominant view, then it appears strange that there are similarities between his fears and the warning in *Dorian Gray*. The significant difference is that Wilde’s warning does not judge Dorian’s behaviour, only the reasoning behind his choices. Wilde’s protagonist Dorian is not condemned for fulfilling immoral desires, but desires that are not his own.

Even though Wilde is associated with aestheticism rather than modernism, I begin my discussion of diabolical literature with *Dorian Gray* because this type of response to Arnold’s claim for the integral role of poetry in modernity originates with his contemporary Wilde. Wilde addressed Arnold’s ideas in his essay ‘The Critic as Artist’ (2007a) [1891]. The original title for the essay was ‘The True Function and Value of Criticism’, an allusion to Arnold’s own essay, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (Danson 1998, pp. 128-9). In his essay, Arnold argues that literary criticism is a means by which many can achieve part of the creative power shared by writers of genius, and that the ideas of literary critics can inspire future works of art (1958a, pp. 422-33). Wilde’s mouthpiece Gilbert rebukes his foil, Ernest, for entertaining the same idea, arguing that ‘criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent’ (2007a, p. 982). Gilbert’s explanation reveals that for Wilde, criticism is not—or should not be—constrained by academic standards, but is rather an art form that takes another artwork as the material necessary to produce an unfettered and highly subjective response. This essay, then, suggests an antagonistic relation between Arnold’s views and Wilde’s.

Significantly, in ‘An Unnoted Allusion to Matthew Arnold in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’ (1988) Apryl L.D. Heath emphasises the significance of the passage in which it is said that Dorian ‘never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house
in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 117). Heath argues that the allegory of the inn is a pointed inversion of Arnold’s Epictetus-inspired allegory of the writer who prioritises morals in literature, and the aesthete writer who does not. For Arnold, who wrote that ‘[a] poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life’ (1922, pp. 12-3), a writer whose poetry is amoral is akin to a man who stays forever at an inn on his journey home because he enjoys its pleasures, instead of returning to his responsibilities at home.

Heath’s interpretation of the significance of this allegory is that for Wilde, morality is the distraction and aesthetics that true responsibility, or ‘home’, of the writer. The similarity between this possible reading of the allegory and Wilde’s aesthetic theory makes it an understandable conclusion. However, there is a level of irony in this line, as Dorian is blind to the fact that he has mistaken an inn for a house, mimicking art instead of listening to his soul. Thus, while he is mocking Arnold’s view of art, Wilde is also interrogating Dorian’s opposing view that ‘the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal’ (2007f, p. 117).

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Dorian Gray is dominated by the idea that the soul—as a repository of one’s desires, character and potential—is the only appropriate guide for life. In order to substantiate my reading, I elucidate how Wilde’s aesthetic theory is intertwined with his interpretation of individualism, track the recurrence of the idea of the ‘soul’ throughout his other works and its similarity with the concept of authenticity, and show how these ideas contributed to the concerns of modernism. I also address Wilde’s tendency for contradiction, intellectual carelessness and flippancy, in order to explain these problematic elements in light of Wilde’s aesthetic theory. Contrary to the majority of Wilde’s critics, I argue that Dorian Gray does not contradict its preface and that its only moral is, paradoxically, that one should not take art seriously.

Aesthetics versus Ethics and Morals

The preface to Dorian Gray purports to warn the reader not to mistake the artwork that follows for didactic writing. Wilde explains that the artist creates beauty and beauty only in his work, and that any perceptible moral schema is simply an unfortunate
consequence of the artist’s ‘perfect use of an imperfect medium’ (2007f, p. 3). Therefore, he argues, any reader who finds ‘ugly meanings in beautiful things [is] corrupt without being charming’ (p. 3). Before beginning the narrative, Wilde defensively proclaims that he, as the artist, is not responsible for anything more than the beautiful imagery and ideas—meaning that reading the novel as a comment on life is a mistake on the part of the reader.

The preface was composed after the original version of the novel appeared in Lippincott’s Magazine and was met with criticisms and controversy. John Allen Quintus considers the preface ‘an afterthought’ and explains that ‘Wilde could hardly have been expected to apologize for his novel’ and instead ‘[di did] quite the opposite’ (1980, p. 562). With the preface’s history raising the possibility that Wilde only wrote it to quell the critics, it is not surprising that modern critics have frequently argued that in Dorian Gray Wilde undermines the aesthetic theory outlined in the preface. Joyce Carol Oates claims that Wilde confesses ‘doubts of both a personal and impersonal nature’ (1980, p. 427); Bruce B. Clark believes that the book ‘dramatically contradicts its preface’ (1981a, p. 236); Simon Joyce finds a ‘systematic critique of aestheticism’ (2007, p. 413); and Jerome Hamilton Buckley perceives ‘a reworking of the familiar Faust theme, its allegory… fashioned to explore the terrors of evil that the soul yielding to the temptations of hedonistic desire must ultimately experience’ (1951, pp. 234-35). However, I wish to make the argument that the moral schema these critics read in the novel is their own creation, mirroring Wilde’s response to the outraged critics of Dorian Gray: ‘What Dorian Gray’s sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them’ (1970b, p. 247).

Wilde had previously said that ‘[w]hen I first conceived the idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth… I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place… subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect’ (1970a, p. 245). The novel is therefore not a flawless example of his theory that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 3) because of the way in which narrative conventions such as closure, and tropes such as the Faust myth, have historically suggested a moral schema. Wilde expressed a belief that the necessary inclusion of a moral to the story
was ‘the only error in the book’ (1970c, p. 241). He attempted to reconcile the existence of the novel’s Hellenic moral with his philosophy:

The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself. (Wilde 1970a, p. 246)

Thus, for Wilde, the unavoidable presence of a moral in *Dorian Gray* did not negate his expectation that works of art be judged on aesthetic merits, rather than on ethical grounds.

This expectation was not respected by his readers. In 1885 *Dorian Gray* was used as evidence against Wilde when he sought to prove that the Marquess of Queensberry’s assertion that Wilde was a ‘posing sodomite [sic]’ (cited in Holland 2003a, p. xix) was libel. Wilde was questioned whether the depiction of the relationship between Dorian and Basil ‘might lead an ordinary individual to believe it had a sodomitical tendency’ (Holland 2003b, p. 81) on the assumption that a text depicting homoerotic desire is encouraging it.19 The use of *Dorian Gray* in Wilde’s trials demonstrated that his aesthetic ideals were out of touch with the public perception of literature as a commentary on how one should live.

Wilde’s aesthetic ideals were instead representative of an influential aesthetic movement, aestheticism, which prided itself on its rejection of the norms and values shared by the public. In order to substantiate my argument that Wilde was more logically consistent than is generally acknowledged, I now contextualise his novel in terms of aestheticism, decadence and Romanticism before showing how their views of literature’s autonomy from the demands of the community informs Wilde’s novel.

For the aesthete, Aatos Ojala argues, ‘aesthetic values prevail over all others, from moral to material ones’ (1977, p. 13). The preface to *Dorian Gray*, consequently, was a recapitulation of Wilde’s own theory of aestheticism, as expressed in the four essays published as *Intentions*: ‘The Decay of Lying’, ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’, ‘The

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19 Queensberry’s counsel only had to prove that Wilde was ‘posing [as a] sodomite’, not that he had committed illegal acts (cited in Holland 2003b).
Critic as Artist’ and ‘The Truth of Masks’. Here, he proclaims that ‘Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror’ (2007c, p. 933). In the aesthetic theory discernible in these essays, art is believed to be superior to life because the former does not need a referent in life. Conversely, life is necessarily perceived in ways conditioned by art and aesthetic ideals. This reasoning for art’s autonomy means that a central precept of Wilde’s aestheticism is that aesthetic ideals are the only standards that matter in literature. Consequently, his essays reject the applicability of ethics to literature, for the consideration of art in ethical terms would be to misunderstood the principle regarding art’s distinctness from reality (Wan 2011, p. 714).

However, aestheticism was not homogenous, and Wilde’s interpretation deviated from other notable figures within the movement. Walter Pater, Wilde’s idol and a man with ‘a reputation as the foremost Aesthete of his day’ (Beckson 1981, p. xxxii) distanced himself from the aesthetic philosophy of the younger writer upon the publication of Dorian Gray. In his 1891 review of the book Pater praised the ‘first-rate… artistic management’ but felt that the book’s philosophy ‘fails, to some degree’ because of the ‘[loss of] moral sense… the sense of sin and righteousness’ (1970, p. 84). Karl Beckson notes that Pater had used the term ‘art for art’s sake’ in his theoretical work but was ‘concerned with moral development through art, and was not—as some of his professed disciples were—opposed to moral considerations in art’ (1981, p. xxxiii). The divergence can potentially be explained as Wilde’s wilful or genuine misunderstanding of Pater or, his ‘curiously eclectic mixture of philosophical ideas’ which Ojala explains that Wilde combined freely (1977, p. 102). It can also be associated with Wilde’s allegiance to decadence.

In ‘The Critic as Artist’ Wilde states that ‘Aesthetics are higher than ethics… Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change’ (2007a, p. 1015). This comment hints at a distaste for the unsavoury reality of the world, which is soothed by the production of beauty. It signals that Wilde—far less than Pater—was a decadent, as well as an aesthete. Decadence was essentially aestheticism taken to its extreme (Ojala 1977). The decadents were
appalled by the modern state of the world and sought to transcend reality and its ugliness. Pleasure and the cultivation of beauty were taken to be the only things that could appease the sense of dread felt by the decadents as the century came to an end—seen in Dorian’s response to ‘fin de siècle’: ‘I wish it were fin du globe’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 156). Paradoxically, though, for the decadents this abysmal state was the one in which the greatest beauty could emerge (Denisoff 2007, p. 33). As such, the decadents did not seek to repair society, but to find beauty in its current state. This meant that the decadents rejected standard values that aligned growth with good and decay with bad, and therefore did not ascribe to dominant models of the ideal society and family.

As society’s move towards postconventional morality over established ethics demonstrates, Western modernisation has been a process of gradual ‘promotion of the individual as against the collective’, which also created a ‘veritable cult of the self’ (Muchembled 2003, p. 208). This process was far less gradual in the artistic sphere, as Romantic understandings of the uniqueness of the artist meant that this movement ‘[had] a propensity towards individualistic preoccupations’ (Johnson 1979, p. 4). Thus, Romantic poets’ sympathy for Milton’s Satan shows the link between the proclamation of the autonomy of art and an increased acceptance of alternatives to the ethical standards of society by certain individuals.

Significantly, though, Alessandro Ferrara contends that personal and aesthetic autonomy is taken for granted in modernity, with greater emphasis placed on authenticity: ‘While the Enlightenment is the age of autonomy par excellence, ours is the age of authenticity’ (1998, p. 5). The increased attention to individuals’ subjective experience of the world in modernity produced an ‘ethics of authenticity [which] start[s] from the assumption that in order to be a worthy moral being, we must not deny or try to suppress, but rather acknowledge the urges which deflect us from our principles’ (Ferrara 1998, p. 7). The aesthetes and decadents expanded on the Romantics’ rebellious critique of society by asserting that ethics are concerned with the collective at the expense of the individual, who is best served by art. Art is not the supreme value for the aesthetes and decadents because it is autonomous, but because its autonomy from ethical obligations enables it to fulfil human needs in a unique way.

Despite the presence of a discernible moral in Dorian Gray, then, the reader is not left with only two alternatives—to accuse Wilde of contradiction or else read
'Dorian Gray as a kind of exercise in self-justification… [and identifying] a model of pernicious influence that might correlate with his supposed corruption of Lord Alfred Douglas and a network of lower-class rent boys’—as Joyce disingenuously suggests (2007, p. 413). In the succeeding sections of this chapter I demonstrate that Wilde is more logically consistent than is generally acknowledged if the doctrine of individualism and the associated value of authenticity are taken into consideration.

The Centrality of Individualism to Wilde’s Thought

To restate the aim of this chapter, the question of whether Dorian Gray undermines Wilde’s aesthetic theory through the inclusion of a moral that suggests that aestheticism, materialism and hedonism lead to destruction can be explained through an exploration of a theme that appears in Wilde’s work, alongside his aesthetic theory, from Dorian Gray to De Profundis. In Dorian Gray Henry voices this theme in the most explicit terms: ‘The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for’ (2007f, p. 19). Later, in prison, Wilde wrote as himself in De Profundis, ostensibly a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas: ‘It is tragic how few people ever ‘possess their souls’ before they die... Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation’ (2007b, p. 1084). An earlier version of this quote can be found in Dorian Gray, when Dorian is told that a person under another’s influence:

> does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him.

(Wilde 2007f, p. 19)

This theme can be most succinctly expressed as individualism, which Wilde continually referred to in his fiction and non-fiction works, such as ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’. This modern way of understanding the position of the individual in relation to society proposed that ‘men and women in the modern world were becoming more private, autonomous, and unique’ (Meer 2011, p. 3). The interests of the individual became paramount, potentially placing them at odds with the interests of the community.
It is Wilde’s failure to admit its centrality to his aesthetic theory has led to the accusations of contradiction. In the aforementioned essay, however, it is clearly a dominant idea in his philosophy. Although Wilde’s conflation of individualism and Socialism in his declaration that ‘[t]he chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others’ (2007h, p. 1041) might seem anomalous, given Socialism’s emphasis on the collective, Josephine M. Guy (2003) explains that nineteenth-century political Individualism was similarly founded on a negative definition of liberty. In this sense, there are significant similarities between political Individualism and the modern artistic sphere, with its desire for art to be emancipated from cultural norms and ethics implicit in the idea of the autonomy of art.

Although Wilde engages with a political movement in the aforementioned essay, his politics were like his aesthetic theory: unique. His individualism, Regenia Gagnier asserts, ‘was a dandiacal strategy of self-differentiation’ (2010, p. 91). Wilde’s proclamations of his own genius and disregard for ethical standards or academic standards of originality has led critics to understate his commitment to individualism and interpret his work as self-referential. However, his ‘strategy of self-differentiation’ can also be understood as a moral challenge to the restrictive ethical demands of late nineteenth-century Britain.

Wilde made a career out of reformulating existing words, phrases and even poetry in his own style. Nevertheless, his first book of poems was rejected by the Oxford Union Library because this conflicted with late nineteenth-century standards of art. Oliver Elton spoke against the book’s inclusion in the library for the reason ‘that they are for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors’ (cited in Robbins 2012, p. 124). For Wilde, proclamations of his own genius were not contradicted by his plagiaristic use of the work of other poets. Beckson observes that Wilde’s ‘originality… lay in his clever manipulation of other men’s ideas rather than in his personal vision and voice’ (1981, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii). He disparaged the concept of nature, asserting that what was assumed to be ‘natural’ was actually mimicry anyway, because it had already been thought or created (Danson 1997, pp. 85-6). Consequently, pre-existing materials such
as the natural world or the canon were there to be improved upon. Wilde took the cliché ‘the whole truth pure and simple’ and enriched it with his wit, producing the line, ‘[t]he truth is rarely pure and never simple’ in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Wilde 2007e, p. 671). Wilde’s ‘plagiarism’ is actually consistent with his literary theory: as the protagonist of ‘The Portrait of Mr W.H.’ claims, ‘to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem’ (Wilde 2007g, p. 219). Moreover, McCormack suggests that Wilde’s innovative understanding of originality was the result of his Irish heritage, a country where oral culture still thrived and fiction was privileged (1997, pp. 96-9). *Dorian Gray*, like *Poems*, recalls earlier texts—*Faust*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*—because ‘originality is simply not a value in the oral tradition’ (McCormack 1997, p. 111).

Although the distinction between art and life is sometimes confused by Wilde’s insistence that his life was a work of art, and refusal to consider his art a reflection of his life at the trial, Wilde similarly thought that the self should be improved through conscious manipulation. Merlin Holland recounts ‘Wilde’s response to the New York reporter who asked whether he had indeed walked down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand… “To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph”’ (1997, p. 3). Whether this happened was not important, only the fact that the rumour of this event produced an image of Wilde that was in line with his carefully manufactured public persona. This anecdote offers a glimpse of a more significant aspect of Wilde’s perspective on the relation between the individual and society. Ethical standards such as ‘truthfulness’ were often framed as inapplicable or even immoral for Wilde, because their inability to account for individual difference meant that they often conflicted with what he saw as one’s true duty, the cultivation of a unique self. In ‘Wilde as Critic and Theorist’ Lawrence Danson reformulates a line from ‘The Decay of Lying’ to express a central paradox in Wildean thought: ‘In quest of the natural we spend our lives imitating an imitation, when (like art) we should “never express anything but [ourselves]”’ (1997, p. 85).

What may be superficially understood as narcissism and the need to resort to plagiarism because of a lack of talent is actually a consistent literary theory in which individualism is the highest value. Wilde’s public identity continues to distract from the real concerns of his work, so that critics—whether they are writing from favourable
or critical perspectives—have not noticed how his allegiance to individualism actually manifests in *Dorian Gray*. His stylised public persona and witticisms based on reversals of Victorian standards means that his work has been read as a contrarian rejection of ethical values for aesthetic values, simply intended to shock and provoke.

However, *Dorian Gray* shows evidence that Wilde did, in fact, consider the moral implications of the effect of literature on readers. The preface that proceeds the novel indicates that Wilde’s aesthetic theory is actually a theory of the relationship between the artist and the reader, rather than the concept of beauty. The opening lines of the preface state that ‘[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things’ but in fact, ‘[t]o reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 3). Literature is primarily about the reader, not the writer: ‘it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 4). But, as I explore, this does not mean that art is to be mimicked by every reader, but that its beauty should inspire other autonomous individuals.

**The Responsibility of the Reader**

That *Dorian Gray* is about the reader, not the writer, is not a commonly accepted interpretation. The well-known facts of Wilde’s life and the association made between the novel and his biography by the trial means that many critics feel that they can authoritatively state that ‘*Dorian Gray* dramatizes Wilde’s own conflicts’ (Ragland-Sullivan 2007, p. 473). However, other critics have emphasised the authorial role, rather than Wilde’s biography. Oates makes the argument that the novel is ‘a highly serious mediation upon the moral role of the artist’ (1980, p. 420). She suggests that in *Dorian Gray* ‘[t]he consequences of a Faustian pact with the devil are dramatized, but the devil himself is absent, which suggests that the novel is an elaborate fantasy locating the Fall within the human psyche alone. Basil, Henry, and Dorian are all artists, aspects of their creator’ (1980, p. 424). The basis for this reading, it seems, is Wilde’s famous comment that ‘Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry Wotton what the world think me: Dorian what I would like to be in other ages perhaps’ (cited in Gomel 2004, p. 91). However, although Oates is right to say that the novel depicts a conflict within the psyche, her reading of the three main characters as alternate projections of Wilde’s consciousness is one that necessarily ignores a central theme of the novel. The novel is an account of the Fall instigated by social interaction,
locating the potential for corruption outside the individual human psyche. *Dorian Gray*, therefore, is not as far from the traditional Faust myth as Oates implies. Not as external as the Devil, who cannot be reconciled into the natural world, art as the source of corruption is still external to the human psyche while being part of the social world. As such, in addition to the theme of artistic responsibility which Oates discusses, *Dorian Gray* and many of Wilde’s other works explore its corollary: the responsibility of the reader to be amused by a book, but not influenced.

Wilde warns his reader of this quite explicitly in the preface to the novel. He asserts, ‘all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 4). Thus Oates is correct in asserting that ‘the artist, even the presumably “good” Basil Hallward, is the diabolical agent’ (1980, p. 420)—with qualification. This is how the artist is for Dorian, and Wilde is arguing that Dorian’s susceptibility to the influence of the artist is his failing. Dorian is ignorant of Wilde’s own statement that ‘[n]o artist has ethical sympathies’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 3) and takes on lessons from Henry and the ‘poisonous book’ as sincere guidance, rather than recognising them as art to be appreciated for their beauty and uselessness. The artist and even artwork can play the role of the Devil, but only if the reader or audience frame them in that way. As such, for Wilde, art is to be revered if it is a work of beauty. It is only when it is taken to be commenting on reality, and interpreted in terms of ethics or guidance, that it becomes dangerous and diabolical. The concept of a poisonous book, therefore, does not have to ‘negate the aesthete’s defiant boast in the Preface’, as Nicholas Ruddick claims (2007, p. 196).

At the beginning of *Dorian Gray*, Dorian is a naive youth who ‘had kept himself unspotted from the world’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 17), and by the end ‘[t]hey say he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face’ (p. 167). Though he is not initially an exemplary human being—Dorian’s innocence and purity sits alongside petulance and narcissism (Liebman 2007, p. 446)—Dorian’s corruption only begins when he is exposed to the influence of Henry’s hedonistic philosophy, the image of Basil’s painting, and the ‘poisonous book’. This can be deduced through the mechanism of the supernatural painting, as his externalised image begins to show signs of decay after he mistreats Sybil.
Before Henry introduces him to decadent ideals, Henry makes a statement that should be taken as a warning: ‘All influence is immoral’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 18). Dorian, however, is not astute enough to recognise this statement as a warning, nor recognise that Henry’s philosophy is a subjective truth, not an objective one. As such, he is only ‘dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him’, under the misguided impression that ‘they seemed to him to have come really from himself’ (p. 20). Henry’s philosophy is based on fulfilling his natural impulses and desires, rather than repressing or sublimating them: ‘to live… life fully and completely… to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream’ because ‘[e]very impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us’ (p. 19). However, before this conversation, Dorian only has childish whims, not transgressive desires. Henry insists that he must ‘have had passions that have made you afraid’ but Dorian’s thought in response is that ‘there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood’ (p. 20). It is unclear whether he really did have frightful passions, or just awareness of having witnessed other people’s passions. Consequently, when he tries to live out Henry’s proposition that ‘[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it’ (p. 19) the temptations he responds to are not internal, but the ones suggested to him by the ‘poisonous book’ Henry gives him. Thus, ‘Lord Henry’s language creates a new reality for Dorian’ (Cohen 1987, p. 808) that superimposes false need-interpretations over Dorian’s prelapsarian understanding of his relation to his desires and the world.

The other form of art that can be said to influence Dorian is the picture of the title, which shows the signs of Dorian’s sins and age as he continues to look beautiful and innocent. The painting therefore firstly, inspires him to identify with his beauty and encourage others to objectify him and secondly, functions as an excuse to act with disregard for the consequences. Oates makes the claim that Dorian ‘would not have exchanged his soul for eternal youth and beauty had not an artist, Basil, presented him with an utterly new, unrequested, and irresistible image of himself’ (1980, p. 421). Indeed, Dorian juxtaposes his observation that Basil’s compliments ‘had not influenced his nature’ with the fact that his ‘sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 25) as he looked at the painting for the first time, indicating that the painting is another diabolical influence. Dorian begins to cry upon
realising that the painting will keep the beauty he will lose, which prompts Henry to observe that ‘[i]t is the real Dorian Gray’ (p. 27). Ostensibly referring to Dorian’s childishness, the ambiguous pronoun may also refer to the painting, conflating Dorian’s identity with his image.

From the time of his wish, Elana Gomel asserts, ‘Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a man’ (2004, p. 80). This image, moreover, embodies Basil’s desire, rather than showing anything of the true nature of Dorian. Ed Cohen explains that as an image, he is ‘a space for the constitution of male desire’, ‘the surface on which the characters project their self-representations’ (1987, p. 806). As such, though Dorian feels that the painting ‘is part of myself’, he misrecognises it—Basil has already confessed that he has ‘put too much of myself in it… every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion’ (Wilde 2007f, pp. 27, 8).

This moment of misrecognition points to a potential problem with an influential reading of the novel: if the painting truly represents Basil’s desire, not the real Dorian, then how can the painting represent the externalisation of Dorian’s conscience or soul and the process of its corruption by his evil acts, as critics such as Daniel M. Haybron (1999) and Colin McGinn (1999) have assumed? Dorian’s acceptance of this idea, conveyed in his statement that ‘[i]t had been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 194) does not prove this theory, but instead reveals Dorian’s detachment from his own values and desires. What the painting represents is not Dorian’s conscience, but his soul—a different concept entirely—and its corruption by external influence. In the next section, I elucidate this claim through an exploration of the concept of ‘the soul’ in Wilde’s work.

The ‘Soul’ in Wilde

After asserting that ‘[a]ll influence is immoral’, Henry goes on to explain that ‘to influence a person is to give him one’s soul’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 18). The concept of the soul is one that clearly fascinated Wilde, as it is a major theme in Dorian Gray and several of his other works: ‘The Fisherman and his Soul’ (2007d), ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ (2007h), and ‘De Profundis’ (2007b). These three stylistically
different works—a fairy tale, a treatise, and an elegiac letter—offer insight into what Wilde means by the soul in *Dorian Gray*.

When the editor of *Lippincott’s Magazine*, J. Marshall Stoddart, requested a publication from Wilde for his magazine, Wilde first suggested ‘The Fisherman and his Soul’ before writing *Dorian Gray* for this purpose (Gillespie 2007, p. xii). This fairy tale, therefore, is something of a precursor to Wilde’s only novel. In ‘The Fisherman and his Soul’ a fisherman falls in love with a mermaid, but cannot be with her while he has a soul. After pressuring a witch who belongs to the Devil to tell him how to rid himself of his soul, the fisherman cuts away ‘what men call the shadow of the body… [which is really] the body of the soul’ (Wilde 2007d, p. 282). He goes to his lover, refusing to give the abandoned soul his heart. The miserable soul goes out into the world and becomes wise but corrupt, although still attempting to be reunited with the fisherman every year. The fisherman is eventually convinced by his soul to reunite through the temptation of a dancing girl, and repents when he realises that his soul is now evil and that he cannot cut it away again. The story ends with the suicide of both the mermaid and the fisherman, along with his soul. Wilde’s fairy tale suggests that he does not correlate the soul with conscience. The fisherman remains moral and loving without his soul, while the soul becomes corrupt even as he becomes experienced and wise because he does not have a heart or the capacity to love. The soul, then, is something that can be corrupted by society, and can only thrive when it is connected to the heart’s needs and desires.

A defence of Socialism and repudiation of private property is quite surprising coming from a man who first found fame ‘as a personification of aesthetic style come to life’ based on ‘his dress, his accoutrements, and his wit’—not published works (Goldman 2011, pp. 23-4). However, Wilde’s reasoning in ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ is that ‘Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to individualism’ (Wilde 2007h, p. 1042). Wilde does not advocate socialism in general, therefore, and explicitly states his opposition to authoritarian structures of socialism. He sees a favourable style of life in Socialism, rather than an ideal model of government (Quintus 1980, p. 571).

In this essay, Wilde imagines a future in which machines have been invented to do all the undesirable tasks so that everyone is free to be themselves and find their
own fulfilment. ‘It does not matter what he is as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him’ (2007h, p. 1049), Wilde claims. He also draws on the teachings of Jesus Christ, presenting him as an individualist whose teaching spoke to Wilde’s own lifestyle (Quintus 1991, p. 515). As such, the ostensibly political essay is actually a means of affirming the goal he associates with Jesus: ‘Be yourself’ (2007h, p. 1047). It suggests that for Wilde, the soul is something like a person’s potential, home to one’s innermost dreams and aspirations.

Wilde offers a similar interpretation of the soul in ‘De Profundis’, but he incorporates the idea that desire can actually be antithetical to one’s soul. Mournfully recounting the actions that lead to his jail sentence, he says, ‘I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me’ (2007b, p. 1071). However, he distances himself from this desire, claiming, ‘I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease’ (p. 1071). Here, Wilde admits that he allowed external forces to compromise the guidance of his soul. His confession that he represented himself publically in a way that he was ashamed of also indicates that for Wilde the soul had to be in harmony with one’s public image as well. This is what he is referring to when he states that ‘[w]hat the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible’ (p. 1078), rather than the corporeal reality of the body. His experiences apparently having only strengthened his belief in the inherent purity of the soul and its appropriateness for guidance, Wilde again makes comparisons with Jesus, as in ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’. He returns to the idea that ‘Christ is the most supreme of individualists’, aligning his teachings with Wilde’s own theory of the soul, when he says that ‘one realises one’s soul only by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions, be they good or evil’ (p. 1083). ‘De Profundis’ attests to the ongoing importance of the soul in Wilde’s writings.

Overall, his writings put forward the idea that although the soul can be corrupted by imitation of societal norms and other people’s desires, a soul that reaches its potential by staying true to one’s desires (or heart) and body is beneficial to society at large. In ‘The Soul of the Man under Socialism’ Wilde asserts that ‘[a]ll imitation in morals and in life is wrong’ (2007h, p. 1049). He encourages the revaluation of values and suggested:
What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (2007a, p. 979)

Wilde asserts that if everyone is true to their soul, rather than adhering to the arbitrary values of society, the notion of sin would become obsolete and society would thrive. As Baker notes, Wilde believed that the individual must progress before society could (1969, p. 351). Wilde can therefore be opposed to Freud; while the psychoanalyst ‘believed mental health consisted of accepting reality and the constraints of civilization’, the aesthete thought that ‘sanity meant “being true to oneself” and acting consistently with one’s beliefs’ (Foldy 1997, p. 100). Wilde’s concept of the soul, consequently, is a poetic representation of the ideal of authenticity. Being ‘true to one’s soul’ is synonymous with Ferrara’s definition of authentic conduct, ‘the quality of being somehow connected with, and expressive of, the core of the actor’s personality’ (1998, p. 5)

However, Wilde’s emphasis on the supremacy of the soul seems to be in conflict with his emphasis on artificiality and insincerity. Dorian’s comment that ‘insincerity… is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities… To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature…. (Wilde 2007f, p. 125) seems to undermine Wilde’s faith in a pure soul that can be betrayed by acting falsely. A fascination with the multiplicity of identity is a common theme throughout his work. In The Importance of Being Earnest (2007e) Jack creates a fake persona for himself, Ernest, and Algernon a fictitious friend, Bunbury, in order to escape their regular lives.

However, Dorian’s seemingly authoritative comment about insincerity being a virtue appears when he is in a state of deep denial; he has not yet acknowledged that the book is poisonous, has ‘never sought to free himself from it’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 112). Dorian’s comment about the ego, then, is advocated ironically and intended to reveal Dorian’s naivety. Less comic than The Importance of Being Earnest, Dorian Gray thematises the danger associated with misjudging another’s identity. Henry, for
example, refuse to believe that someone of Dorian’s angelic beauty could be capable of committing the ugly act of murder, and insists that the painting—Dorian’s image—is the real Dorian. Similarly, Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane because of her ability to become the characters she plays. ‘To-night she is Imogen… and to-morrow night she will be Juliet’, he says, and in response to Henry’s question, ‘When is she Sibyl Vane?’ he replies, ‘Never’ (p. 50). Jonathan Goldman explains that ‘Dorian’s flirtation with marriage to Sybil Vane is thwarted when she shocks him by developing a stable subjectivity’ (2011, p. 43). Dorian repudiates her because she can no longer act, imitation having become a mockery of the passion and emotions that she now feels. She has, in fact, realised herself through her love of Dorian: ‘You came—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 77). Sibyl is not an example of Wilde’s philosophy, though, as she champions life over art, and ruins her art for life.

One could take from Henry’s comment that ‘the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it’ (p. 12), that Wilde advocated insincerity without qualification. However, it is not a comment about life, but a comment in art. ‘The Decay of Lying’ tells us that ‘the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art’ (Wilde 2007c, p. 943). For Wilde, the artistic sphere was autonomous from that of ethics; as such, insincerity can be a virtue in art but not in life. In ‘De Profundis’ Wilde makes this clear, stating that ‘while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes’ (2007b, p. 1073). Insincerity was only problematic for Wilde when it threatened the purity of the soul.

Critics have found it easier to accept the presence of contradiction in Wilde rather than looking for an interpretation that reconciles conflicting ideas because of Wilde’s reputation for intellectual carelessness and flippancy—after all, he claimed that ‘I rarely think that anything I write is true’ (cited in Holland 2003b, p. 74). For example, in the preface to Dorian Gray Wilde says that ‘There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book’ (2007f, p. 3), whereas in ‘The Critic as Artist’ he has his theoretical spokesman Gilbert claim that ‘All art is immoral’ (2007a, p. 995). Wilde’s disdain for consistency appears to undermine my project of arguing for his oeuvre being more logically consistent than previously supposed. However, Wilde’s
contradictions often clarify, rather than obscure, his claims. Books themselves are not immoral, although society frames them as immoral because ‘emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art’ and ‘[t]he beautiful sterile emotions that art excites in us are hateful in [society’s] eyes’ (2007a, pp. 995, 6). Accordingly, Wilde’s claim during the libel trial that ‘I don’t think there is any influence, good or bad, from one person over another’ (cited in Holland 2003b, p. 102) could be taken as a lie spoken to help him win his case, or as evidence to disprove my interpretation. It could also be understood as a veiled comment of the superficiality of influence compared to the power of the soul.

Therefore, Arthur H. Nethercot’s proclamation that Dorian’s repudiation of Henry at the end of the novel means that he has learnt that ‘the effect of art on morals can no longer be neglected’ and is evidence of the fact that ‘deep down in his heart’ Wilde ascribed to a conventional morality (1944, pp. 847, 50) is incorrect. When Dorian claims that Henry ‘poisoned [him] with a book once’ and makes him promise to ‘never lend that book to any one. It does harm’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 190), he is admitting that he allowed Henry to influence him and in so doing betrayed the demands of his soul. He warns Henry that ‘[t]he soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect’ (p. 187). Henry remains a pitiful, passive figure whose artistic philosophy and witty approach to society does not equip him for life as depicted in the novel. His wife leaves him, and he wildly misreads Dorian towards the end of the novel, claiming: ‘It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder’ (p. 185). Unsurprisingly, he has not achieved Dorian’s mature understanding of the soul, telling him: ‘Don’t be so serious. What have you or I to do with the superstitions of our age? No: we have given up our belief in the soul’ (p. 187). Henry negligently insists that he had been speaking of the soul in metaphorical terms when he said he enjoyed the activity of ‘project[ing] one’s soul into some gracious form, and let[ting] it tarry there for a moment’ (p. 34), but the novel—and many of Wilde’s other works—make a case for its existence as an individual’s interior guidance. The soul and conscience are not conflated, because the conscience is an ethical construct that does not take into account the needs, desires and ideals that are in the soul. Resistant to other people’s standards of morality, ethics, and understandings of sin, Wilde championed the idea of the soul, which could be corrupted by society’s influence, or
provide a valuable contribution to society if it were able to flourish. As such, the painting, as an externalisation of Dorian’s soul, only becomes corrupted when Dorian betrays his soul in the public sphere.

The Absent Devil

The frequent references to the transmigration of souls and the impact of sin on the soul are clear allusions to the Faust myth, in which one sells his or her soul to the Devil. Although the metamorphic painting shifts the diegetic world from one that conforms to the natural laws of reality to one that permits elements of the supernatural, until the action of stabbing the painting results in the painting’s restoration and Dorian’s death, it is tempting to locate the novel in the mode of the fantastic. Tzvetan Todorov describes this mode as one that is profoundly ambiguous, stranding the reader between an interpretation that conforms to natural laws, and one that accounts for the supernatural (1973, p. 41). After all, Dorian keeps the painting hidden in the attic which introduces a metaphorical level, as Dorian’s childhood experiences in the attic mean that it functions, at least for Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, as ‘a kind of metaphor for the... unconscious’ (2007, p. 478). In addition, most people respond to his prolonged youth with envy, rather than suspicion. The most perplexing ambiguity is the representation of the effects of a deal with the Devil without the representation of a Devil character, or a gap in which we can read an unmentioned deal with the Devil—Dorian is as surprised as the reader.

There is, in fact, enough evidence to read the novel as an example of the Faust myth despite the lack of the traditional central figure. I have already made a case for the Devil being represented by art, as manifested by Basil’s painting, Henry’s words, and the poisonous book, based on their function as temptations to act in transgressive ways. In terms of textual evidence, there is a comment made by the woman from the opium den: ‘[t]hey say he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 167). The veracity of this statement is left ambiguous owing to its origins in hearsay, but as Goldman notes, it is the characters who are on the margins of society and are not invested in the status quo who are able to perceive Dorian most accurately (2011, p. 34). Moreover, Donald L. Lawler and Charles E. Knott, in their work on the origins
of Dorian Gray, find that there are similarities in the descriptions of the appearance and mannerisms of both Henry and the Devil in ‘The Fisherman and His Soul’—likely to edify, they say, ‘those critics who have emphasized his role as a decadent Mephistopheles’ (1976, p. 392).

The absence of a Devil character is logically consistent with Wilde’s intentions, as indicated by the preface. A Christian symbol of evil, the mere presence of the Devil signposts a moral framework underpinning the narrative. It is a symbol that Wilde must avoid, then, if he is to maintain his claim that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book’ (2007f, p. 3). In order to depict a man selling his soul without betraying his philosophy, the Devil must be metaphorical, rather than literal.

Nevertheless, my analysis has already demonstrated that Dorian Gray conveys a warning about the natural and the ethical that—alongside the ‘erroneous’ comment on moderation—seems to be the ‘moral’ of the story. But Wilde did not think that readers should simply accept the moral schema put forward in a text, for literature is not meant to be didactic. He did not think that this was the only way literature could contribute to readers’ moral education, though. To recap Wilde’s views on ethics and their mobilisation in literature, Wilde thought that ethics, which are derived from custom, were immoral because they did not allow progress or a reconsideration of values (such as homoerotic desire). Because Wilde disparaged the ethics of his culture and refused to moralise in his art, he was accused of being completely immoral as well—implied in his conviction for ‘gross indecency’. However, Wilde’s works indicate that he had a strong albeit unconventional belief in the need for morality, and thought that literature could inspire the cultivation of a personal morality in which ‘good’ meant ‘true to one’s soul’.

Benjamin Smith, in his article ‘The Ethics of Man Under Aestheticism’ (2005) puts forward an interpretation of Wilde that is similar to my own, in that Smith credits Wilde with a consistent aesthetic and ethical theory that has been overlooked by other scholars. He argues that Wilde’s theory is an ‘aesthetically structured ethic’ that has individualism and imagination as its highest values. The cultivation of the imagination through an appreciation of beauty in art negates the need for ethics in art, for these would direct the reader away from the true intention of art: to ‘foster the creation of truly autonomous subjects’ (2005, p. 321). Imagination is needed because art with an
‘aesthetically structured ethic’ should ‘present figures characterised by indeterminacy’ (2005, p. 321). This indeterminacy allows the cultivation of individual morality, rather than a mimicking of accepted ethics. Despite the absence of a clear Devil figure, then, *Dorian Gray* is engaging with ideas similar to those associated with the ambiguous figure of the Devil.

As such, Wilde makes a case for the arbitrariness of the values that are commonly internalised. In *Dorian Gray* Henry tells Dorian, ‘[t]o be good is to be in harmony with oneself… Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age’ (Wilde 2007f, p. 70). There are no characters amongst the hedonists to be admired in the text, but neither are there amongst the traditionally moral characters, because everyone upholds a morality that does not speak to his or her needs. The only exception is Henry, who professes an aesthetic philosophy similar to Wilde’s own, but does not live out the ideals nor believe in the soul. Henry is consequently no hero for Wilde. The mockery of ‘modern morality’ and inversion of clichés set the scene for Wilde’s argument that the soul should be the only guide for action. His fixation on the soul as something that needs to be cultivated, spanning his career, suggests that he saw it as in opposition to the pressure to conform to societal norms.

It seems that Wilde did not intend for his novel to be read as anything but a work of art, with its moral the unavoidable consequence of a Faustian narrative. If we ignore his warning that ‘[t]hose that go beneath the surface do so at their peril’ (p. 4) it becomes clear that the work fulfils the preface as much as possible, with its ‘moral’ reiterating Wilde’s aesthetic theory. *Dorian Gray* depicts Dorian’s internalisation of the values proposed by his new hedonistic social circle and later his desire to transgress these standards through good deeds and the destruction of the painting. This suggests that whenever exterior ideals are internalised, there is always a temptation to transgress them, because they are arbitrary. The novel does put forward a model for living—Henry’s hedonistic philosophy—but it remains at a critical distance from this philosophy. Though it depicts negative consequences arising from Dorian’s attempts to live out the philosophy, and Henry’s inability to fulfil his own ideas, it does not condemn the philosophy outright. The absent or concealed Devil figure indicates that the reader is free to make his or her own judgement of the events and ideas of the
novel. After all, when speaking of achieving the perfection of the soul, Wilde asserted that ‘[t]here is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are perfect men’ (2007h, p. 1049). For Wilde, the only legitimate moral guidance was the soul.
Conclusion

Ann Ardis asserts that ‘Oscar Wilde… haunts the modernist imaginary as an ambiguously gendered father-figure whose paternity is dangerous to claim’ (2002, p. 47). Like the modernists, he tried to think the unthought through his witty inversions of clichés, and refused the worldview that his culture gave him. Similarly, while the modernists ‘argued that reality was as varied as the individuals who perceived it’ (Childs 2008, p. 55), Wilde’s antinomian refusal to depict a universal ethical order in his work privileged the personal worldview over the collective. His insistence that one’s identity is perpetually misrecognised because so few people’s exterior accurately reflects their interior self is indicative of a mindset similar to those that produced modernist experimentation with alternate modes of writing to better represent the self, such as stream-of-consciousness. As John Paul Riquelme explains, Dorian Gray contains ‘so many doublings and shifts of position… [that t]here is no ultimately controlling perspective based on a geometry of narrative relations that allows us to find a stable, resolving point of vantage’ (2007, p. 497). Wilde exacerbated this chaos through his language and life, disguising his coherent worldview with paradox, flippancy and insincerity. In a sense, then, his conviction for ‘gross indecency’ can be understood as Victorian England’s response to this challenge to its ethical code.

In Dorian Gray Wilde confronted a theme that would pervade modernist literature: the conflict between the individual and society and the role of literature as a conduit between them. Foreshadowing his successors, he promoted the autonomy of art and the inappropriateness of applying real life concerns and ethical standards to literature. Lacking Habermas’ uncertainty regarding the capabilities of literature, Wilde maintained that literature is a sphere in which language, values and need-interpretations can be subverted in order to produce new, authentic worldviews. Art therefore has the potential to be as divine as it can be diabolical; as Danson explains, for Wilde ‘when everyone is realised as an individual, everyone will be an artist’ (1997, p. 94). He envisioned a better world in which the exercise of the imagination led to greater self-knowledge and the cultivation of an individual morality that suited the individual, not their out-dated culture (Quintus 1980, p. 571). In doing so, Wilde pre-empted Boucher’s and Fox’s claims that literature can be an instrument of social change as a supplement to, and impetus for, communicative reason.
Accordingly, Wilde did not think that anyone should replicate a worldview put forward in art, but should replicate the *process*: the revaluation of values to best fulfil the desires of the soul. Art was not a guide to life, but a celebration of beauty meant to engage with the imagination rather than the conscience. While not innately diabolical, then, literature has diabolic potential when it is used inappropriately by the reader. As such, the moral of *Dorian Gray* is that one should not go looking for morals in books.
CHAPTER TWO: LOLITA

Humbert Humbert, the Devil’s Plaything: Vladimir Nabokov’s Literary Games

Introduction

Certain critics, sensing something devilish about Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita (1955), have attempted to attribute this impression to an allusion to the Faust myth. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (1999) looks back to Nabokov’s 1926 short story ‘Skazka’ or ‘A Nursery Tale’, which anticipates Lolita through its common theme of sexual obsession with young girls. In Lolita’s precursor, however, this theme is explicitly depicted as diabolical with a Mephistophelean Devil character inviting a lonely man, Erwin, to collect a harem of women of an odd number by midnight. Unfortunately, Erwin’s desire for a young girl makes him choose the same girl twice so that thirteen eludes him and he is unable to complete the task. For Sweeney this is the shadow cast over Lolita, but Steven F. Walker claims that ‘…Lolita is, if not inhabited, at least haunted, by the ghost of Goethe’s Faust’ (2009, p. 512), citing the textual references to Goethe and parallels between Lolita and Faust’s lover, Gretchen. As Lolita’s tragic experiences recall that of Gretchen, who lost her mother, brother, child and life as a result of Faust’s interference with her youth, Walker asserts that this ‘haunting’ indicates that the novel’s moral dimension needs to be taken more seriously by critics. Similarly, in her doctoral thesis Aurora Mackey argues that Faust is ‘a hidden compositional structure within Lolita… a rhetorical framework by which [Nabokov] could explore his own—and modern America’s—notions of sins, souls and salvation’ (2007, p. 21). However, Jake Pultorak indicates that this is unlikely, given that Nabokov’s letters to Edmund Wilson show, as Gennady Barabtarlo notes, that “Nabokov did not care much for Goethe and once called Faust an “academic shibboleth”” (cited in Pultorak 1993, p. 50). Pultorak proposes that all Faustian allusions in Lolita are parodic.

As Lolita is in many ways a literary pastiche, referencing Poe, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Freud and the genre of detective fiction (amongst others), it seems unlikely that one literary reference is the key to the text’s meaning. Moreover, Sweeney’s emphasis on Nabokov’s own works, rather than his indebtedness to other writers,
offers more insight into a writer whose ‘entire oeuvre [seems to have been] planned from the very first… structured by a single, systematic, and complex creative mechanism’ (Rowe 1971, p. viii). If the possible textual references to Goethe and his play—the relationship between an intellectual and a young girl, Lolita’s married name ‘Schiller’ recalling Goethe’s friend Friedrich Schiller, Humbert referring to himself as ‘Herr Doctor’ and using German at his most diabolical moments (Walker 2009)—are put aside, it is evident that the allusions to the Devil stand in for another force. To recount some key examples of these allusions, Humbert insists that at the Haze home it was the Devil who ‘would tempt me—and then thwart me’, before allowing Humbert to enjoy Lolita upon his lap as ‘the devil realized that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted to have me as a plaything for some time longer’ (Nabokov 1955, pp. 60, 1). Fate, personified by Humbert as ‘Aubrey McFate’, is the workings of ‘that devil of mine’ (p. 61); and Lolita makes ‘a diabolical plopping sound’ (p. 233) with her mouth right before she attempts to assert her autonomy, using her knowledge of Humbert’s crimes as leverage. The true nature of nymphets—Humbert’s term for an aesthetically ideal girl between nine and fourteen who bewitches artistic men—is described as ‘not human, but… demoniac’ (p. 15). Significantly, Humbert’s claim that his ‘endeavour’ is ‘to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets’ (p. 151) reveals that despite his assertion that he is one of the few men that can perceive nymphets, he still finds them mysterious and their allure ineffable.

What is diabolical in the novel is that which Humbert is not controlling: the conspiracy Quilty first inspires in Humbert’s mind and then brings to life is ‘his diabolical game’ (p. 284), while Lolita’s ‘diabolical glow that had no relation to me whatever’ (p. 243) is an inscrutable expression for which Humbert must invent an interpretation. However, it is obvious that someone is orchestrating the events of the novel, making Lolita glow and laying out a puzzle for Humbert to put together, and it is not Mephistopheles: it is the author, Vladimir Nabokov. Allusions to the Devil do not appear alongside questions of sin or salvation, but in reference to the construction of the novel’s world and events. As such, Lolita’s Devil is literary creation itself.
CHAPTER TWO: LOLITA

After all, *Lolita*’s devilish precursor, ‘A Nursery Tale’, is a subversive literary game dressed up as a fairy-tale where misdeeds are punished. Erwin fails to win the harem of women promised by the Devil because his fixation on a young girl prevents him from choosing the mandated odd number of women, and the girl tells him, ‘[y]ou ought to be ashamed of yourself’ (1998, p. 171). This moral conclusion draws attention away from Nabokov’s subversion of the fairy-tale. In the terminology of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), Erwin is the hero and the Devil is the donor—and yet, they would both seem to be villains because of the immoral nature of the hero’s goal. Similarly, the tale mimics the numerical patterns common in fairy-tales through its representation of the Russian phrase ‘a devil’s dozen’, meaning thirteen (Sweeney 1999, p. 514). The overt presence of the Devil in the story disguises the fact that the structure of ‘A Nursery Tale’ is also diabolical, transforming the benign fairy-tale and the number thirteen into something perverse. Nabokov then raises the stakes in *Lolita*.

Irena and Omry Ronen claim that in Nabokov’s oeuvre the Devil is a metaphor that connotes ‘the underlying theme of Nabokov’s mature art: the ontological implication of artistic illusion’ (1981, p. 374). There is no Devil character in *Lolita*, therefore, because the entire structure of the narrative is diabolical. Here, Nabokov produces a beautiful work of art that is likely to affect the reader and tempts them to sympathise with a pedophile or with a girl who is nothing more than words on a page—thus proving that ‘style can do anything’ (McNeely 1989, p. 185). In Robert Hughes’ interview with Nabokov the author implies that this is akin to the temptation of the Devil, referring to the ‘first thrill of diabolic pleasure that you have in discovering that you have somehow cheated creation by creating something yourself’ (cited in Weiner 1998, p. 224).

Accordingly, in this chapter I argue that Weiner’s view—that by alluding to the Devil Nabokov ‘warns against the power of art to subvert aesthetic and ethical absolutes, the power of artists to appear touching while creating worlds of total evil’ (1998, p. 197)—is half right. Nabokov has this view of the power of art, but he is not benevolently warning the reader. As Trevor McNeely claims (with radically different conclusions), ‘the whole thing is a literary game’ and ‘[t]he plot has one justification and basis only—to trap the reader’ (1989, p. 194). Nabokov uses (and subverts) genre
conventions, such as detective fiction, to unsettle the reader and demand close reading and attentiveness. He also disorients the reader by beginning the novel with a foreword ostensibly written by an editor who speaks of the ‘true’ story, turns Lolita’s tragedy into a puzzle, and persuades through rhetorical techniques used for sophistry.

_Lolita_ explores the potential consequences of naively reading literature without an awareness of the implications of art’s autonomy and a suspicion of the narratorial voice’s motives. Bringing together themes explored in works such as ‘A Nursery Tale’, _Despair_ (1966) [1934] and _Pale Fire_ (1962), it does this by embracing the idea that literary creation is diabolical and approaching the question of the morality of modernist literature as devil’s advocate. As McNeely claimed, the novel is full of ‘traps’ that direct readers towards an interpretation that is universally considered unethical (that a pedophile and murderer is sympathetic), or to reconcile their enjoyment of the novel with its theme by putting aside ethics entirely. Readers who manage to resist all the traps, however, are in a position to recognise that literature can express ideas that are unethical just as easily as those that are ethical. This is the troubling implication of the doctrine of the autonomy of art that threatens the suitability of art as a replacement for religion. Although literature can, like religion, reinforce ethics and provide a sense of wonder and meaning, it is under no obligation to do so. The emphasis on literary experimentation in modernism means that its experimentation can extend into experimentation with ethical values. On its surface, _Lolita_ may appear to be promoting the transgressive position on the role of morality and ethics in literature. It is not actually doing so.

This brings me to an important point that can be brought out through my Habermasian framework. Acutely aware of the postconventional status of modern morality, Nabokov shows that although he has the freedom to judge values and norms in terms of their universality, this does not preclude him from writing from an immoral position—using his freedom to abuse the freedom of others. Fox’s comment that in dramaturgical action the ‘dissembling’ writer’s ‘self-presentation is not aimed at reaching understanding, but in moving the reader in some particular, preordained way’

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20 I only touch on the qualities of the detective fiction genre that make it particularly amenable to discussions of the diabolical nature of literature in this chapter, as I go into further detail in Chapter Five.
(2012, p. 237) highlights that the writer might not only be coercing the reader into agreement, but putting forwarding a value system that is insincere. If we accept Boucher’s designation of literature as a critique with which communicative participants can engage in order to refine their own values and ideas, literature does not have to promote ethical behaviour to benefit readers.

Nabokov’s supposedly ‘unethical’ narrative is actually highly moral, because it provides the opportunity to show how modernist literature can refine readers’ moral sensibilities through the experience of reading itself. *Lolita* promotes reflection on the assumptions about the role of ethics in fiction that readers bring to a text. As Michael Wood notes, ‘[m]oral questions… are put to work in his fiction. Nabokov doesn’t write about them; he writes them’ (1994, p. 7). *Lolita* tells the attentive reader how to begin to answer.

**Succès de scandale**

*Lolita* embodied the conflict between ethical and aesthetic standards from, and even before, its publication. Ladenson (2007) recounts that Nabokov, unable to find an American publisher willing to risk a court case by publishing an ‘obscene’ book like *Lolita*, was forced to turn to Maurice Girodias, at the French Olympia Press. Though Nabokov warned Girodias that the novel was ‘a serious book with a serious purpose’ this alliance threatened to undermine Nabokov’s intentions, for Girodias also published pornography and understood *Lolita* to be ‘a liberatory argument for acceptance of pedophilia’ (cited in Ladenson 2007, pp. 207, 8). Nevertheless, Girodias’ willingness to publish *Lolita* brought the conflict between ethics and aesthetics to a wider audience. The English writer Graham Greene named Nabokov’s novel one of the best books of 1955 in the London Sunday Times, despite its local unavailability, and this was met with a scathing review by John Gordon in The Sunday Express that concluded with the statement that ‘[a]nyone who published or sold it here would certainly go to prison’ (cited in Ladenson 2007, p. 210). The novel was released in America by Putnam’s in August 1958, reaching the top of the best-seller list despite mixed reviews.

Most early reviews took a definite stance on the morality of the novel. For example, Howard Nemerov thought that *Lolita* was a highly moral work, for ‘Humbert
Humbert is a wicked man, and... gets punished for it in the end. Also in the middle. And at the beginning’ (1982, p. 92); while Orville Prescott thought that it was ‘repulsive... high-brow pornography’ (cited in Ladenson 2007, p. 213), condemning it for its depiction of Humbert’s immoral desires and actions. Notably, despite the novel’s depiction of pedophilia and an unrepentant murderer, in 1958 leading critic Lionel Trilling found that he was actually ‘not able to muster up the note of moral outrage’ (1982, p. 94). He claimed that ‘Humbert is perfectly willing to say that he is a monster; no doubt he is, but we find ourselves less and less eager to say so’, because ‘in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents’ (1982, pp. 94, 3). Trilling justified his response by explaining that the novel depicts a passionate form of love that is opposed to societal ideals and norms, for which there is no place in the modern world.

Trilling’s reaction to the novel foreshadowed the next trend of Lolita criticism. For many critics, the novel offered too much—beautiful language, imagery, intertextual references, irony—for it to be rejected on account of its depiction of ‘immorality’. Like Trilling, there were critics who found an interpretation of the novel that acknowledged Humbert’s crimes but did not suggest that the novel supported them. Other critics, though, accepted the maxim of ‘art for art’s sake’ and did not address the question of the morality of the novel. As Ellen Pifer explains,

In the decade following its succès de scandale, the novel achieved widespread critical acclaim, laying to rest the charges of obscenity with which, in certain quarters of the reading (and non-reading) public, it had initially been greeted. With remarkable alacrity, scholars and critics dismissed the shocking nature of Humbert’s sexual conduct and turned their attention to mapping the contours of the novel’s linguistic design. (2005, p. 185)

Alfred Appel, Jr., believing that ‘the reader of Lolita attempts to arrive at some sense of its overall “meaning”, while at the same time having to struggle... with the difficulties posed by the recondite materials and rich, elaborate verbal textures’ (Appel 1970b, p. ix) produced The Annotated Lolita in 1970 so that readers could grasp the full implications of Nabokov’s intertextual references, allusions and asides in foreign languages. Appel’s work is indicative of Nabokovian criticism of the time: elsewhere
he recognises that ‘the power and effect of his rhetoric’ is to ‘figuratively [make] the reader his accomplice in both statutory rape and murder’ (1967, p. 224), but asserts that readers tend to be ‘more troubled by Humbert Humbert’s use of language and lore than by his abuse of Lolita and law’ (1970b, p. ix). However, Appel—who produced his annotated edition with the assistance of Vladimir Nabokov—genuinely thought that language, rather than pedophilia, was the true focus of the novel. He observes that ‘it has become commonplace of recent criticism to note that a work of art is about itself’ but maintained, following Vladislav Khodasevich, that ‘Nabokov’s works in part concern the creative process’ and ‘[t]his is especially true of Lolita, where Nabokov’s constant theme is masked, but not obscured, by the novel’s ostensible subject, sexual perversion’ (1970a, p. lvii). He perceived that the superficial narrative of Humbert’s obsession with nymphets masks an exploration of the power of words, and ‘seems to be structured with [the reader’s] predictable responses in mind; and the game-element depends on such reflexive action, for it tests the reader in so many ways’ (1970a, p. lx).

Nevertheless, critics continue to return to its apparent ‘immorality’. Accusing Nabokov of ‘diabolical cleverness’ (1989, p. 187), in his essay “Lo” and Behold: Solving the Lolita Riddle’ Trevor McNeely posits that the novel is nothing more than a grotesque exhibition of Nabokov’s literary talents. He does not oppose the depiction of pedophilia, but the way in which Nabokov encourages acceptance of the act solely to showcase his stylistic talents:

By choosing pedophilia as his subject, then, Nabokov is setting himself up for the ultimate triumph as a jokester—to present this inherently repellent activity in such a way that the public will not only read and enjoy a book about it, but also so that the scholarly community again will work it into a cause célèbre like Ulysses, championing its author and even committing the ultimate absurdity of condoning the activities of its hero—finding “legitimate” scholarly grounds for judging him innocent. (1989, p. 185)

McNeely’s ethical criticism, based on a fear that Humbert’s prose will cause readers to forgive him for his crimes, is the forerunner of an increased focus on critics’ emotional responses to the novel.
Pifer observes that ‘[d]uring the past two decades, with increased public attention focused on the issues of child abuse, questions have been repeatedly raised concerning Nabokov’s choice of subject and his depiction of the sexually exploited child’ (2005, p. 186), reinvigorating ethically-based readings of Lolita. This trend suggests that, despite the artificiality of the text, readers relate to Lolita as a child in pain, not a fictional character. It has led to a blurring of fiction and reality by certain critics, who take the reader’s reception of the character to be as significant as the textual representation of Lolita. Elizabeth Patnoe’s emotionally-laden response to the novel which she claims is a ‘prolonged account of how a young girl is sexually enslaved for two years’, incorporates the complaint that ‘as if it is not enough that Humbert repeatedly violates Lolita and that she dies in the novel, the world repeatedly reincarnates her—and, in the process, it doubles her by co-opting, fragmenting, and violating her: it kills her again and again’ (1995, pp. 88, 2). Similarly, Graham Vickers’ book Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov’s Little Girl All Over Again is ostensibly about the popular culture responses to the character of Lolita, but the author admits that it ‘always seemed to me to want to be a biography of Lolita, in spirit, at least’ (2008, p. 230). Accordingly, Vickers writes as though she is real girl whose reputation needs protecting. He laments that ‘Lolita would gradually exemplify the Sultry Teenage Temptress. It was a travesty from the start’ and vows to give Lolita ‘a more objective appraisal than [the novel’s] solipsistic narrator, Humbert Humbert’ (2008, pp. 7,1). The increased thematisation of the author’s (and reader’s) responsibility to Lolita seems to be the attempt of some modern critics to locate a moral core to the novel, when Humbert’s narration destabilises almost everything on which he comments.

As such, critics who emphasise the moral or ethical dimensions of literature—with the exceptions of Michael Wood and Leona Toker, whose analyses I address later in this chapter—have often been reluctant to consider Lolita as an aesthetic game, assuming that this explanation is not compatible with an ethical reading. There is an influential school of thought, though, that maintains the moral dimension of the text and stresses the importance of Nabokov’s aesthetic technique, all the while envisioning Lolita as a real child. Anika Susan Quayle notes that since the 1980s and 1990s ‘[i]t has become a critical commonplace that Humbert is blind to Lolita, replacing her with,
or subsuming her within, an imagined idealized image that is the product of his artist’s imagination’ (2009, p. 1). These critics sometimes differ on whether the reader is able to perceive the ‘real’ Lolita through Humbert’s narration, but tend to follow Véra Nabokov’s view that the most significant part of the novel is not Humbert’s language, but the girl being described:

Critics prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH’s predicament... I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child’s helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. (cited in Schiff 1999, p. 236)

In this line of thinking, those who put Lolita’s suffering aside in order to enjoy the language of the text are missing the point of the novel. Richard Rorty contends that in Lolita Nabokov is ‘helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty’ (1989, p. 146) Specifically, ‘Humbert’s greatness as a writer lies in his success at “fixing” Lolita within the pages of a book, but the identical process in his life constitutes his greatest crime as a human being’ (Winston 1975, p. 425). In sympathy with Dolores Haze, who ‘had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 322) many of these critics refuse to call her Lolita, Humbert’s name for his nymphet ideal. One of these is Eric Rothstein, who has a footnote explaining that ‘[s]ince “Lolita” exists only as a figment of Humbert’s fantasy life, I will call the character “Dolores” throughout’ (2000, p. 22). This interpretation emphasises lines from the text such as ‘I have often noticed that we are inclined to endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader’s mind’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 302) to show that Humbert gradually comes to realise his mistake.

Susan Bordo, a proponent of this view, makes a comment that supports both her and my own argument: ‘...for Nabokov what distinguishes effective art from pedagogical schmaltz is not the absence or presence of moral attitude but the means by which it is deliver to the reader: through the subtle emotional power of imagery rather than the heavy-handed persuasion of ideas’ (2003, p. 125). Bordo is correct to say that the moral insights can be found in thought-provoking imagery such as the description of the mature Lolita, ‘hopelessly worn at seventeen’ (Nabokov 1955, p.
316), but I would argue that this image does not reflect the presence of a moral attitude because it promotes sympathy for Lolita’s degradation, but rather because it persuades the reader to sympathise with a fictional character’s degradation. In this chapter I explore the artistic techniques Nabokov utilises in Lolita to demonstrate that there is another way to reconcile Nabokov’s persuasive prose with questions of morality. Nabokov is not concerned with the ethics of pedophilia or of subsuming a girl within an idealised image of her, but with the moral implications of reading about these in a modernist novel.

**Puzzles and Traps**

When he asserts that academia has been ‘duping itself into believing that Lolita exists for some other, and presumably more significant, reason than mere deception. It does not’ (1989, p. 183), McNeely is overstating his case, but it is true that the concept of deception is central to the novel. Critics who read the novel as an apologia for pedophilia and murder that seeks to garner sympathy for Humbert, and those who consider it to be a game or puzzle, similarly recognise its importance. It would be easy to assert that the novel is Devil-like because the narrator’s untrustworthiness is characteristic of the Devil, but, like the term ‘diabolical literature’, the novel’s use of deception is far more complex and morally ambiguous.

Nabokov’s interviews and non-fiction works demonstrate that he abhorred didactic writing and instead considered literature—or at least literature that he had written—to be a puzzle. He uses his other interests, lepidoptery and chess, to justify challenging his readers. In a BBC television interview he claimed that ‘deception in chess, as in art, is only part of the game’ (Nabokov 1973, pp. 11-2). Moreover, it is right that art is deceptive, because ‘so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation’ (1973, p. 11). Literature, for Nabokov, is a deceptive artifice, but this is not morally problematic. As deception occurs at every level of nature, he proposes that his role in artistic creation is an homage, not hubris. ‘[A]rt is a divine game’, Nabokov claims, ‘because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming the true creator in his own right’ (cited in Alexandrov 1991, p. 18).
In this sense, then, artistic creation is neither moral nor immoral, but amoral. Its inherent ambiguity means that it is the reader’s perspective that determines the messages, lessons or interpretation they take from the text. Nabokov takes advantage of the situation, and attempts to trick (or deceive) his readers who seek the answer to the divine puzzle that the author has laid out. In *Speak, Memory* he says, ‘I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip’ (1967, p. 109). Nabokov is familiar with the way in which people read; at the conclusion of his work on Gogol he turns the attention back onto himself, assuming that anything he writes will be taken as another clue: ‘[d]esperate Russian critics, trying hard to find an Influence and to pigeonhole my own novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol, but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was empty’ (1944, p. 155).

As Nabokov indicated that *Lolita* was the novel in which he perfected his art of deception, stating in his 1964 *Playboy* interview that ‘*[Lolita]* was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle—its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is the mirror view of the other’ (1973, p. 20), many critics and readers have put aside moral concerns and sought to find out what is in the box, to use Nabokov’s own metaphor. Mackey claims that readers of Nabokov are eager to uncover his “‘solution” to his own riddle [which] would reveal… an elegant structure to the novel that Nabokov had grappled with for years’ (2007, p. 2), and proposes Goethe’s *Faust* as *Lolita*’s intertext and solution, as I have already established. I have also noted that Weiner is of the opinion that the solution is an exorcism of the Russian demonic novel. Vladimir E. Alexandrov has a radically different idea, based on a comment by Nabokov’s wife and scribe Véra that ‘*potustoromnost*’ (the otherworld or hereafter) ‘saturates everything he wrote’ (1991, pp. 3-4). Alexandrov takes Véra as an authority on her husband’s intentions and in his book ‘investigate[s] the otherworld in detail and places it at the center of”, not just *Lolita*, but ‘Nabokov’s entire oeuvre’ (p. 4). Conversely, Eric Naiman does not think Nabokov is at all concerned with spirituality; he is interested in the perversity of reading. Naiman explains that ‘*[t]he thrill of reading Nabokov well results from the interplay of two possibilities: the triumphant bringing to light of hidden, undiscovered meaning, and the risk of appearing ridiculous, of misguidedlly “abusing [one]self in the dark”’ (2010, p. 44). After all, Nabokov openly
derides critics and those who seek to decipher his novels in his interviews (Josipovici 1971, p. 201).

Consequently, the most fruitful way to read Lolita is to foreground the ‘traps’ set for the reader, rather than trying to avoid them. It would be far-fetched to suggest that a writer who speaks of tricking the reader would be concerned about the naive reader’s moral development. However, as my analysis of Lolita shows, the novel rewards the attentive reader with insights about the morality of literature.

Nabokov’s Methods of Deceit

The duplicity of the text begins with the novel’s foreword, ostensibly written by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. Here, Nabokov sets up the double perspective that is promoted throughout the novel: alternatively critical of the moral implications of the work, and enthusiastic about the beauty of the prose. In addition, he constructs the illusion that there are “‘real” people beyond the “true” story’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 2). The effect of beginning the novel with these insinuations is to heighten the effect when the reader, having fallen into his trap, sympathises with a pedophile and overlooks a girl’s suffering in order to enjoy the language and solve a puzzle. However, the methods of deception extend far beyond the preface, prompting Alfred Appel, Jr. to describe Lolita, and Nabokov’s other works, as ‘artifice or nothing’ (1970a, p. xviii). The metafictional techniques used by Humbert in his narration suggest that literature is simply deception.

Nabokov emphasises Lolita’s fictionality through literary references. On the same page that Lolita takes piano lessons from ‘Miss Emperor (as we French scholars may conveniently call her)’ Humbert also mentions ‘Gustave’s… I mean Gaston’s’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 229) in case the reader failed to perceive the reference to Emma Bovary’s music teacher in Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. This reference, like his frequent association of Lolita with Carmen, of Prosper Mérimée’s novella, implies that Lolita’s sexuality is dangerous and reduces her to a literary trope. However, the most significant literary allusion is at the beginning of the text. As Ladenson notes, ‘[t]he identification of the original nymphet as “Annabel Lee” makes the entire text into something very different from a moral tale; it becomes instead a vast game of literary and metaliterary reference’ (2007, pp. 194-5). Humbert would have us believe
that ‘there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 7), but her existence (and purpose) is called into question as soon as he calls her Annabel, the daughter of Mr and Mrs Leigh. Humbert does not just allude to Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Annabel Lee’, he recreates it: the love affair between two children, the seaside, Annabel’s subsequent death. Moreover, Humbert’s references to Poe and his child-bride—‘Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar possessed her’ (1955, p. 46)—his assertion that Annabel was Lolita’s precursor—‘…when Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me… in a kind of fictitious, dishonest, but eminently satisfactory seaside arrangement…’(1955, p. 188)—and the conflation of Humbert and Poe—‘Mr Edgar H. Humbert (I threw in the “Edgar” just for the heck of it)’ (1955, p. 84)—demonstrate that the ‘Annabel Lee’ allusion is no coincidence. Such references emphasise Humbert’s unreliability and force the reader to question the rules of this fictional world—could such a coincidence be possible?

An adherent of Véra Nabokov’s position, Alexandrov (1991) maintains that Humbert’s blindness to patterns not of his own devising, symbolic of his blindness to Lolita, is more significant than his unreliability. He claims that Humbert is unable to recognise that Annabel is as significant to his life story as Lolita, symbolised by Nabokov in the comment that Jean makes at the beach: ‘I once saw… two children, male and female, at sunset, right here, making love. Their shadows were giants’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 100). Alexandrov explains ‘the symbolic significance… the shadow of Humbert and Annabel… falls across Humbert’s entire narrative’ (Alexandrov 1991, p. 178). Although Humbert’s narrative demonstrates that he ignores some aspects of Lolita he is (consciously or unconsciously) unwilling to recognise, I do not think that he is blind to the patterns underlying the novel. For example, Humbert is well aware of Annabel’s significance, commenting that ‘[t]he able psychiatrist who studies my case… is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside… and [find] release from the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 188). Moreover, to further substantiate his argument that the novel is about Humbert’s inability to control the world despite his role as narrator, Alexandrov suggests that Humbert ‘remember[s] details whose significance he cannot fathom’ (1991, p. 178). This claim
does not hold up, as Humbert is writing retroactively and understands the pattern perfectly. He is in control of all the details given and answers revealed. Even when Humbert makes mistakes—he says ‘I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 33), referring to the replacement of ‘appeared’ with ‘disappeared’ in the Dolores Quine Who’s Who entry—he draws attention to the clue hidden within it, such as Lolita or Dolores Haze’s eventual disappearance. Similarly, when Humbert demands the name of his first wife Valeria’s lover, the revelation that it is the driver of the taxi Humbert had unknowingly ushered her into appears to prove that Humbert is not in control of his narrative. However, this event is mentioned by Humbert as a clue to the attentive reader to take note of minor characters in order to deduce the identity of Lolita’s abductor, whose name first appears in the eighth chapter.

Mirroring Nabokov’s authorial ‘anthropomorphic deity’ persona (cited in Weiner 1998, p. 189), Humbert, as writer of his memoir, entertains the idea that the world responds to his needs and desires. It is only by chance that he meets Lolita, as he is forced to stay with Mrs Haze after his intended destination, the McCoo home, ‘burned down—possibly, owing to the synchronous conflagration that had been raging all night in my veins’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 37). Additionally, when his ex-wife dies in childbirth Humbert describes it as ‘[having] my little revenge in due time’ (p. 31) as though fate is an extension of his personal influence. However, there are also extreme coincidences in the novel that directly benefit or hinder Humbert, who is apparently not responsible. The world seems to be against Humbert when builders block Humbert’s view of Beardsley School on the very first day of class and never appear again. Usually, though, these coincidences help Humbert and set the narrative in motion. Ladenson notes:

*Lolita* strains verisimilitude on every level. It is filled with the most extravagantly unlikely of chance occurrences, the most obvious example being the accident that kills Charlotte at the very moment when she has discovered Humbert’s secret and is about to reveal it to the world and take Lolita from him forever. (2007, p. 202)

Charlotte’s timely death ‘reveals the presence of the author as puppeteer’ (Ladenson 2007, p. 203), demonstrating that *Nabokov* is in control.
While Humbert is depicted as in control of the information shared, he is still a creation of the author. Nabokov writes him as mistakenly thinking that he is in control of the course of the narrative and has Humbert try to wrest back control of his life from Quilty, Lolita and the law by ‘[f]ashioning himself as the center around which everything revolves’ (Tweedie 2000, p. 154). The world of *Lolita* is deceptively created through careful word choice by its internal and external creator-gods (perhaps better described as demiurges, or devils). In the following section I analyse these word choices in further detail.

**The Duplicity of Language**

Writing after he has lost both Lolita and his freedom, Humbert laments, ‘Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 33). Accordingly, the words he uses in his memoir are arranged in a way that allows Humbert to act as the authorial God, shaping the story and the world as he sees fit. Humbert also uses the duplicity of language to mask the brutality of his treatment of Lolita and construct a narrative in which she has consented to stay with him. In the line ‘…I greatly liked… her trick of sighing “oh dear!” in humorous wistful submission to fate, or emitting a long “no-o” in a deep almost growling undertone when the blow of fate had actually fallen’ (p. 212). Humbert evades the truth that he is consciously raping Lolita—it is not ‘fate’.

Similarly, at the conclusion of the novel Humbert condemns himself for his treatment of Lolita, claiming that if he had ‘come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges’ (p. 352) and proclaims that he has ‘camouflaged what I could so as not to hurt people. I have toyed with many pseudonyms for myself before I hit on a particularly apt one… for some reason I think my choice expresses the nastiness best’ (p. 351). However, Nabokov has left the veracity of these statements ambiguous. Even if Humbert has nobly opted to withhold publication until both he and Lolita are deceased, can we be sure that such a devious narrator has not taken advantage of his relationship with Lolita in order to produce a narrative about Lolita—and no less Humbert—that will ‘live in the minds of later generations’ (p. 352)? Additionally, can we believe that Humbert changed names to protect people, when he has such fun renaming characters, such as the two female professors who live together, ‘tweedy and short-haired Miss Lester and
fadedly feminine Miss Fabian’ (p. 203)? And, lastly, does the name ‘Humbert Humbert’ signify an admission of monstrosity, or is it an excuse to pun on Humbert: we read ‘my world… Humberland’ (p. 187); ‘between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would… plump for the former’ (p. 187); and ‘Mummy and Hummy’, ostensibly written by Lolita (p. 91)? These examples, like many other literary techniques in the novel, demonstrate the untrustworthiness of Humbert as narrator, and language and literature in general.

Lisa Zunshine makes the point that ‘[t]he writer who creates an unreliable narrator runs an exciting and terrible risk: his or her readers may wind up believing the narrator’s version of events’ (2006, p. 100). After the novel’s publication Nabokov clarified his belief that ‘Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear “touching”’ (1973, p. 94), but readers may still fail to recognise this (or disagree with his assessment). One way in which Humbert manipulates the reader is through his (or really, Nabokov’s) undeniable mastery of language, including use of rhetorical techniques favoured by sophists.

In the middle of the novel, Humbert recites the ways in which he rapes, enslaves and terrorises Lolita in a matter-of-fact tone: ‘Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident “what d’you think you are doing?” was all I got for my pains’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 187); ‘How sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had done her morning duty’ (186); ‘I really did not mind where to dwell provided I could lock my Lolita up somewhere,’ (199). Humbert only hints at his cruel treatment of Lolita, nestling these admissions amongst passionate proclamations using beautiful rhetoric that is far more memorable: ‘I knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else’ (316); ‘You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight’ (p. 307); and ‘Don’t think I can go on. Heart, head-everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat until the page is full, printer’ (p. 123). Humbert’s comment that ‘[y]ou can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style’ (p. 7), can be taken, as Pifer does, as ‘[d]rawing attention to the deceptive as well as evocative power of his language’ (2005, p. 187). If the Devil in *Lolita* is literary creation, then Humbert—as the text’s ostensive literary creator—necessarily appears as devilish. Fittingly, Weiner makes the statement that
‘[t]he most natural pose for a worse-than-unreliable narrator to strike is probably the tempter of the Judeo-Christian demonology’ (1998, p. 16).

Nabokov, through Humbert, reveals that language is deceptive even before it falls into the hands of a murderer. Ralph A. Ciancio demonstrates that Nabokov is interested in [words’] coincidental “logic”, which heightens the artificiality of language, listing examples such as Mabel wearing a ‘halter’ even though she has ‘little to halt’, the dead banker who is called a ‘banked banker’, and how Humbert ‘ruminated’ in his ‘room’ (1977, p. 520). Humbert makes the well-meaning and pure perverted, as in his reference to the ‘book with the unintentionally biblical title Know Your Own Daughter’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 197). The most disconcerting, though, is that ‘the rapist’ and ‘the therapist’ is only ‘a matter of nice spacing in the way of distinction’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 168). By drawing attention to this fact, Nabokov promotes the worrying thought that the English language itself is diabolical. Moreover, even when he is reassuring the reader, the danger lingers: Lolita is ‘unraped’ but Nabokov’s usage of the rhetorical technique litotes (Lanham 1968, p. 63) makes the word reverberate with ‘the inner struggles [it] evoke[s] and depict[s which] remain to haunt the reader’ (Rowe 1971, p. 7).

This can also be reframed as Lolita rejuvenating language and highlighting the possibilities it enables if used creatively. In the phrase ‘Lo and Behold, upon returning, I would find the former’ (1955, p. 182) Nabokov plays with the technique of syllepsis (Lanham 1968, p. 95) to create something nearly-tangible (an image of a girl) out of a clichéd phrase. Similarly, through his neologism ‘pre-dolorian’—a pun on ‘prelapsarian’ meaning ‘before he was corrupted by meeting Dolores Haze’—the author emphasises the creative and subversive potential of language (surely Humbert was not corrupted by a child?). However, because he celebrates language while simultaneously utilising it to present a pedophile and murderer as sympathetic, the implication is that linguistic creation may be more diabolical than divine.

**Controlling the Reader**

Through Humbert’s conspicuous play with words, Nabokov self-consciously draws attention to the fact that his story is a pattern of letters on pages of a book. Correspondingly, Humbert enjoys speaking to the reader, the editor, and the printer;
admits to the thought processes behind his stylistic choices; and engages with literary and cinematic conventions. Humbert demonstrates the text’s artificiality in multiple ways that reveal that his narrative is highly subjective and a reflection of his personality and whims. He often includes records of past events while casually acknowledging that he is working from his ‘sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 247). Charlotte’s letter, in which she declares her love for her boarder, is a pivotal moment in the text as it enables Humbert to become Lolita’s step-father and later, guardian. However, after including the letter in his narrative Humbert admits that it is only what he remembers of the real letter, which was twice as long, and that the wording is his own—he admits that ‘[t]here is just a chance that “the vortex of the toilet” (where the letter did go) is my own matter-of-fact contribution’ (p. 76). As this letter foreshadows the ensuing chapters, with ‘Charlotte’ declaring that if he took advantage of her love he ‘would be a criminal—worse than a kidnapper who rapes a child’ (p. 75) it is clear that Humbert is not intent on writing honestly, but playing with words to produce a literary puzzle.

Similarly, Humbert also records his thoughts of what might have happened according to literary convention or hidden sentiments even though they did not, in an exaggeration of the litotes technique of expressing something through its converse: “…why don’t I drive there right now, and you may sleep with Jean”—(he did not really add that but Jean supported his offer so passionately that it might be implied)’ (p. 113), he records John saying; describes how ‘I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did’ (p. 320); and laments that ‘[i]t had happened at last. She had gone forever. In later years I have often wondered why she did not go for ever that day’ (p. 254). William Woodin Rowe notes that in this ‘incomplete negation, the initial, denied image typically, vividly lingers’, resulting in ‘a superimposition of one “reality” upon another so that the final image, or impression, seems at once fresh and yet strangely familiar’ (1971, pp. 5, 17). With each incomplete negation, however, Humbert signals his untrustworthiness as a narrator given how he blatantly toys with the reader. The effect of these techniques is to destabilise the reader’s identification with Humbert.

Furthermore, Virginia Blum contends that ‘Lolita’s narrator wants to control the readers as much as it controls the characters’ (cited in Herbold 1998/1999, p. 74),
forcing the readers to play his game and be derided when they attempt to resist, or cannot play as well as expected. Sarah Herbold observes that Humbert draws attention to the reader’s presence at the narrative’s most transgressive moments, and emphasises that when Humbert is describing forcing Lolita to perform sex acts for her allowance he cries, ‘O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me…’ (1998/1999, p. 88). Similarly, when he masturbates against Lolita he first asks the ‘learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 62). Another example of this occurs when Humbert fantasises about kissing Lolita and exposes the reader as colluding in Humbert’s depravity through (according to Humbert, his) close reading: ‘…my learned reader, (whose eyebrows, I suspect, have by now travelled all the way to the back of his bald head)’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 52). Sexual pleasure is likened to the enjoyment of literature, and ‘the comparison of Humbert’s sexual pleasure to a male reader’s literary pleasure implies that this reader in particular is supposed to recognize that Lolita (like detective fiction in general) is a sadomasochistic and masturbatory game’ (Herbold 1998/1999, p. 86). However, Zunshine draws attention to the way Nabokov ‘manipulate[s] us into not fully comprehending what kind of reader’ he implies that the reader is: ‘a hardened pedophile… [and it is] only in contrast to this kind of reader/rapist that Humbert may appear “tenderhearted[”]’, as he claims to be elsewhere (2006, p. 107).

The text constantly draws attention to what the reader is doing, or trying to do: enjoy and understand the text. Before Humbert reveals the name of Lolita’s abductor, he suggests that it is ‘the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 310). This comment, and Lolita’s succeeding explanation that highlights clues the reader should have picked up on (Quilty’s uncle, the dentist, knew her mother; Lolita starred in his play; and Lolita misled Humbert by claiming Clare was the female playwright) undermines Humbert’s claim that he is writing his memoir to immortalise his love. Having included Lolita’s letter that says she has ‘gone through much sadness and hardship’ (p. 304) and depicted her as poor, hugely pregnant, and with faded looks, Humbert quickly turns back to finding an answer to the puzzle that has been kept from him and the readers. Humbert is more concerned with his literary creation and resuming control over his life story than with representing Lolita as she is. The reader, naturally, must follow along and concern him or herself with discovering the culprit.
and Humbert’s victim, skimming over Lolita’s tragedy. It is hard not to see these
examples as Nabokov goading the reader to denounce the book as immoral, or ignore
this discomfort and proclaim the book a masterpiece of literature (in which moral
questions are irrelevant, of course).

Humbert also draws attention to the reading process by self-consciously
highlighting potential interpretations of the novel. Attentive readers are forewarned
about over-analysing the text or looking for unconscious motivations though, as
Humbert confesses that he had ‘discovered there was an endless source of robust
enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them
see that you know all the tricks of the trade…’ (p. 36). Nabokov’s contempt for Freud
is well-established and made perfectly clear in his statement that ‘Freudism and all it
has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the
vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others’ (1973, pp. 23-4). Owing to The Interpretation of Dreams and popular tendencies in psychoanalytic
literary criticism, Nabokov correlates emphasis on symbolism in literary criticism with
Freudian psychoanalysis. In an interview published in Wisconsin Studies in
Contemporary Literature, Nabokov advises literary critics to ‘[a]sk yourself if the
symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories… Do not drag
in Freud at this point’ (Nabokov 1973, p. 66). Accordingly, he has Humbert ridicule
potential readers who attempt to psychoanalyse the narrator:

The able psychiatrist… is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside
and have me find there, at last, the “gratification” of a lifetime urge, and release from
the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial
little Miss Lee. (Nabokov 1955, p. 188)

It is true that Humbert does want to take Lolita to the beach, actually, and his use of
‘Lee’ instead of ‘Leigh’ reinforces the symbolism of ‘Annabel Lee’. Nabokov
knowingly lays the groundwork for an allegorical or psychoanalytic reading and then
tells the reader to abandon it by noting its obviousness. This apparently excludes the
possibility of such an interpretation being the solution to the text the reader is looking
for.
Similarly, Nabokov promotes a reading of Quilty as Humbert’s double. After Quilty manages to take Lolita away by pretending to be her uncle, Humbert sets out ‘to destroy my brother’ (p. 281). Although Humbert is responding to Quilty’s alias, the term resonates because of the similarities between the two characters. Both Quilty and Humbert are artists with deviant sexual desires and an aptitude for puzzles who vie for possession of Lolita. Accordingly, many critics emphasise the significance of the description of Humbert’s struggle to kill Quilty: ‘I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us’ (p. 340). James Tweedie, for example, explains that ‘Humbert’s prose flip-flops pronouns and identities, confirming that the two characters are essentially doubles’ (2000, p. 167). The idea that Quilty and Humbert are doubles is one that lends itself to a sympathetic reading of the text. For Charles Mitchell, Quilty is an externalisation of Humbert’s bestial nature, and Humbert must kill him “to liberate his spirit… destroying a part of himself”, although his violent methods mean that he cannot achieve complete redemption (1963, p. 341).

Of course, our highly literary narrator Humbert knows that the double is a common motif of psychoanalytic literary criticism that allows analysis of externalised psychic processes. If Quilty is set up as the personification of Humbert’s dark desires, what better way to prove the sincerity of Humbert’s repentance than showing him kill them? In his 1966 essay Martin Green is so suspicious of the way in which the double motif is presented for the reader he suggests that it undercuts the integrity of the novel:

we are invited to believe that Humbert first invents Quilty, to take on the worst of his own guilt, and then kills him, to purge himself symbolically. But, if this is true, then a great many of the novel’s events must be untrue, and the whole persona of the narrator is one we cannot take at face value. (Green 1966, p. 357)

The double motif threatens to conceal that the struggle between Humbert and Quilty is ‘not between the forces of good and evil… If anything, Humbert and Quilty are the forces of bad and worse’ (Jenkins 2005, p. 236).

In Nabokov’s earlier work Despair there is an indication that the author finds the idea of doubles to be a contrived literary technique. In this ironic work, the narrator Hermann Hermann recounts how he met his double Felix by chance on a business trip, and convinced him to help Hermann commit fraud before murdering him instead in a ploy to receive the life insurance money. Like Humbert, Hermann takes great pride in
his literary skill—he is ‘perfectly sure of [his] power to write and of [his] marvellous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness’ (1966, p. 13)—but in a contrast to Humbert, Hermann’s assurances of his skill conflict with the awkwardness of his prose and his inexperience with producing art: ‘Rather bulky imagery, this’ (p. 13), he comments, and later notes that ‘I think I ought to inform the reader that there has just been a long interval’ (p. 14). Nevertheless, when his plan fails because no-one else thinks that the double resembles him, he is appalled that they do not realise that the murder is a work of art, legitimising his double. He laments that the police,

faced by the miracle of Felix’s resemblance to me… hurled themselves upon such small and quite immaterial blemishes as would, given a deeper and finer attitude towards my masterpiece, pass unnoticed, the way a beautiful book is not in the least impaired by a misprint or a slip of the pen. (p. 160).

Although he resists the truth, Hermann is forced to confront the fact that doubles are means of conveying information via symbolism in literature, rather than an accurate reflection of the world. Wood explains that ‘Lolita is not only a book with a manically material double in it, it is a joke about books which allow such creatures any sort of run’ (1994, p. 128). The double motif is there for readers to find, but not openly ridiculed by Humbert in the way that he does alternate interpretations because this particular motif promotes the desired sympathetic response from the reader (which seems not to have been sought in Despair). As Green notes, Lolita ‘is in part a game the narrator is playing against us… and he is not above cheating’ (1966, p. 358).

In a related move, Humbert draws attention to the reader’s expectations borne of literary and cinematic conventions. In the very first pages he introduces Annabel as the girl he had been attempting to re-find throughout his adult life—and then barely mentions her once Lolita has been introduced (Quayle 2009, p. 8). The Annabel reference becomes a mere trope of memoirs, abandoned for the conventions of other genres. Accordingly, Humbert uses phrases such as ‘the door I had slammed… [was] a poor substitute for the backhand slap with which I ought to have hit her across the cheekbone according to the rules of the movies’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 13). He also compares the events of his narrative with ‘a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics; but that is not McFate’s way—even if one does learn to recognize certain obscure indications’ (p. 239), suggesting to the reader that Humbert has been
consciously writing his memoir with the genre of detective fiction in mind. But as ‘A Nursery Tale’ is a parody of a fairy-tale, not a traditional fairy-tale, so is Lolita a parody of detective fiction: ‘This detective story does not solve a crime, but is solved by one’ (Wills 1974, p. 4). Moreover, the ambiguous references to Humbert’s crimes from the foreword suggest to the reader that they are to deduce the victim, and later, Lolita’s abductor.

The reader is not warned that they should be treating Humbert’s entire narrative as unreliable testimony—as Zunshine remarks, ‘[w]e do not realize until well into the novel, and sometimes not even then, that no information offered, however casually, by Humbert was safe from his manipulation and misrepresentation’ (2006, p. 103)—so that the allusions to murder and kidnapping draw the reader’s attention away from the component of the narrative that requires readerly vigilance. Nabokov draws attention to genre throughout the novel to demonstrate how readers rely on convention and may see what they expect to see. By doing so, Nabokov attempts to reawaken the reader to think about what is actually in the text rather than what they infer.

Wolfgang Iser explains that reading is a creative act in which the reader only achieves comprehension by filling in the gaps between what is presented in the text (1978, pp. 107-8). Consequently, as Humbert is the unreliable narrator of a fictional memoir, this creates a layer of implied ‘truth’ that the reader can attempt to reach by reading between the lines. For example, when Humbert reaches orgasm while Lolita is on his lap, he assures the reader ‘[t]he child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 68). However, in his description of the event ‘[i]mmediately afterward (as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased) she rolled off the sofa… cheeks aflame, hair awry…’ (p. 67). Herbold argues that ‘Lolita may be not only having an orgasm but also orchestrating their mutual stimulation’ and asks, if that is the case, ‘is it possible that Humbert could not have known… [?] Who is deceiving whom… [?]’ (1998/1999, p. 82). The disjunction between what Humbert describes and his conclusions suggest that his perspective cannot be trusted and that readers must judge for themselves whether Lolita knew what was happening or not, constructing a competing version of events (Marcus 2005, p. 193). Quayle contends that we can find the ‘real’ Lolita because Nabokov made an ‘effort to ensure that, in spite of the fact that her story is told by Humbert, Lolita had a strong presence and a clear voice in the
text’ (2009, p. 22). However, when Quayle says that the aforementioned scene is a popular example ‘of the way in which the novel encourages the reader to discover the ‘truth’ about Lolita and the events concerning her by reading through the gaps in Humbert’s narrative’ (2009, p. 5), she, like the other critics she alludes to, assumes that there is a character to be found by the reader beyond the image Humbert shares.

*Lolita* is fiction, though, and so the only thing that *does* exist is the unreliable narration, a fact ironically alluded to in the preface that speaks of ‘the “real” people beyond the “true” story’ (Nabokov 1955, p. 2). The reader may feel intelligent for picking up on Humbert’s duplicity, but Nabokov has left the allusions to a real Lolita there for them to find. Wood has an insightful response to this dilemma:

…can we sensibly speak… of [Lolita as] a substantial American child? Aren’t all the characters made of words, here as everywhere else in literature? …Lolita is Humbert’s obsession and what escapes it, she is its name and its boundary. The ‘actual’ Lolita is the person we see Humbert can’t see, or can see only spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not because the reader makes her up or because she is just ‘there’ in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do. (1994, p. 117)

The indications of what the character of Lolita was feeling in the scenario described by the unreliable narrator are just as much the work of the author as the information stated explicitly. There is a comment made by Humbert during their stay at The Enchanted Hunters that relates to this point, and is one of Nabokov’s most generous clues that the key to the novel is the language itself:

Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me… (Nabokov 1955, p. 146)

Humbert does not exist unless imagined by a reader and this, of course, is just as true for Lolita. Accordingly, searching for the ‘real’ Lolita is just as much a trap as looking for the reasons for Humbert’s obsession with Lolita. Both, as Wood indicates, are
demonstrations of the games Nabokov can play with words, creating worlds and characters.

‘Aesthetic Bliss’ and Moral Education

Weiner’s *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia* (1998), to which I have referred in this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis, is the most sustained analysis of the Devil motif and its relation to artistic anxiety in Nabokov’s work. However, our conclusions diverge because he situates Nabokov’s work within the Russian tradition of demonic novels rather than modernism, as I have discussed earlier. In Weiner’s view, unlike his antecedents, Nabokov writes novels in which a malevolent narrator appears to have control of the novel but finally submits to the goodness of the world created by the ‘outer deity’ or author. While this is a plausible reading of novels such as *Lolita, Despair*, and *Laughter in the Dark* (1996), for example, it downplays the games Nabokov plays with his readers that imply an important modernist heritage, as well as his published statements on the character of art.

Walter Cohen contends that the publication of *Pale Fire* (1962) saw ‘Vladimir Nabokov emerge in the critical literature as the quintessential modernist—uninterested in politics, society, or even morality, but extremely concerned with games, patterns, consciousness, and memory’ (1983, p. 333). While Nabokov is both a significant writer and a modernist, the term ‘quintessential’ misleadingly suggests that Nabokov’s work embodies all the major trends of modernism. John Burt Foster, Jr. explains that Nabokov ‘favors parody, cultural multiplicity, a richly textured novelistic prose, and a guarded receptivity to life writing’ but ‘[h]e rejects the mythical method, fixed cultural centers, poetry made new in the manner of Pound, and the doctrine of authorial impersonality’ (2005, p. 91). Nabokov does not respond to the question of secularism and the place of literature in the secular world with overt anxiety or nostalgia. Instead, he became the writer most often cited in discussions of modernist self-consciousness because, in the fictional worlds of his novels, this authorial God makes his and his reader’s presence known (Alter 1975; Boyd 1983; 21)

21 Unlike *Lolita* which was written in English, *Laughter in the Dark* and *Despair* were written and originally published in Russian in 1933 and 1934 respectively, and translated by the author and published in English in 1938 and 1937 (revised 1965).
Chénetier 1996; Hutcheon 1984; Stonehill 1988; Waugh 1984). As Cohen notes, ‘[w]hen the world seems to lose its meaning, the basis for authorial knowledge and judgement disappears. The self-consciousness, or artifice, of Nabokov’s prose is partly designed to overcome this problem’ (1983, p. 336).

As such, even though the idea that literary creation is diabolical could be the heritage of either tradition, the techniques he uses to evoke this idea are modernist. Although all my examples of diabolical literature are self-conscious, Lolita foregrounds its self-consciousness more overtly than any of the other texts; it seeks to ‘expose the very artificiality of the novel genre and its conventions and… flaunt conspicuous awareness of the presence of [its] readers in the imaginative process of reading’ (Moore 2001, p. 76). The conventions of metafiction, therefore, are Nabokov’s most complex ruse. Humbert uses metafictional techniques in an attempt to pre-empt the reader’s analysis of his unconscious motivations, or destabilise the reader’s identification with Humbert, just as his fancy prose style encourages sympathy for Humbert. This diabolical text tempts the unreflective reader to forgo reflective and creative thinking and agree that the novel is immoral, or that it is beautiful and amoral, or that Humbert eventually realises the error of his ways and truly loves Lolita. The reader who perceives these traps and deems the text inherently equivocal is in a position to realise that the ‘solution’ to Lolita lies in the reader’s relationship to the text—an answer supported by Nabokov’s later work, Pale Fire (1962), where the real story is in Charles Kinbote’s interpretation of John Shade’s poem.

Alter notes that a self-conscious or metafictional novel that allows the reader to see the fictional world as an authorial construct ‘could conceivably be no more than… a self-indulgent game’ (1975, p. xiv). However, ‘when such devices are integrated into a large critical vision of the dialectic interplay between fiction and reality, they may produce one of the most illuminating dimensions of the experience we undergo in reading a novel…’ (1975, p. xiv). Metafiction highlights the artificiality of the story presented for the reader, and enables them to more clearly recognise the techniques used by the author to manipulate and persuade. For the readers who recognise that this is not just a style but a theme in Lolita, there is an invitation to consider the morality of literature.
Although it would seem that Nabokov did not explicitly make any such claim, his assertion that ‘[a] work of art has no importance whatever to society’ (1973, p. 33) does in fact support this contention. This comment has been misleadingly described as ‘recall[ing] Wilde’s pronouncement that no one could be harmed by a book because “art has no influence upon action”’ (Ladenson 2007, p. 200). Nabokov says that art has no effect on society; he did not say on the reader. For Nabokov, the act of reading can make one more perceptive, thoughtful, and even encourage the development of a personal morality. Leona Toker acknowledges that he ‘saw ethical value in aesthetic experience and created conditions for such experience’ for his reader (2005, p. 232).

However, Nabokov also claimed that ‘I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit’ (1973, p. 16). Good art, he thought, should entertain and awe instead of moralise. He did imply that he was actively trying to teach the reader something though when he said that the ‘major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer’ (Nabokov 1980, p. 5). Aesthetics do not provide direct access to ethics or morality, but the ‘enchantment’ creates an experience that is conducive to reflection. Accordingly, Nabokov emphasises ‘such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead’ for ‘general ideas are of no importance’ (1973, p. 157). In another interview he reiterates the idea that aesthetic appreciation of the intricate detail of the work enables the learning process:

…I could never explain adequately to certain students in my literature classes, the aspects of good reading—the fact that you read an artist’s book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine. “Ladies and gentleman, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel.” (1973, p. 41)

As this quote demonstrates, the reader is encouraged to find what the author wanted them to feel, not automatically take on the author’s message. If Nabokov was teaching anything, it was that an enchanting text that captures the reader’s attention and sympathies can broaden the reader’s moral awareness.

In ‘On a Book Entitled Lolita’ Nabokov argues that the only reason to read fiction is to experience the feeling of ‘aesthetic bliss’—but offers a definition of
‘aesthetic bliss’ that is compatible with a developed personal morality rather than aestheticism:

There are gentle souls who would pronounce Lolita meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s assertion, Lolita has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (Nabokov 1955, p. 358)

The qualities associated with Nabokov’s definition of ‘aesthetic bliss’ are the ones an attentive and compassionate reader should have. The readers of Lolita who do not enjoy aesthetic bliss and utilise all of these qualities read naively and superficially, and fall into Nabokov’s traps. Compassion without curiosity leads to sympathising with Humbert, because the reader does not interrogate his unreliable narration. Similarly, curiosity and ecstasy without tenderness promotes the amoral response to the text that suggests that the beauty of the work is all that matters.

As I have previously mentioned, the text tempts the reader to look past Lolita’s tragic circumstances in order to solve the mystery of her abductor. Rorty suggests that the text depicts or encourages careless cruelty in this way to warn the reader that they can become complicit if they are not attentive. He highlights Nabokov’s comment in ‘On a Book Entitled Lolita’ that ‘the Kasbeam barber’ is one of ‘the nerves of the novel… the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted—although I realize very clearly that these and other scenes will be skimmed over or not noticed’ (Nabokov 1956, p. 360). The significance of the barber episode is that Humbert belatedly realises that he was so inattentive to the barber’s tales of his son that he did not comprehend that the son was long dead. Rorty likens this to Humbert’s transcript of Charlotte’s letter, in which he leaves out a paragraph about Lolita’s deceased brother, and suggests that there are allusions to the brother throughout the text for the attentive reader. For Nabokov, Rorty claims, ‘the death of a child is [the] standard example of ultimate pain’ and the reader who glosses over these lines supports Nabokov’s fear that ‘there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness’ (1989, pp. 163, 0). The model for this, of course, is Humbert himself, locating Rorty’s
reading in the tradition that condemns Humbert for his preference for art at the expense of life. Notably, Rorty also recognises that Nabokov is concerned with the reader’s response to the cruelty depicted in the text, but his statement that Nabokov fears that ‘there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness’ is misleading. Nabokov may fear this is the case for many of his readers, but he did not assume that it was an impossibility. The traps that he sets for the inattentive or naive reader demonstrate that he is fully aware that some readers will empathise with his fictional creations and ignore the markers of their artificiality, just as some will ignore the representations of suffering because of the beauty of the work. There are rewards, though, for those who approach the work in search of ecstasy with kindness.

Toker claims that what Nabokov is doing is educating the senses, which:

- consists in learning to perceive what is... not relevant for any practical endeavour, to perceive details for their own sake... the education of the senses means learning to perceive not only the “useless” beauty but also the “irrelevant” pain of another human being, that which appeals to pity’ (2005, p. 236).

While some aforementioned critics such as Winston, Rothstein and Bordo consider the text to be about Humbert’s blindness to Lolita, I propose that it is really about the fact that the reader can be persuaded—through the manipulation of language and artistic technique—to also be blind to Lolita’s suffering, and to that of minor characters. Consequently, I agree with Toker’s argument that Lolita can educate the senses and thus develop a personal morality, but contend that both Toker’s and Rorty’s interpretations of the effects of the text neglect the conceptual metaphor at work in the novel. Nabokov does indeed encourage readers to be attentive and compassionate as to prevent careless cruelty in reading and in life—and he does it by warning that literature is diabolical.

**Conclusion**

Appel, reworking a metaphor Mary McCarthy used for Pale Fire, suggests that in Lolita we are ‘looking down on three or more games being played simultaneously by two chess masters on several separate glass boards, each arranged successively above the other’ (1970a, p. lxxi). Nabokov uses unreliable narration, intertextual references,
metafictional techniques and plays with words to keep the reader unsettled and force them to read even more closely to avoid being tricked. In the course of the novel, he makes the reader consider the world through the mind of a pedophile and murderer and witness the suffering of a young girl, suggests that the implied reader is as perverse as the narrator, and mocks the reader if they attempt to psychoanalyse or otherwise explain or judge Humbert. He also tempts the reader to sympathise with the pedophile and murderer, ignore the representation of a girl’s suffering in order to solve a mystery, accept an implausible amount of coincidences, and above all else, treat words on the page as though they referred to real people, real events, and real pain.

Nabokov, then, is not benevolently warning that literature and language are diabolical; he is basking in the opportunity of sharing his revelation with the readers that can keep up with him. In conventional novels the reader is implicitly asked to sympathise with characters, trust the narrator, accept the events and interpretations given as true, and recognise a moral schema that recalls our own world. In modernity, however, the autonomy of art means that authors are ostensibly free to represent anything and assert any claims. Nabokov’s *Lolita* makes the techniques in the modernist author’s arsenal—symbolism, metaphor, plotting, metafictionality, intertextuality, narration, word choice—ostentatious and obvious so that thoughtful readers can see the means by which they can be persuaded to feel and think. Nabokov practices ‘[d]eceipt, to the point of diabolism’ (Nabokov 1967, p. 222) to show that it is up to the reader to apply moral principles, because the modernist author does not have to be moral when writing.  

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22 I gave a paper based on this chapter at the 2014 conference of the *Australasian Association of Literature: Literature and Affect*, where the chair of my panel, Joe Hughes, made the insightful observation that even the ‘way out’ of Nabokov’s trap is diabolical, because the author demands that the reader respond to the novel in a certain way—essentially creating the ultimate trap.
The Morality of Being a Writer

The magnitude of the political changes throughout the world in the mid-twentieth century shaped the way writers of this time engaged with the conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical*. The two texts discussed in this section, *The Master and Margarita* and *Doctor Faustus*, are urgent responses to the question of the place of literature in their respective cultures—Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. The effect of Soviet censorship on Bulgakov and forced exile on Mann prompted them to turn their focus back onto themselves, as a representative ‘writer’, rather than on their readers.

This means that such works return to the idea that the writer has to be responsible—moral, if not ethical—when writing. The possibilities of modernism are not treated with the same levity as in Nabokov’s subsequent *Lolita* because Bulgakov’s and Mann’s disagreements with the ethical standards of their governments are far too strong. Instead, both writers attempt to provide an alternative perspective to those authorised by the repressive governments of their countries.

The self-consciousness of modernism means that they cannot do so without also confronting their own identity as writers. For Bulgakov, who maintains that the Soviet government is in need of a diabolical adversary, this is not too troubling. For Mann, however, the flawed nature of the writer threatens the worthiness of the writer’s output. Thus, the two texts offer contrasting perspectives on the morality of being a writer.
The Gospel according to the Devil; or, Mikhail Bulgakov’s

_The Master and Margarita_

Introduction

Over the ten or so years that Mikhail Bulgakov spent writing and revising _The Master and Margarita_, the novel’s title underwent two changes. As the original draft did not even include characters called the Master or Margarita, its title was ‘The Gospel according to the Devil’ and later ‘The Gospel according to Woland’ before becoming _The Master and Margarita_ (Weeks 1996, pp. 12-3). This background information suggests that the final text is not only about the Devil’s visit to 1930s Moscow, but is a self-confessed diabolical text.

From the perspective of the Soviet government, this is certainly the case. Their priority was the establishment of the communist state, meaning that complete conformity was required to ensure that the revolution could be completed. One method used to eradicate antithetical beliefs was the prevention of their promulgation, so that there was no artistic or religious freedom in Russia under Soviet leadership. This is represented in the opening pages of _The Master and Margarita_, where Berlioz schools Bezdomny on the mistake he made in depicting ‘a Jesus who had once existed, although, admittedly, a Jesus provided with all sorts of negative traits’ when the only appropriate view is ‘that Jesus… never existed on earth at all’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 5). Thus, the novel begins with the enforcement of Soviet ideology in a scene that would not be out of place in a ‘socialist realist’ novel (Avins 1986, p. 277); the genre that conformed to the censors’ demand that literature glorify communism. However, in _The Master and Margarita_ this ideology soon becomes the object of mockery.

Bulgakov’s extant plays, novels and short stories reveal his frustration with Soviet ideology and its impact on everyday life in Russia. His long-standing defiance and the Soviet authorities’ repressive restrictions on art meant that very few of his plays were performed—even when he accepted and fulfilled a commission to write a positive treatment of Joseph Stalin’s early years. This play, J.A.E. Curtis surmises, would have offered Bulgakov the opportunity ‘to reflect publically on the tyrant’ who had ‘interven[ed] to save [his career] in 1930, but subsequently presided over his
gradual strangulation as a writer’ (1991b, p. 230). Bulgakov’s response to this situation was to continue writing in secret, with the last ten years of his life spent revising *The Master and Margarita*. The novel has become his best known and most celebrated work since it was published twenty-six years after his death in censored form in the journal *Moskva* in 1966 and 1967, and then in full in 1973 (Curtis 1991b, p. x). As Weiner has said, ‘[t]he novel’s explosive success owes much to the animation with which its devilish heroes travesty the belief system of Bulgakov’s atheist society’ (1998, p. 1).

The subversive plot of *The Master and Margarita* starts when Berlioz and Bezdomny’s conversation is interrupted by a foreigner intrigued by their casual acceptance of atheism, as befits their political association. He assaults their faith in the rational capabilities of humankind, beguiles them with a narrative about Pontius Pilate’s first meeting with Jesus—which he claims to have witnessed—and predicts future events including his residence in Berlioz’s apartment, Berlioz’s impending death by decapitation and Bezdomny’s institutionalisation. This foreign visitor later claims to be a supernatural being: the Devil. The foreigner’s identity is fitting for a novel satirising the officially atheist Soviet Union. Riita H. Pittman notes:

> From the official viewpoint, Woland is evil: he represents those regions of human experience whose existence the prevailing ideology seeks to ignore, and even to deny. For example, the mundane world is termed the only reality, but Woland bears testimony to the existence of metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. Thus his visit to Moscow results in the Muscovites being brought face to face with evil, as defined by their society’s official code. (1991, p. 21)

*The Master and Margarita* parodies such designations of good and evil, for the arrival of this ‘evil’ force sees the writer protagonist and his lover rewarded and the morally corrupt Muscovites terrorised and punished in a largely jovial tone. Bulgakov’s inversion of his society’s values requires an inversion of the work’s epigraph from *Faust*: ‘I am part of the power which forever wills evil and forever works good’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 1). While Woland’s vendetta against the writers and theatrical staff who have acquiesced to the demands of the Soviet government and support of a writer bold enough to write on Pontius Pilate is evil from the official viewpoint Pittman
speaks of, it reflects Bulgakov’s inverted value system. To Bulgakov, Woland is no Mephistopheles; he ‘wills evil’ for those who blindly follow authority and ultimately ‘works good’ for the Master and Margarita, who have love, faith, and imagination. *The Master and Margarita* is ‘a protest against socialist realism and a defense of artistic freedom’ (Tumanov 1989, p. 49).

It is striking that in his narrative of the Devil visiting Moscow, Bulgakov opted for a complete inversion of values, rather than casting Stalin as the Devil. As Stalin was the authority responsible for the government’s policies regarding art and religion, as well as its brutal methods of enforcing them, many writers sharing Bulgakov’s politics wrote satirical works in which Stalin is represented as the Devil or the Antichrist (Ryan 2009, p. 120). Karen L. Ryan asserts that there is reason to believe that Woland ‘is on one level a portrait of Stalin’ while also admitting that amongst critics, ‘[t]here is considerable disagreement concerning the validity of an allegorical reading of the character of Woland as Stalin’ (2009, pp. 120,31). She reconciles the attributes that suggest Stalin—Woland’s role in the disappearances of many Muscovites and his influence over the Master—with the qualities and allegiances that discredit a reading of Woland-as-Stalin by suggesting that he reflects Bulgakov’s ambivalence towards Stalin, who ‘was not only the agent of evil who needed to be satirically purged from Russian culture’, but ‘could save or destroy lives and careers at will’ (2009, p. 136). As Woland is presented as opposed to Soviet ideologies, he cannot be understood as an unequivocal allusion to Stalin, but Stalin’s role as Bulgakov’s sometimes benefactor may have influenced Woland’s portrayal.

After all, *The Master and Margarita* is dominated by Bulgakov’s dream of a Russia in which he could publish such a work. In 1930 Bulgakov wrote a letter to the Soviet government that included the following lines:

To struggle against censorship, whatever its nature, and whatever the power under which it exists, is my duty as a writer, as are calls for freedom of the press. I am a passionate supporter of that freedom, and I consider that if any writer were to imagine that he could prove he didn’t need that freedom, then he would be like a fish affirming in public that it didn’t need water. (cited in Curtis 1991b, p. 106)
The Devil’s choice of targets in *The Master and Margarita* demonstrate that Bulgakov was not only opposed to the state censorship which gave him the marginal status of a writer whose works could not reach the public, but rejected hortatory censorship with equal rancour. While his satirical works were frequently banned by the censors, the state-sanctioned socialist realism reached its intended audience. Amei Wallach explains that ‘[c]ensorship in the Soviet Union succeeded absolutely when government support of the arts became the only form of support available’ (1991, p. 75). For this reason, Bulgakov begged the government to let him leave Russia where his livelihood was crippled by censorship, and stayed because Stalin intervened and found him work at the Moscow Arts Theatre (Curtis 1991b, pp. 111-12). Bulgakov’s novel can be seen as a treatise against both the state censorship that prevents the publication of heterodox art, and the willingness of authors to write socialist realism and practice internal censorship, denying their creative impulses. The Devil’s support of subversive artists—like Bulgakov—within the novel suggests that he embraced the adversarial role of the Devil. In this sense he is unlike Milton, knowing that he is ‘a true Poet and of the Devil’s party’ (Blake 2010, p. 12). Accordingly, he appears to write for an imagined or implied Soviet reader, who he needs to guide (or tempt) ‘to a wider historical and cultural reality beyond the conventions of Soviet life’ (Kisel 2009, p. 584). As communicative reason or even unhindered dialogue was impossible in Soviet Russia, Bulgakov sought to inform his readers that it was both possible and desirable to disagree with state policy.

It is because literature has the potential to be like the Devil and challenge the accepted law (of God, or the Soviets) that Bulgakov maintains that it has a fundamental role to play in society. Uniquely amongst my examples of diabolical literature, *The Master and Margarita* was produced in a society where literature had never been considered a substitute for religion, but was thought of as a challenger to Soviet ideology in the same category as religion: threats to the Soviet value of reason. Accordingly, as Christianity had lost its influence over Russian ethical standards, Bulgakov mobilises Christian narratives (and select values) to critique his society’s values and norms in terms of their morality and suitability for human experiences. Woland and his retinue are not only in Moscow to help the Master and test the Muscovites, but also to share the story of Pontius Pilate, who learned too late that faith
should triumph over political ideals. They are ultimately concerned with the expression of the irrational capacity of humankind: faith, imagination, love, laughter and the production of art. Irrationality has been demonised in Soviet Russia, and so it takes the Devil to show these are an essential compliment to reason, just as God needs the Devil, and light requires the shadows. Thus, for Bulgakov, the transgressive position outlined by Gaut—in which transgression of accepted norms and values in literature is encouraged—was justified by the repressive censorship and ideals of Soviet Russia.

Furthermore, his novel is not only diabolical because it opposes the ‘pseudo-religion’ of Marxism (Lawrence 1972, p. 577), but because it makes manifest the threatening associations of the Devil: temptation, trickery, and most importantly, ambiguity. It is no coincidence that critics’ readings of *The Master and Margarita* are often elaborate and contradictory, diverging on such issues as the authorship of the Jerusalem narrative, Woland’s primary purpose in Moscow, and the meaning of symbolism. The conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical* enables Bulgakov to put to work the ambiguity associated with the Devil to destabilise the coherent world view promoted by socialist realism. As such, in this chapter I contextualise *The Master and Margarita* in terms of the unique understanding of the Devil in the Russian culture and the restrictions on the publication of literature under the Soviet regime, and elucidate how modernist techniques heighten Bulgakov’s challenge to Soviet ideology. I then propose that the diabolical nature of the narrative is so engrained that a case can be made for the Devil, Woland, being the narrator of both the Moscow and Jerusalem narratives. Throughout, I argue that in order to draw attention to the crippling one-sidedness of Soviet ideology, Bulgakov presents his critique as a diabolical novel, which resists any attempts to contain it using reason.

**Devils and Demons in Russia**

In her introduction to *Russian Literature and Its Demons* (2000b) Davidson explains that the proliferation of devils and demons is a distinguishing feature of the doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian folklore. Unlike Western Christianity, which envisions the Devil as a singular opponent of either God or every sinner, multifarious ‘agents of temptation and deception’ are more common in the Orthodox tradition (Franklin 2000, p. 42). Belief in the plurality of devils and demons is also
associated with Russian folklore, which synthesised Christian demonology with existing belief in mythical spirits (Wigzell 2000). Thus, when the Devil is treated as a singular being—the Orthodox Devil—he is an amalgam of these different understandings of the Devil: profoundly ambiguous. As Simon Franklin explains, in the Orthodox Church, ‘[t]he Devil is an extrapolation, a field of possibilities, a set of interwoven traditions’ (Franklin 2000, p. 33).

This unique understanding of devils and demons accounts for the frequency of representations of the Devil in Russian literature, such as The Master and Margarita and Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, which is discussed briefly in Chapter Four and in the appendix to this thesis. For Davidson, the transition of the resonant cultural understanding of devils and demons into literary figures led directly to the recurrent theme of literature as demonic:

From the cells of monks and the marshes, woodlands and ravines of the peasant world, they migrated into literature and set about the business of adapting to this new habitat. Their main sphere of action became the literary world, their target—writers and readers, and their principle weapon—the creative process and the literary text. Although this shift of environment brought about various inevitable changes, many essential features were retained: literary demons remained ubiquitous and dangerous agents of temptation or manifestations of the unclean force, ambivalent in their many different guises, and highly elusive. (2000b, p. 19)

Although the association between writing and the Devil had been made across the Western world since the inception of the Christian church, this issue has been explored far more in Russian literature than the literature of any other Western culture. Weiner argues that it is because the association between the novelistic creation and divinity is particularly powerful in Russian culture. While God and the artist are associated allegorically elsewhere, in Russia they are directly linked as a result of the Orthodox church’s view of art as God-given, and the relatively late introduction of secular literature into Russia in the seventeenth century (Weiner 1998, pp. 38-44).

Lolita, although written in English by an author residing in America, is to a large degree also a Russian novel because of Nabokov’s Russian nationality.
Weiner asserts that it has led to the development of a theme particular to Russian literature. In major works such as Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Dostoevsky’s *Devils* [*Demons*] and Bely’s *Petersburg*, Weiner asserts, the moral viewpoint of the work is compromised by this cultural obsession with demons and devils that threatens to corrupt the work from within. Implicit in his argument is the view that atheism was never fully embraced by the country’s writers, making their anxiety about literature’s demonic nature sincere and consuming. For Weiner, though, *The Master and Margarita* embraces the association between the Devil and literature underpinning much of Russian writing—without giving in to the Devil. Weiner claims that ‘Bulgakov culminates the line of demonic novels with an implicit movement back to the God from which it swerved in the first place…’ (1998, p. 7) by having the divine figure of Yeshua reward art brought into being by a passionate writer also helped by the Devil. Although I agree with the majority of his reading of *The Master and Margarita*, I disagree with his assumption that the association between the divine and the diabolical in the work means that it is ultimately reconciled to the Orthodox Church. The literary nature of both Woland (whose name is an allusion to an alias of Goethe’s Mephistopheles) and Yeshua (who, while associated with Jesus, is not the figure of scripture) contradicts Weiner’s reading. *The Master and Margarita*, I argue, engages with religion to make a claim about literature, rather than thematising literature to make a claim about the validity of a certain religion. I suggest, then, that while *The Master and Margarita* cannot be taken out of context and is undoubtedly influenced by the Russian cultural tradition, it can be insightfully read in terms of its similarities with other twentieth century works that thematise the diabolical nature of literature.

*The Master and Margarita*, after all, is more than a novel about the Devil. It is a novel that juggles satire, realism and the fairy tale; incorporates far too much ambiguity to allow a stable and coherent interpretation; and subverts the value system of the context in which it was written. It fits the definition that Vicki Mahaffey proposes for modernism: works that inspire a transformation of ‘perception, thought, and feeling. Such works stimulate engaged readers to interpret more independently, more sensually, more thoughtfully, more joyfully, less deferentially’ (2007, p. vii). *The Master and Margarita* sees the Devil intrude on the banal lives of the Muscovites and
expose the limitations of the Soviet lifeworld, prompting the implied Soviet reader to reconsider the world outside of ideology. Yet, this transformative experience is a response to true terror and fear. The Gothic motifs allude to ‘[t]he dark side of the discourse and experience of modernity’ (Riquelme 2008, p. 7): in this case, Soviet ideology and life under communism. The influence of the Gothic on modernism has been noted more frequently in recent scholarship, after Smith and Wallace, in their introduction to *Gothic Modernisms*, asserted that ‘the roots of modernism can be found in the Gothic’s images of perversion and disorder’ (2001, p. 3).

*The Master and Margarita* is the exception that proves the rule of diabolical literature. Uniquely, the text engages with the techniques of literary modernism but is responding to a cultural context that, while European, was shaped by Marxist views of literature rather than the idealistic (and ideological) vision of literature shared by Arnold and his contemporaries. Though the impetus for Bulgakov’s exploration of the morality of literature is dramatically different—resulting in an unusually positive understanding of literature as diabolical—there are enough similarities between Bulgakov’s work and the other works I discuss for it to be included in the category of ‘diabolical literature’. This suggests that the tendency to self-consciously interrogate the morality of literature is an inextricable part of modernism.

Thus, I argue that *The Master and Margarita* is a major work of modernism that uses a profoundly ambiguous Devil to expose the avowedly rational and orderly Soviet Union as perverted, disordered and essentially blind to the modern condition. This is done by recovering the Russian demonological tradition that had been suppressed by the Soviets.

‘The Devil Only Knows’

This cultural tradition was never fully eradicated, for the Orthodox and folk heritage of a multiplicity of devils has shaped the Russian language. A common refrain in *The Master and Margarita* is the colloquial phrase, ‘the devil only knows’ or ‘the devil knows what’ (Bulgakov 1995, pp. 105, 97), said by the Muscovites flippantly when reality is beyond their comprehension. In Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O’Connor’s English translation of the novel, there are at least forty-six examples of colloquial phrases mentioning the Devil made by characters to express surprise or
confusion. Pittman explains that such “devilish” expressions… are very common in Russian colloquial speech and almost totally innocuous in meaning’ and their proliferation is ironic, for ‘the Soviet citizens, allegedly self-professed atheist and rationalists, reassert the reality of the devil’s existence despite themselves by constantly referring to him’ (1991, p. 40).

The Devil’s strong association with the unknowable in the Russian language is significant for an analysis of the Devil’s visit to Moscow in The Master and Margarita. What is he there for, after all? He seems to have a wildly different role from Part One to Part Two, as he begins by punishing vice and then shifts to rewarding virtue (Lakshin 1975, pp. 255-6). It is possible that he is there only to host his Grand Ball at midnight on Good Friday, and his other activities were unforeseen. Considering the title of the novel, it is also possible that he is there to redeem the Master and his lover Margarita. However, Korovyov claims that Margarita was chosen to be hostess of Woland’s Ball because tradition dictates that the hostess must be a native of the location of the Ball called Margarita and she was the only suitable candidate, and it appears that the Master only meets Woland because his return is Margarita’s wish. Can we take seriously Woland’s laughter and surprise when the Master tells him that he is the author of a novel about Pontius Pilate, though? The story Woland tells Berlioz and Bezdomny about Pontius Pilate at the beginning of the novel seems to be the same narrative as the chapters of the Master’s novel that Margarita later reads. Just how much Woland knows or is controlling is unclear. As a consequence, ‘the devil only knows’ what he is really doing in Moscow.

Bulgakov amplifies the Devil’s mysteriousness by attributing to him diabolical acts but potentially divine intentions. Woland prophesises (and perhaps orchestrates) Berlioz’s death; ruins, exiles or otherwise harms the employees of the Variety Theater; and holds a Grand Ball for historical villains that ends with a human sacrifice. However, his crimes are largely in the name of justice and are punishments that reflect a morality that is comprehensible, albeit unconventional. For example, Woland punishes the staff of the Variety Theater because ‘they’ve been acting like swine lately. They get drunk, use their position to have affairs with women, don’t do a damn thing…”’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 69). Woland does also tempt people to give in to desires forbidden in their society. In his magic show he proves that the Muscovites are
materialistic and greedy despite their claims to be good socialists with his magical shop of foreign luxury clothes. Nevertheless, he does not seek to take their souls in repayment. Their humiliation as they are left stranded in their underwear as the clothes disappear is enough to satisfy him and prove his point about the flaws of life in Soviet Russia. Moreover, Woland’s comic exile of Styopa to Yalta—which is no more than an inconvenience—contrasts sharply with the terror associated with the deportations and disappearances of renegades and innocents under Stalin in the period in which Bulgakov was writing. Consequently, Woland represents a power that does upset enlightened rationalism of socialist Moscow, but is not ‘evil’.

The clearest indication of his intentions occurs during the performance of ‘Black Magic and Its Exposé’. Woland asks his associate, Korovyyov, in the guise of Fagot, ‘have the Muscovites changed, in your opinion, in any significant way?’ (p. 101). They agree that the Muscovites have changed externally, but Woland observes that internally, ‘they are like people anywhere’ (p. 104). Regardless of whether Woland orchestrated the events of the novel, it seems that he does have a clear goal for his visit to Moscow: to determine whether communism has truly changed the Muscovites, and fulfils their needs as it purports to do.

For this reason, the attention of Woland and his retinue is focused on the two areas of human culture typically oriented towards reconciling people to the harsh realities of the world: religion and art. In regards to the former, the first lesson that Woland teaches is the seventh proof of the existence of God. At the end of his conversation with Berlioz and Bezdomny Woland says:

But as we part, I implore you, at least believe that the devil exists! ...Keep in mind that for this we have the seventh proof, the most reliable of them all! And you are about to get a demonstration. (p. 35)

As the ‘demonstration’ of this proof involves Berlioz being decapitated by a streetcar, as Woland predicted, one plausible interpretation of the seventh proof would be the ubiquity of evil which proves the existence of the Devil, and as a corollary, God. However, the question that Woland asks the men upon hearing that they are atheists, ‘if there is no God, then… who is in control of man’s life and the whole order of things on earth?’ (p. 8) suggests that this issue is key. Although death could be associated
with evil, Berlioz’s death does not seem to be an act of evil: he slips on oil spilt by accident and is run over by a streetcar that could not stop in time. It is true that Berlioz’s death could be classed as an act of evil if Woland had not only predicted Berlioz’s death but orchestrated it. As this important distinction is left unclear, though, it more accurate to say that the lesson is that God exists because there is order in the world external to human will, rather than that God exists because the Devil does. What is demonstrated in Patriarch’s Ponds is that Berlioz was wrong in his claim that he had complete control over his life and could state with certainty what he would be doing that evening. This suggests that what Bulgakov’s ‘seventh proof’ actually proves is the existence of forces that humans cannot comprehend, and may appear to be diabolical or godly, as irrational or inspirational.

The effect of this is to insinuate that rational and scientific understandings of the world are inadequate, and that Soviet society is desolate without the option of imaginative literature or religious faith. Contrary to expectations regarding the Devil symbol, then, Bulgakov’s Devil works towards the same goals as his traditional opposition, Jesus, in the guise of Yeshua. Edythe C. Haber articulates this with her statement that ‘although Yeshua works through light and love and Woland through darkness and violence, the aim of both is the destruction of the deadening and coercive status quo in the name of life and freedom’ (1975, p. 403). Woland helps the Master and Margarita because they epitomise the values that he is attempting to reanimate in Moscow: love, faith and art (Tumanov 1989, p. 56). However, in the second half of the text it is Yeshua, now the religious figure Christ, who sends Matvei to tell Woland that the Master ‘has earned peace’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 305). This indicates that in the novel, the personages of Christianity such as Satan and Jesus are not opposed to each other, but are a united front against non-belief. In the context of Moscow, they oppose the political regime in the Soviet Union and state atheism.

Despite the actions of Woland and the divine incarnation of Yeshua, the novel is not a plea for the Muscovites to return to the Orthodox Church. Christianity is used to represent the disavowed elements of life that cannot be understood through reason. It is perhaps for this reason that the inner narrative which tells of Pontius Pilate’s dilemma is concerned only with his moral dilemma, and not the divinity of Jesus. Similarly, Yeshua sends Matvei to tell Woland that ‘He has read the Master’s work…
and asks that you take the Master with you and grant him peace’ (p. 305). The Master is not rewarded for being a good Christian; rather, he is rewarded for daring to write an innovative and thoughtful work on Pontius Pilate. As Curtis observes, ‘there is never the slightest suggestion that the Master is in a conventional sense religious, any more than Bulgakov was himself’ (1987, p. 153). This lack of religiosity shapes Bulgakov’s interpretation of the Devil figure, and more importantly, the Devil’s relation to art.

Pittman suggests some possible literary precursors for Woland, including *Venediktov, or the Memorable Events of My Life* by V.A. Chayanov, which also tells of a Devil’s visit to Moscow (1991, p. 31). She suggests that the novel alludes to many of these earlier literary devils. There are parallels between the Devil from Ivan’s dream in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and Woland. The most obvious, pervasive and undeniable—although by no means coherent—references are to Goethe’s *Faust*. The Faust myth is constantly referenced in elements such as Woland’s German nationality, his walking stick with the head of a poodle, Margarita’s necklace marked with the image of a poodle at Satan’s Grand Ball, names (Margarite being the real name of Goethe’s Gretchen, while Voland is an alias of Mephistopheles) and of course, the epigraph (Proffer 1995b). If there is one diabolical narrative that the text is responding to, it is surely *Faust*.

However, there is very little resemblance between the characters and plot of Goethe’s work and Bulgakov’s. In fact, the superficiality of the Goethean allusion has led Andrew Barratt to claim ‘that the allusions to Goethe are a diversionary tactic as skilfully prepared as a false trail in a good detective story’ (1987, p. 138). Most significantly, the verbalised diabolical pact in *The Master and Margarita* is between Margarita and Woland, and she is rewarded rather than punished. It seems, then, that the references to *Faust* are not meant to be taken as a simple analogy, even an inverted one. Like the ambiguous Devil of the Russian Orthodox Church, Woland is an amalgam of literary devils: like none of them because he is all of them. The effect of this is to highlight Woland’s association with the literary.
CHAPTER THREE: THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

The Master and Margarita and Censorship

When Woland comes to Moscow, he does not terrorise random Muscovites, but the members of two groups: the staff of the Variety Theater and the members of the literary association MASSOLIT. There is a presumably a biographical element to these targets, as Bulgakov was both a writer and playwright. However, it is the characterisation of these two groups that is most important. MASSOLIT only accepts writers who are conformist enough to receive an ID proclaiming them Soviet-approved writers, and the Variety Theater upholds Soviet ideology with their insistence that Woland’s black magic show be performed with an exposé so that it does not leave the ‘painful impression’ that magic is real (Bulgakov 1995, p. 108). It is those who have internalised Soviet ideology and publicly proclaim their commitment to state ideals that are tormented by the Devil.

After the death of Lenin, Stalin took over the leadership of the Soviet Union and turned his attention to clarification of the place of literature and other forms of art in the communist society. Katerina Clark observes that ‘Socialist Realism as such did not exist until the Revolution was at least fifteen years old, for the term was not presented to the Soviet public until 1932’ (1981b, p. 3). Socialist realism was created at a meeting between Stalin, Maxim Gorky and other writers during which Stalin declared that ‘writers are engineers of men’s souls’ (cited in Solomon 1979, p. 239), who could help shape them as sincere communists. As such, the socialist realist work should ‘be based on the Marxist-Leninist philosophy that the worker was the most important and constructive element in life… Everything about the new order had to be presented in an optimistic manner. It was forbidden to depict anything wrong or negative about life in the socialist state’ (Carmilly-Weinberger 1986, p. 132).

The Soviet policies regarding literature were also indebted to the thought of Andrei Zhdanov, who similarly believed that literature has a powerful effect on readers. He claimed at the first Soviet Writers’ Congress that Soviets were writing ‘a literature which has organized the toilers and oppressed for the struggle to abolish one and for all every kind of exploitation’ (1935, p. 17). As a consequence, Zhdanov was wary of literature that might encourage dissenting views. Socialist realism had to be unambiguous and avoid techniques used in modernism, which was founded on an entirely different interpretation of history, modernity and progress. Soviet art should
instead seek to create a new myths for the revolutionary hero, without reference to anything that could be a distraction from the revolution (Carmilly-Weinberger 1986; Solomon 1979). The scope for acceptable art was very limited.

The implicit belief in the influence of art conveyed in the doctrine of socialist realism was complemented by measures taken to eradicate heterodox art. In 1932 all art organisations were dissolved, to be replaced by the Union of Artists, which had strict guidelines that conformed to the policies of the communist party. Membership in the Union was compulsory for all artists (Carmilly-Weinberger 1986, p. 133). However, the most notable strategy of ensuring artistic conformity was censorship, a key precept of Zhdanovism. The formation of the Union of Artists and the insistence that all artworks conform to the conventions of socialist realism promoted self-censorship. Wallach explains that this gave writers added responsibility: it became their ‘job… to second-guess, tussle with their consciences, anticipate who would object to what and what they ought to do about it. They were to become their own secret police’ (1991, p. 76).

This did not eradicate the need for the official secret police, though. Soviet censorship practices in the 1930s did not only seek to eradicate heterodox sentiments and literary works, for the intense focus on the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable had produced ‘an obsession with reducing signs to a single meaning’, so that ‘the abolition of ambiguity became an important secondary mode’ for the censors (Plamper 2001, p. 526). The Soviets’ fear of ambiguity can be understood as representative of the relationship between their ideology and literature: every Russian work had to extol the revolution completely to ensure that the thought that the process of revolution was not perfect could not even occur to the reader. Literature had to been complementary and unequivocal. Because he refused to comply with this demand, the censors attempted to suppress the work of Mikhail Bulgakov.

**Authorship as a Moral Obligation**

Bulgakov, unlike the fictional writers of MASSOLIT, was a writer of satire. This mode was antithetical to Soviet ideology because it critiqued the dominant culture. *The Heart of a Dog* (1968), Bulgakov’s satirical novella about a dog who is experimented on by a professor and becomes a self-identified worker concerned with his revolutionary
rights, was confiscated by the censors in 1926 and not published in Russia until 1987—long after the complete version of *The Master and Margarita* had reached the Russian public. Curtis explains that the Soviet attitude towards satire can be understood as conforming to the views of the influential critic V. Blyum, who claimed in 1921 that satire had been permissible under the tsarist regime when dissent was admirable, but ‘Soviet culture no longer had any need for satire, because the interests of the workers were now identical to those of the State, and satire had become effectively redundant because there were simply no longer any problems requiring satirical treatment’ (1991a, p. xi). Not surprisingly, Bulgakov’s insistence on writing satire meant that his career was plagued by rejections and the threat of repercussions from the censors.

Bulgakov explained that his creative output is inherently linked to his belief in the necessity of artistic freedom:

That is one of the characteristics of my creative work, and that alone is sufficient to make it impossible for my works to exist in the USSR. But all the other characteristics that emerge in my satirical stories are connected with that first point: the black and mystical hues (I am a MYSTICAL WRITER) in which I have depicted the innumerable horrors of our everyday existence; the poison in which my language is soaked; my deep scepticism about the Revolutionary process that is taking place in my backward country… (cited in Curtis 1991b, pp. 106-7)

In this statement it becomes clear that for Bulgakov, the seriousness of the Soviet Union’s failings meant that his critiques could not be simply comedic, but appropriately take on ‘black and mystical hues’. As Punter and Glennis Byron have noted, the Gothic is often ‘activated… in the service of a penetrating social critique’ (2004, p. 30). This is manifested through the casting of the Devil as the agent of social critique in *The Master and Margarita*, and in different ways in Bulgakov’s other works.

His early short story, ‘Diaboliad’ (1972) [1925] emphasises the evil of the Soviet bureaucracy through hellish symbolism such as the matches in which Korotkov is paid filling his room with an odour of sulphur. In Bulgakov’s later novels, though, the diabolical tends to reflect an inverted value system in which the diabolical is that which is evil from the Soviet perspective, and not Bulgakov’s own. As the issue that
most concerned Bulgakov was the Soviet’s refusal of artistic freedom, artistic freedom came to be represented as diabolical as a marker for his divergence with the accepted view.

For much of the time that he was working on The Master and Margarita, Bulgakov was also writing a fictionalised auto-biography, A Dead Man’s Memoir (A Theatrical Novel) (2007) [1965]. In one scene the protagonist Sergei Leontievich Maksudov decides to commit suicide because he has decided that he is a failure as a writer. Believing that for his life to be worthwhile his work must be read and respected, he laments that ‘the very worst thing was not [the pain] but that the novel was bad. And if it was bad, that meant that the end of my life was approaching’ (Bulgakov 2007, p. 13). However, he is interrupted firstly by the sounds of the opera Faust on the gramophone and his desire to hear Mephistopheles’ entrance once more, and then by the arrival of the editor and publisher of Motherland, Ilya Ivanovich Rudolfi. Rudolfi is there to offer to publish Maksudov’s novel, but instead of being described as a divine emissary Maksudov claims that he ‘appeared at my home… in the guise of Mephistopheles’ (p. 17). Throughout this meeting Rudolfi is described as Mephistopheles twice and otherwise as an evil spirit, while the only revision he demands of Maksudov is that he delete three words: ‘the first word was “Apocalypse”, the second was “archangels” and the third was “devil”’ (p. 18). As Maksudov describes how he ‘stopped rebelling and decided to submit to Rudolfi’ (p. 18), using terms that allude to Satan’s rebellion in Paradise Lost and Faust’s pact in Faust, the devilishness of this chapter is palpable.

Bulgakov’s association between the written word and the Devil is certainly in debt to the Russian cultural tradition, but it is notable that in A Dead Man’s Memoir that what is associated with the Devil is not the act of creation, but the act of publication. Rudolfi, as the willing editor, is diabolical because he is the medium through which the written world will be transformed into a challenge to Soviet ideology. Bulgakov’s specific understanding of ‘the diabolical’ as that which upsets the status quo and undermines accepted ethical standards necessitates an understanding of literature as potentially, not inherently, diabolical—a potential that is often brought out in literary modernism, and is highly desirable in Bulgakov’s terms.

24 The novel was also published in English as Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel.
His writing attest to his conviction that writing authentically was the moral obligation of a writer. Socialist realism is disparaged, therefore, because it does not embrace that potential, opting for an inauthentic and sycophantic depiction of life in the Soviet Union.

Literature that is authentic, rather than conformist, takes on mythic qualities in Bulgakov’s works. The Master’s novel, which implicitly challenges state atheism through its focus on Pontius Pilate, is burnt by its author after being refused publication and savaged in the press. However, Woland restores the manuscript as though he were a ‘donor’ in a fairy tale, to use Propp’s terminology (1968), proclaiming that ‘[m]anuscripts don’t burn’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 245). The immortality of the Master’s manuscript conveys the idea that literature that is imaginative and sincere cannot be destroyed; it will survive long after socialist realism has been forgotten. Bulgakov also indicates that authentic literature has an otherworldly essence that the Soviets cannot comprehend. ‘[I]n order to ascertain that Dostoevsky is a writer, do you really need to ask him for an ID?’ Korovyov asks a representative of MASSOLIT, with Behemoth arguing that because of the calibre of his work, ‘Dostoevsky is immortal!’ (pp. 299, 300). Accordingly, the idea that authentic art is devilish is not simply perceivable as a metaphor in The Master and Margarita but realised through its very narration, as I demonstrate in the following sections of this chapter.

**Deducing the Narrator**

If Woland is not making deals to win souls like Mephistopheles, is attempting to convince atheists to believe in Jesus, and rewards Margarita for her compassion, then why call him the Devil? In Between Two Worlds (1987) Andrew Barratt argues that reading The Master and Margarita is a process of discovering the identity of Woland, which becomes increasingly unclear as his proclaimed personas (foreign professor, Mephistopheles, the Devil) are exposed as insufficient descriptors. For Barratt, Woland’s claim that he is the Devil is a misdirection for the reader, who can only solve the riddle of The Master and Margarita by coming to the conclusion that ‘Woland is not the devil but a gnostic messenger’ who has come to Moscow ‘bearing a message, which, if properly deciphered, promises the possibility of divine illumination’ (1987, pp. 172, 1). Barratt’s analysis implies that it is only by rendering Woland’s function
clear that we can make sense of *The Master and Margarita*. This is a necessary consequence of deeming Woland a ‘gnostic messenger’ for, as he explains, this messenger will only be recognised by the few who can appreciate the truth of the divine message (1987, p. 171). In Barratt’s analysis this refers to the Master, Margarita, and Bezdomny, but the fact that the medium of Woland’s message—the Jerusalem narrative—is presented as four chapters of *The Master and Margarita* means that it also applies to enlightened readers, with whom the divine message is shared. As Vladimir Tumanov notes, ‘the Master’s novel is the metafictional embodiment of Bulgakov’s novel’ (1989, p. 60).

Thus, when Barratt claims that Bulgakov is engaging with the Symbolist view that art is ‘an essentially religious practice in which the artist was to function as a sort of priest, a mediator of the hidden truth about human existence’ (1987, p. 318), this must be understood as applying to the internal narrative and the complete external one. Critics such as Carol Avins have noted that *The Master and Margarita* addresses the difficulty of heterodox literature such as the Master’s work on Pontius Pilate ‘reaching a reader’ (1986, p. 272), conscious of the fact that the real work was even more subversive and unlikely to be published under Soviet rule.

If this divine message is, as Barratt argues, that ‘Christ has not only brought the promise of redemption, he has restored man’s creative freedom… [and] creation… is man’s ultimate freedom’ (Barratt 1987, pp. 324-25) then it seems that Woland has been denied his Devil identity unfairly. Literary creation is divine in this novel, but it is undoubtedly also diabolical—perhaps explaining why Yeshua and Woland seem to be working towards the same goal using different means. As such, while Barratt claims that the first ‘instance of true insight regarding Woland’ in the novel is when Bezdomny gives up trying to expose him, ‘because he now comprehends that Woland’s real importance resides not in his diabolical antics at all, but in the fact that he has brought to the world the story of [Yeshua] and Pilate’ (1987, p. 159), I argue that bringing this story to the world is a diabolical act indeed because of the way that the narrative choices of the novel undermine Soviet ideology.

As Barratt makes a convincing case for Woland’s purpose in Moscow being the promulgation of the story of Yeshua and Pilate, I want to consider its providence in further detail before considering the content of the Jerusalem narrative in the next
section of this chapter. It would seem that Woland tells Berlioz and Bezdomny of Pilate’s first meeting with Yeshua in order to prove to the staunch atheists ‘that Jesus did exist’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 12), and then rewards the Master for writing his novel about Pilate despite the threat of the censors. However, the four chapters of *The Master and Margarita* that make up the Jerusalem narrative read as a coherent narrative, despite ostensibly being Woland’s tale, Bezdomny’s drug-induced dream, and two chapters from the Master’s novel.

If it is all one narrative, it is apparent that the book the Master wrote that was refused publication by the Russian publishers, because Margarita clearly reads the same words from the manuscript that appear in the fourth chapter of the Jerusalem narrative. As Woland later tells the Master he has read his magnum opus, this may explain why his tale of Pontius Pilate seems to be part of the same narrative—but why does Bezdomny dream the Master’s unpublished novel? The narrative having three authors is not credible.

Other critics have not been satisfied with this interpretation, either. Using psychoanalytic theory and specifically dream analysis, Judith M. Mills argues that we can understand the whole novel as Bezdomny’s dream (1989, p. 305). However, having the whole novel occur in a character’s subconscious would, it seems, detract from the otherworldly nature of Woland’s message. Laura D. Weeks (1989) also argues that only one character can possibly be the author of the Jerusalem narrative. She agrees that it could not be the Master, as he has no access to Bezdomny’s dream and upon hearing Bezdomny recount the Devil’s interpretation of events does not claim authorship, but proclaims that he guessed right. Like Mills, she suggests that Bezdomny is the most likely candidate, but builds upon Mills’ argument by proposing that he is the author of the entirety of *The Master and Margarita*—as he is told to continue the Master’s story and yet becomes a professor of history and philosophy, abandoning poetry. She asserts that the novel is his account of his experience through the lens of history and philosophy. There is one hole in this theory, though, which Weeks admits in a footnote: ‘it is questionable whether either the Master or [Bezdomny] could learn of all events taking place during Woland’s visit as they occur’ (1989, p. 60). She suggests that he could have ‘easily’ learned about them once he was released, but this is implausible, as the last time we see Bezdomny (now using the
official name of Professor Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyryov) he has repressed the truth of the preceding events, and believes that ‘he was the victim of hypnotist-criminals and that he had to go in for treatment and was cured’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 333).

Instead, Gary Rosenshield suggests that *Woland* may be the true author, with compelling evidence. While Mills’ and Weeks’ arguments require that the whole novel be a dream as Bezdomny can have no first-hand knowledge of the activities outside the mental asylum in which he is being held, or that Bezdomny took on a journalist role in order to find out what happened when he was in the mental asylum, Woland, who claims to be the Devil, is under no such restriction. Rosenshield observes ‘that Woland may be the author of the Jerusalem chapters should not surprise: once we admit the supernatural, nothing, of course, is impossible’ (1997, p. 205). The evidence is convincing: for, first of all, surely the Devil could have implanted the dream in Bezdomny’s mind—particularly as the initial story he tells in Patriarch’s Ponds is felt by the listeners to be a dream? Similarly, the Master, who had been a historian, writes his novel speedily (as though divinely inspired!) despite having never written before (Rosenshield 1997, p. 206), and produces a novel as accurate as the tale of Woland, a direct observer, because he ‘guessed everything right’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 112). It appears that the Master is doing the work of the Devil long before their first meeting.

If the embedded text is the product of the Devil, the metafictional relationship between the interior and exterior of the novel implies that the narrative of *The Master and Margarita* should be considered diabolical as well. I have already made a case for this on account of the value system of the novel inverting the understanding of good and evil privileged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In addition, there is reason to believe that despite the stylistic differences, the Jerusalem narrative and the Moscow narrative have the same narrator.25 This would make the entire novel, and not just the story of Pilate, ‘The Gospel according to the Devil’: the original title for *The Master and Margarita*.

J.A.E. Curtis (1987), Donald M. Fiene (1995), and David Gillespie (1996) have all drawn attention the narrator’s comment when describing the restaurant at Griboyedov House, ‘Oh gods, my gods, give me poison, poison!’ (Bulgakov 1995, p.

25 The reasons why neither the Master nor Bezdomny can be the author of the entire Jerusalem text similarly rule them out as candidates for the narrator.
Here the narrator mimics Pilate’s thought, appearing in the chapter narrated by Woland: ‘O my gods! ... Poison, give me poison’ (p. 17). There are many parallels throughout the novel, such as the midnight festivities at Griboyedov house, said to be ‘[i]n a word, hell’ (p. 50) recalling Satan’s Ball at midnight; and the betrayal of Yeshua by Judas and the Master by Aloisy. The ‘poison’ parallel is particularly notable though because the shared language suggests that the two narratives are inextricably linked. Indeed, the separate narratives merge in the second half of the novel, as Woland takes the Master to the sleeping Pilate, asking him to free Pilate with his words. The Master does so, implying that his interpretation of Pilate is in fact reality, not literary creation. The merging of the narratives is also apparent in the linguistic choices. The Master’s already-decided upon concluding words—‘The fifth procurator of Judea, the knight Pontius Pilate’ (p. 115)—appear at the end of the main narrative (chapter thirty-two), and are repeated at the conclusion of the epilogue. The words that end the final chapter read by Margarita, however, are ‘the fifth procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate’ (p. 281) missing the word ‘knight’. Curtis warns that ‘to equate the Master’s novel with The Master and Margarita… is to introduce an unnecessary and misleading blurring of distinctions’ (1987, p. 142), but this is a consequence of her interpretation of the novel’s authorship. For Curtis, the most important aspect of the Jerusalem narrative is to ‘confirm the significance of the Master’s achievement as a writer’, which means that he ‘cannot be seen as the ‘author’ of The Master and Margarita; his concern is with Pontius Pilate alone’ (1987, pp. 145, 2)

This is an accurate assessment of the Master, but as I have demonstrated, it appears that his novel of Pontius Pilate was diabolically inspired. As such, my proposed alternate author of the Jerusalem narrative, Woland, is a plausible candidate for the implied author and narrator of the entire text; he is at its centre and concerned with all elements of the narrative. It is fitting, then, that Neil Cornwell has highlighted the fact that Woland is the “author” of the chaotic events which occur in Moscow’ (1990, p. 168). While he instigates the conversation with Berlioz and Bezdomny, and appears on the stage during the Black Magic show, the vast majority of the chaotic antics associated with his visit are enacted by his retinue, who are under his command. Even in that initial conversation, the most Woland does is talk; it is Korovyov who
spooks Berlioz by appearing as an apparition and then scares him into running up to the turnstile where he is killed.

If he is the ‘author’ of the events of the narrative, then, it is possible to ‘go further. If we are looking for a hidden author or narrator, one who is present on all levels with a knowledge of all events—who has greater omniscience than Woland?’ (Cornwell 1990, p. 168). Beville makes the same claim, but for a different reason:

Although no explicit remarks are made to suggest that the narrator is the devil himself, there are clues to his identity which lead us to this conclusion. [In Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*] the cause of the revelation of the narrator’s identity was his satanic pride. The same may be said of Bulgakov’s omniscient narrator, who thrives on hinting to the reader that he has secret knowledge, and on mocking and ridiculing various characters for their ignorance of demonic qualities. (2009, p. 151)

Thus, the argument that the Devil is the author of *The Master and Margarita* is not just a possible logical inference; it is a way of naming the novel’s textual strategies.

**Diabolical Narration**

It can be argued that in a third-person narrative the reader is positioned to accept descriptions of events as truthful and unquestionable, for there is no apparent agency seeking to manipulate their sympathies. *The Master and Margarita* initially appears to be such a novel, for the narrative begins (and ends) without a narrator identifying himself.²⁶ However, in Part One of the novel, this narrator laces the narrative with subtle comments that indicates that he is omniscient and authoritative but duplicitous. The first of these comments is the observation that ‘it is worth noting the first strange thing about that terrible May evening’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 3). The narrator apparently thinks the evening on which the Devil visited Moscow and Berlioz was killed was a ‘terrible’ night, which suggests that the narrator will possess the ethics of a Soviet. However, by the end of Part One the narrator has shown himself to be playful, ironic and mischievous, providing a metafictional element to the work that highlights that the narrator has complete control over the path of the narrative:

²⁶ The narrator does refer to ‘himself’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 326), though, explaining my choice of pronoun.
The narrator of *The Master and Margarita* is particularly unreliable because he attempts to foreground his objectivity. His insistence that the words he is writing are a ‘true narrative’, ‘truthful lines’, ‘most truthful lines’ (pp. 181, 326, 47) raises the suspicion that they are not actually the entire truth. Similarly, the admission that the narrator *could* have investigated the ‘other strange occurrences’ and continued to tell the story of the events of Moscow, rather than following Woland, the Master and Margarita, suggests that the narrator has a particular agenda—involving the Devil.

That the narrator would continue to follow the events in which Woland is involved rather than detailing the misfortunes of the Muscovites is unsurprising if, as I am arguing, Woland is also the narrator. Superficially, it may seem that the argument that he is not only the real author of the Jerusalem narrative but is also narrating the story of his visit to Moscow stretches credulity because of the disparity between the knowledge that the narrator and Woland possess. However, this seems to be a reason for my interpretation, as both have moments of omniscience, and apparent ignorance. Woland, after all, can predict the futures of both Berlioz and Bezdomny, while the narrator is attuned to the emotional reactions of cats, recalling that a ‘black cat… rolled its martyred eyes’ (p. 327). Similarly, in the epilogue the otherwise omniscient narrator claims that ‘[a] lot of other things happened, but one can’t remember everything’ (p. 328), and Woland similarly pretends not to speak Russian after Berlioz is killed because it suits his agenda.

This duplicity underscores the dramatic irony of the novel. The narrator’s pretence of acquiescing to the realistic and rational worldview upheld in Soviet ideology works to shape the novel as a mocking critique of the Muscovites under Soviet rule. When Margarita meets Woland, he is described in terms of the (clearly false) Soviet belief in his non-existence: on the bed ‘sat the one whom poor Ivan… had recently tried to convince of the devil’s non-existence. This non-existent being was, in fact, sitting on the bed’ (p. 216). Additionally, the narrator makes a show of his sincere belief that the ‘foreigner’ in lilac is truly a foreigner and is not a citizen.
shopping at the Torgsin store with illicit hard currency and valuables (Proffer 1995b, p. 352). When Behemoth and Korovyov discuss the foreigner and he responds with a shudder, the narrator ignores the obvious interpretation and piously declares that ‘it was probably just a coincidence since a foreigner could not possibly have understood what Korovyov and his companion were saying in Russian’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 295). The narrator maintains this position despite ‘the lilac fellow… screaming in perfect Russian with no trace of an accent’, suggesting that ‘[t]he shock of what had happened had obviously given him instantaneous mastery of a language previously unknown to him’ (p. 298). The disparity between the narrator’s purported claim to believe the man in lilac and the sceptical representation of Soviet ideology throughout The Master and Margarita shows Soviet ideology to be ridiculous and fallacious. In the Soviets’ attempt to eradicate the heterodox and irrational they have succeeded in exposing its unescapable existence.

This is augmented by the pervasive impression evoked by the narrator that the world is fundamentally ambiguous. In the chapter called ‘The Incident at Griboyedov’ the narrator states that the meeting place for MASSOLIT is named for an earlier owner, the aunt of writer Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov. The narrator then muses that she might never have owned the house: ‘I even seem to recall that Griboyedov did not have an aunt who owned property’ (p. 45). However, on the next page the narrator conforms to the accepted view that she did own the house and even finds—or creates—the history of a certain room, ‘that same colonnaded room where Griboyedov’s aunt had enjoyed listening to her brilliant nephew’s comedy’ (p. 46).

The narrator is therefore untrustworthy. The process of reading this text entails accepting contradiction, accepting that common symbols may have a different referent, and reading with scepticism. Such strategies are both antithetical to Soviet ideology and censorship practices, and reminiscent of the Russian Orthodox understanding of the Devil. While there is enough textual evidence to support an interpretation of Woland as the narrator, it is the text’s characterisation as diabolical that is most convincing. As such, before ending this chapter I explore the diabolical elements of the apparently realist Jerusalem narrative to determine why Woland brings his story of Pontius Pilate to Moscow.
A Diabolical Gospel

While the Moscow chapters are overtly fantastic, the Jerusalem narrative is sombre and ostensibly realistic. As the story begins with Woland insisting that, although ‘absolutely nothing written in the gospels ever happened in actual fact’, ‘Jesus did exist’ (Bulgakov 1995, pp. 33, 12), the reader is positioned to treat the Jerusalem narrative as what ‘really’ happened. This is encouraged by such strategies as the transliteration of the name of the Jesus character as Yeshua Ha-Notsri, which reads as more authentic (Weeks 1989, p. 64). Consequently, the ambiguities within this narrative have the impression of being merely textual; that is to say, it appears that the world of the Jerusalem narrative is not inherently ambiguous but that there is key information being withheld from the reader which produces the sense of ambiguity.

Despite the realist strategies of the narrative, the influence of the gospel accounts of the story means that the absence of any obvious supernatural attributes of Yeshua is not enough to grant certainty. Thus, when Yeshua tells Pilate ‘that you are too isolated and have lost all faith in people. After all, you will agree, one shouldn’t lavish all one’s attention on a dog’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 18), apparently without any evidence for this (in fact, truthful) claim, it appears that he does have divine knowledge. Yeshua explains that he simply analysed Pilate’s gestures and mannerisms, but the external narration disallows confirmation of Yeshua’s methods.

The suspicion that the overtly naturalistic narrative is covertly supernatural is also the result of how the nested narrative is initially framed. Although Woland proclaims that ‘I myself witnessed the whole thing’ (p. 34) as he tells the beginning of the tale, he does not appear in the Jerusalem narrative in the form he takes on in Moscow. As Curtis recounts, some critics have suggested that the passing swallow, the swirling column of dust or even the chief of the secret service Afranius are the Devil in disguise (1987, p. 135). These interpretations are plausible because of the sense in the ‘Pontius Pilate’ chapter that he is being tested. Pilate tries to make the correct decision regarding Yeshua’s fate despite the heat, his headache, and the hallucinations that plague him. However, none of the theories of the Devil’s presence and influence can be accepted definitively. This section balances between the naturalistic and the supernatural: Pilate seems to have a prophetic vision that includes ‘a totally absurd notion about some sort of immortality, and for some reason this
immortality evoked a sense of unbearable anguish’ yet, as he (or the narrator?) recognises, ‘[t]he blood pouring and pounding into his temples was probably also responsible for what had happened’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 21).

The most pronounced ambiguity occurs in the scenes in which Pilate and Afranius discuss the fate of the political prisoners and the traitor Judas of Kerioth. When Afranius tells Pilate that Yeshua would not drink anything given to him while he was on the cross—contradicting the representation of this event in ‘The Execution’ chapter—it becomes clear that this narrative will not expose the ‘truth’ behind the gospel accounts. The sense of ambiguity is exacerbated by the ensuing plot against Judas that Pilate either directs Afranius to carry out with great subtlety, or sincerely asks him to prevent. The specify of Pilate’s ‘premonition’ that ‘he will be murdered tonight’ (p. 263) and the urgency with which he tells Afranius of this, as well as his later boast to Matvei that he had Judas killed, suggests the former. However, this does not rule out the possibility that Afranius has betrayed Pilate, as he continues to lie to him after Judas killed has been killed. Pilate guesses correctly how Judas was lured out of Yershalaim, asking Afranius, ‘Could it have been a woman?’ Afranius does not tell him the truth, but—acting as though he is merely theorising—rejects this notion outright and reproaches Pilate for the very suggestion: ‘That possibility is ruled out entirely… What’s more, I would argue that such a hypothesis can only serve to throw us off track, impede the investigation, and complicate things for me’ (p. 274). Afranius leaves Pilate feeling that he has taken care of matters, but whether he acted as Pilate wished is unclear.

Richard W.F. Pope has explored this matter, considering the possible readings of Afranius and Pilate’s dialogue. He proposes four possible solutions: that Afranius is not deceiving Pilate, an interpretation that relies on the text being deceptive; that his description of the execution was true while the description of the murder was false; that he lied about the execution but not about the murder; and that he lied consistently, perhaps because he is secretly a Jew or an instrument of the Devil (1977, pp. 5-15). Having considered these options, Pope asks whether rejecting the possibility of a solution is the best solution:
one could, I suppose, adopt one interpretation and stick to it, somehow manipulating the signifiers strewn throughout the text which are meant to clash with the chosen interpretation. But why should we reduce the number of signifiers when Bulgakov has so carefully and deliberately multiplied them? ... If we are interested in the meaning of Bulgakov’s text rather than in the significance it may hold for ourselves or any other posited reader... should we not admit that we are dealing with ambiguous and imprecise meaning and attempt to come to grips with it instead of pretending it is univocal and precise? (1977, p. 16)

As Pope demonstrates, the extent of the ambiguity dictates that it should not be explained away. The ambiguities mark the narrative as the Devil’s gospel; obscuring the divinity of Yeshua, the true account of his crucifixion and the implications of his death.

The effect of the ambiguities surrounding Yeshua and the death of Judas is to bring the narrative’s actual focus to light: the moral dilemma of Pontius Pilate and his failure to act morally because of his cowardice. Amongst the ambiguity, this is stated remarkably explicitly. As he sleeps before meeting Afranius, Pilate is consumed with the question of whether he was a coward for not having risked his career to prevent the execution of a man he knew was innocent. Pilate’s musing is interrupted by the following lines:

...the thunderstorm would only come towards evening, and cowardice was, undoubtedly, one of the most terrible vices. Thus spoke Yeshua Ha-Notsri. No, philosopher, I disagree with you: it is the most terrible vice! (Bulgakov 1995, p. 272)

Curtis notes that although it is possible that the personal pronoun could be Pilate, ‘[a] subjective narratorial interjection seems to be inserted’ here (1987, p. 155). It is plausible that this is the authorial persona—Woland—highlighting the key message of his gospel. After all, such an intrusion occurs elsewhere in the novel that is attributed to Woland, the consultant in Black Magic: when Ivan is asking himself how his actions after his meeting with Woland have made him look, “‘Like a fool!!’ a bass voice pronounced distinctly, a voice which [was not internal] and was amazingly reminiscent of the consultant’s bass’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 97). The claim that cowardice is the most
terrible vice is formally ambiguous, because the identity of the speaker is not obvious. That it is a major concern of the novel, however, is clear.

Pilate, not Jesus, is the focus of the Jerusalem narrative because Woland is concerned with authenticity, and the courage it often requires. Pilate’s guilt is so strong that he cannot rest for thousands of years because he cowardly followed his socialised ideals and sentenced Yeshua to death for treason, betraying his spiritual need for Yeshua’s teachings and conscience in the process. In a sense, it does not matter whether Pilate was behind Judas’ death, because his cowardly nature prevents him from proclaiming his responsibility—and the reason for his actions—to anyone but the disempowered, unthreatening Matvei. Woland shares this story with the Muscovites as a message that ‘promises the possibility of divine illumination’ (Barratt 1987, p. 171) but has a diabolical component because the message is less about religion than art and the imagination. Pilate’s sin, of course, is that of almost all the Muscovites except the Master and Margarita—acquiescing to the values of their tyrannical society even though this means ignoring their values, needs and desires.

Conclusion

Upon finding out that the Master had been reported for possessing illegal literature by Aloisy Mogarych, who coveted his basement apartment, Woland and his retinue throw him out the window and replace his name on the tenants’ register with the Master’s. Korovyov suggests to the Master that ‘if your landlord acts surprised, tell him Aloisy was someone he dreamt about. Mogarych? What Mogarych? There was never any Mogarych’ (Bulgakov 1995, p. 247). This idea—that one can and should take back the role of guarantor of reality from those authorised to determine right and wrong—is reiterated throughout The Master and Margarita. Woland’s visit to Moscow is an exercise in exposing the falsity of the Soviet claim that the communist revolution fulfils all human needs and desires, and is the natural progression for society. He reveals that state atheism, censorship and the housing shortage have made the Muscovites unfulfilled and petty.

While it is easy to deduce the target of Bulgakov’s critique, his proposed alternative is not as clear. What Woland rewards are values, not ways of living: faith, not Christianity; creativity, not any particular literary movement; love, not monogamy.
Proffer notes that ‘[t]he fantastic nature of *The Master and Margarita* itself is Bulgakov’s answer to his era’s denial of imagination and its wish to strip the world of divine qualities’ (1995a, p. 367). This display of the ‘irrational’ side of human existence cannot be reduced to a univocal meaning. For this reason, Barratt’s interpretation of Woland as a bearer of a divine message does not adequately take into account the diabolical element, best expressed in Pope’s view that the text overtly resists interpretation. Through the use of fantastic elements and pervasive ambiguity, Bulgakov suggests not just an alternative way of understanding the world but the need to constantly question our understanding of the world.

Bulgakov’s novel conveys the view that, for him, diabolical and dangerous are not synonyms when discussing literature. It proposes that socialist realism’s sycophantic portrayal of life under communism is the true danger to the community, as it robs literature of its potential to critique ethical standards. The rigidity of the ethical standards imposed by the Soviet government means that the diabolism of *The Master and Margarita* is a necessary corrective. It is for this reason that Bulgakov continued to call for freedom of publication, and wrote his heretical work in secret. Bulgakov, like the Soviets, knew that literature had the potential to influence readers’ worldviews. It should come as no surprise therefore that an argument can be made for Woland being the narrator and implied author of the heretical *The Master and Margarita*. As the Soviet government refused to allow dissenting perspectives that could break the hold they had over the Russian people, Bulgakov, as a writer of subversive literature, had to take on the role of diabolical adversary in order to write his nonconformist views.
A Tale of Two Fausts: Thomas Mann’s Exploration of Artistic Responsibility

Introduction

The novel’s subtitle ‘The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn As Told by a Friend’ indicates that *Doctor Faustus* (1997) [1947] is about the solitary figure of Adrian. Actually, this supposed *künstlerroman* is as much about the friend recounting Adrian’s biography as Adrian. Both Adrian and the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, can lay claim to the ‘Doctor Faustus’ title (Champagne 2000; Crawford 2003). While only Adrian makes a literal deal with the Devil, the key element of the Faust myth, it is Serenus who introduces himself as a PhD and is married to a woman called Helene, recalling Faust’s liaison with Helen of Troy in Goethe’s and Marlowe’s versions of the story of Faust.

The standard reading of the novel is that Adrian Leverkuhn, a genius composer who makes a deal with the Devil in order to produce music that is avant-garde but devoid of human warmth, offers insight into the degradation and propensity towards barbarism of twentieth-century Germany. However, this account only takes into consideration one perspective of a narrative that is fundamentally dualistic. A more fruitful reading would take into account Serenus-as-Faust as well as Adrian-as-Faust, noting the ways in which a casting of two characters as Faust undermines the interpretation of Adrian’s life that Serenus is at pains to foist on his reader. As Hans Eichner notes, ‘Leverkuhn’s gradual approach to insanity and the climax of the irrationalist orgy in Hitler’s Germany of which this is a symbol are placed simultaneously before the reader’s eyes, so that this novel, in a unique manner, contains its interpretation’ (1952, p. 47). Eichner also demonstrates that the novel is a parody of a biography, and one cannot read it without being aware of the faux biographer’s personality and noting his protestations of being ill-qualified for the task. Serenus claims that his work is only a ‘very provisional biography’ (Mann 1997, p. 5); apologises for his emotional attachment, lack of artistic talent and inability to report events in chronological order; and recounts conversations that he was not privy to:
To what happened between Adrian and Rudolf Schwerdtfeger two days after our memorable excursion, to what happened and how it happened—I know all about it, though the objection may be raised tenfold that I could not know, that I was “not there.” No, I was not there. But it is a psychological fact today that I was there, because for anyone who has experienced an event, lived through it again and again as I have this one, a dreadful intimacy makes him an eye- and ear-witness of even its hidden phrases (p. 455).

The interpretation that the text is apparently asking for, then, must be understood Serenus’ subjective interpretation.

Accordingly, Karin L. Crawford has argued that we must ‘exorcise the devil from Mann’s [Doctor Faustus] because there is no devil in the novel’ (2003, p. 168). She argues that Serenus is the diabolical being of the text, and that his unrequited love for Adrian and fear of change prompt him to see evil and barbarism where there is none. Deeming Serenus an unreliable narrator, Crawford asserts that ‘what initially appears to be a dialogue with the devil’ (2003, p. 172) is only a passage for the Faust cantata that Adrian writes. Moreover, Serenus’ tale of Adrian’s Faustian pact, sealed when he contracts syphilis from the prostitute Esmeralda and founded on the condition that he not love anyone, rings false for Crawford. Adrian \textit{does} have loving relationships with characters who are not harmed by his love, she opines, and as Adrian’s father, sister and nephew show syphilitic symptoms, Adrian’s syphilis must be congenital—absolving the Devil from any role in Nepomuk’s death after Adrian dares love him. In Crawford’s reading, Serenus’ narration masks the text’s optimistic vision of the future of Germany society and art.

However, my argument shall be more closely aligned with that of George Bridges (1999) and Osman Durrani (1985). The latter observes that the novel depicts a society ‘racked by tensions which proceed from the coexistence of the intellect and the senses’ and concludes that ‘[t]he weak-kneed, tearful teacher and thwarted Humanist is no less striking an emblem of this predicament than is the syphilitic artist’(1985, p. 658). While Crawford astutely incorporates Serenus’ bias into her analysis, it seems mistaken to interpret Serenus’ narration as simply getting in the way of the ‘true’ story. The Devil may be metaphorical, but the ideas that he represents possess the narrative—or narratives.
There are in fact two Faustian narratives being told in Doctor Faustus, with the first attempting to stifle the existence of the second. This ‘first perspective’ is the one that seems to contain its own interpretation, in which the narrator is taken to be reliable. The ‘second perspective’ is hinted at throughout the narrative when Serenus interlaces his account of Adrian’s life with confessions of his personal motivations and observations on his contemporary period, and fully emerges when he admits he has doubts about the morality about his choice to write Adrian’s biography. Adrian, in the second perspective, is simply an eccentric composer who was made a scapegoat for Germany, and can be understood in terms of his parallels with Friedrich Nietzsche. Thus, in the former, Adrian is Faust for having sold his soul to the Devil for the means to create great art. In the latter, it is Serenus who is Faustian for having left Germany to its fate in order to write in isolation.

Mann’s use of the Faust myth means that the Devil and the demonic in Doctor Faustus represent, instead of the broad idea of evil, a self-centred turning away from humanity. For Mann, diabolical literature is literature that, like Serenus’ biography of Adrian, compromises the author’s morality. Serenus’ use of words connoting the supernatural to represent a human problem exacerbates this problem by revealing his desire to deny an aptitude for such selfishness, and unwillingness to recognise that it is not the result of supernatural evil. However, this is not immediately evident at the beginning of the novel: reading Doctor Faustus is a process of finding out what the Devil and the demonic really mean.

Serenus’ burgeoning realisation of the aforementioned possible interpretation of his actions carries the implication that the empirical author—Thomas Mann—can potentially be understood in Faustian terms. As Parker has observed, the parodic element to the novel serves to reiterate that there is an authorial presence behind Serenus (2011, pp. 172-73). In The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus (1961) [1949] Mann discusses how he wished to distance himself, through the narrator Serenus, from a novel that was about very personal concerns:

27 Throughout John E. Woods’ English translation Serenus conflates demons and the Devil so that ‘demonic’ can be understood here as largely synonymous with ‘diabolical’.

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this strategy was a bitter necessity in order to achieve a certain humorous leavening of the somber material and to make its horrors bearable to myself as well as to the reader… It removed some of the burden, for it enabled me to escape the turbulence of everything direct, personal, and confessional which underlay the baneful conception. (Mann 1961, pp. 30-1)

Mann does not avoid the logical inference that he is as guilty as Serenus. As I elucidate, *Doctor Faustus* represents the culmination of a theme evident in earlier works, such as *Death in Venice* (1988) [1912] and *Lotte in Weimar: The Beloved Returns* (1968) [1939]: the diseased and diabolical nature of artistic creativity.

In *Doctor Faustus*, Mann explores the morality of being a writer. His concern is not the effects of literature on the reader, but the writer’s responsibility to society and the relationship between art and life. The novel is fundamentally ambivalent about these issues, and consequently neither perspective is championed as wholly ‘right’. For this reason, there are enough clues for Crawford to refute Serenus’ framing of Adrian’s life story in terms of a Faustian pact, but enough consistency in Serenus’ account to prevent it from being undeniable. In this chapter, I draw attention to the fact than Mann left his readers stranded between these two perspectives, and forced them to judge the morality of artistic creation for themselves.

**The Faustian Composer**

Though Serenus Zeitblom is ostensibly trying to redeem for posterity Adrian Leverkühn, ‘musical genius, a revered man sorely tried by fate’ (Mann 1997, p. 5), Serenus describes him in terms of the demonic and provides a dialogue between Adrian and the Devil. The Faustian allusion is not just restricted to Serenus’ narration, though. Gunilla Bergsten observes that Adrian is ‘a reincarnation of the old Doctor Faustus’ (1969, p. 46) from the chapbook, the earliest Faust narrative. She goes on to list the similarities between Adrian and the original Faust, including the length awarded in the pact (twenty-four years), background (men of peasant families who study theology at university before desiring to surpass its limitations) and the depiction of the Devil (changing appearance and emitting a cold sensation).

Regardless of the narrator’s bias, then, in one perspective—the aforementioned first perspective—the reader is positioned to acknowledge that Adrian is Faust. He
willingly becomes Faust, in fact, in order to create art rather than parody in a stale cultural climate. The Adrian that Serenus describes believes that the twentieth century is too self-conscious for traditional methods and conventions (Eichner 1952, p. 30). In the figure of Adrian the author brings together the philosophy of significant German thinkers such as Nietzsche and Theodor Adorno. As such, Adrian’s response is to design ‘a double breakthrough, both backward and forward: backward to a primitive and more vital (i.e., authentic) expression, forward to a brave new world that is rational and solely man’s creation’ (Bridges 1999, p. 28).

Adrian’s music—which Serenus assures us is the product of a genius—is nevertheless deemed ‘barbaric’. Adrian devises a system mimicking Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system that his German audience hears as ‘soulless’. His work that Serenus describes in the most depth, *Apocalipsis cum figuris*, takes this idea to the extreme. Adrian’s oratorio overtly depicts hell and the demonic, but the true horror of the piece is the evocation of the human within the *Apocalypse*. The piece is dominated by use of the glissando, which produces a sound that Serenus tells us is (for him) ‘anticultural, indeed anti-human, even demonic’ (Mann 1997, p. 393). Adrian’s use of the glissando as a substitute for the human voice suggests to his listeners that humankind is irrevocably tainted by the demonic. The effect is heightened by the opposition of infernal laughter with a chorus of children. This chorus, Serenus narrates sadly, is ‘a reprise of the Devil’s laughter’ (p. 398). The belief that humanity and the demonic coincide ‘is Adrian Leverkuhn in his entirety’, the oratorio ‘the music he represents in its entirety’ (p. 398).

The interpretation that the text seems to demand is that a view of humanity in the modern age as cursed, or diabolical, is unavoidable for a man such as Adrian. From childhood, Adrian is distant from the world and cold in nature. He rarely uses anyone’s name or an informal address, and appears blind to social conventions as when he has Rudi propose to Marie in his stead later in life. However, Serenus continually refers to Adrian’s ‘sense of the comic, his craving for it, his habit of laughing, laughing to the point of tears’ (p. 94). Serenus is astute enough to see that this does not contradict other elements of Adrian’s personality. Adrian does not laugh because he is a part of the world, but because he sees through the absurdity of life’s conventions. The few times that Serenus reproduces extended discourse from Adrian his language supports this
CHAPTER FOUR: DOCTOR FAUSTUS

interpretation. Compared to the dryness and straightforwardness of Serenus’ prose, Adrian speaks in ornate and antiquated language. Words and social conventions, like tones, are tools that Adrian manipulates without regard for their socially-accepted interpretations. Adrian is demonic well before he makes a deal with the Devil in this sense because he makes a mockery of all that grounds his culture. Patrick Carnegy suggests that ‘[t]he seeking out of the syphilis is the crucial thing, not the effect that the disease has on him, for this is merely the consummation of what was there, and fully matured within him, already’ (cited in Picart 1999, p. 47).

In The Story of a Novel Thomas Mann asserts that his work explores ‘the flight from the difficulties of the cultural crisis into the pact with the Devil, the craving of a proud mind, threatened by sterility, for an unblocking of inhibitions at any cost, and the parallel between pernicious euphoria ending in collapse with the nationalistic frenzy of Fascism’ (1961, p. 30). Accordingly, critics unanimously agree with the view that ‘Adrian stands here as a symbol for Germany’ (Rey 1950, p. 24). What the figure of Adrian says about Germany, however, is up for debate. I shall first look at Mann’s own statements on the relationship between the Faustian hero and his fatherland, before developing my own reading of the novel.

Discussing the nature of Germany and Germans, Mann says:

> If Faust is to be the representative of the German soul, he would have to be musical, for the relation of the German to the world is abstract and mystical, that is, musical,—the relation of a professor with a touch of demonism, awkward and at the same time filled with arrogant knowledge that he surpasses the world in “depth”. (2008, pp. 51-2).

Adrian’s character flaws, then—his coldness, his arrogance, his tendency towards introspection over engagement with the community—are the flaws that Mann saw in Germans in general. Accordingly, Martin Travers contends that ‘[t]here is, certainly, no denying that the novel constitutes a moral condemnation of the arrogant and nihilistic mentality that had encouraged Mann’s homeland to enter into a pact with the devil by embracing National Socialism’ (1992, p. 113). As Adrian makes a mockery of social conventions with his unsavoury use of music and language, Germany makes a mockery of such fundamental social values as compassion and respect through its
part in the Holocaust. The fact that this was able to occur suggests—in the terms of the text—that there is some truth to Serenus’ conviction that Adrian believes the human and demonic often coincide. It is not clear, though, whether this is actually Adrian’s belief, or one that Serenus attributes to him erroneously.

**The Unreliable Biographer**

By parodying the conventions of the biography in *Doctor Faustus* Mann reveals the subjective component of interpretation. As Adrian’s life story is told by a close friend who witnessed much of his life, the reader is initially positioned to judge Serenus’ narrative as authoritative. However, Adrian is presented as a particularly unconventional man who is capable of surprising and shocking Serenus. When Adrian reveals his plans to marry Marie, for example, Serenus comments, ‘[o]ne can imagine my amazement!’ (Mann 1997, p. 442). We must therefore question the legitimacy of Serenus’ interpretations of Adrian’s beliefs, values and intentions. Given that the conversation in which Adrian asks Rudolf to propose to Marie on his behalf reproduced in the novel (cited earlier in this chapter) is actually only Serenus’ invented version, even the true nature of Adrian and Rudolf’s relationship is brought into question. Serenus’ unreliable narration means that it is unclear whether it was just the ‘elfin bond’ (p. 442) he deems it, or if he is invested in having it explained away in these terms. Regardless of whether Serenus honestly describes Adrian’s relationships, it is crucial to a discussion of the novel’s stance on the responsibilities of the writer to explore Serenus’ motivations behind his representation of Adrian.

Throughout the text, Serenus attributes his own worldview to his faith in the doctrine of humanism. When he feels uneasy about some of the attitudes professed in Adrian’s theological course at Halle, Serenus admits that he and Adrian have aligned with opposite perspectives—‘I as a humanist, and he as a theologian’ (p. 100). In the mind of the young Serenus, the moral, creative, political and technological progress of human society does not require supernatural intervention: human agency and creativity will insure it.

Serenus’ humanism is revealed as inadequate as a response to the course of events that led to the Holocaust. In his youth Serenus optimistically tried to live out his humanism, becoming a professor of Classics, involving himself in artistic circles,
and even conducting an affair with a lower class woman ‘to put into practice one of
the theoretical convictions I held’ (p. 157). However, after the Second World War,
Serenus express uncertainty about whether he can go back to his teaching profession
and educate his students in the same ideals. As a man and as a humanist Serenus was
completely ineffectual when facing the rise of Nazism, avoiding confrontation in the
guise of protest. Serenus perceived evil in the Nazis and found he had no response. He
says:

Though scarcely presuming to deny the influence of the demonic on human life, I…
have instinctively excluded it from my worldview… This attitude has meant
sacrifices, both in ideal terms and as regards my physical wellbeing, for once it
became apparent that my views could not be reconciled with the spirit and claims of
our historical developments, I did not hesitate prematurely to retire from the teaching
profession I loved. (p. 6)

As Durrani notes, Serenus’ ‘commitment to Humanism is no more beneficial to
humanity at large than Adrian’s study of musical harmonies is conducive to harmony
in the world he inhabits’ (1985, p. 656).

Serenus’ humanist values do not help him comprehend Germany’s fate, and
leave him disillusioned. The reason for his demonisation of Adrian is his insistent need
to prove that he was not wrong for holding on to humanist values, and that the source
of evil must be elsewhere. As something powers Adrian that is ‘barbaric’—irrational,
immoral (or amoral), sexualised and out of step with high culture—Serenus describes
him in terms of the demonic and the diabolical. From the third page of the novel, when
Serenus supposedly unintentionally ‘broach[es] the topic of genius and what is surely
the influence of the demonic upon it’ (Mann 1997, p. 7) the text’s concern with the
nature of the demonic is foreshadowed.

In a discussion of the German vulnerability to demonic forces, one of the
students at Halle reminds the others that ‘[t]he demonic, in German, that means the
instinctual’ (p. 133). This comes well into the narrative after Serenus has used the term
as a synonym for ‘diabolical’, in the supernatural sense; and for transgressive desires.
For Serenus, the demonic is the unexplainable, which does not recognise the centrality
of human civilisation nor the human moral order. Fervent humanist, he cannot
understand the lure of the demonic, nor its power, without recourse to otherworldly terms and framework.

In childhood, Adrian’s father shows his son and his son’s friend Serenus how he can manipulate chemicals to mimic plant life. ‘Phantasms of this sort’, the adult Serenus tells his reader, ‘are exclusively the concern of nature, and in particular of nature when she is wilfully tempted by man. In the worthy realm of the humanities one is safe from all such spooks’ (p. 23). This superficially appears to be in conflict with his earlier claim that his beloved humanities are open to demonic forces (Ames 1952, p. 254). Serenus’ comments actually show that he thinks exploration of the demonic is fine as long as it does not threaten humanist ideals. Art itself is a place—the only place—where demonic beings and impulses can be safely integrated; Serenus says he ‘often explained to my senior students how culture is actually the reverent, orderly, I may even say, propitiatory inclusion of the nocturnal and monstrous in the cult of the gods’ (Mann 1997, p. 12).

However, the more the demonic realm overlaps with the human realm, the more fearful Serenus is. Serenus’ discussion of the trend of liberal theology, in which science is integrated into faith, develops his position. He claims that as a religious man himself, he thinks that religion should be about a ‘feeling for the infinite’ (p. 98), a sense of wonder at the mechanism that enabled the creation of human life and its moral order. The demonic is then the tendency that threatens this blessed state, and it is not without a sense of the supernatural. Serenus does not argue that the demonic does not exist, but on the contrary, thinks that it should be recognised and externalised, projected into the humanities and the arts. Accordingly, he criticises liberal theology for subordinating religious feeling to reason and reducing it to ethics. In doing so, ‘its theological position is weak, for its moralism and humanism lack any insight into the demonic character of human existence’ (p. 99).

Although I believe Crawford wrongly disenchants the narrative, her argument that Serenus sees the demonic where it is not is a persuasive one. In John E. Woods’ English translation of the novel, Serenus perceives Rudolf’s character in ‘a demonic light’ (p. 366); suggests that genius is ‘surely’ influenced by the demonic (p. 7); and in a discussion of the popularity of Schleppfuss’ lectures and his frequent references to sexuality he says, ‘[w]henever the topic was the power of demons over human life,
sexual matters always played a conspicuous role. How could it have been otherwise?’ (p. 113). Serenus’ conflation of instinctual drives with supernatural evil anticipates his interpretation of Adrian’s life in terms of the Faust myth. His characterisation of Adrian’s laughter as demonic can be unpacked to reveal an entirely plausible alternative that does not demonise Adrian, as I show in the next two sections of the chapter.

**Interpreting Adrian’s Laughter**

Writing as a biographer, Serenus indicates that Adrian’s tendency to laugh is central to his character, and mentions it at least fifty-three times (Roche 1986, p. 312). He asserts that Adrian’s ‘sense of the comic of which he had boasted, or of which he accused himself… [is what made him] compatible with art’ (Mann 1997, p. 143), because it ensured that he would never be satisfied with repeating dull traditions, but would strive for something new. Mark W. Roche explains that ‘[w]ith his laughter Leverkühn negates traditional values and abandons the spheres in which such values once had validity’ (1986, p. 312). Accordingly, the ways in which Adrian laughs suggest that his ‘sense of the comic, his craving for it, his habit of laughing, laughing to the point of tears’ (Mann 1997, p. 93) is related to his arrogance, or sense of superiority. Serenus clarifies that Adrian’s inclination towards laughter is not simply a reflex, or a mild and measured response, but ‘a mildly orgiastic release… from the rigors of life that result from extraordinary talent’ (p. 93). Instead of creating a sense of community, from Serenus’ perspective Adrian’s laughter distances him from the world and other people (with perhaps the exception of Rüdiger Schildknapp). As a child, Adrian’s laughter is adult, perceptive, and contemptuous, signalling that he is far more intellectually advanced than the two years senior, future academic Serenus. This laugh has within it ‘lay knowledge and the initiate’s sneer… But at the same time his eyes, seeking out the distance, registered a special look, and the dusk of their metallic flecks would retreat deeper into shadow’ (p. 32). This description of the physical effects, emphasising the incomprehensibility of Adrian’s laughter and metaphorically illustrating the darkness that surrounds it, foreshadows Serenus’ association of laughter with the demonic.
CHAPTER FOUR: DOCTOR FAUSTUS

The first explicit example of this comes when Serenus confesses that ‘I am not so very fond of laughter’ and notes that Adrian’s laughter always reminded him of the story of Ham, son of Noah, who ‘had been the only man ever to laugh upon being born, which could have happened only with the help of the Devil’ (p. 94). Supporting his association between the demonic and Adrian’s laughter, Serenus goes on to record Adrian laughing at his friend Schildknapp’s misfortune, at Kumpf’s song and dance in defiance of the Devil, and at the Devil’s terms during their dialogue.

It is through Adrian’s Apocalypse that Serenus’ apprehension regarding Adrian’s laughter becomes clear. He states:

I am deeply moved as I write this in its defense—and am seized with yet another emotion: the recollection of the pandemonium of laughter, of infernal laughter, that forms the brief, but ghastly conclusion of the first part of the Apocalypse. I hate, I love, I fear it; for... I have always feared Adrian’s penchant for laughter, which, unlike Rüdiger Schildknapp, I was always poor at encouraging—and I feel that same fear, that same timid and anxious helplessness when listening to this sardonic gaudium of Gehenna as it sweeps across fifty bars, beginning with the giggle of a single voice... to the mocking, triumphant laughter of hell. (1997, p. 397)

As I have previously mentioned, Serenus asserts that he comprehends the oratorio and is convinced that Adrian thinks the demonic and the human coincide. The Apocalypse makes Serenus uncomfortable because of the centrality of the ‘hellish laughter’ (1997, p. 397). Instead of being an uplifting, life-affirming human laughter that suggests a sense of community, this laughter recalls the Devil.

Laughter is indeed inherently ambiguous. The same phenomenon can have an entirely different meaning depending on the context; one can ‘laugh at’ or ‘laugh with’. Serenus is fearful of Adrian’s tendency towards laughter and deems it demonic because he does not relate to his inclination to laugh and does not understand it, even though he proposes that it acts as a release from the pressure of a genius mind. It appears that this humanist holds a similar interpretation of the function of laughter as F.H Buckley, who proposes a theory of ‘the morality of laughter’, asserting that ‘[o]ne of the strongest cultural signals about how to live comes from laughter, whose sting we can never ignore’ (2005, p. x). Anita Houck elaborates on this line of thinking,
stating that ‘laughter… affirms moral standards… enforces the rule of the status quo… [or] can challenge prevalent moral codes’ (2007, p. 49). Adrian’s laughter does not function in this way, although such laughter does occur in the text with Adrian as its object, not source. On the verge of complete insanity, Adrian invites a crowd of people to hear his cantata The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus and prefaxes his work with a confession of his own Faustian status. His eccentric speech, appearance, behaviour and talk of his pact are taken to be a parody of a genius composer, rather than a legitimate representation of his person. The incongruity of his behaviour with modern standards of behaviour prompts laughter from his listeners. As Serenus describes: ‘the response that greeted him around the room was first one of laughter—soft snorts through the nose or titters from the ladies’ (Mann 1997, p. 520).

Considering what we are told about Adrian’s character and the stimulus for his laughter, it is evident that Adrian does not laugh for such community-oriented reasons. I believe that Serenus’ comment about Adrian’s laughter being ‘a mildly orgiastic release… from the rigors of life that result from extraordinary talent’ (1997, p. 93) is correct. This is supported by one of the few examples of Adrian’s own words that Serenus shares with us, in which he says:

I have been damned from the start with the need to laugh at the most mysterious and impressive spectacles, and I fled from my exaggerated sense of the comic into theology, hoping it would soothe the tickle—only to find a lot of things awfully comic there as well. Why must everything appear to me as its own parody? (1997, p. 143)

Adrian laughs because he understands spectacles that are mysterious and impressive to other people. Consequently, the Devil says that he has a ‘favourable disposition, out of which, presupposing but a little enkindling, incitement, and inebriation, something lustrous might be made’ (1997, p. 244). Roche comments that Adrian relativises musical notes, treating them as parts instead of a whole, thereby exposing the constructed nature of traditional music (1986, p. 315). Only a man who laughs at the traditions and conventions of the world is able to produce music as innovative as Adrian Leverkühn’s.

An interpretation of Adrian’s laughter than does not attribute it to the demonic, as Serenus does, is possible when one refers to the work of the philosopher on whom
Adrian’s biography is partially based on Nietzsche. This model has been well-established by critics, following Mann’s explicit admission: ‘There is the interweaving of Leverkuhn’s tragedy with that of Nietzsche, whose name does not appear in the entire book—advisedly, because the euphoric musician has been made so much Nietzsche’s substitute that the original is no longer permitted a separate existence’ (Mann 1961, p. 32). Roche in particular reads Adrian’s laughter and ethics as Nietzschean, and concludes that Doctor Faustus condemns its protagonist, so that ‘[t]he novel’s abandonment of Nietzsche must be seen as fundamental’ (1986, p. 328). I bring this assertion into question towards the end of this chapter.

John Lippitt asserts that ‘ignoring Nietzsche’s contribution to the philosophy of laughter and humour is an important oversight, since he awards laughter a status higher than that granted by any other philosopher’ (1992, p. 39). In Thus Spoke Zarathustra the prophet Zarathustra tells the people that they should aspire to be Übermensch, overcoming their own herd instinct. Zarathustra directs his attention to the ‘preachers of equality’, believing that the notion that all are equal is born of envy, resentment and conceit, and says that he wants to expose this corrupt motive, ‘therefore I laugh into your face my laughter of the heights’ (Nietzsche 2006, p. 76). Zarathustra indicates that the Übermensch should laugh at false doctrines and stale conventions with sinister motives of conformity, expressing one’s superiority. Although ‘many fools [that] laugh at things they simply do not understand’, the laughter that Zarathustra promotes is directed ‘at things that do not concern us, and are not work our zeal or wrath—that which has already in our person been overcome’ (Burnham & Jesinghausen 2010, p. 45). Similarly, in The Gay Science Nietzsche suggests that the only type of laughter that has an intelligent cause is that which acknowledges that the human condition is indeed laughable:

To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh out of the veriest truth,—to do this, the best have not hitherto had enough of the sense of truth, and the most endowed have had far too little genius! There is perhaps still a future even for laughter! When the maxim, “The race is all, the individual is nothing,”—has incorporated itself in humanity, and when access stands open to every one at all times to this ultimate emancipation and irresponsibility.— Perhaps then laughter will have united with wisdom… (1974, pp. 17-8)
Nietzsche thus differentiates between his ideal of ‘laughter of the heights’, which affirms one’s self-overcoming of humanity, with ‘laughter of the herd’, which aims at promoting conformity through humiliation (Lippitt 1992) and is equivalent to Buckley’s laughter of morality.

Mark Weeks is critical of academics who consider Nietzsche a proponent of laughter in general, as ‘Nietzsche conceded that as he wrote laughter did not have the function he would like for it’ (2004, p. 12). In Nietzsche, ‘[l]aughter is nothing like an end… but rather an instrument, representing an event whereby static structures might be seen to collapse and liberate the explicitly “tragic” force of becoming and overcoming’ and therefore Nietzsche must challenge ‘his readers, through Zarathustra, to will a new kind of laughter…’ (2004, pp. 10, 3). Weeks’ argument is valid, and actually points to the appropriateness of Nietzsche’s theory for an understanding of Adrian in Doctor Faustus. Adrian does not exhibit ‘laughter of the herd’, the more common form of laughter but the ideal ‘laughter of the heights’ because he stands outside of the community. Noted for his coldness, physically distanced from other people for much of the novel owing to his residence in Pfeiffering, continually making a mockery of social conventions and composing music that only an elite can appreciate, Adrian is an approximation of the Übermensch, or a Zarathustra-figure. The fact that this is the ideal that the Devil requires that he embody, repudiating sentiment and focusing solely on creative achievement—something that he is unable to do once he meets Nepomuk—seems to suggest that Serenus is right in demonising Adrian’s Nietzschean laughter. However, all these qualities were already apparent in Adrian before he meets the Devil—‘[t]he pact had already been signed; only clarification of the terms was necessary’ (Picart 1999, p. 47). There is certainly ambivalence in the correlation between Nietzsche and Adrian, but Adrian is not unequivocally condemned. Indeed, Mann admitted his preference for Adrian over all his other characters, and stated, ‘I shared Serenus’ feelings for him, was painfully in love with him…’ (Mann 1961, p. 89). I discuss this ambivalence in greater detail in the final section of the chapter.

If Adrian is depicted as exhibiting ‘the laughter of the heights’ when he deduces the construct of a melody as a child, prodigiously comprehending musical
theory and convention, or when Kumpf attempts to stave off the Devil, Serenus’
diagnosis of his laughter as demonic is misguided. What Serenus thinks is ‘demonic’—
the unexplainable, irrational and intoxicating—can also be understood as Nietzsche’s
‘Dionysian’, associated with ‘the Dionysiac monster called Zarathustra’ (Nietzsche
1993, p. 12). For Nietzsche, the god Dionysus is associated with music, intoxication,
madness and reconciliation with nature. He is juxtaposed to Apollo, who represents
the plastic arts, ethics, reason and moderation (pp. 16, 26). The Devil’s ‘pact proffers
the demonic ecstasy or “illumination” that Nietzsche calls Dionysian, the power to
revitalize an overintellectualized civilization’ (Scaff 1995, p. 156).

Serenus continually conflates the Devil’s influence with instinctual or
‘demonic’ forces in Doctor Faustus because they are both the same in the novel: they
are both other names for the Dionysian force. It is therefore not surprising that
Germany’s actions are described in terms that recall both the demonic and the
Dionysian:

…the wanton contempt for reason, the sinful ignoring of truth, the vulgar voluptuous
cult of a trashy myth, the culpable confounding of something that has run to seed with
what it once was, the sordid abuse and cheap peddling of what was old and genuine,
faithful and familiar, of what was fundamentally German, from which liars and frauds
then prepared a stupefying home-brew. That wild intoxication—for constantly
yearning to be intoxicated, we drank freely, and under that illusory euphoria we have
for years committed a plethora of disgraceful deeds—must now be paid for. (Mann
1997, p. 186)

What so disturbs Serenus about Adrian’s ‘demonic’ laughter is that it so consumes him
it is as if he loses his sense of self. When Schildknapp’s misfortune prompts Adrian to
‘[laugh] to the point of tears at all his misery’, he is no longer the cold and distant man
that Serenus has described to us, the ‘personality for which [he] felt a strained and
fearful love’ (Mann 1997, pp. 476, 332). This ‘demonic’ experience is actually an
experience of Dionysian release—and that is what scares Serenus.

Significantly, Adrian is not only Dionysian (in his laughter and obsession with
the prostitute, for example) but Apollonian (in his detachment, mathematical ability
and favoured style of music) (Durrani 1985, p. 657). Serenus fixates on only one force
not because it is the sole cause of Adrian’s faults, but because it is the one that he,
Serenus, purports to be unaffected by. Apollonian Serenus fears the Dionysian force because it transforms Adrian into something that is not Adrian, is *more than Adrian*, something demonic. Unsurprisingly, Serenus is fascinated by the idea of an undivided self throughout his narration. Durrani notes that ‘[h]e rarely misses an opportunity to highlight the contradictions in a character; almost everyone is portrayed as being in some way divided against himself or herself’ (1985, p. 657). His response to Adrian’s wild laughter is one of horror because ‘the boundary which establishes each human being as a discrete entity’ (Creed 1993, pp. 55-6) disappears in laughter. To Serenus—but not necessarily the reader—Adrian’s ‘laughter of the heights’ is uncanny.

**Confronting the Unknown**

When Adrian laughs, he both is and is not Adrian. There is ‘a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural’ (Royle 2003, p. 1)—a component of the uncanny. Nicholas Royle, in his book-length study *The Uncanny*, claims the uncanny is an experience of fear, uncertainty, disturbance, alienation, and most importantly, the simultaneity of familiarity and unfamiliarity; prompting a sense that one is ‘double, split, at odds with ourselves’ (2003, p. 6). Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, which makes the argument that the sense of the uncanny reveals the return of repressed desires or knowledge, is fundamental to any discussion of the uncanny (2003, p. 147). However, Todorov offers an understanding of the uncanny that does not rely on psychoanalytic precepts. As noted in regards to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a text is ‘fantastic’ when it can simultaneously be interpreted in natural and logical terms, and alternatively, supernatural terms. However, when the aspects of the texts ‘that seem supernatural throughout… receive a rational explanation at its end’ the text is considered ‘uncanny’ (Todorov 1973, p. 44).28 Because the supernatural is only a mistaken impression of a character or characters and not a reality in uncanny texts, the categorisation relates to the characters’ reactions and interpretations (p. 47).

The scene in which Adrian engages in dialogue with the Devil—and by extension, the entire novel—is uncanny in Todorov’s terms. As I have noted, Crawford contends that there is enough evidence to read the dialogue scene as an excerpt from

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28 The Jerusalem narrative in *The Master and Margarita* is therefore ‘fantastic’ rather than ‘uncanny’, as the presence of the supernatural is left unclear.
the Faust cantata, rather than an account of an event in Adrian’s life (2003, p. 172). This scene is only uncanny because Serenus cannot decide whether it is real. He expresses his misgivings at choosing either alternative:

A dialogue? Is it truly that? I would have to be mad to believe it… But if he, the visitor, did not exist—and I am horrified to admit that such words allow, even if only conditionally and as a possibility, for his reality!—it is gruesome to think that the cynicism, the mockery, and the humbug likewise comes from his own stricken soul… (Mann 1997, p. 237)

If Serenus as the ostensive author had incorporated Adrian’s manuscript into his narrative with a decisive provenance, the uncanny effect would be absent.

As such, Adrian’s laughter only appears as something supernatural to the reader because Serenus’ focalisation is filtered through his subjective interpretation. Readers can distance themselves from Serenus’ narration and read Adrian’s laughter as something entirely natural, as I have done with my alternative reading of Adrian’s laughter as Nietzschean. The uncanny, then, only exists in the first perspective of the novel. Recounting Adrian’s life and character brings Serenus into conflict with the insufficiency of his humanist worldview. He deems Adrian’s laughter diabolical because he recognises the Dionysian impulse as something he and much of his society have repressed, to use Freud’s term. Serenus insistently describes Adrian’s music and laughter as demonic because he is misrecognising the impulse as something exterior to humanity, when it can be argued that it is fully human. The impulse’s ambiguous origin is central to its uncanniness: is it demonic in the sense of diabolical, or demonic in the sense of instinctual?

There is an indelible link between laughter, the Devil, and the uncanny in Doctor Faustus. Mann himself makes this clear in his recollection of Franz Werfel’s reaction to a draft of the book: ‘I shall not forget how struck he was—or shall I say premonitively disturbed—by Adrian’s laughter, in which he instantly recognized something of the uncanny, an element of religious diabolism…. In that laughter the devil, as the secret hero of the book, is invisibly present’ (1961, p. 70). In this quote Mann brings out another instance of ambiguity that is central to the text—is the Devil or Adrian the hero? This question can be phrased in other ways: ‘is this a novel about
a supernatural force, or a human one?’ or even ‘was it Adrian’s natural inclination to create art at the expense of engagement with the human world, or was it the Devil’s pact?’ I have already suggested that the uncanny arises due to a profound uncertainty about the origin of the Dionysian impulse. The corollary of this exploration is a question of moral action: how can one act responsibly when one does not know? In order to elucidate this point, I offer a reading of the Dostoevskian dialogue between Adrian and the Devil before turning to Serenus’ own guilt.

The scene in which Adrian converses with the Devil—the only section in which Adrian’s perspective is unmediated by Serenus—incorporates three significant allusions: to Nietzsche, Adorno, and the work of Dostoevsky. As I have already noted, Adrian’s biography is based on the life of Nietzsche. These include the context in which Adrian contracts syphilis, the amount of time he is awarded to live in a heightened state of creation before the onset of insanity, the age at time of death, and the date of death. This paints Nietzsche as a diabolical figure, as the similarities are largely to do with the Devil’s bargain. Fittingly, the style of art that Adrian produces through his pact with the Devil evoke the Dionysian. Adrian Del Caro thus claims that ‘[o]nly the pathological mind of Nietzsche, amplified by the sympathetic evil of the devil, could convey Mann’s message concerning the damnation of a culture’ (1988, p. 136).

However, Andrew Erwin insists that reading Doctor Faustus as a repudiation of Nietzsche is misguided. He draws attention to David Pan’s reinterpretation of Nietzsche’s aesthetics, in which Pan argues Nietzsche advocates ‘an aesthetic mimesis of pain [that] constrains the freedom of both artist and audience’ and in which ‘pain rather than truth becomes the determining value’ (cited in Erwin 2003, p. 296). In this light, Adrian’s work is redemptive, as the notion of pain being one that unites humankind means ‘Leverkühn is more closely connected than ever to “life” and thus feeling at the end of the novel’ (2003, p. 297). Serenus’ interpretation of The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus actually supports this. He claims that by the time of completion, Adrian’s beard ‘lent his countenance a kind of spiritualized suffering, indeed, something Christlike’, and the work ends with a final high G which ‘stands as a light in the night’ (Mann 1997, pp. 507, 15). If Mann is engaging with this idea (in the first perspective, no less) then it would suggest that Nietzsche is not being entirely
rejected. Rather than unequivocally marking Nietzsche as diabolical, then, the Nietzschean allusions serve to make the Devil and Adrian’s relationship more ambiguous.

This is not the only philosophical reference at work. At one point the Devil appears in the guise of Mann’s guide in musical theory, Adorno, even paraphrasing *Philosophy of Modern Music* (Bergsten 1969, pp. 79-80). Like Adorno, the Devil believes that methods of composition become obsolete and true art breaks with tradition. Both *Philosophy of Modern Music* and *Doctor Faustus* are concerned with the nature of artistic expression, but they present differing opinions. Justice Kraus observes that for Adorno, the artist’s role in artistic expression was limited, while Mann’s novel suggests that the composer’s subjectivity is paramount in the creation of art, and thus Mann puts him at the forefront of the novel (2008, p. 176). In a novel that thematises the writing of a novel in early to mid-twentieth century Germany—and also focuses on an avant-garde composer—the artist’s personal moral responsibility is highly relevant. If Serenus condemns Adrian, he must condemn himself, for it is not answered whether chronicling the historical events he has witnessed is a moral substitute for active resistance. As such, the novel retains a profoundly ambivalent relationship to Adorno’s thought.

The dialogue scene also recalls the meeting between Ivan and the Devil in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Del Caro lists the similarities between the two scenes, which includes the Devil’s unimpressive appearance, the protagonist’s denial of the reality of the Devil, the scene appearing slightly different when the protagonist comes to his senses, and the fact that ‘both Ivan and Adrian pretend to be disgusted by the Devil’s testimony, whereas the Devil insists that what he has to say is rather pleasing to them’ (1988, p. 135). The effect of this parallel is a heightened sense of ambiguity in the novel’s pact scene, as a key element of Ivan’s dialogue with the Devil is his inability to determine whether the Devil is real or a figment of his imagination. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the Devil tells an anecdote that Ivan recognises as his own creation, and asserts that the Devil cannot be more than his hallucination. However, the Devil replies that ‘I deliberately told you your own anecdote, which you had forgotten, so that you would finally lose faith in me… hesitation, anxiety, the struggle between belief and disbelief—all that is sometimes such a torment for a conscientious
man like yourself, that it’s better to hang oneself’ (Dostoevsky 2004, p. 645). Similarly, Adrian accuses the Devil of knowing nothing he does not know, which ‘lays bare your nothingness’ (Mann 1997, p. 241). The Devil retorts that ‘[r]ather than construe from my informed state that I am not present in the flesh, you would do better to conclude that I am not merely in the flesh, but am also he for whom you have taken me all this time’ (p. 241).

In his dialogue with the Devil, Adrian is given permission to give into his Dionysian inclinations and give up his sense of responsibility. The Faustian bargain trope suggests that we should condemn him for this because a deal with the Devil entails a person explicitly making a choice he or she already knows is wrong. The uncanniness that arises is therefore not an ambiguity between the rightness or wrongfulness of the action, but surrounds the question of whether the intermediary was needed to make a wrong choice, or whether it had been made long before; is there a Devil, or is there just Adrian? Mann’s novel inclines towards an answer, with the Devil noting that Adrian had already ‘promised yourself to us and are baptized ours—this visit of mine is intended merely for confirmation’ (Mann 1997, p. 264).

Serenus’ Guilt

Nevertheless, Serenus refuses to conceptualise his friend Adrian’s downfall—or the actions taken by Germany that led to the Holocaust, to which he compares it—as something within the realm of natural human possibility. Paul Eisenstein claims that for the faithful humanist Serenus, ‘the events that defile must be referred to the Faustian situation—i.e., must be made the subject of a drama about guilt and grace’ (1997, p. 328). By writing Adrian’s story as the story of Doctor Faustus, Serenus proves himself a Doctor Faustus.

If the second perspective in the narrative is foregrounded, it becomes clear that Serenus is searching for absolution for his part in Germany’s fate, and Adrian’s story. He is quick to note his refusal to support the Nazis and commitment to alternative ideals. However, his observation that ‘I share the sense that we are only getting what we gave, and if our atonement should be more terrible than our sins, then let our ears ring with the dictum that he who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind’ (Mann 1997, p. 38) suggests a personal sense of guilt. Indeed, he proclaims that when the citizens
of Weimar are forced to see the concentration camp whose activities they ignored, ‘I shall look with them, in my mind’s eye I let myself be jostled along in those same apathetic, or perhaps shuddering, lines’ (p. 505). Eventually he explicitly questions his assumption of innocence, even as he continues to associate Adrian with Germany:

I, certain of its ghastly end, held myself apart from [Germany’s] sins, hid from them in my solitude. Must I not ask if I was right in doing so? And again: Did I actually do so? I have clung to one man, one painfully important man, unto death and have described his life, which never ceased to fill me with loving fear. It is as if this loyalty may well have made up for my having fled in horror from my country’s guilt. (p. 529)

In this line the first perspective of the narrative gives way to the second perspective, suggesting that by writing about Adrian and refusing to confront the events of his own time, Serenus, too, has made a deal with the Devil.

This concept has been explored by both Bridges and Durrani. Bridges suggests that if Adrian is inspired by the Devil and Serenus is inspired by Adrian, he is surely just as culpable. The biography, then, is the product of ‘the same risk that his friend takes—namely, the gamble that the work he produces… will justify the sacrifice he makes for the sake of that work’ (1999, p. 31). Durrani makes a similar argument, claiming that Serenus’ ‘loyalty’ to Adrian can be understood as ‘an unacknowledged pact with evil, which paralyses the schoolmaster in much the same way as Adrian is paralysed emotionally by what he sees as his compact with the devil’ (1985, p. 656). At the intersection of the two perspectives, there are two Fausts.

In her article, Crawford proposes that Serenus demonises his friend in part because of his bitterness at Adrian’s refusal to reciprocate his love. However, I feel that as Serenus’ ongoing love for Adrian is palpable in the narrative, this reason is secondary to one even more personal: Serenus’ refusal to confront his own guilt. Like Goethe’s Faust, who proclaims he has ‘given myself to necromancy / To hear the mouths of ghosts…’ (2005, p. 17), Serenus conjures up the ghosts of old friends such as Adrian Leverkühn, Rudolf Schwerdtfeger and Clarissa Rodde, in order to create an allegory for Germany’s plight and thus come to terms with the events of his life. In his interpretation, both Adrian and Germany cultivated their natural antisocial tendencies and transformed them into something truly demonic by making a pact—in Adrian’s
case with the Devil, and for Germany, Nazism—and giving themselves up to its influence. What makes it truly demonic is that this pact is an act of resignation, where one proclaims their lack of further responsibility.

However, Serenus’ interpretation evolves over the two years he writes the biography. At its beginning he recounts how he nobly resigned from his teaching position in protest of Nazism, and has distanced himself from his two sons who serve the Führer. By its conclusion, however, he has admitted that he does not know if he is worthy of being a teacher any longer, and is questioning his choice to stay focused on the past. It has become apparent to Serenus that the crimes he has accused his subjects of are his own crimes as well. Fittingly, in *A Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus* Mann confesses that he did not give a physical description of his protagonists because they ‘had too much to conceal, namely, the secret of their being identical with each other’ (1961, p. 90). In writing his biography, Serenus conjures up the ghost of his friend in order to create great literature—just as Adrian made a deal with the Devil to compose innovative music—and exposes the inadequacy of humanism as a muse in the process. Similarly, Serenus criticises Adrian for his lack of responsibility, and yet he has withdrawn from the world and refused to take any responsibility for the nation to which he belongs. Telling Adrian’s story is ironically both Serenus’ attempt at absolution, and another of his sins.

What Serenus learns through his demonisation of Adrian is that he too is a Faust, and that the Faustian tendency—perhaps better described as arrogance, selfishness, curiosity and ambition—is innately human. He discovers that Adrian’s ‘acquired and destructive genius’ (Mann 1997, p. 7) was really something inside him that was externalised and treated as something outside of him that he could not be held responsible for. This means that he cannot blame Adrian’s temperament or the German spirit because it is possible *even in those who decry the demonic* if they are not conscientious. What shatters Serenus’ understanding of Adrian’s act is the realisation that the Dionysian impulse did not lead directly to the diabolical pact.

In light of this, we can comprehend Mann’s ambivalence towards Nietzsche and his own protagonist. He finds his ideas fascinating, but believes they are demonic in the sense I have used throughout the chapter: opposed to the best interests of human civilisation. The influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy of the *Übermensch* on the Nazis
is certainly fundamental here. However, the very fact that Adrian needs the Dionysian to produce innovative art—humanism will not do—prevents the novel from ever truly rejecting Nietzsche.

**The Responsibility of the Writer**

As such, while the first perspective indicates that the novel focuses on the life of Adrian Leverkühn in order to explicate the conditions that led to the rise of Nazism in Germany, the second perspective reveals that the nature of art and the artist is a concern of similar interest. Like Habermas, Mann found the perlocutionary effect of literature concerning because of the one-sided relationship that is set up between the reader and the author via the medium of the book. Mann’s characterisation of art as diabolical or Dionysian attests to an ambivalence towards literature that pervades his oeuvre. William V. Glebe contends that Mann’s writings reflect his inability to ‘overcom[e] his early belief that the artist, the highest manifestation of man, was afflicted with a kind of “disease” peculiar to him alone’ (1961, p. 55). The artist’s task of creating works of great beauty necessitates putting aside moral demands. The troubling consequences of this are that it tempts the artist to give in to dark and antisocial desires, and privilege art over life. Two of Mann’s earlier works, *Lotte in Weimar: The Beloved Returns* and *Death in Venice*, offer insight into the treatment of these themes in *Doctor Faustus*.

*Lotte in Weimar* is Mann’s fictionalised account of the meeting between Charlotte Buff Kestner, the inspiration for Lotte in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1989) [1774], and the aforementioned author many years after the novel’s publication. In this text, Mann uses Goethe, as an exemplar of literary genius, to explore the relationship between life and art, and the nature of genius. Mann engages with an idea that goes back as far as Plato: the art is dangerous because imitation is superficial, giving little insight into truth.

In the novel, Charlotte is in Weimar with the stated intention of seeing her sister and a covert plan to see Goethe. She is delayed from leaving the hotel by multiple admirers of Goethe who wish to see the source of his renowned work. The belief that Charlotte gives direct insight into Goethe’s fictional Lotte haunts Charlotte, who bemoans that poets ‘think only of themselves’ when writing such a ‘wicked mixture
of truth and make-believe’ (Mann 1968, pp. 19-20). One of her visitors, Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer, sympathises with her, stating:

We all know… that you and your good husband now resting in God have suffered for the indiscretions of the genius and his making free with your names and histories for his artistic ends, in a way humanly hard to justify. He recklessly exposed you to the gaze of all the world, mixing truth and fiction with that dangerous art which can clothe the actual in poetic garb and give to invention the hall-mark of reality, till the boundary between the two is dissolved and done away. (p. 60)

Her interior dialogue reveals that she is troubled by the fact that even she sometimes confuses her own experiences with the ones attributed to Lotte in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Thus, when others conflate her identity with that of Lotte, she is quick to protest that she has blue eyes and Lotte has black. When she discusses this with one of her visitors, however, it is evident that she is actually greatly invested in being identified with Lotte. The thought that Lotte’s black eyes might indicate that the true source of the character is the black-eyed Maxe La Roche, another romantic interest of Goethe, is ‘a bitter pill to swallow’ (p. 115) for Charlotte.

Charlotte and the residents of Weimar are entranced by Goethe’s literary genius, regardless of whether they recognise the moral implications of his art. The head waiter at Zum Elefanten in Weimar is oblivious to Charlotte’s distress, constantly overstaying his welcome and ushering in admirers of Goethe to engage in dialogue with her. Riemer, though he comprehends Charlotte’s situation and expresses sympathy, nevertheless follows up his accusation against Goethe of inappropriateness with a plea for further intimate details of Charlotte’s life: ‘Tell me, then, for I would give my life to hear… how and to what extent have you been able to reconcile your pain and chagrin at having been thus made use of…?’ (p. 61). Through the multiple perspectives in the novel Mann is able to explore both the destructive effects of confusing art with life and, importantly, the possibility that a man of such genius should be forgiven for his moral lapses. Charlotte and her husband’s pain might be the price that has to be paid for a work such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to exist. Reimer asserts that it is ‘humanly hard to justify’, but through this character Mann also
raises the idea that a genius cannot be held to human standards. ‘[I]t is wrong to conceive of God and the Devil as opposed principles’, Reimer muses,

If God is All, then He is also the Devil… so that, in a manner of speaking, heaven looks at you out of one eye, and the hell of the iciest negation and most destructive neutrality out of the other… it is two eyes… that make up one gaze… it is the gaze of absolute art, which is at once absolute love and absolute nihilism and indifference and implies that horrifying approach to the godlike-diabolic which we call genius. (pp. 82-3)

In order to do justice to Truth and Beauty, then, a genius cannot be concerned with questions of ethics or morality, for ‘absolute art’ exists in an entirely different sphere. If art is to reach a state akin to divinity (or sublimity), it will also be diabolical—amoral, thoughtless and cold—because the divine is antithetical to human concerns.

As such, there are similarities between Mann’s representation of Goethe—who never bothered to visit Charlotte on his many travels, and remains aloof even when Charlotte comes to Weimar—and Adrian in Doctor Faustus. Both prioritise their art at the expense of human relations, and show no concern for the moral implications of their actions or artworks. This indicates that Serenus is not simply demonising Adrian to accomplish the dual tasks of working through his bitterness towards Adrian and explaining Germany’s openness to Nazism through the resulting allegory, as Crawford asserts, but that the theme of the diabolical nature of genius is central. In Lotte in Weimar there is a foreshadowing of the concern about the duty of writers to those around them that is fully realised in Doctor Faustus. Hayden White observes:

Mann us[es] Charlotte to vindicate Goethe the artist against the egotism and inhumanity of Goethe the man. But this act of forgiveness extends by implication to Mann as well. This is why the novel can be read as an apologia for Mann’s own life as an artist and a confession of what he took to be his own limitations as a man. (1990, p. xi).

Doctor Faustus attests to a resurgence of anxiety surrounding the responsibilities of the author.
Going further back into Mann’s oeuvre is even more fruitful. In the pre-First World War novella *Death in Venice* the respected writer Gustav von Aschenbach journeys to Venice, where an obsession with a beautiful boy sparks a resurgence of imagination and creative output. Aschenbach, a perfectionist who lives an ascetic and regimented lifestyle, has long been of the opinion that ‘the questionable nature of art and of the artist himself’ (Mann 1988, p. 206) must be managed with such discipline. Despite his resistance to spontaneity and frivolity, a series of uncanny experiences leads him to buy a one-way ticket to Venice and stay at the Hotel des Bains, where he first observes the Polish boy Tadzio. Tadzio’s classical beauty prompts Aschenbach to reconnect with Ancient Greek theories of beauty and the perfection of form, and inspires an ‘emotional intoxication’ in Aschenbach (p. 237). Enchanted by Tadzio, Aschenbach produces the greatest work of his career, ‘that page and a half of exquisite prose which with its limpid nobility and vibrant controlled passion [which] was soon to win the admiration of many’ (p. 239). He fails to heed the warnings of a cholera outbreak in Venice or inform the oblivious Polish family for fear that he will never see Tadzio again, his sense of responsibility and morality eroded; ‘his steps follow[ing] the dictates of that dark god whose pleasure it is to trample man’s reason and dignity underfoot’ (p. 247). Mentally and physically deteriorated from his experiences in Venice, the narrative ends with Aschenbach’s death on the beach in Venice on that day that Tadzio is to leave.

The novella has continuously been read in terms of a struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian forces (Brinkley 1999, p. 4). Under his former Apolline lifestyle Aschenbach became a highly respected writer, but his experiences with the Dionysian enable him to produce what he believes is his best work—and lose his dignity. One of the major concerns of *Death in Venice*, then, is whether the chaos and passion of the Dionysian should be embraced because of its potential for artistic inspiration, or if the risks are too great. In Aschenbach, it is associated with the transgressive pedophilic and homosexual (illegal in the context depicted) desire he has for Tadzio, the immorality of his decision to hide the news of cholera outbreak from Tadzio’s family in order to prolong his rapture, and his rapid physical decline.

Notably, many of the characters that help Aschenbach reach Venice and Tadzio, the source of Dionysian inspiration, are characterised as diabolical. One critic
who has noticed insinuations of the Devil’s presence in *Death in Venice* is Edgar Rosenberg, who observes that ‘the story teems with the sort of tempter-figures whose function is unmistakably Mephistophelian’ (2004, p. 154). As in *Doctor Faustus*, the protagonist’s encounter with the Dionysian, diseased and diabolical is both productive and destructive.

Nearing the end of his life, Aschenbach thinks:

> the public’s faith in us is altogether ridiculous, the use of art to educate the nation and its youth is a reprehensible undertaking which should be forbidden by law. For how can one be fit to be an educator when one has been born with an incorrigible and natural tendency towards the abyss? We try to achieve dignity by repudiating the abyss, but whichever way we turn we are subject to its allurement. (Mann 1988, p. 265)

This bold statement reads as one extreme answer to the question of the responsibility of the writer, but it is not, in fact, Aschenbach’s conscious belief. Rather, it is a ‘discourse his brain was delivering, his half asleep brain with its tissue of strange dream-logic’ (Mann 1988, p. 264). The other extreme—that writers do not have to consider their responsibility—is represented by Aschenbach’s actions, which lead him directly to his death. *Death in Venice* offers insight into *Doctor Faustus* because of the differences in point of view in the two works. In *Death in Venice* the covert narrator does not offer a view of the morality of being a writer; thus, both extreme positions are represented as existing within Aschenbach’s conflicted mind. Aschenbach’s turmoil over this issue is represented as secondary to his transgressive sexual desires because of his belief that literature’s potentially dangerous nature had been contained by his rigid Apollonian lifestyle. The issue only resurfaces as a consequence of his confrontation with his consuming desire for Tadzio. However, in *Doctor Faustus* the morality of being a writer (or artist) is brought to the forefront by highlighting the personage ostensibly responsible for the narration, Serenus Zeitblom. Having demonised Adrian’s application of the Dionysian principle to his work, Serenus comes to realise that his memoir is just as problematic as Adrian’s compositions. Thus, Serenus comes to a revelation that Aschenbach moves away from: that literature begun
with the purest of motives can still be perceived as immoral because of the diabolical potential of literature.

**Conclusion**

*Doctor Faustus* asks if it is possible for anyone—writer, reader or onlooker—to be innocent in a world where the Holocaust has occurred. It does this by replicating in meta-discourse an eternal regression that positions the reader to recognise their own complicity. I have demonstrated that Serenus realises he has committed the same crime as Adrian, and thus cannot really be innocent. However, if we are to judge Serenus for writing a biography in exile in lieu of taking responsibility, can we avoid judging Mann, who wrote his novel in the United States of America during the Second World War, in the same way? Can we even avoid judging ourselves as we read about a human inclination that is externalised onto a cast of characters, when it may actually be part of the human condition? Serenus comes to realise that art may not actually be a safe place to explore the demonic, as he originally argued, and that it may actually be dangerous to suggest so. In Caroline Joan S. Picart’s words, *Doctor Faustus* is ‘an unflinching exposé of the dilemma of the politically responsible artist’ (1999, p. 56), and it undermines the reader’s traditional detachment from the narrative. The centrality of experimentation to literary modernism allows Mann to emphasise its self-consciousness in a way that involves the reader in the themes of the novel.

It appears that Mann was perfectly aware of his own complicity, and for this reason Serenus has been interpreted as a ‘rather pathetic portrait… [that] represents a good deal of what he feels about himself and his relation to Germany…’ (Frank 1961, p. 25). This ‘pathetic portrait’ does not have the answers, and indeed well before the end of the novel the reader is positioned to question his judgement and consider him an unreliable narrator. As almost everything that is said about Adrian is mediated by Serenus, an untrustworthy source, Mann leaves his reader without a moral guide. This means that the problem of the source of the demonic and the degree to which one is responsible for it is left to be answered by the reader. Accordingly, as Travers explains, ‘Zeitblom’s final message… is that the burden of guilt should be shared by all; not only by those, like Leverkühn, who made the Faustian gamble, but also by others, such as himself, who were held in awe by the spectacle’ (1992, p. 112). Just as Serenus can
be considered a Faustian figure for engaging with his story of the past and scapegoating Adrian rather than dealing with the reality of the present and acknowledging his own guilt, readers become Faust if they read the narrative—and enjoy the spectacle—as the story of characters or a country, and cannot see themselves in it. *Doctor Faustus*’s attempt to persuade readers to acknowledge their responsibility and act accordingly suggests that Mann’s novel has illocutionary aspirations.

Thus, *Doctor Faustus* attests to Mann’s ongoing engagement with the question of the morality of being a writer, particularly in a time that demands moral action. His extant letters to his brother Heinrich show how ambivalent his feelings towards his chosen medium were, commenting in one from 1901 that ‘literature is death! I shall never understand how anyone can be dominated by it without bitterly hating it. Its ultimate and best lesson is this: to see death as a way of achieving its antithesis, life’ (1998, p. 46). The seductive nature of literature meant that he did not stop trying to find a balance between art and life that would allow him to be a responsible and conscientious writer.
The Morality of Secular Literature

In the final decades of the twentieth century, theoretical innovations in literary studies increasingly foregrounded aesthetics at the expense of ethics. Arnold’s optimistic and arguably naïve view of the future of literature was replaced by perspectives sceptical of univocal meaning in literature, let alone the possibility of literature guiding ethical action. For some, however, the complexity, ambiguity, and transgressive potential of literary modernism made such literature a highly desirable substitute for religion because it was nothing like religion.

Writers such as Eco and Rushdie juxtaposed the static nature of monotheistic religion with the relative freedom of literature. Literature, because it was not required to conform to ethical values, might inspire change and provoke questioning of the status quo. For both writers, the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical applied to literary modernism because they conceived of the Devil as a largely positive force that enabled positive social change in societies informed by religious ethical standards. Eco accordingly made a case for literature being important because it does not have the structural influence of religion, but Rushdie’s investment in the notion of literature as diabolical yet fundamentally important had far-reaching ramifications for the author and literary history.

Thus, writers of late-twentieth-century literature shared an interest in the effect of literature with earlier writers of diabolical literature, but they expanded their focus beyond the individual readers of texts. They were conscious of the fact that religion does not only guide individual ethical action but shapes a community’s ethical standards. The comparison between literature and religion, for writers such as Eco and Rushdie, demanded that the ‘effect’ of literature be considered in similarly broad terms. As a consequence of the late-twentieth-century reinterpretation of literature as the heir of religion, modernists self-consciously interrogated the morality of secular literature.
The World as the Devil’s Book: Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*

**Introduction**

Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983b) [1980] depicts a series of murders in a medieval monastery, suspected by the monks to be the work of the Devil. The elderly monk Adso of Melk narrates events occurring in his youth when he accompanied his mentor, William of Baskerville, to the abbey for a debate on the poverty of Christ. Having accepted the abbot’s request that he uncover the diabolical plot, William soon finds that the motivations behind the murders (as well as the initial suicide) reflect the darker side of human nature, but becomes convinced that the deaths create a pattern based on the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse. The investigation takes a literary turn as Eco’s Sherlock Holmesian figure realises that the deaths are also linked by a mysterious Greek book and the abbey’s forbidden, labyrinthine library, the Aedificium. The diabolical and the literary are intertwined throughout William’s investigation, before his confrontation with Jorge of Burgos—responsible for four of the murders—who reveals that the deaths were the result of a human struggle over a forbidden book, and the apocalyptic pattern illusory.

The revelation that the monks’ fears about the Devil’s presence were unfounded, and that men were responsible for the ‘diabolical’ acts surrounding the mysterious Greek book, seems to imply a severing of the link between the literary and the diabolical in *The Name of the Rose*. However, the apocalyptic theme continues in the text even after the pattern is revealed as false, with the library going up in flames as William faces an existential crisis. Adso’s melancholic final pages, in which he recounts returning to the ashes of the abbey and collecting the scraps of the surviving books, reignite the theme that led Adelmo to his suicide and thus beginning the events of the novel: literature as an eternal temptation.

This idea informs the layout of the abbey’s library, with its labyrinthine structure, traps set for unwelcome intruders and a hidden room accessible only by secret passageways, the *finis Africae*, which stores the most dangerous of the books. However, this medieval fear of the heretical written word is transformed into a modern
anxiety as Adso attempts to find meaning in his own narrative and in the ‘lesser library… a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books’ (Eco 1983b, p. 492) collected from the ruins of the Aedificium. He despairs that he does not ‘know whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or none at all’ (p. 493). The last pages of Adso’s narrative thus recall William’s final appearance in the novel, in which he realises the futility of his skills of detection:

I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental. I arrived at Jorge seeking one criminal for all the crimes and we discovered that each crime was committed by a different person, or by no one. … I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe. (p. 484)

Because Adso does not know whether William spoke the truth after the destruction of the abbey, or if his earlier maxim that ‘the world speaks to us like a great book’ (p. 15) was correct, Adso is unable to draw out a meaning from his narrative. Less intellectual than his master, Adso does not fully comprehend why the events at the abbey shake William’s faith that the universe has a coherent meaning, like a book. Believing the sole temptation books pose is the lust for knowledge, William succumbed to a greater temptation: seeing the world as having the reassuring structure of a book, complete and univocal.

This belief was supported by William’s faith in an omnipotent God. However, his loss of faith in the former leads to a loss of faith in the latter. Accordingly, at the height of his misery, William responds to Adso’s question, ‘What difference is there, then, between God and primigenial chaos? Isn’t affirming God’s absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom with regard to His own choices tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?’ with another question: ‘How could a learned man go on communicating his learning if he answered yes to your question?’ (Eco 1983b, p. 485). William’s consolatory world-view is shattered in these final pages, as he realises his search for knowledge about the word is futile if there is no God who has imbued the world with meaning.
Since *The Name of the Rose* is overtly about literature, one way to understand the God of which they speak is as the authorial God. This means that the metaphor set up and then undermined by Eco promotes a discussion of the concept of ‘the death of the author’. Speaking of Roland Barthes’ landmark essay from 1968, ‘The Death of the Author’, Carla Benedetti claims that it was ‘like a nuclear explosion that creates a desolation around it and leaves the earth sterile for who knows how long’ (2005, p. 196). Barthes argued that the author *had* to die, because ‘[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’ (2008, p. 315). The theoretically-endorsed death of the author ended the hegemony of the author as arbitrator of meaning, signalling ‘the birth of the reader’ (p. 316). Though Barthes writes in a celebratory tone, his argument implies that the death of the author will hinder or prevent future literary creation. The theory of ‘the death of the author’ is highly ambivalent. If the author cannot ‘furnish [the text] with a final signified’, creation might well be chaos. How can literature be produced in such conditions?

The view of Arnold and like-minded critics that literature would replace religion prompted modernist authors to question the morality of literature and explore its diabolical nature throughout the twentieth century, but Barthes’ mid-century announcement of the death of the author gave this conceptual metaphor new momentum. If a text is not the product of a sole author—with the reader’s reading experience shaped by prior texts and allusions that the author cannot control—then the author cannot be called upon as the arbiter of the text’s meaning. Significantly, the author’s loss of control over the meaning of the narrative extends to its moral schema. The absence of the authorial God, therefore, renders literature inadequate for communicating ethics and leaves the reader susceptible to temptation by the diabolical text. Catherine Belsey observes that ‘Literature can be dangerous. Freed from confinement to the author’s experience, allowed to remain plural, ambiguous, or undecidable, it addresses questions to readers, promoting reflection, deliberation’ (2009, p. 203). If the wrong interpretation is taken from the work, the transgression

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29 Michel Foucault, Pierre Macherey, Maurice Blanchot and Paul de Man also wrote on this topic, but as Barthes’ essay is, according to Séan Burke, ‘the single most influential meditation on the question of authorship in modern times’ (1998, p. 19), it is the only essay I address, owing to the need of brevity.
becomes the reader’s, not the author’s. Barthes put the responsibility of contending with the diabolical text onto the reader.

Eco apparently accepts the theory of the death of the author, stating in *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* that ‘[t]he author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text’ (1984, p. 7). But for Eco this reflects his semiotic allegiance and the ambiguity of signs, rather than Barthes’ apocalypticism and the impossibility of creation. Semiotic theory has led him to the conclusion that it is difficult to be sure of anything, as the interpretation of signs and texts requires choosing between possible alternatives (Caesar 1999, p. 119). However, rather than equating the death of the author to the end of literature and literary criticism, he attempts to show the reader that this potentially frightening responsibility can be enjoyable and emancipatory.

Eco’s exaggerated, Gothic metaphors ironise the aforementioned apocalypticism: in *Reflections* the reader is his ‘accomplice’, his ‘prey’, has made a ‘[pact] with the devil’, while the author is (or should be) dead (Eco 1983b, pp. 7, 50, 3). He even takes Barthes’ argument to its logical conclusion and observes:

> The *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Paris) recently… discovered that a book in which the murderer is the reader has yet to be written. I ask myself whether this scenario (revealing to the readers that they, or rather *we*, are the murderer) might not be at the heart of every great book’ (1990a, p. 152).

Eco emphasises that if determining the meaning of the novel is now the responsibility of the reader, it is the reader that has killed the author.

For Eco, this is all in good fun. He is, after all, the man who claims to have written *The Name of the Rose* because he ‘felt like poisoning a monk’ (Eco 1984, p. 13), and repays Jorge Luis Borges for providing inspiration by depicting him as a deranged murderer. His response to the problem Barthes outlines is partially obscured by his narrator, Adso, who is based on Thomas Mann’s self-serving and unreliable narrator Serenus (Eco 1984, p. 33). Amongst his lamentations of his failure as a

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30 *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* will hereafter be referred to as *Reflections.*
detective, William has a revelation that, I argue in this chapter, conveys Eco’s response to living (and reading) in late modernity. As the library burns, he suggests:

Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from the insane passion for the truth. (Eco 1983b, p. 483)

Peter Bondanella comments that Eco sees comedy as ‘a subversive force undermining established authority and customs’ (1997, p. 125). The death of the author must therefore be treated as humorous, if the reader is ever to be able to read after this latest loss of grounding.

Evidently, Eco’s diagnosis of literature as diabolical is not intended as criticism, but as praise. He advocates laughter, subversion, and secular literature, and frames late-twentieth-century apocalyptic modes of thinking within the artistic sphere as just as fearful and hysterical as the medieval Church considering the Devil. Thus, Eco tries to lead his reader to the revelation that the author is dead, and it is the reader who has killed him—and that the only appropriate response is to laugh like the Devil.

**Medieval Anxiety**

To confront a modern problem, Eco returns to the Middle Ages. In *Travels in Hyperreality* he explains that ‘all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages’ (1986, p. 64). ‘Thus looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy… in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene’ (1986, p. 65), he contends. Although the detail of the novel may suggest that the choice of setting for his novel was determined by his familiarity with the period, significantly, semiotic theory had its infancy in the Middle Ages (Coletti 2009, pp. 72-4). Moreover, at this time there was widespread devout yet anxious faith in an omniscient God who made the world meaningful, and an expectation that the apocalypse would soon occur.

Another modern concern that Eco traces the origins of is the characterisation of literature as diabolical. However, in *Reflections* he abdicates responsibility for the events of the text, claiming that the story is generated by the constraints of the fictional
world (1984, pp. 23-9). When that fictional world recalls the real world and a specific historical period, the historical events and personages, beliefs, and value systems shape the events and concerns of the narrative. Eco’s understanding of literary creation allows him to avoid describing the work as a mimetic representation of the Middle Ages, which would involve making the false claim that it is a neutral depiction of reality. It also allows him to draw on medieval fears about the relationship between the Devil and literature in order to make the argument that secular literature embraces its diabolic potential. The setting of a monastery famed for its library in Italy, November 1327 demands that secular literature be presented as diabolical.

The period preceding the historical setting of The Name of the Rose saw a growth of literacy, critical thinking and reasoning, which Russell explains led to the decreased presence of the Devil in theology (1984, pp. 159-60). It did not mean that the Devil was forgotten, though. Instead, ‘[t]he Devil became a more colorful, immediate, and present figure in art, literature, sermons, and popular consciousness… to the extent that he often degenerated into a caricature of rhetoric or propaganda’ (Russell 1984, p. 161). The decline of the Devil did not mean that he was not believed in or feared; rather, it meant that he could be conceived of as the opponent of the average person as well as the enemy of Christ. It also allowed comparisons between the Devil and more everyday sources of evil, strengthening the belief that the Devil was the source of all evil.

In his investigation, William perceives that two explanations for the first death have occurred to the abbot. Adelmo’s burial in the cemetery implies (falsely) that he did not commit suicide, so ‘obviously the presumed suicide was… pushed, either by human hand or by diabolical force’ (Eco 1983b, p. 24). William’s next statement suggests that this ‘human hand’ is assumed by the abbot to be indirectly the work of the Devil as well: ‘you are distressed because an evil force, whether natural or supernatural, is at work in the abbey’ (p. 24). The aforementioned ‘evil force’ would be the work of the Devil for a Benedictine monk. As such, the abbot is ‘bewildered’ when William ‘insist[s] on speaking of criminal acts without referring to their diabolical cause’ (p. 22).

The abbot’s need to uncover the guilty party is still less than his desire to maintain the security of the monastery library. He outlines the long-standing measures
in place to prevent the library’s books from being accessed, beginning with its secret labyrinthine plan, understood only by the librarian and his assistant. In addition, only the librarian can access the shelves, with the other monks merely allowed to read the list of titles. The abbot warns that:

…a list of titles often tells very little; only the librarian knows, from the collocation of the volume, from its degree of accessibility, what secrets, what truths or falsehoods, the volume contains… Because not all truths are for all ears, not all falsehoods can be recognized as such by a pious soul; and the monks, finally, are in the scriptorium to carry out a precise task, which requires them to read certain volumes and not others, and not to pursue every foolish curiosity that seizes them, whether through weakness of intellect or though pride or through diabolical prompting. (p. 29)

Although the greatest intellectuals of the day were religious men, the Church retained scepticism towards secular knowledge. As Evelyn Birge Vitz observes, the illiteracy of some saints was presented as a positive attribute as ‘[b]ook learning has never been thought of as necessary to salvation or, indeed, to sanctity’ (2005, p. 21). Nevertheless, the clergy attracted those interested in ‘book learning’ because the small portion of the population that were literate was largely made up of monks (Steinberg 2003, p. 12). As one of the few institutions that could benefit from written works, monasteries kept heretical as well as religious texts. The abbot explains why they are kept (although hidden away), stating that ‘even in books of falsehood, to the eyes of the sage reader, a pale reflection of the divine wisdom can shine’ (Eco 1983b, p. 29). Though they could perceive worth in impious works, the founders of the library feared the books’ potential effect on their readers.

The opening line of Adso’s narrative (and the Gospel of John), ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (p. 3), demonstrates that he, as a devout monk, believes that all truth is divine. Conversely, although the abbot was already adamantly opposed to any but the librarian accessing the library, William’s admission that he had already desired to see the entirety of the library before accepting the abbot’s request to investigate seems to strengthen the abbot’s resolve. A Franciscan like Roger Bacon and William of Ockham, William sees secular knowledge as illuminating the divine plan, not threatening it. Although the
other denominations depicted in the text differ on many theological issues, one commonality is the suspicion of the desire for knowledge. As Ubertino admonishes Adso, who confesses that he is distressed by ‘the yearnings of the mind, which wants to know too many things’, ‘...that is bad. The Lord knows all things, and we must only adore His knowledge’ (p. 212).

Robert A. Rushing observes that the monastic setting is opportune for depicting the temptation of ‘guilty pleasures’ (2005, p. 120). The asceticism of Christianity is challenged throughout the narrative as William uncovers sexual liaisons between the monks, unlawfully enters the library, and is duped by Benno, who acts out of a lust for knowledge. Although Eco ‘create[s] a whole series of “guilty pleasures” that characterise everyone within the abbey’, the most powerful ‘is, without question, the unauthorized access to forbidden books’ (Rushing 2005, p. 120). William observes that ‘in this story things greater and more important than the battle between John and Louis may be at stake’, and responds to Adso’s surprised rejoinder that ‘[b]ut it is a story of theft and vengeance among monks of scant virtue!’ with the passionate reply, ‘[b]ecause of a forbidden book, Adso! A forbidden book! (Eco 1983b, p. 386). The desire to possess a forbidden book drives Adelmo to succumb to Berengar’s seduction, for which Adelmo feels such guilt that he commits suicide; leads to the deaths of Venantius and Berengar from the poison smeared on the book by Jorge; and prompts Benno to break his vow to William to help him find it.

Drawing on medieval Christian beliefs about the role of the Devil in acts of evil, and the Devil’s ability to tempt the faithful through such means as books, Eco casts secular literature as diabolical. In doing so, he emphasises its ability to unsettle norms and rules—exemplified by his subversion of detective fiction.

**Solving the Unsolvable**

Eco’s protagonist’s name, William of Baskerville, is accepted by critics to be a reference to Arthur Conan Doyle’s consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes.31 The name ‘Baskerville’ has been understood as merely a metonym for Holmes on account of the story *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and not a specific intertextual reference.

31 However, Christine de Lailhacar suggests that it might also be a reference to the font named after John Baskerville, ‘a sign that stands for a sign’ (1990, p. 160).
However, there is a notable similarity within Eco’s and Conan Doyle’s texts. When Dr Mortimer meets with Holmes to request his services in solving the mystery of the supernatural hound apparently responsible for the deaths of members of the Baskerville family, Holmes sums up Mortimer’s concerns: ‘In your opinion there is a diabolical agency which makes Dartmoor an unsafe abode for a Baskerville....’ (Conan Doyle 2010, p. 29). In William of Baskerville’s name, then, there is a reference to the fear of diabolical influence and the detective who exposes both the culprit and the fear as superstition.

Eco’s decision to explore the fear of diabolical influence through detective fiction is illuminated by his comment in an article for Gioventù cattolica (Catholic Youth) from 1954 that ‘[t]he detective novel… is a perpetual temptation’ (cited in Bondanella 2009, p. 91). The temptation inherent in the detective novel is the false security, coherency and sense of order it provides. Detective fiction is historically the genre which has been the most concerned with the ‘rights’ of the reader. After all, during the post-First World War ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction the Detection Club of London produced rules that sought to ensure that authors would ‘play fair’ with their readers (Lovitt 1990, p. 68), and give them the desired satisfactory outcome.

In Conan Doyle’s novels and those of Golden Age writers such as Agatha Christie, there is no mystery that cannot be solved by the time the reader reaches the back cover of the book. While the genre revolves around death, the texts themselves are largely bloodless, clinical and orderly. Kevin J.H. Dettmar claims that ‘[t]he art of Agatha Christie, and of all formulaic detective fiction, is not an art of disruption but of comfort’ (1990, p. 162). As it is only concerned with solving the mystery that has originated within it, and not characterisation or innovation, the detective novel ‘conduc[t]s a drive toward fixed identities for people, single meanings for words, and perfect closure for readers’ (Veeser 1988, p. 198).

David I. Grossvogel contends that this genre is a response to the mystery of human existence, and speaks of the writer of detective fiction:

Unable to grasp or to abandon mystery, he resorts to a familiar fraud: he attempts to absorb mystery in speculation; he invents incarnations with which he can cope.

Literature plays a part in this process, and most literature is tinctured to some extent with the effects of that concern. (1979, p. 4)
The Name of the Rose does not give such consolation. In Reflections Eco admits that he wanted the reader to ‘become my prey—or, rather, the prey of the text—and would think he wanted nothing but what the text was offering him’ and admitted that he hoped the reader would ‘realize how I lured you into this trap’ (1984, p. 53). The novel subverts the conventions of the detective novel to ensure that the reader feels William’s crisis as well. The Name of the Rose has been described as, alternatively, an ‘anti-detective novel’ (McHale 1992), an ‘innovative anti-detective novel’ (Tani 1984) and a ‘metaphysical detective story’ (Merivale & Sweeney 1999). All three definitions refer to a mystery novel in which the detective is left with more questions than answers. Instead of comforting the reader with a tidy resolution, such novels draw attention to the futility of attempting to draw conclusions about a mysterious and unknowable world.

The concurrency of the period of high modernism and the Golden Age of detective fiction, and certain shared precepts, has led critics such as Brian McHale to theorise metaphysical detective fiction as a postmodern backlash against modernism. Just as writers of Golden Age detective fiction wrote novels that comforted and consoled, rather than agitated, many modernists attempted to restore meaning to the world through the use of symbolism, myth and psychology in their works. Conversely, in the aftermath of the Second World War, literature that conveyed sceptical responses to the earnest project of myth-making and questioned the possibility of coherence and meaningfulness came to be described by some critics and writers as literary postmodernism. As self-consciousness is central to modernism, the categorisation of postmodernism for metaphysical detective novels such as The Name of the Rose is unnecessary. Nevertheless, McHale’s work offers valuable insights. He believes that the works he describes as postmodern are dominated by questions of ontology, what exists, while earlier modernist works are dominated by questions of epistemology, what we can know about the world. This means that ‘a modernist novel looks like a detective story… Its plot is organized as a quest for a missing or hidden item of

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32 I have decided to use Merivale and Sweeney’s term ‘metaphysical detective novel’ for The Name of the Rose rather than ‘anti-detective novel’ as the mystery in the novel is indeed solved by the detective, even if only solved accidently.
knowledge’ (McHale 1992, p. 147). Conversely, a metaphysical detective novel ‘deliberately cripples the detective story’s epistemological structure’ (1992, p. 151) and focuses on what the detective can rely on—what exists—rather than what the detective can learn.

Accordingly, the beginning of Adso’s narrative sees William of Baskerville educate his pupil on how to reason about the world and make conjectures about what exists. William believes that complete knowledge would be attainable if not for human limitations, such as human fallibility, the Church’s suspicion of secular knowledge, the danger of such knowledge falling into the hands of evil people, and the enmity between Christians and the ‘infidels’ who hold valuable scientific understanding. He makes an impressive entrance when he greets the cellarer with the words, ‘…don’t worry. The horse came this way and took the path to the right’ (Eco 1983b, p. 14). William has not seen the horse, nor been told that a horse is missing; he has reasoned its existence. Even Adso, he says, can ‘recognize the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book’ (p. 15). The universe is made up of symbols or signs that obscurely speak about the divine order, and clearly speak of smaller matters too. William explains that all he required to form his hypothesis that there was a valued horse missing which would be found in the location he specified was the physical marks in the environment, the layout of the landscape, what has been written about an ideal horse, and the presence of the cellarer in the search party. The success of this demonstration of his abilities gives both William and the abbot confidence that William can similarly discover the force behind Adelmo’s death. At this point, William believes that ‘the universe is a collection of “texts” all based upon the one, great Text and all readable by the same method’ (Yeager 1985, p. 46), organised by God as Logos.

William performs ‘abduction’, a technique which fascinates Eco. In the Borges-inspired ‘Abduction in Uqbar’ (1990a) he explains Charles S. Peirce’s theory of the three modes of reasoning, of which abduction is the one that allows for ‘revolutionary’ discoveries. It is used in science, crime investigation, and art; it is a conjecture, the product of creativity. This technique presupposes that there is a coherent order in the universe, and that the material considered conforms to that order. As Eco explains, ‘the general mechanism of abduction can be made clear only if we assume that we deal with universes as if they were texts and with texts as if they were
universes’ (Eco 1983a, p. 205). Even at this time, William is cautious of overestimating his abilities. He explains to the abbot that he does not claim to know when the Devil is at work: ‘reasoning about causes and effects is a very difficult thing, and I believe that the only judge of that can be God’ (Eco 1983b, p. 22). William still thinks that he can read signs that speak of local events clearly, even if his powers of reason do not give him a clear understanding of the signs that speak of a divine plan. However, the events at the abbey bring his faith in his ability (and in God) into question and force him to take his ideas to their conclusion.

When William reaches the finis Africae he realises that the path that led him there was full of mistakes. He admits that he ‘was convinced the series of crimes followed the sequence of the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse’ (Eco 1983b, pp. 461-62) and yet Adelmo had committed suicide, the places in which Berengar and Venantius were found were random and Severinus was killed by whatever was available to Malachi. Unable to fully accept that Malachi’s last words, ‘[h]e told me… truly…. It had the power of a thousand scorpions…. ’ (Eco 1983b, p. 406) did not refer to the fifth trumpet of the Apocalypse, William asks Jorge to explain this mystery to him—reversing the traditional ending to a detective novel in which the detective tells the criminal how the crime occurred. Hearing of William’s theory, Jorge became convinced that he was caught up in a divine plan, and tempted Malachi to read the forbidden book, which he coated in poison, by warning him not to read it. The detective finds out that he ‘conceived a false pattern to interpret the moves of the guilty man, and the guilty man fell in with it’ (Eco 1983b, p. 462). Consequently, while the abbey burns, William mournfully asserts that ‘[t]here was no plot… and I discovered it by mistake’ (Eco 1983b, p. 483). His comment that ‘[i]t’s hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the free will of God and His omnipotence’ prompts Adso to ask, ‘[w]hat difference is there, then, between God and primigenial chaos?’ (Eco 1983b, pp. 484-85), showing William how his reasoning leads to the conclusion that God does not exist. As Michael Cohen explains, ‘[i]n The Name of the Rose epistemological doubt is connected to theological doubt; a failure in detection implies a failure of faith’ (1988b, p. 143). The epistemological problematic becomes, upon William’s failure, an ontological crisis.
William’s detection fails because the signs he perceived had a different meaning from the one he attributed to them. For example, when Severinus is killed with an armillary sphere, William assumes that this unconventional murder weapon is meant to symbolise the fourth trumpet, ‘And the third part of the sun was smitten and the third part of the moon and the third part of the stars…’ (Eco 1983b, p. 356). He later realises that all it symbolised was Malachi’s haste and desperation: it was the closest object available to him. Again, the duplicity of signs is something that William does know, but stubbornly refused to take to its conclusion. His claims about the horse were an educated guess, he tells Adso, and they were the most likely conclusions of all the conclusions he had considered. He says, ‘[t]he others believe me wise because I won, but they didn’t know the many instances in which I have been foolish because I lost, and they didn’t know that a few seconds before winning I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t lose’ (Eco 1983b, p. 296).

As the perpetually confused Adso conveys throughout the narrative, signs are fundamentally ambiguous. The orthodox faith of Ubertino seems to be no different from the faith of the heretics, love that is forbidden feels like love that is sanctioned, and the solemn martyr acts like the defiant heretic. These ambiguities trouble Adso because they represent the difficulty of determining what is good and what is evil. He has great faith in the order and meaning of the world, discussing such wonders as the name ‘lamb’ or ‘agnus’ aligning with the animal’s ‘purity and goodness’, and the fact that even the unsavoury habit of the dog eating its own vomit speaks of the human condition, ‘a sign that, after confession, we return to the same sins as before’ (Eco 1983b, p. 273). Accordingly, he feels that the wiser members of the clergy could clarify ambiguities for him. Consumed with guilt over his sin with the girl in the kitchen, Adso expresses a need for such assistance: ‘The fact is that correct interpretation can be established only on the authority of the fathers, and in the case that torments me, I have no auctoritas to which my obedient mind can refer, and I burn in doubt’ (Eco 1983b, p. 240).

The view that the Church fathers are required to establish meaning is one put forward by the Church to maintain authority. This belief is vocalised by the abbot, when he is educating Adso on the meanings of the precious stones he wears:
The language of the gems is multiform; each expresses several truths, according to the sense of the selected interpretation, according to the context in which they appear. And who decides what is the level of interpretation and what is the proper context? …it is authority, the most reliable commentator of all and the most invested with prestige, and therefore with sanctity. Otherwise how to interpret the multiple signs that the world sets before our sinner’s eyes, how to avoid the misunderstandings into which the Devil lures us? (Eco 1983b, pp. 439-40)

In this passage, the abbot explains another way in which the Devil opposes God and goodness. As the Truth is the word of God, ambiguity is the word of the Devil. Ambiguity is therefore also temptation; to the devout it suggests possible deviations from the recognised ‘Truth’ and disguises them as legitimate alternatives. This brings me to an important claim: William’s existentialist crisis is a realisation that though the world ‘speaks to us like a great book’ (Eco 1983b, p. 15), it is authored not by God but by the Devil. Only in a diabolically ambiguous, chaotic world made up of abstruse signs could William paradoxically assert that ‘there was no plot… and I discovered it by mistake’ (Eco 1983b, p. 483).

**Living with Unlimited Semiosis**

As the metaphysical detective novel requires that the reader know the conventions of the traditional detective novel so that they can perceive the ways in which the author has subverted them, it is not surprising that the world of *The Name of the Rose* is made up of other texts, written and yet to be written. Although Jorge thinks that Aristotle’s book on comedy is a far bigger threat to the Church than any other book, there is not one book that poses a threat to William: it is the collection of books, the library. The library promotes William’s delusion that everything can be known through reading and reason; that semiosis can be completed if the reader can just find the right book (or signified). However, Eco’s comment, that when writing the novel he ‘rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books’ (Eco 1984, p. 20), suggests that it is not the case. The reader becomes trapped by ‘unlimited semiosis’, in which a book only ever refers to another book, and a sign’s meaning is another sign. David Robey explains that in Eco’s concept of unlimited semiosis:
Meaning is an infinite regress within a closed sphere, a sort of parallel universe related in various ways to the “real” world but not directly connected to it; there is no immediate contact between the world of signs and the world of the things they refer to. (1989, p. xxii)

Books that openly flaunt their relationships to other books show the complexity of Eco’s characterisation of literature as diabolical: their meaning is ambiguous because intertextuality creates an infinite regress, and yet the reader may be tempted to interpret the allusion as a shortcut to meaning, a ‘clue’, that gives the book (and the world) a sense of order.

Eco suggests that this temptation is fundamentally human. His essay ‘Those Who Don’t Believe in God Believe in Everything’ (2007) explores the willingness of people to believe in anything and seek connections between unrelated events or data. One of his examples is the ‘Dan Brown phenomenon’, which saw the Catholic Church’s obstinate rejection of the conclusions drawn in the thriller novel The Da Vinci Code (2003) matched by the enthusiastic response to the novel of ‘inexperienced readers’ who believed the fictional conspiracy plot (Eco 2007, pp. 299-300). The novel begins with a page that proclaims ‘Fact’ and goes on to assert that the secret societies and mysterious sects mentioned in the novel are real, and the ‘descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate’ (Brown 2003, p. 15). This led some readers to accept the unoriginal but controversial theories put forward in the work—the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the alternative interpretation of the grail, and Jesus’ descendants forming the Merovingian dynasty—even as they acknowledge that the events of the narrative are fictional. Eco’s explanation is that:

…people are hungry for mysteries (and plots). All you need to do is offer them another one. Even when you tell them that it was cooked up by a couple of con men, they’ll swallow it right away.

I think that this is what is worrying the Church. The belief in the code (and in another Jesus) is a symptom of dechristianization. When people stop believing in God, as Chesterton used to say, it’s not that they no longer believe in anything, it’s that they believe in everything. Even the mass media. (2007, p. 301)
The responses to Dan Brown’s novel should not have been startling because Eco had, in fact, prophesied the phenomenon in his second novel, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, fifteen years before. Far more self-reflective than Brown’s bestseller, Eco’s novel explores the fascination of conspiracy theories as the narrator succumbs to his fictional plot.

In *Foucault’s Pendulum*, the narrator Casaubon is hired at Garamond Press to write a history of metals. To make the book marketable, the editor Garamond advises him to find reasons to discuss tangentially related topics that will hook the reader: scientists’ mistakes, cabala and computers. Garamond’s confidence in the relevance—or at least marketability—of all connections drives his next scheme. He brings in Casaubon to review the occult books produced by earnest authors willing to self-fund their publication, called the ‘Diabolicals’. Amused—and to some degree, seduced—by the outrageous connections that the authors draw between secret societies, historical mysteries and religious scripture according to a ‘principle of mystic resemblances’ (Eco 1989, p. 361), Casaubon and his co-workers Belbo and Diotallevi create their own conspiracy theory using a computer program that randomises data. Belbo even goes so far as to suggest including the information that ‘Minnie Mouse is Mickey’s fiancée’, arguing that ‘we must overdo it. If we admit that in the whole universe there is even a single fact that does not reveal a mystery, then we violate hermetic thought’ (p. 375). In doing so, they seek to tap into the human desire for connections, secrets and revelations that Garamond is manipulating.

Casaubon’s highly intelligent and staunchly realistic girlfriend Lia tells him that their ‘plan isn’t poetic; it’s grotesque’ and warns him that ‘people will believe you… they’ve been told that God is mysterious, unfathomable, so to them incoherence is the closest thing to God. The farfetched is the closest thing to a miracle’ (Eco 1989, p. 541). As the reader has known since the beginning of the text, the Plan does soon generate believers. Belbo receives a call from a representative of Tres, a secret society mentioned in the Plan that they believed was fictional. They tell Belbo, ‘We’re the Tres… and you know more about the Tres than we do’ (Eco 1989, p. 560). The fictional Plan leads to a harsh reality for its creators, as Diotallevi dies of a cancer that he connects to the Plan, Belbo is murdered by the secret society, and the novel ends with Casaubon on the run, believing that the Tres are after him too.
Victoria Vernon explains that the editors’ fictional plot ‘escapes the control of its creators and dictates the work’s climax’ as others mistake a story for reality (1992, p. 843). It is significant that these others are the Diabolicals: they treat the world as if it is the Devil’s book and they can redeem it. That is to say, they believe that the ambiguity of signs is only a façade, hiding a plot that once uncovered can illuminate the seemingly meaningless world. As Lia perceives, interpreting incoherence as divinity is accepting the Devil as a false God.

In this line of thinking, intertextuality in narrative fiction is a fundamentally diabolical technique. However, there is a schism between the threat of unlimited semiosis in Foucault’s Pendulum and Eco’s enthusiasm for the concept. ‘It is my ambition that nothing in my book be by me but only texts already written’ (cited in Bondanella 1997, p. 99), he has said. Eco is not ignorant of the fact that the temptation to make disparate events and phenomena meaningful is more pleasurable than the harsh truth that Lia puts to Casaubon. Eco embraces the diabolism of unlimited semiosis and uses intertextuality to convey central thematic interests in The Name of the Rose.

**Books in Dialogue**

Although Eco does not achieve his goal of constructing a novel entirely out of other texts with The Name of the Rose, the world of Eco’s novel is still ordered by other books. These intertexts include classic detective fiction such as Sherlock Holmes, religious texts such as the Apocalypse of John, and Voltaire’s Zadig. The Name of the Rose can also be illuminated by Eco’s subsequent novels on similar topics, such as Foucault’s Pendulum and Baudolino (2002), suggesting that in Eco’s first novel there are ‘visions of books as yet unwritten’, as the ostensive translator claims (Eco 1983b, p. xiii). However, the most significant allusion is to the work of Jorge Luis Borges. It is accepted by critics that ‘Jorge of Burgos’, the blind, Spanish former librarian is an allusion to the blind, Argentinean former librarian and writer who is also a significant influence on The Name of the Rose. Ensuring that readers do not just consider the resemblance a coincidence, Eco also has the narrator of the prologue find mention of Adso’s story in a book called On the Use of Mirrors in the Game of Chess in Buenos Aires. In this paragraph are also the first indications of the labyrinths to be found in
the following narrative. Argentina, mirrors, books in dialogue with other books and
labyrinths: from the beginning of *The Name of the Rose* the text is speaking of Borges.

Following his earlier claim that the constructed world of the story determines
how the story will unfold, Eco professes that ‘when [he] put Jorge in the library [he]
did not yet know he was the murderer’ (1984, p. 28), but the association between the
Spanish language and the Apocalypse directed the course of action. Moreover, he
based a character on Borges because he ‘wanted a blind man who guarded a library (it
seemed a good narrative idea to me), and library plus blind man can only equal Borges,
also because debts must be paid’ (1984, p. 29). Such an explanation seems to be as
flippant as his professed desire to poison a monk, with the exception of the debt that
he admits has to be paid. How, then, are we meant to understand the relationship
between Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, and Jorge Luis Borges?

The complexity of Eco’s allusions to Borges mean that critics have differing
opinions on their significance. Hans Kellner suggests that ‘the work of Borges may be
taken as the absent guide for readers of *The Name of the Rose*’ (1988, p. 35); Cohen
observes that the presence of Jorge of Burgos is there to show that the most
‘appropriate allusions are not to Doyle’s work… but to the futile and enigmatic
detectives of Borges’ (1988b, pp. 141, 3); while Christine de Lailhacar refuses to
consider Borges Eco’s ‘father figure’—in part because it would be tantamount to
‘accus[ing] Eco of parricide’—and suggests that instead, ‘[t]here is no anxiety of
influence, but there are affinities or common obsessions’ shared by both writers (1990,
pp. 160-61).

There are indeed significant thematic similarities between Borges and Eco. To
begin with, William’s delusion that a final signified can be found is the dream of
Borges. Borges’ stories are not wish-fulfilment, though. They present truths in their
nightmarish, chaotic form. In two stories, ‘The Library of Babel’ (1964c) [1941] and
‘The Book of Sand’ (1998b) [1975], Borges demonstrates that this chain of allusions
and references, at first both thrilling and promising, inevitably leads to the revelation
that the ultimate truth is always out of reach. Both stories are stories of books, for they
are the main source of this delusion. As Grossvogel explains, ‘[a] book is an
ordering… its very being denies, and will convey less than adequately, the
structureless and unpronounceable chaos, the infinity of space and formlessness that
extends beyond man’s ability to measure and to shape’ (1979, p. 129). In the former, the universe is a potentially infinite library. A long-dead librarian deduced that the library contains all possible combinations of the alphabet, all possible books. This teaching gave the people hope that they could discover the purpose of their universe. Accordingly, the narrator speaks of the popular desire to find the book whose combination of letters ‘is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest’ (Borges 1964c, p. 83) and his own dream: that he (or another) will discover that the volumes on the shelves repeat the same disorder, ‘which, thus repeated, would be an order’ (Borges 1964c, p. 86). The frequent suicides mentioned highlight the anxiety and disillusionment of many without the assurance of an order that would give meaning to their lives. Similarly, in ‘The Book of Sand’ the narrator purchases an infinite book ‘called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end’ (Borges 1998b, p. 91). The narrator becomes obsessed with trying to confirm that it is indeed infinite, but the very nature of infinity means that he can never complete the project. Both stories demonstrate that the possibility of infinite knowledge is not consolatory, but unnerving, because it means that the final answer is not in reach.

Given Borges’ fascination with the idea that there is no final signified which will retroactively give the world meaning, it is not surprising that he pre-empted Barthes in theorising the death of the author through his creative works. In the parable ‘Borges and I’ (1964a) [1960] and two of his stories, ‘The Other’ (1998c) [1972] and ‘August 25, 1983’ (1998a) [1983], Borges demonstrates the impossibility of the author being the arbitrator of meaning when the author is just as inconsistent, changeable, and indeterminate. The two stories consider the same problem from two perspectives. In the former, the elder Borges meets his youthful counterpart, to whom he cannot relate: ‘A half century does not pass without leaving its mark’ (Borges 1998c, p. 9). In the latter, a younger Borges dreams he meets himself on his deathbed and treats his older self with mistrust and animosity. Similarly, the parable contrasts the exterior façade of Borges, ‘the one things happen to’ (Borges 1964a, p. 282) with his interior sense of self. If the author cannot even locate his own immutable self, how can he give the text a univocal meaning? The effect of these stories is to highlight that the only one who can affix a meaning to a text—even if only for a particular moment—is the reader.
To conclude, another Borgesian story that illuminates *The Name of the Rose* is ‘Death and the Compass’ (1964b) [1942], in which the detective’s elaborate interpretation of a crime prompts the criminal to conform to the supposed pattern in order to kill the detective. This is replicated in Eco’s novel through Jorge’s adherence to the pattern of the trumpets of the Apocalypse after hearing that William had deduced this (unintentional) pattern. While this seems to be a simple homage to Borges, I argue that by casting Borges’ double as the criminal in the position of power over the detective, Eco is ‘paying his debt’. That is to say, he is giving recognition to his precursor, naming Borges his accomplice in his crime against the reader.

**Who Killed the Author?**

The concept of the death of the author was integrated into the narrative of literary theory in the decades following ‘Borges and I’. This post-structuralist idea resonated throughout the late twentieth-century artistic sphere, shaping how late modernist authors thought of literature as diabolical. In the case of Eco and *The Name of the Rose*, literature is diabolical because it is left perpetually ambiguous without an authorial God to determine its meaning. Although Eco offers his own unique solution to this dilemma, he is responding to earlier theorisations of the death of the author, which I elucidate here.

‘Borges and I’ might predate Barthes’ essay, but the essay has received the most critical attention. ‘The Death of the Author’ confusingly argues that the author must die, and also that the author has always been dead. Barthes writes as though he has only recently discovered this eternal truth, and is urging it upon others so that the author can finally be laid to rest. In place of a work controlled by an authoritative author, ‘[w]e know now that a text is… a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash…. [the writer’s] only power is to mix writings….’ (2008, p. 315). ‘The Death of the Author’ is not simply a proclamation of intertextuality, though. It argues that the eradication of the author means that ‘the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile’ (2008, p. 315). Instead, each text has a multiplicity of meanings, determined by the reader. For Seán Burke, ‘The Death of the Author’ is fundamentally about ‘allow[ing] language to become the
primary point of departure and return for textual apprehension and analysis… open[ing the text] to an unlimited variety of interpretations’ (1998, p. 43).

However, the essay is not only about the centrality of language and the inappropriateness of considering the author’s biography in literary analysis. John Trimbur observes ‘an odd twist to the story’ of the death of the author: namely, that ‘[t]he exhilaration that accompanied the burial of the author turned almost immediately into a sense of anxiety’ (2000, p. 285). Barthes’ claim ‘that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning (the “message” of the Author-God)’ (2008, p. 315) cast ‘The Death of the Author’ as the successor of Nietzsche’s apocalyptic proclamation of the death of God. Burke argues that it had a similar function for twentieth-century thought as the former had for nineteenth-century thought, as:

> Both deaths attest to a departure of belief in authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity. For a culture which thinks itself to have come too late for the Gods or for their extermination, the figures of the author and the human subject are said to fill the theological void, to take up the role of ensuring meaning in the absence of metaphysical certainties. The author has thus become the object of a residual antitheology, as though the Satan of Paradise Lost had suddenly redirected his rebellion against the unsuspecting figure of Milton himself. (1998, pp. 22-3)

The mood of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century was therefore vastly different to the optimism of late nineteenth-century British criticism. Many of the doubts that had been felt about religious authority began to extend to literary authority as well. Ferdinand de Saussure’s revolutionary understanding of language as the means by which human reality is constructed, and his distinction between the signifier and the signified (Harris & Taylor 1997, pp. 207-9), determined the course of literary criticism and philosophical schools such as Barthes’ post-structuralism and Eco’s semiotics. The fallibility of the author became obvious to literary critics influenced by Saussure, to the degree that it was questioned whether literary creation was even possible—the idea that literature could replace religion was not even conceivable. As Benedetti explains, ‘[l]ate-modernity’s bereavement is over the impossibility to create; it perceives itself as a terminal culture. The myth of the author’s death… is its elaboration: an interminable labor of mourning’ (2005, p. 202).
The consolation for the death of the author is, of course, the birth of the reader. The reader has to be born because the author’s genius has been questioned to the extent that creation seems impossible; only through readers can there be anything new—even if their interpretations are only provisional. Consequently, the reader’s role is not to discover the authorial intent or ‘truth’ of the text, but to develop their own interpretation and ‘create’ in this way. ‘To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts’, Eco explains (1990b, p. 23).

The reader’s creative power plays an important part of Eco’s theoretical work. Although ‘The Death of the Author’ provides justification for Habermas’ exclusion of literature from communicative reason because it does not involve a dialogue between two or more people, Eco’s reinterpretation of the concept suggests that there is a place for literature in preparing the reader for communicative reason. In The Role of the Reader Eco observes that writers must assume that the reader has a similar understanding of the codes used in the work. He describes ‘closed’ texts, which are constructed by unambiguous codes or genre conventions and direct the reader to a certain interpretation. In their strict expectation of the reader’s response, these texts expose themselves to ‘any possible “aberrant” decoding’ by a thoughtful reader (1979, p. 8). The ‘open’ text also allows alternative interpretations; in fact, it demands them. Incorporating more formal innovation than closed texts, the subversion of conventional codes produces ambiguity, which cannot be made univocal. Speaking of this modern—and particularly modernist—form of writing, Eco asserts that it:

is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself. (1979, p. 49)

Accordingly, in Reflections he notes that as a text ‘produces its own effects… the author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text’ (1984, p. 7). The ambiguity of modern texts means that the author cannot retain control of the meaning of the work. While the reader of detective fiction looks
for the clue that will clarify the obscurity of ambiguous signs, the reader of innovative art does not have such luxury. In part, this is because the author is not in control of the ambiguity—it is an attribute of language. In Eco’s foreword to a book of scholarly essays on his novel he notes that his commentary is unnecessary, for ‘[w]hen one has the text to question, one need not question the author… [to a large extent] an author can be unaware of the effects his text has’ (1988, p. 17). Consequently, he praises ‘several of the essays in this book [which contain] brilliant, possible readings of my novel, readings I cannot absolutely challenge because they are rooted in the text and of which I became aware only by reading the readings of my readers’ (Eco 1988, p. 17). Eco’s theorisation of the open work, then, seems to be in accordance with his discussion of the death of the author in relation to The Name of the Rose.

Indeed, Eco destabilises the idea of ‘authorial intent’ within the novel through the Borgesian device of tracking the manuscript’s corruption throughout history. In the prologue to Adso’s narrative, the unnamed narrator and final translator recounts how the manuscript came to be in his possession and brings its authenticity into question. The narrator observes that it is an ‘Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century’ (Eco 1983b, p. xiv). Can the reader enjoy a text whose claim to truthfulness is deceptive, for ‘there is no doubt that, in translating Adso’s Latin into his own neo-Gothic French, Vallet took some liberties, and not only stylistic liberties’ (Eco 1983b, p. xiv)? Certainly, if the reader accepts that the author is irrelevant to the text, as Barthes and Eco would have them believe. Of course, the effect of the prologue is lessened if the reader remembers that the text was never Adso’s, but has always been Eco’s. The literary technique retains its resonance, though, if it is taken as a metaphor for the allusions inherent in language which the author cannot control.

In Eco’s interpretation of the death of the author the shift in focus from author to reader is a burdensome one. The author, though dead, is still in control. Eco gives the following explanation of the death of the author, which is essentially a description of the demands and responsibilities placed on the reader: ‘the “author” is nothing else but a textual strategy establishing semantic correlations and activating the Model Reader’ (1979, p. 11). The empirical reader’s power is limited, rather than increased.
By ‘establishing correlations’ the author may partially erode the ambiguity of the text which promised the reader freedom from the author’s design. Moreover, the concept of the Model Reader implies that the reader cannot do whatever they want with the text. The empirical reader must hypothesise the Model Reader that the text is speaking to, and then read the text as that imagined Model Reader—in *The Role of the Reader* the reader is warned that ‘[y]ou cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it’ (Eco 1979, p. 9). Textual coherence supersedes the reader’s preferences, Eco explains in ‘Reading My Readers’ (1992, p. 821), and any interpretation must be tested against other aspects of the text to confirm its applicability. Consequently, an open work directs the interpretation, even if it allows multiple, potentially contradictory interpretations. Eco’s interpretation of the death of the author is somewhat disingenuous, as he claims that ‘the initiative of the Model Reader consists in figuring out a Model Author that is not the empirical one and that, at the end, coincides with the intention of the text’ (Eco 1992, p. 821). The reader suddenly seems less empowered than Barthes assured. In Eco’s theoretical works the reader is tethered to the intentions of the text, which is related to, even if not determined by, the intentions of the author.

As such, Eco seems to be conflicted about the birth of the reader being at the expense of the death of the author. His refusal to comment on the final meaning of his novel does not prevent him from talking about its construction—and writing an entire book, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose*, on the topic—and the ‘Model Reader’ he had in mind during the writing of *The Name of the Rose*. He discussing wanting:

> An accomplice, to be sure, one who would play my game…. I wanted to create a type of reader who, once the initiation was past, would become my prey—or, rather, the prey of the text—and would think he wanted nothing but what the text was offering him… And at this point you will have to be mine, and feel the thrill of God’s infinite omnipotence, which makes the world’s order vain. And then, if you are good, you will realize how I lured you into this trap, because I was really telling you about it at every step, I was carefully warning you that I was dragging you to your damnation; but the fine thing about pacts with the devil is that when you sign them you are well aware of their conditions. Otherwise, why would you be recompensed with hell? (Eco 1984, pp. 50-3)
Through this Gothic metaphor, Eco simultaneously stakes his claim as the authorial God of the novel and reiterates the danger of reading in late modernity—with irony. Although William thinks that Jorge’s revelation that the apocalyptic pattern was entirely unintentional proves that there is no order in the universe, in fact it proves quite the opposite: the existence of an apocalyptic pattern in the text *despite its intratextual unintentionality* implies that there is order in the (textual) universe. *The Name of the Rose* reveals the fallacy within the doctrine of the death of the author—the author might not control the text’s meaning or signification, but he or she is still its creator. In *Reflections* Eco continually undermines his insistence that there is no authorial God, describing novel-writing as ‘a cosmological matter, like the story told by Genesis’ and referring to his authorial role as ‘God’s infinite omnipotence, which makes the world’s order vain’ (1984, pp. 20, 53). Despite Eco advocating the death of the author and bringing into question the possibility of authorship, his novel ‘reveals to us, behind the layers of patterns of events and misconstructions of patterns and retrospective reconstructions, the presence of the real author himself: smiling, bearded Umberto Eco, cosmologist and labyrinth-builder’ (McHale 1992, p. 151).

Barthes placed the responsibility of determining meaning on the reader after the death of the author. Although he knew how treacherous this was in late modernity—for ‘a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation…’ (Barthes 2008, p. 316)—he presents this as an exhilarating opportunity. However, it can also be understood as the frightening revelation that there is never any ultimate interpretation; even the Model Reader’s best efforts are provisional. Eco’s theoretical works and Gothic metaphors in his description of the Model Reader for *The Name of the Rose* suggests that while he agrees with many of Barthes’ arguments in ‘The Death of the Author’, likely due to their shared adherence to Saussure’s key ideas, he treats the apocalyptic tone taken by other proponents of the concept as a joke.

Semiotics has led Eco to the conclusion that he, as the author, is not in total control of the text’s meaning, but he does not think the reader needs to fend for themselves. Embedded in *The Name of the Rose* is his endorsement of comedy and not taking the world too seriously, as I explore in the following section. Learned readers will realise that this is intended as advice for them in their similarly confusing,
apocalyptic time. The Latin words that haunt Adso throughout the text whenever he picks up certain books, ‘De te fabula narratur’, translates as ‘The story is about you’ (Haft, White & White 1999, p. 133).

**Eco’s Solution**

For Eco, ‘[a] text is meant to be an experience of transformation for its reader’ (Eco 1984, p. 53). Accordingly, *The Name of the Rose* seeks to transform the reader’s attitude towards the harsh realities of the world, such as mortality, the incomprehensibility of the universe, and the inscrutability of an overarching, meaningful pattern. Eco explains that as he ‘wanted [the reader] to feel as pleasurable the one thing that frightens us—namely, the metaphysical shudder—I had only to choose… the most metaphysical and philosophical [plot]: the detective novel’ (1984, p. 53). Eco recasts the chaos of the world as a mystery to be solved by a detective to make it ‘pleasurable’, before admitting that there is no easy answer to be found.

However, Eco’s endorsement of laughter as a response to this situation can be pieced together from the dialogues on laughter and Aristotle’s comedy, and William’s epiphany about the centrality of laughter in a well-rounded life. Doing so requires being suspicious of Eco’s unreliable narrator Adso, whose namesake is the abbot of Montier-en-Der, author of the first narratve account of the arrival of the Antichrist (Almond 2014, p. 176). Similarly pessimistic, Eco’s Adso has arbitrarily framed the narrative of the events at the monastery as a tragedy. While Jorge’s destruction of the last remaining copy of Aristotle’s book on comedy is indeed terrible, there is humour to be found in the imagery of ‘the old man… eat[ing] up all of Aristotle!’ (Eco 1983b, p. 474). *The Name of the Rose* recommends a dual perspective, in which a realistic assessment of harsh truths is tempered by a sense of humour.

Thus, Eco looks to Aristotle (or at least, a fictionalised Aristotle) for guidance. William reconstructs Aristotle’s argument in the ‘forbidden’ book, explaining that:

*Comedy does not tell of famous and powerful men, but of base and ridiculous creatures, though not wicked; and it does not end with the deaths of the protagonists. It achieves the effect of the ridiculous by showing the defects and vices of ordinary men. Here Aristotle sees the tendency to laughter as a force for good, which can also have an instructive value: through witty riddles and unexpected metaphors, though it*
tells us things differently from the way they are, as if it were lying, it actually obliges us to examine them more closely, and it makes us say: Ah, this is just how things are, and I didn’t know it. (Eco 1983b, p. 464)

Aristotle praises the genre that gives a voice to the disempowered, and has their interests at heart. He equates laughter with subversion and suggests it can empower the disempowered and overturn the status quo. As Keller explains, laughter ‘is the preface to doubt and to the open world of discovery. Those who would add to the world read it as an “open work”; they must laugh at it. In doing so, they inevitably undermine whatever structures of authority exist’ (1988, p. 63).

Laughter, for the dogmatically devout, is at odds with piety and total faith in God: it is diabolical. The abbot feels this to be true without having read Aristotle’s book, for he bans the Coena Cypriani, a humorous story about biblical figures at a banquet that destabilises the solemnness of biblical narratives. It is scorned by many of the Benedictines, and particularly Jorge, who asserts that ‘Christ never laughed’ (Eco 1983b, p. 88). Consequently, Jorge hides Aristotle’s book on comedy before resorting to coating it with poison. Reflecting his association with Borges, Jorge knows that a book can affect the world, and seeks to prevent the teachings of Aristotle on comedy from reaching any of the other monks. Of all the heretical works, this one is the most threatening, for Aristotle’s intellectual authority threatens the stability of divine knowledge.

To Jorge, laughter is the work of the Devil because it weakens the power of the Church. He laments the ‘diabolical transfiguration of the Holy Scripture’ that is the Coena Cypriani, and how the comedic element tempts the monks to ‘read it [even] though they know it is evil’ (p. 467). The pleasure of laughter persuades one to enjoy the Devil’s machinations rather than fear them. The one who laughs would no longer be guarded against the threat of the Devil, who appears to be foolish and unthreatening. As such, the greatest threat that laughter poses is the lesson that there is no need for fear. The Church, Jorge openly admits, is founded on the fear of death and the afterlife. He thinks that laughter and frivolity could encourage the oppressed to question their place in society and the respective position of the Church, arguing that:
if one day someone could say (and be heard), “I laugh at the Incarnation,” then we would have no weapons to combat that blasphemy, because it would summon the dark powers of corporal matter, those that are affirmed in the fart and the belch, and the fart and the belch would claim the right that is only of the spirit, to breathe where they list! (p. 469)

By giving into the pleasure of laughter, one privileges the sinful body over the soul. Martha Bayless casts light on Jorge’s reference to ‘the dark powers of corporal matter… the fart and the belch’ with her comment that in the Middle Ages, ‘bodily impurity’ and ‘[t]he material corruption of the body was regarded as… an inescapable part of the human condition, like original sin—and indeed not just like original sin, but as the actual material embodiment of original sin’ (2012, pp. 7-8). To accept the sinful nature of the body and laugh about it, rather than feel shame for it, breaks the hold of the Church.

In this sense, laughter is a strategy for combatting apocalyptic fears and oppressive expectations, such as those Barthes writes of in ‘The Death of the Author’. Eco does, to some degree, accept the death of the author and agrees that literature has changed since this idea gained public acceptance. He does not, however, agree that this change has been negative. For Eco, literary creation has been democratised. His theory of the open text privileges innovation rather than canonicity, while he looks to new interpretations that speak to his readers, rather than the one ordained by the author. As Robey observes, for Eco, ‘[a]rt is therefore political in its own special way; it produces new knowledge that can serve as a basis for changing the world, but it does not necessarily have an explicitly political content’(1989, p. xv). Paradoxically, Eco recommends that the important medium of literature be taken less seriously. The Name of the Rose demonstrates that rigidity, fanaticism and humourlessness lead to the suppression of alternate understandings and prevents cultural and social progress, as well as human happiness.

As such, Eco urges the reader to enjoy the text—‘at least as much as I was enjoying myself [while writing it]’ (Eco 1984, p. 59). At the close of the novel, William realises that ‘those who love mankind [must] make people laugh at the truth… because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth’ (Eco
The Name of the Rose contends that the appropriate response to ‘the malaise of modernity’ (Benedetti 2005, p. 21) is humour and levity.

Conclusion

In *The Name of the Rose* Eco depicts the world as the Devil’s book: ambiguous, chaotic and meaningless. Rather than fretting over the death of the author and the congruent futility of deciphering a text in late modernity, though, Eco laughs. He rejects the latent anxiety of Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ and chooses to support the new reader. Offering his theory of the open work and the Model Reader, Eco proposes a new understanding of literary creation that extends to anyone who opens a book.

The late twentieth century saw increased disillusionment with narrative fiction in the artistic sphere, but certain writers such as Eco (and as I show in Chapter Six, Salman Rushdie) continued to show the constructive potential of literature and its ability to revitalise and recreate the world in positive ways. As the titular character observes in Eco’s recent novel *Baudolino*, ‘[t]here is nothing better than imagining other worlds… to forget the painful one we live in… [although] I hadn’t yet realized that, imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one’ (2002, p. 99).

Given the apocalyptic mood amongst the artistic sphere that formed the backdrop of Eco’s text, it is perhaps not surprising that through *The Name of the Rose* Eco plays the diabolical adversary and questions the accepted view. Thus, Eco’s use of the conceptual metaphor *literature is diabolical* to interrogate the morality of literature after the death of the author owes more to the seductive and rebellious literary Devil than the Christian Devil. Despite the religious setting, the text’s concern is not religious but literary. As such, to say that literature is diabolical in *The Name of the Rose* is not to condemn it. In the novel, what is depicted as ‘the work of the Devil’ are ambiguity, unlimited semiosis, opposition to authority and laughter. While the monks fear these markers of the disruption of divine meaning, Eco suggests that the qualities associated with the literary Devil have a positive potential in late modernity. In this way, he proposes that what makes literature necessary in modern life is that it is not under any obligation to conform to societal norms, be ethical or be moral. Eco’s
position is therefore a relaxed version of the aestheticist position outlined by Gaut that is open to the spirit of rebellion reflective of the transgressive position.

Eco believes that literature should be enjoyable, not anxiety-inducing. His theoretical and fictional works suggest that this is the approach the reader should also take when they open a book and create through interpretation. Rather than feeling burdened by their complicity in the death of the author and the demand that they construct their own meaning, they should have the same attitude towards their role in literary creation as Eco. He told his interviewer, when asked about his writing anxieties, ‘I have no anxieties… Before I sit down to write, I am deeply happy’ (Zanganeh 2008). *The Name of the Rose*, then, is a fictional world replicating the myth told in the Egyptian work bound with Aristotle’s book on comedy, which ‘attributes the creation of the world to divine laughter’ (Eco 1983b, p. 459).
Salman Rushdie’s ‘Faustian Contract in Reverse’

Introduction

From the title alone, it is evident that Salman Rushdie’s fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), engages with the idea that literature can be diabolical. Like Umberto Eco and Mikhail Bulgakov, Rushdie embraces this potentiality, suggesting that the qualities of indeterminacy and opposition to authority associated with the Devil in literature can provide a constructive alternative to a status quo with a monopoly on truth. However, Rushdie’s decision to explore this theme alongside a retelling of a story associated with the history of Islam—Muhammad’s expulsion of verses inspired by the Devil from the Qur’an—led to British, Indian and Pakistani Muslims protesting against the book and calling for it to be banned. The outcry against the book reached its pinnacle when on the 14th of February, 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran proclaimed a *fatwa* to ‘inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of *The Satanic Verses* which is against Islam, the Prophet and the Qur’an, and all involved in its publication who are aware of its content are sentenced to death’ (cited in Sardar & Davies 1990, pp. 193-4).

The effects of the public reaction to a literary work were unprecedented. Days before the novel was published, Rushdie, having been warned by his interviewer that his novel would be controversial, said that ‘it would be absurd to think that a book can cause riots. That’s a strange sort of view of the world’ (Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 40). Nevertheless, the book did cause riots. The *fatwa* also forced Rushdie into exile; led to the death of his Japanese translator, attempts on the lives of his Italian and Norwegian translators, and the assassinations of imams seen as being too lenient; inspired the bombing of book stores; and hindered diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran. Rushdie, like Wilde, Nabokov, Bulgakov, Mann and Eco before him, entertained the idea that literature was like the Devil found in the Western canon: subversive, beguiling and even heroic. However, because he conflated this Devil with the Islamic Shaitan, he found that writing literature could be ‘a Faustian contract in reverse’ (Rushdie 2012, p. 91).

In the aforementioned interview, Rushdie explained that he believed:
everything is worth discussing. There are no subjects which are off limits and that includes God, includes prophets. I refuse to think that I should shut my mind off to subjects which are not just of interest to me but which have been my concern all my life... I guess some people might get upset because it is not reverent, but the point is it is a serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person. I think that’s a completely legitimate exercise. (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 41)

In line with Rushdie’s stated views about his freedom to discuss any topic and tell any story, *The Satanic Verses* involves a storyline—framed as the dream of schizophrenic Indian movie star Gibreel Farishta—that plays with the possibly apocryphal account of the satanic verses, which was reported by the tenth-century Muslim historian Abu Jafar at-Tabari (Armstrong 1993, p. 147) and is now ‘rejected as a spurious invention’ by modern Muslim scholars (Sardar & Davies 1990, p. 148). Rushdie shows that the Muhammad figure involved in his satanic verses narrative both is and is not Muhammad through the name given:

His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision... Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil’s synonym: Mahound. (Rushdie 1988, p. 93)

By writing about Mahound, not Muhammad, Rushdie signals that his narrative is not intended as a realist and neutral account of the origins of Islam, but one that is informed by his knowledge of Islam’s subsequent impact on the world and the world on Islam.

In Rushdie’s interpretation, Mahound is tempted to placate the authorities of his city by acknowledging the goddesses Al-Lat, Manat and Uzza within the new religion. After initially proclaiming that Allah desires their intercession and then having his hopes of acceptance shattered by the Grandee’s wife Hind, Mahound has a new revelation and subsequently recants the ‘satanic verses’, announcing that they were the work of the Devil. Rushdie’s narrative leaves it unclear whether the source of both the satanic and Qur’anic verses was Mahound himself, Gibreel in the guise of
the archangel Gabriel, or the Devil, as Gibreel indicates that the source was the same each time: ‘it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 123). As this storyline continues, Mahound becomes a rigid and self-serving leader of the faithful who fails his scribe Salman the Persian’s test of sincerity when he does not notice Salman’s changes to the verses. Thus, Rushdie’s interpretation of the satanic verses incident incorporates scepticism of the possibility of divine revelation typical of secular society.

However, the Rushdie affair began because the world of the twentieth century was not a homogenous secular society. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies assert that the controversy over Rushdie’s novel showed that the conventional understanding of ‘modernity’ as secular, rational, technologically-advanced and democratic is a Western ‘norm that subsumes all diversity’ (1990, p. 8). Resistance to this norm, particularly by non-Western cultures, has meant that there has been a resurgence of religious practice and belief amongst some groups rather than the irreversible move towards secularism anticipated by the West (Armstrong 2000, pp. ix-x). Accordingly, Rushdie’s secular interpretation of the birth of Islam caused uproar. A year after the fatwa, Ali A. Mazrui reported that ‘Salman Rushdie has been perceived by many Muslims of being guilty of cultural treason for writing The Satanic Verses’ (1990, p. 118). It is notable, though, that the petition which representatives of the Muslim community in Britain presented to Rushdie’s publishers, Penguin Books, claimed that they did not object ‘to anyone writing critically or irreverently about Islam or Muslims’ (Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 80). The problem was that the vehicle of Rushdie’s critique was a reworking of their holy text, the Qur’an.

Believing that the Western failure to understand Muslim anger over The Satanic Verses indicated a lack of understanding of the significance of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an for Islam, Rafiq Zakaria produced a study of the topic to offer clarification. The Qur’an, he explains, is the immutable, unchangeable, direct word of Allah (1991, pp. 3-4). This means that, unlike the Christian Bible, the Qur’an is believed to have been created without human influence. Accordingly, Muhammad is the ‘medium of the divine will’ (p. 3)—not the author of the text. He is considered a prophet in Islam because he received revelations from the archangel Gabriel, which he recited to his followers, including the scribes who kept copies of the verses (pp. 63-
These were collated by Muhammad’s followers after his death so that the verses would not be lost (p. 67). As the words of the Qur’an provide Muslims with direct access to the words of their God, maintaining the purity of their religious text is of paramount importance to Islam. In his discussion of this topic, Zakaria comments that, ‘[e]ven Muhammad could not change a word in it: that, as the [Qur’an] says, would have brought the wrath of Allah on him. How then can any man now, or ever, engage in such an exercise!’ (p. 4).

The conflict at the heart of The Satanic Verses, therefore, is between the Islamic belief that the verses of the Qur’an are sacrosanct and the assumption of Western secular modernity that no story is sacred. Western ideals of secularism and progress encourage looking forward and creating new texts so that culture can advance to meet the needs of modernity. This belief underpins The Satanic Verses, as Kenan Malik observes:

Rushdie had long understood that stories embodied truths, and that they belonged to everyone. And because everyone had the right to refashion and retell every story, so the truths embodied in those stories could also be renewed. That understanding was woven into the fabric of his own stories. Yet those were the very ideas that the fatwa came to challenge. (2013, p. ix)

Because Muslims believe that the truths contained in the Qur’an are eternal and complete, literary experimentation is antithetical to their interests. In this line of thinking, Rushdie’s project of manipulating a story from the birth of Islam into one that conveys a skeptical, secular truth does not enhance the Qur’an for orthodox Muslims; it perverts it (Mullen 1990, p. 29).

The insult was Rushdie’s audacity in using a story from the history of Islam as simply another intertext, but it was certainly exacerbated by the way he used that story. Mazrui explains that ‘Salman Rushdie’s blasphemy… [is] his suggestion that [the Qur’an] is the work of the Devil’ (1990, p. 120). To a large degree, this underpins his critique of Islam and particularly the treatment of women in that religion. Furthermore, as a textual strategy, it seeks to destabilise the Islamic world view and allow Rushdie to put forward his own alternative, in which doubt and multiplicity replace certainty. Understanding what Rushdie is doing with his text requires that the reader distinguish
between the literary Devil, a marker for ambiguity, and Shaitan, the Devil of Islam—something that Rushdie made near impossible when he conflated the two by retelling the historical story of the satanic verses in his novel. It is Shaitan that he insinuates is the author of the Qur’an, and the literary Devil that he embraces.

Thus, the ‘Rushdie affair’ demonstrated that the ideals held by the West, and particularly Western writers and critics, were certainly not universal. I begin this chapter by outlining the two value-systems whose irreconcilability was exacerbated by the publication of Rushdie’s novel. I then analyse the ways in which Rushdie uses the figures of the Devil, the migrant and the writer to challenge existing worldviews and privilege change over tradition, with reference to Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and key essays. The *Satanic Verses* proved that literature could indeed affect the world and challenge deep-seated assumptions, even if it was not the way the author had intended.

**Interpreting the ‘Rushdie Affair’**

In the aftermath of the *fatwa*, many critics felt compelled to ask the question, ‘Did Rushdie know what he was doing?’ The general consensus was that even though he did not anticipate the vehemence of the negative reaction, he surely knew that there would be one. Roger Y. Clark, who believes that the novel is ‘one of literature’s most difficult, dangerous, and one might even say reckless experiments’, emphasised that ‘[having studied] Islamic history at Cambridge, [Rushdie] must have known that one of the things most likely to incite controversy was a reworking of the “satanic verses incident”’ (2001, p. 129). Similarly, Timothy Brennan points to Rushdie’s first-hand knowledge of Islam and India from his upbringing in a Muslim family in Bombay: ‘His revisions of the historical and mythical narratives of Islam… were the work of one who knew all the pressure points and who went about pressing them’ (1989, p. 144). Consequently, outraged Muslims condemned him as an apostate and traitor.

Rushdie has argued that this is an unfair label, proclaiming that, ‘I do not accept the charge of apostasy, because I have never in my adult life affirmed any belief, and what one has not affirmed one cannot be said to have apostasized from’ (1991b, p. 405). He was unable to so absolutely refute the claim that his novel criticises Islam, however: it could be argued that his characterisation of Mahound and his religion as
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misogynistic—with Salman the Persian insinuating that he made up verses in order to ‘force women] back into the docile attitudes the Prophet prefers’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 367)—belongs in a satire rather than an a thoughtful exploration of a religion.

There is definitely a conflict at the heart of the Rushdie affair, but to read it as simply a clash between the East and the West is an oversimplification. Rushdie also critiques the West, highlighting racism against migrants in Britain and critiquing Margaret Thatcher (Morton 2008, p. 30). As such, Rushdie does not entirely fit into the category of ‘Western writer’. The Rushdie affair, therefore, represented a clash of values, and the complex allegiances held by the players exacerbated the conflict. As Stephen Morton observes, ‘the British state’s defence and protection of Rushdie and his right to free speech is often taken as a sign of the British government’s disregard for the religious beliefs of Britain’s Muslim population’ (2008, p. 30). The values that were at odds—freedom of expression and secularism, against religious faith and honour—were not clearly divisible into values held by those in the West and those in the East. There were even some British writers such as Roald Dahl, Germaine Greer and John Le Carré who expressed their disapproval of Rushdie’s actions, with Le Carré stating that, ‘[a]gain and again, it has been within his power to save the faces of his publishers and, with dignity, withdraw his book until a calmer time has come… It seems to me he has nothing more to prove except his own insensitivity’ (cited in Anthony 2009, p. 6).

Understanding the Rushdie affair as a clash between those who value literary experimentation as a means to generate new truths and those who believe respect for religious adherents and their texts should trump such experimentation brings to light the opposing understandings of blasphemy. As I have already noted, Islam teaches that the verses of the Qur’an are sacrosanct, and it is blasphemous to alter them. Richard Webster suggests that on the charge of blasphemy—from which the other perceived insults stem—Rushdie’s ‘evident insensitivity in this regard, however, is not simply his own fault. It is our fault for creating a culture which… has frequently failed to grasp the amount of destructive violence which has been locked up in the realm of the obscene’ (1990, p. 92). Webster’s insight may be overly critical of Western values and particularly secularism, but it points to a relevant difference of opinion. In the Western artistic sphere, blasphemy is often considered daring and liberating. The shelter of
secular society means that blasphemy is one of the transgressions utilised in high art to push the boundaries of accepted norms and values. As Alyson Miller contends, ‘blasphemous works act as counter-narratives, re-visioning doctrine and opening “sacred” stories to the transformative opportunities of literature’, challenging religious authority (2013, p. 171). Rushdie’s comment that ‘[o]ne of the things that a writer can do is to say: Here is the way in which you’re told you’re supposed to look at the world, but actually there are also some other ways’ (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 29), made days before the fatwa, suggests that this view of blasphemy informed his representation of Islam in The Satanic Verses.

It is clear that there are some Western writers who cling to the value of freedom of expression and champion the transformative potential of art as if literature were its own religion. Norman Mailer, for example, encouraged writers to demonstrate their importance to society by defending Rushdie:

…the Ayatollah Khomeini has offered us an opportunity to regain our frail religion which happens to be faith in the power of words and our willingness to suffer for them. He awakens us to the great rage we feel when our liberty to say what we wish, wise or foolish, kind or cruel, well-advised or ill-advised, is endangered. We discover that yes, maybe we are willing to suffer for our idea. Maybe we are even willing, ultimately, to die for the idea that serious literature, in a world of dwindling certainties and choked-up ecologies, is the absolute we must defend. (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, pp. 174-75)

Mailer maintains that writing literature is not a frivolous exercise, but essential to making modernity livable. It is a ‘frail religion’ because it has no church, no claim to eternal truth and no consistent doctrine, but it does seek to fulfil the need left by secularism. In this, Mailer is in agreement with Rushdie, who has said that he has a ‘God-shaped hole’ which, ‘[u]nable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, [he has] tried to fill up… with literature’ (Rushdie 1989, p. 11).

The views of Mailer and Rushdie are not an aberration in Western society, but are instead an exaggeration of the trend in the modern Western artistic sphere to see literature as a challenger to traditional religious faiths; one that refuses to acquiesce to the status quo and presents alternative understandings of the world that may offer greater satisfaction. As my chapter on The Name of the Rose suggests, Eco’s view that
literature is valuable because it has a diabolical temperament that can help readers cope with life is a milder version of this belief. While Eco suggests that literature should be enjoyed, rather than taken seriously, Rushdie, Mailer, and like-minded writers argue that literature should be taken very seriously indeed.

Superficially, this may seem to be a continuance of the nineteenth-century view that literature would eventually replace religion. However, the two beliefs are substantially different, as they have a dramatically dissimilar understanding of the function of both religion and literature. To Arnold and his contemporaries, literature was the means by which culture, ethics and social norms would be reinforced and reproduced, and even give insight into something spiritual. For the late modern writers who consider literature the new religion, conversely, literature deserves to be the new religion because it can unsettle stale and antiquated culture, ethics and social norms. This reinterpretation of the idea of literature being a successor to religion is actually an extension of the transgressive position outlined by Gaut. In the extreme modern view, literature is both diabolical and divine, for transgression is understood as having a redemptive function.

The term ‘literature’ as used by Mailer and Rushdie is largely synonymous with the novel. Given that Arnold actually worded his view that literature would replace religion with the term ‘poetry’, this may account for some of the differences between the two beliefs. The novel, as a genre, has few constraints in terms of content or style, but typically requires the writer to construct an artificial world. The modernist novel takes advantage of the comparative freedom of the form, experimenting with literary techniques in order to adequately respond to modernity. Thus, in ‘In Good Faith’ Rushdie celebrates the ability of the novel to challenge complacency and conservatism:

Let me be clear; I am not trying to say that The Satanic Verses is ‘only a novel’ and thus need not be taken seriously, even disputed with the utmost passion. I do not believe novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word novel seems to insist upon: to see the world anew.’ (Rushdie 1991b, p. 393)

Importantly, novel-writing, modernist and otherwise, originated in the West and has not entirely been embraced in the Islamic world. Demonstrating the extent of
Islamic suspicion towards narrative, the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz’s Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded ‘largely for his work in establishing the novel as a genre in Arabic’ (Corcoran 1990, p. 159). This was in 1988, the same year The Satanic Verses was published. The vociferous responses of many Muslim readers to The Satanic Verses indicate that they were not as accepting of the freedom awarded to the novel as Rushdie and much of the West. Sardar and Davies reject the idea that Muslim readers do not understand the genre of the novel, however. They explain that Muslim readers understand perfectly that the novel is meant to be fictional, but nevertheless believe that incorporating divine truth into fiction produces a confusion that is dangerously blasphemous (Sardar & Davies 1990, p. 151).

Although many novels avoid confronting questions of religious truth, and some even uphold religious worldviews, it is true that literary studies tends to associate the novel with secularity. The Eurocentric understanding of the novel assumes that the Western experience of modernity is universal. Thus, Georg Lukács, in his later repudiated The Theory of the Novel, declares that ‘[t]he novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’ (1971, p. 88). The political climate of Germany at the outbreak of the First World War led to Lukács producing his theory—most applicable to modernist novels—that the novel is the most suitable art form for modernity, as it does not assume that the world has transcendental meaning, and can respond to this situation with detached irony.

The reactions of some critics of the Rushdie affair suggests that this understanding of the novel was influential, even as Lukács’ despair was replaced with pride in the potential of the novel. At the conference held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London on the topic of controversy over The Satanic Verses the novelist Maggie Gee asserted that the novel arose as a form to give voice to those who had lost faith in the authority of the church. She praised the boldness of the novel form, stating that the ‘individual[’s] invent[ion of] their own private fictions, alternative world… can be seen as a god-like act, inherently blasphemous’ (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 199). The influential Western view that individuals need to create their own myths and systems of meaning in modernity provides the justification for Rushdie’s pre-fatwa statement that in the twentieth century,
Everything we know is pervaded by doubt and not by certainty. And that is the basis of the great artistic movement known as Modernism. Now the fact that the orthodox figures in the Muslim world have declared a jihad against Modernism is not my fault. It doesn’t validate an entire way of looking at the world which is, to my mind, the most important new contribution of the 20th century to the way in which the human race discusses itself. If they’re trying to say that this whole process has gone out of the window—that you can’t do that, all you have is the old certainties—then yes, I do argue. (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, pp. 30-1)

Rushdie’s hyperbolic claim that Islam has declared a jihad against literary modernism demonstrates that he conceives of Islam and the modernist novel as irreconcilable opponents. We must assume, consequently, that his knowledge of the sensitivities of Muslims to perceived threats to the purity of the Qur’an mattered less than his faith in the righteousness of literary experimentation.

While not an explicit answer to the question, ‘Did Rushdie know what he was doing?’, there is an idea which appears in The Satanic Verses as a theory of Jumpy (Rushdie 1988, p. 459) and in Rushdie’s memoir is revealed as the phrase that inspired him as he wrote the novel: “To write a book is to make a Faustian contract in reverse’, it said. ‘To gain immortality, or at least posterity, you lose, or at least ruin, your actual daily life” (Rushdie 2012, p. 91). This comment, ostensibly about the process of writing a book, was eerily fitting for the Rushdie affair. It suggested that the writer would accept great costs in order to produce an immortal book. It also implied that the form of literature he was writing—literary modernism—had undeniable diabolic potential.

**Rushdie’s Devils**

In his 1991 essay ‘In Good Faith’ Rushdie explains that the Qur’an had little influence on The Satanic Verses. The novel was actually influenced, he says, by Blake’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell and, most significantly for this thesis, Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita (Rushdie 1991b, p. 403). I have already made a case for The Master and Margarita being a work that utilises the literary Devil in order to challenge the world view promoted by an authority perceived as having a dangerous monopoly on truth—in this instance, the Soviet government. As The Satanic Verses also
challenges an influential understanding of the world, it is not surprising that Rushdie wrote to Arnold McMillin that he was ‘a devoted admirer of The Master and Margarita’ and admitted that the aforementioned work had shaped his own: ‘the echoes are there, and not unconsciously’ (cited in McMillin 1996, p. 252). Although Bulgakov had to write his novel in secret because there was no freedom of speech in his society and Rushdie was free to publish his novel and received the support of the majority of the writing community, Rushdie conflates the two situations, observing that ‘The Master and Margarita and its author were persecuted by Soviet totalitarianism. It is extraordinary to find my novel’s life echoing that of one of its greatest models’ (Rushdie 1991b, p. 404).

Not only aligning with a powerful Western understanding about the value of literature, Rushdie also locates his novel within the Western literary tradition. Blake and Bulgakov are not his only Western influences, with the relationship between Saladin, Gibreel and Alleluia framed as a retelling of William Shakespeare’s Othello by the narrator: ‘My Chamcha may be no Ancient of Venice, my Allie no smothered Desdemona, Farishta no match for the Moor, but they will, at least, be costumed in such explanations as my understanding will allow’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 425). Although Rushdie does emphasise the Eastern tradition of retellings in The Satanic Verses by adopting phrases from Arabic folk tales—‘Once upon a time—it was and it was not so, as the old stories used to say, it happened and it never did—maybe, then, or maybe not…’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 35)—the innovative modernisation of Othello suggests that his novel is more like James Joyce’s homage to Homer than a folktale.

Unsurprisingly, then, Rushdie’s representations of the Devil are also influenced by the Western canon. In her reading of the text, Beville observes a diabolical narrator who ‘appears to be built quite solidly around the modern Western literary model, that of the charming and intellectual rebel’, which reveals the influence of ‘Milton, Defoe, Blake and Bulgakov through to Mick Jagger’s lyric persona in Sympathy for the Devil’ (2009, p. 135). As in Bulgakov’s novel, there are only suggestions as to the identity of the narrator, who is sometimes playful and sometimes dry and omniscient. This has led to some critics suggesting that there is actually more than one narrator. Beville, for example, suggests that that the narration is multivocal, and the ‘satanic narrator’ is one means by which the novel is related (p. 133). James
Harrison agrees that the satanic narrator does not dominate the narrative, and suggests that the few asides granted to the Devil may be ‘vestiges of an apparently promising but short-lived bright idea’, or included to allow ‘a kind of challenge to authorial hegemony’ (1992, pp. 114, 5). Both these interpretations acknowledge that at times there is also an intrusion of an agency that may be God or may be the author, an authorial God.

The similarity between the Western view that literature is both diabolical and divine that is evident in Rushdie’s essays, and Alex Knönagel’s view that the singular narrator is simultaneously the Devil, God, and the author himself, makes his argument particularly compelling. Knönagel maintains that the changing tone of the narration does not mean that there is more than one narrator, instead alluding to ‘[t]he close and problematic relationship of The Satanic Verses and the Qur’an’ as the Qur’an similarly has a ‘narrator [who] is omniscient and occasionally makes direct statements in the text’ (1991, p. 70). Considering that Muslims believe that the narrator of the Qur’an is Allah, Rushdie’s choice to mimic the narration of the religious text, while suggesting that there is a diabolical element to the divine and a divine element to the diabolical, may be read as a challenge to Islam. The view that there is only one narrator is supported by another of Rushdie’s comments in ‘In Good Faith’, in which he confirms that his understanding of God and the Devil ‘was influenced by the pre-Christian belief, expressed in the Books of Amos and Deutero-Isaiah and quoted in The Satanic Verses, that God and the Devil were one and the same’ (1991b, p. 403).

Signalling that discovering the complexity of the narrator’s identity is an important task for the reader, on the second page of the novel the narrator taunts the reader by asking, ‘Who am I? Who else is there?’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 4). The diabolical aspect of the narrator shifts from being hinted at to being expressed clearly in the chapter ‘Ellowen Deeowen’, when the narrator observes,

Falling like that out of the sky: did they imagine there would be no side-effects? Higher Powers had taken an interest, it should have been obvious to them both, and such Powers (I am, of course, speaking of myself) have a mischievous, almost a wanton attitude to tumbling flies… You think they fell a long way? In the matter of tumbles, I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-. From clouds to ashes, down the chimney you might say, from heavenlight to hellfire… (p. 133).
In Islam, as in Christianity, the Devil is expelled from Heaven and falls, either because of pride or envy for humanity (Russell 1984, pp. 55-6). The narrator’s identity seems to be obvious.

However, while the Christian Devil is banished to Hell, Islam teaches that ‘Satan roams the world, and until the end of time God allows him to tempt and deceive us’ (Russell 1984, p. 57). The Western literary tradition is divided over this issue, with Defoe, in his History of the Devil, refuting Milton, ‘who will have it, that the Devil, immediately at his expulsion, roll’d down directly into a Hell proper and local’ (2010, p. 78). As the epigraph to The Satanic Verses is Defoe speaking on this subject—‘Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode…’ (Rushdie 1988, p. iii)—we can assume that Rushdie is familiar with the debate about the Devil’s location after his fall. Is there a reason, then, why the epigraph states that the Devil is ‘without any fixed place’ but the narrator claims to have fallen straight into ‘hellfire’ (pp. ii, 133)?

There does seem to be a reason: namely, Rushdie has two types of Devil at work in The Satanic Verses. Roger Y. Clark has made a similar point, suggesting that there is a satanic narrator (who he believes is not always in control of the text) who has two concerns: the situation of migrants who are demonised in England and his ongoing rebellion against God (2001, p. 141). While I agree that there is more than one use of the Devil symbol in the text, I believe that it is actually split into the ‘Western literary Devil’, best represented by Bulgakov’s narrator, and the ‘outcast Devil’, which is closer to the interpretation favoured by Defoe in the epigraph. The narrator is the Western literary Devil who seeks to undermine the established truth with diabolical uncertainty and seems to have been ‘[h]urled headlong flaming from th’ ethereal sky… To bottomless perdition’ (Milton 2000, pp. ll.45, 7) like Milton’s Lucifer. The Devil character, however, is closer to ‘a vagabond wandering’. After he survives the plane crash, Saladin Chamcha metamorphoses into a goatish incarnation of the Devil. He is then made to feel that this is how migrants are actually seen in England. Since the fatwa, Rushdie has emphasised that it is this Devil that the book is really about, arguing that ‘[i]f The Satanic Verses is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of the world’ (1991b, p. 394). I address the text’s discussion of migration in...
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Further detail in the following section, but highlight here Rushdie’s tendency to intensify the ambiguity associated with the Devil by integrating different traditions.

This is also evident in the Jahilia chapters, in which the uncertainty at the heart of the Satanic Verses incident—Did the Devil inspire the verses? Did Mahound tell the truth?—is exacerbated by the narratorial comments. After he recants the verses, Mahound finds that his wife has died and the narrator intrudes with the comment, ‘[a] kind of vengeance—whose? Light or dark? Goodguy badguy?—wrought, as is not unusual, upon the innocent’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 124). According to Karen Armstrong, the name ‘Shaitan’ is used for both the Islamic Devil and for ‘a purely human tempter or a natural temptation’ in Arabic (1993, p. 148). Rushdie’s interpretation of the incident implies that the latter may have been the cause of Mahound initially accepting the goddesses. Mahound seems to force the ‘satanic’ revelation out of the bewildered dreamer Gibreel (in the persona of the archangel Gabriel) after having asked himself, ‘O my vanity, I am an arrogant man, is this weakness, is it just a dream of power? Must I betray myself for a seat on the council?’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 111). For Mazrui, the insinuation that the Qur’an might be the work of Muhammad alone is not the source of Rushdie’s blasphemy; it is the standard interpretation of those who are not Muslims (1990, p. 119). More concerning is that Gibreel maintains that the source of both revelations was the same: ‘From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 123). The charge of blasphemy is only relevant because the presence of a diabolical narratorial agent alongside a retelling of the incident of the Satanic Verses raises the possibility that Mahound—and therefore the historical Muhammad—could not tell whether his inspiration was divine or diabolical. This opens up the troubling possibility that the source of inspiration was always Shaitan.

As the text plays with this idea, rather than presenting it as a coherent argument, it indicates that Rushdie is not trying to uncover a truth about Islam. Instead, The Satanic Verses appears to be attempting to undermine the very possibility of certainty. The narrator’s description of Mahound is interrupted by the following lines, which capture this idea:

Question: What is the opposite of faith?
James Piscatori asserts that ‘Rushdie, in telling the story of Islam’s birth, intends precisely to distract and ultimately to radicalize the reader. By deliberately juxtaposing the illuminating world with imagined words and histories, he casts doubt where clarity was meant to rule and posits ambiguity as the heart of Islam’ (1990, p. 772). Thus, Rushdie replaces the divine narrator of the Qur’an with that of an ambiguous narrator who is sometimes the Devil and sometimes God—or may always be the Devil, but sometimes pretends to be God.

*The Satanic Verses* proved so controversial because Rushdie used the Western literary Devil in a retelling of a narrative that was about Shaitan. While Muslims accept that Shaitan has been granted the power to tempt and deceive by Allah (Russell 1984, p. 57), the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with the Western literary Devil cannot be reconciled with the Islamic understanding of the world. *The Satanic Verses*’ reception was therefore determined, in part, by Rushdie’s complex synthesis of different understandings of the Devil from both literary and religious traditions.

**A Novel about Migrant Identity?**

The epigraph to the novel from Defoe speaks of the Devil as a symbol of the outcast, an association stronger in literature written prior to the twentieth century than in the modernist works considered in this thesis:

> Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is… without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon. (cited in Rushdie 1988, p. ii)

As I have already noted, the Rushdie affair prompted the author to insist that the novel is less about Islam than it is about migrant identity. Downplaying his use of the diabolical narrator to destabilise the certainties of Islam, in ‘In Good Faith’ Rushdie maintains that the text’s focus is the struggle of Saladin to reconcile his Indian heritage
with his desire to make a home in England. ‘It is’, according to Rushdie, ‘written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity’ (1991b, p. 394).

The idea of metamorphosis brings together the multiple levels of the narrative, with the recurring question, ‘How does newness come into the world? …What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make…?’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 8) as relevant when Mahound tries to maintain the staunch monotheism of his new religion in a polytheistic city as when Saladin attempts to gain acceptance by the British community as one of their own. Rushdie’s engagement with different forms of transformation is emphasised through the narrator’s comment, ‘Rebirth: that’s God stuff… Or, but, thenagain… not always. There are secular reincarnations, too’ (p. 17). Many of the characters in the novel rename themselves, and the names of the two main characters—Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha—are revealed as pseudonyms. Moreover, both Gibreel’s career as the star of religiously themed movies and Saladin’s work as a voice-actor rely on the construction of alternate identities. The close proximity of sacred transformations and secular transformations in The Satanic Verses suggests that rebirth is such an important concept to religion because humanity is naturally in a constant state of metamorphosis. Muhammad Sufyan’s advice to Saladin gives further insight into this idea. He tells the devilish figure that in ancient texts such as The Golden Ass, ‘reverse metamorphosis required personal intervention of goddess Isis… But old times are for old fogies. In your instance, young mister, first step would possibly be a bowl of good hot soup’ (p. 244). The implication of this statement is that as society becomes more secular, so should our understanding of the true nature of transformation.

Rushdie also makes this argument through the parodic representation of an American religious conservative, Eugene Dumsday. Having already suggested that Gibreel’s and Saladin’s transformations into an angel and a devil respectively support Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s theory of evolution in the opening section of the novel, the narrator observes that Dumsday’s tone indicates that for him, ‘the name of… Darwin was as distasteful as that of any other forktail fiend, Beelzebub, Asmodeus or Lucifer himself’ (p. 76). As this is the view of a character depicted as laughable, his statement
actually indicates that while the idea of secular transformation may be as threatening as the Devil to believers, to the non-religious both can be associated with progress.

Saladin goes through positive and negative transformations in The Satanic Verses until he is able to comprehend this for himself. When he initially decides to live in England, he takes control of his identity; desiring to appear as ‘handsome in a somewhat sour, patrician fashion’, he ‘constructed this face with care’ (p. 33). He further orchestrates his British identity by cultivating ‘a voice to go with the face’ and marrying a British woman who realised that if she did not, ‘then his entire attempt at metamorphosis would fail’ (pp. 33, 49-50). However, after he falls from the sky an unwanted transformation is forced upon him; beginning with the eruption of small horns, he is soon fully transformed into a goatish Devil with cloven hoofs, an enlarged phallus, and powerful, hairy thighs. While the angelic-looking Gibreel is left alone, the increasingly devilish Saladin is arrested as an illegal immigrant, beaten, harassed and humiliated, until the officers realise that he is indeed a British citizen. When he wakes up in sanatorium, he is told by a manticore that it is the authorities that are responsible for their transformations: ‘They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct’ (p. 168). Refusing to accept the identities they have been branded with, the inmates of the sanatorium and the nearby Detention Centre regain control by escaping.

This magical realist episode, wherein the prejudices of the British against immigrants shape the latter’s physical form, demonstrates that the text is not simply an attack on values associated with the East, but certain aspects of the West as well. As Beville writes, ‘Rushdie’s postcolonial critique of immigrant society in London should be regarded as operating as part of a grander evaluation of the terror of being lost in a meaningless universe that is ironically imbued with obsessionalist, fundamentalist false ‘meaning’ and epistemic violence’ (2009, p. 127). The immigration officers cling to their rigid definition of ‘British’ and violently reject all foreign elements in the name of protecting their country.33 Rushdie shows that one

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33 Even Saladin has internalised this understanding of ‘British’, thinking to himself that Mishal and Anahita Sufyan, whose parents emigrated from Bangladesh, ‘weren’t British… not really, not in any way he could recognize’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 259).
does not need to believe in demons or devils to ‘demonise’ someone else, proposing that there is an equivalency between exorcism and the regulation of immigration.

Morton suggests that Rushdie utilises magical realism in order to express ‘the importance of religion as an epistemological framework for making sense of postcolonial modernity from the diasporic standpoint of a secular British Indian Muslim’, even as he admits that Rushdie is rarely respectful of religious worldviews. (2008, p. 49). As the main agenda of the text is exploring religious phenomenon from a secular point of view, Morton’s explanation of the use of the magical realist genre in the novel is implausible. The concentration of magical elements in the episode of Saladin’s transformation, incarceration and escape indicate that these magical elements are tied to his identity as an immigrant, rather than his family’s religion. It seems fair to assume that Rushdie’s magical realist strategies are more reflective of Maria Takolander’s view that such texts use irony to ‘invite a metaphorical reading of their fantastical episodes, which usually involves… a marginalist political message’ (2007, pp. 199-200). In the interrogation scene, Saladin is fully transformed into a Devil, but the behaviour of the immigration officers expose them as the true source of evil. The supernatural here represents the prejudices of the powerful which distort their perception of the marginalised; their fear of a transforming, multicultural Britain makes Saladin appear as the Devil they think he is.

However, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the Devil can represent a multitude of ideas. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie takes the outcast Devil and asserts that it is, in fact, the same Devil as the heroic Lucifer who challenged God. The immigrant population of Sussex begin dreaming of Saladin in his devilish form and these ‘nocturnal browns-and-blacks found themselves cheering, in their sleep, this what-else-after-all-but-black-man, maybe a little twisted up by fate class race history, all that, but getting off his behind, bad and mad, to kick a little ass’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 286). The children start dressing as ‘the Goatman’, wearing horns on headbands, while his image is also used at political demonstrations and inspires the minority population to stand up for themselves. To Rushdie, this is what the novel is about: reclaiming the insults used against those who are outside the dominant culture. He has said:
The very title, *The Satanic Verses*, is an aspect of this attempt at reclamation. You call us devils? it seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil’s version of the world, of ‘your’ world, the version written from the experience of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. The purpose is not to suggest that the Qur’an is written by the devil; it is to attempt the sort of act of affirmation that, in the United States, transformed the word *black* from the standard term of racist abuse into a ‘beautiful’ expression of cultural pride. (1991b, p. 403)  

The notion of ‘cultural pride’ and its converse, shame, are the forces behind Saladin’s transformations. At the start of the narrative Saladin is only on the *Bostan*, the airplane that explodes over the English Channel, because his acting work brought him to Bombay. This return home affects him in unforeseen ways: he is seduced by a bold Indian woman, Zeeny Vakil, despite his preference for English women; and is disturbed to find that he loses control of his voice as ‘his speech unaccountably metamorphosed into the Bombay lilt he had so diligently… unmade’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 34). Harrison suggests that Saladin’s transformation into a devil and Gibreel’s transformation into an angel reflects Rushdie’s value system, with Saladin ‘deserv[ing] his horns’ for his snobbish rejection of his cultural heritage and Gibreel cast as the archangel for ‘remaining uncompromisingly Indian’ (1992, p. 98). As both characters continually metamorphose over the novel, this is an over-simplification, but it does accurately point to the centrality of cultural identity behind the transformations. Thus, when Saladin is restored to his own shape and the devilishness becomes *internal*, he seeks to destroy the man who was not arrested by immigration even though he was unashamedly Indian: Gibreel. This transition occurs when Saladin embraces the negative emotions associated with the outcast Devil: jealousy, hate and fear.

34 An argument could also be made that Mahound, who reclaims the insulting ‘Devil’s synonym’ as his name (Rushdie 1988, p. 93), is another outcast Devil and therefore also heroic. However, while the narrator does discuss the tendency amongst the oppressed to reclaim insults as names after stating that ‘[h]ere he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered’, the earlier admission that his name was ‘changed by the vision’, not Mahound himself, undermines this connection (p. 93). The subsequent depiction of Mahound as a self-serving and ruthless religious leader similarly disaffirms the idea that Mahound should be grouped with the oppressed and demonised characters. This possible reading nevertheless attests to the diabolical ambiguity that pervades the text.
Even though Saldin’s ‘satanic verses’—anonymous phone calls in rhyme that claim to be exposing Gibreel’s lover Alleluia’s infidelity—eventually drive Gibreel to murder Alleluia and commit suicide, Gibreel saves Saladin’s life. In light of this revelation that ‘evil is never total, that its victory, no matter how overwhelming, is never absolute’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 467), Saladin returns to Bombay and his dying father with compassion for his Indian heritage. There, he reconnects with Zeeney and reverts back to his original name, Salahuddin. Rushdie emphasises that Salahuddin’s acceptance of his cultural background is not about going backwards: the novel finishes with Salahuddin preparing to move on with Zeeney, proclaiming, ‘Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born’ (1988, p. 547). The novel advocates hybridity; integrating the old and the new, ‘inconstancy and mutability’ (Kuortti 2007, p. 132). As such, migration is represented as synonymous with the modern value of progress, and provides not only ‘a metaphor for all humanity’ (Rushdie 1991b, p. 394) but also for modern art.

This is manifested throughout the very language of the novel, which integrates English with phrases from Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and other languages, creating a new, postcolonial English. Personalising the language of the novel further, Rushdie combines words to emphasise his own understanding of them: when Saladin and Gibreel fall from the airplane it is an ‘angelicdevilish fall’ (1988, p. 5) because their transformations are interrelated and, despite superficial appearances, the difference between angels and devils is not always obvious. Similarly, Saladin’s childhood name for London, which he would ‘gabble out, like a mantra, like a spell, the six letters of his dream-city, ellowen deeowen… In his secret heart, he crept silently up on London, letter by letter’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 37) conveys Saladin’s sense of distance from the Western city as a child in Bombay. As Rushdie has written elsewhere, the hybrid nature of his language reflects the way that ‘those people who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it’ (1991a, p. 64).

Through this postcolonial privileging of metamorphosis and transformation, the new over the old, Rushdie challenges conservatism, insularity, and tradition. His claim that the migrant experience can work as a metaphor for human experience does the same work as his rewriting of the story of the satanic verses and the birth of Islam:
it threatens to destabilise the stability of the status quo. According to Simona Sawhney, *The Satanic Verses* ‘seems to say that perhaps all verses could be satanic and that literature itself is migrant, not only because it wanders wantonly from reader to reader, but also because it does not derive authority from its source or origin’ (1999, p. 269). *The Satanic Verses* does not thematise the death of the author as *The Name of the Rose* does, allowing Rushdie to accept the implications of the concept that suit him and putting aside those that are antithetical to his view of literature and the world. For Rushdie, the death of the author is really the death of tradition.

When the immigrants embrace the Devil figure in the novel, then, they are not just reclaiming an insult, but realising their innately transgressive essence. As the narrator of *The Satanic Verses* observes, ‘[a] man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role… he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 49). Even though Rushdie has attempted to downplay the novel’s challenge to authority by emphasising its focus on the outcast Devil, Sawhney’s observation demonstrates that the outcast Devil and the devilish, subversive narrator form a united front against the authority of Church (or Mosque) and state.

**The Words of ‘Satan Rushdy’**

Considering Rushdie’s claim that the English language can be subverted in order to challenge authority and tradition, it is unsurprising that the writer, like the migrant, is cast as a diabolical force in *The Satanic Verses*. As I have noted, throughout the novel Rushdie explores the respective natures of sacred and secular or profane literature, juxtaposing the desperate need of sacred literature to be as immutable as God with the devilish power of profane literature to challenge its authority. However, he does not just assert that literature can be diabolical, but that the author may be too. In his memoir *Joseph Anton* Rushdie expresses dismay over the fact that protestors’ placards bore a pun on his name, ‘Satan Rushdy’ (Rushdie 2012, p. 5). This professed dismay is somewhat disingenuous, however, when one takes note of the ways in which Rushdie aligned himself—or at least, an artistic persona closely associated with himself— with the Devil in the book in question. As Marlena G. Corcoran observes, within *The Satanic Verses* ‘we find inscribed versions of the very controversy over
sacred and profane writing which has so colored the reception of the book’ (1990, p. 158). In the novel, Rushdie plays with the idea that he is Satan Rushdy, author of diabolical literature—here satanic verses—in ways both subtle and obvious.

To begin with the most subtle but also conventional way in which he does this, Rushdie dramatises the writer’s threat to orthodoxy through the character of Baal, a poet who undermines Mahound’s new religion and tempts believers away from the faith. In the Mahound narrative, a brothel in Jahilia called The Curtain becomes the most popular in the city after the poet Baal, who has been posing as a guard, suggests that the twelve prostitutes take on the identities of Mahound’s twelve wives. When the reason for the brothel’s success is exposed Mahound sentences them to execution, prompting his comment, ‘Writers and whores. I see no difference here’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 392). In the terms of the novel, writers and whores pose the same threat: undermining religious authority. The prostitutes of The Curtain tempt men away from Mahound’s religion, Submission, with its strict policy of segregation of the sexes, and exacerbate the discord created by Mahound’s rules by providing a space where men feel comfortable expressing their dissatisfaction. Moreover, before being forced into hiding, Baal was a proud satirist who maintained that a writer’s job is calling attention to injustice and instigating dialogue. ‘A poet’s work’, he tells the Grandee Abu Simbel, is ‘[t]o name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep’ (p. 97). At his trial, Mahound condemns him for the verses he recited in the name of Mahound’s wives’ doubles, claiming the verses ‘dishonour[ed] my house’ (p. 392). The writer, therefore, is positioned as the diabolical adversary of Allah, mediated by the religion of Submission.

In addition to Baal, the other writer that undermines Mahound’s religion is ‘some sort of bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman’, who acts as Mahound’s scribe (p. 101). Despite Rushdie’s comment about the oddity of the name Salman in this context, one of Muhammad’s most loyal followers was indeed Salman al-Farsi, a Persian and an early convert to Islam (Akhtar 1990, p. 10). Rushdie’s Salman the Persian, unlike Salman al-Farsi, begins to doubt the veracity of Mahound’s

35 Although Islam is never mentioned in the text, Mahound’s new religion is called ‘Submission’, the dictionary translation of Islam (Sawhney 1999, p. 254). Allah is the God of both Islam and Mahound’s Submission.
verses after he notices that they conveniently suit Mahound’s interests. Realising that in his own dream he could not tell the difference between the angel Gibreel and the Devil, Salman decides to see if Mahound can distinguish the angel’s words from those of a diabolical source. He changed:

Little things at first. If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as all-hearing, all-knowing, I would write, all-knowing, all-wise. Here’s the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. (Rushdie 1988, p. 367)

If satanic verses are verses that are not the word of God, then Rushdie’s novel indicates that there is a second group of satanic verses: those doctored by the scribe Salman the Persian. It is these verses, rather than the verses officially recognised as satanic, that most threatens the credibility of Mahound’s religion. When Mahound recants the verses that dictate that the three goddesses should be recognised within the new religion, his follower Khalid praises him for having ‘brought us the Devil himself, so that we could witness the workings of the Evil One, and his overthrow by the Right. You have enriched our faith’ (p. 125). Conversely, Salman’s ‘bedevilment, changing verses’, (p. 368) spreads his doubt and bitterness to Baal, who helps The Curtain achieve success through blasphemy and the provision of a space for complaints against Mahound and Submission. The dramatically different characterisation of Rushdie’s Salman and the historical Salman al-Farsi has led some critics such as Shabbir Akhtar (1990, p. 10) and Corcoran to suspect that Rushdie has taken advantage of the name to create a spokesperson or a ‘double of Salman the author, the writer of fiction’ (Corcoran 1990, p. 159).

Indeed, Rushdie’s characterisation of Salman meant that there are lines in the novel eerily prescient in light of the Rushdie affair. When Baal asks Salman why he is sure that Mahound will have him executed for his manipulation of the divine verses, ‘Salman the Persian answered: ‘It’s his Word against mine’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 368). Moreover, when Mahound confronts the scribe, he is told, ‘[y]our blasphemy, Salman, can’t be forgiven. Did you think I wouldn’t work it out? To set your words against the Words of God’ (p. 374). As Rushdie was accused of the same crime as Salman the
Persian, it is tempting to read the latter as a stand-in for the author. However, Salman the Persian is only one example of Rushdie’s self-referential tendency, which has led readers and critics to conflate the empirical author with the authorial persona he constructs through his texts.

Some of Rushdie’s other works reveal that his novels are—or purport to be—more personal than the works of most other Western writers. As Morton has argued, ‘Rushdie’s life is not anterior to the body of his fictional writing, but inextricably bound up with it’ (2008, p. 24). His magnum opus, *Midnight's Children* (1981) and two subsequent novels, *Shame* (1983) and *The Satanic Verses*, form a loose trilogy set in the nations in which Rushdie spent his early years: India, Pakistan and England. In addition to exploring the traditions and political realities of the cultures which have shaped him, Rushdie fictionalises some of the events from his own life. Abdulrazak Gurnah’s introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie* begins with the fact that the premise of *Midnight’s Children*, which tells of a child born at the exact moment of India’s independence, was based on a family joke about Rushdie’s own birth not long before that moment (2007, p. 1). Similarly, *Joseph Anton* incorporates anecdotes about his life that can be found in his novels. Rushdie’s account of his trip to London with his father at thirteen, for example, reads as a more banal version of Saladin’s trip to London with Changez.

If drawing on his own life was the extent of the ‘personalisation’ of his work, it would hardly be worth noting. The metafictional strategies of *Shame*, however, indicate that in this earlier work Rushdie is emphasising his authorial presence: drawing attention to his voice. The self-conscious tendency of modernism highlights that there is an authorial presence responsible for the reflections contained within the novel. Significantly, *Shame* is a fairy-tale retelling of the political history of Pakistan interspersed with critiques of the partition of India and Islamic law, as well as the author’s own feelings about the way his characters interact in his quasi-historical narrative and his reasons for writing the novel. Having alluded to his identity at the beginning of the second chapter, with an anecdote about visiting Pakistan with his newborn son, the narrator soon makes an observation that appears to be the direct words of the author: ‘I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe
myself when I say this’ (Rushdie 1983, p. 28). Thus, the satirical re-interpretation of historical events in *Shame* appears as not only how a bemused onlooker might view the events, but how the author himself does. In his analysis of the novel, Harrison concludes that ‘there is no pretense in this novel that author and narrator are other than one and the same’ so that the narratorial comments make ‘all too clear who and what is being satirized, who and what we are to disapprove of’ (1992, pp. 80, 1). The conflation of the narrator and author gives the impression that Rushdie is so invested in the issues that he writes about that he is unable to tell the story without authorial intrusions in the guise of the narrator.

The narrator’s claims that the story goes on when he is distracted and that the characters have their own autonomy sit uncomfortably with the obvious presence in control of the narrative. ‘How is one to account for such a character? Is consistency too much to ask?’ (Rushdie 1983, p. 142), the narrator complains when the repugnant character Omar falls in love with Sufiya not long after vowing revenge on her father, who killed his brother—as if the story was determined by a source outside the author. However, elsewhere the narrator recounts the murder of a British-Pakistani girl by her father, who believed that she had brought shame on their family. This incident appalled him, he explained, partially because he understood the killer, having grown up in the same culture. Thus, he decided to ‘write about shame’ with ‘Sufiya Zinobia gr[owing] out of the corpse of that murdered girl’ (p. 116). It is in another comment that the disparity between the narrator’s claim that the characters act of their own accord, and the unsubtle exploration of the narrator’s—or the author’s—reasons for writing his own version of events, is explained:

I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge. But the women seem to have taken over; they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sinuous complexities, to see my ‘male’ plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse and ‘female’ side. (p. 173)

Rushdie is not creating a story from nothing, but responding to the history of a nation. While he can challenge the story Pakistan tells about itself, there are some things he
cannot change—the turbulent political history, the impact of Islam and the notion of ‘shame’—without losing the essence of Pakistan. Thus, the male characters act according to their passions and ambitions, while the female characters demand acknowledgement. In the aforementioned quote the reader is told that a story about men and women in Pakistan can go no other way.

Rushdie compensates for the restrictive nature of the content of the narrative by utilising literary techniques that allow him to add a subversive element. In addition to incorporating intrusive authorial comments permitted in metafictional writing, Rushdie presents the historical narrative as ‘a grotesque fairy tale… [which] foregrounds the constraints placed on writers in a repressive authoritarian society’ (Morton 2008, p. 52). Ostensibly exploring the benefits of the magical realist genre, the narrator lists the ‘real-life material [that] might become compulsory’ (Rushdie 1983, p. 69) in a realist novel to adequately represent the real Pakistan. Collating all of his criticisms of Pakistani politics, censorship and culture into an excessively long sentence, the narrator ironically observes that the magical realist genre allows him to incorporate such criticisms without it being ‘banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned’ because ‘I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale… nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously’ (1983, p. 70).36 In this way, Rushdie hints to the reader that the novel is largely a vehicle for his opinions on Pakistan while celebrating the Western literary techniques that, one would assume, will protect him from repercussions.

Regardless of whether the narrator’s comments on Pakistan in Shame reflect Rushdie’s own beliefs, the novel consistently promotes the idea that this is the case. Similarly, the characterisation of Salman the Persian as suspicious of religious authority and the inviolability of the divine word is too close to the public persona of Salman Rushdie for many readers to resist interpreting him as anything other than a mouthpiece for the author. Shame, however, does not only demonstrate Rushdie’s tendency to incorporate a voice in his texts that appears to be his own, but shows that he has previously made that voice the narrator, highlighting his control over the events and even views represented in the text. I return here to Knöngel’s claim that the

36 Shame was, however, banned in Pakistan.
diabolical voice of the narrator and the omniscient divine voice come from the same source, one that may also be the voice of the author (1991, pp. 70, 1).

As Knönagel explicates in his article, there are two key scenes in *The Satanic Verses* that together suggest that the narrator is meant to be understood as the author. Firstly, in the midst of a fight with Alleluia, ‘Gibreel Farishta saw God’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 318). The divinity that Gibreel sees has an obvious resemblance to Rushdie. Gibreel perceives,

sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. (Rushdie 1988, p. 318)

It is clarified that this divine being is also the narrator when the latter interrupts Saladin’s narrative to challenge—by emphasising that he is not challenging—Saladin’s thought that ‘the circumstances of the age required no diabolical explanations’:

I’m saying nothing. Don’t ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. The rules of Creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll… I’ve been pretty self-controlled up to this point and I don’t plan to spoil things now. Don’t think I haven’t wanted to butt in; I have, plenty of times. And once, it’s true, I did. I sat on Alleluia Cone’s bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel. (pp. 408-9)

Here, the narrator cannot resist taking credit for creation of the world of the novel—the business of the author—and the revelations that Gibreel has received—the business of God. The conflation of the two suggests that Rushdie has taken the idea of the ‘authorial God’ to its extreme.

Significantly, though, this passage comes as a response to the question of ‘diabolical explanations’, indicating that the narrator believes creation and revelation are also the work of the Devil. A key element of Knöna [g]el’s and my own arguments is that the narrator is simultaneously author, God, and Devil, and there are indications in the text that this is the case beyond the narrator’s Luciferian sense of pride. When
Gibreel asks, ‘[h]ow do I know you’re not the other One… Neechayvala, the Guy from Underneath?’ after the man on the bed asserts that he is ‘Ooparvala… The Fellow Upstairs’, the latter is quick to anger (Rushdie 1988, p. 318). He refuses to explain himself to Gibreel, and says that he is not obliged to prove whether he is God, the Devil, or a hybrid of the two. His use of the pronoun ‘We’ in the context of refusing to explain whether he is ‘the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as Oopar and Neechay’ (Rushdie 1988, p. 319) has two effects, the first being added support for the interpretation of the man on the bed being a hybrid of God, the Devil and the author. The second contributes to the overall subversive nature of the text, for ‘We’ often appears as a pronoun representing Allah in the Qur’an (Haleem 2005, p. xx). Furthering the intimation at work in his retelling of the satanic verses story, Rushdie again implies that the inspiration behind Islam was not wholly divine.

The deifying and diabolising of the author in The Satanic Verses, appearing alongside the insinuation that forces exterior to Allah may have been responsible for the verses of the Qur’an, make the argument that the novel is intended as an inverted, secular Qur’an plausible. In Rushdie’s account, Islam repudiated its early association with the Devil and rewriting of verses in order to maintain its claim that the word of Allah is an eternal truth. The Satanic Verses, conversely, ‘projects itself as a rival [Qur’an] with Rushdie as its prophet and the devil as its supernatural voice’ (Brennan 1989, p. 152), embracing the subversive nature of the Devil and suggesting that revision and hybridity are what is needed in modernity, rather than eternal truth. The high stakes of the novel, combined with the strategies Rushdie uses to demonstrate his personal investment in the ideas proffered (refined from similar uses in Shame), mean that it is not at all surprising that Rushdie was defensive rather than apologetic when The Satanic Verses was met with criticism.

The Right to Tell Stories

Rushdie’s response to the critics of his novel was not to argue that they were taking his novel too seriously; it was to assert his right to retell and rewrite narratives, regardless of whether the act of doing so might offend others. In his memoir of the Rushdie affair, Joseph Anton, Rushdie includes a detail from his family history which reads as a defence of his position. Rather than justifying his rewriting of the Qur’an
with reference to the technique of intertextuality, he claims that he learnt it was his right after hearing his father reinvent Eastern tales:

To grow up steeped in these tellings was to learn two unforgettable lessons: first, that stories were not true… but by being untrue they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him; and second, they all belonged to him, just as they belonged to his father, Anis, and to everyone else… (2012, p. 19)

Rushdie slyly makes a case for this mode of storytelling being universal, rather than particular to the West. He even affirms that ‘Man was the storytelling animal… The story was his birthright, and nobody could take it away’ (p. 19) and casts himself as the defender of the human right to tell stories.

This idea was the impetus for the first work of fiction he published after the Rushdie affair began, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The children’s book is dedicated to Rushdie’s son Zafar and tells of a young boy’s fantastical adventure to restore to his father the power of storytelling. Morton notes that ‘[a]s many critics have suggested, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* appears to be an allegory of Rushdie’s own predicament’ (2008, p. 83). The nature of the protagonist Haroun’s quest forces him to ask himself questions that could easily be a segue into Rushdie’s non-fiction works, such as ‘*What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?*’ (Rushdie 1990, p. 20). Rushdie’s answer to that question is, in *Haroun*, simplified to the level that children can understand: stories make people happy. Thus, the villain Khattam-Shud, who has been polluting the Ocean of Stories and attempting to plug the Source of Stories, frames his objection to stories in the following terms when asked,

> ‘But why do you hate stories so much?’ Haroun blurted, feeling stunned. ‘Stories are fun…’

> ‘The world, however, is not for Fun,’ Khattam-Shud replied. ‘The world is for Controlling… And inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.’ (p. 161)

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37 *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* will hereafter be referred to as *Haroun*. 

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Haroun is not just an allegory of the Rushdie affair, but an allegory of how Rushdie publicly interpreted the conflict. Khattam-Shud’s reply indicates that the conflict was not about one man trying to discredit a powerful religion, but one powerful world view based on the divine Word refusing to allow secular alternatives put forward in words. The former interpretation of the Rushdie affair is perhaps the most influential, but some of his later works such as Joseph Anton, Haroun, ‘In Good Faith’ and ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ demonstrate that the latter is the one that Rushdie publicly aligned with.

In the same year that Haroun was released, Rushdie also published ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ (1991c). In this essay he explicitly confronted the question that his books engaged with: Can literature really be a substitute for religion in a secular society? He maintains that before the controversy over his ‘blasphemous’ novel, he did not think of literature as sacred, but as essential to making life meaningful and tolerable in modernity. The strength of his conviction in his right to retell the story of the satanic verses, however, forced him to reconsider whether he was being honest with himself. Rushdie comes close to proclaiming that literature is sacred, asking, ‘Can art be the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds; might it, by “swallowing” both worlds, offer us something new—something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence?’ and answering, ‘I believe it can. I believe it must. And I believe that, at its best, it does’ (Rushdie 1991c, p. 420). He then turns to the needs that religion fills—a sense of wonder, a sense of being chosen, rules to live by and concrete answers to the unanswerable questions about existence—and discusses how the novel can make partial attempts to fulfil these needs. Ultimately, after reiterating the same claims about literature than can be inferred from The Satanic Verses, he finds that he cannot claim that literature is sacred:

now I find myself backing away from the idea of sacralizing literature with which I flirted at the beginning of this text; I cannot bear the idea of the writer as secular prophet… Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world. Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. We shall just have to get along without the shield of sacralization, and a good thing, too. (p. 427).
This conclusion is actually a restatement of his original claim about the reason why modernity needs innovative literature: in an age of uncertainty, there needs to be many new perspectives in order to prevent the dominance of any one. ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ argues that no single work of literature should be deemed sacred because Rushdie is opposed to a single doctrine that cannot be challenged—but this does not change the fact that literature should be privileged.

Given that *The Satanic Verses* has been interpreted by critics as an inverted, secular or rival Qur’an, Rushdie’s statement that ‘[w]e do not need to call [literature] sacred, but we do need to remember that it is necessary’ (1991c, p. 429) reads as a concession. The logical implication of his arguments on the necessity of literature is, as he admits in ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’, that literature cannot comfortably be a substitute for religion; the transgressive interests of the novel are antithetical to those of the religious text, which comforts the faithful. Thus, while his commitment to freedom of expression and the importance of storytelling remain strong, here Rushdie appears to relinquish the Western fantasy of replacing authoritarian monotheism with the secular written word.

**Conclusion**

Although Rushdie aligned himself with the diabolical in *The Satanic Verses* through his textual strategies, subversion of the satanic verses story, and portrayal of himself as a duplicitous, devilish narrator, in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair he made an effort to demonstrate the ways in which he also thought literature was—in a metaphorical sense—divine. It is evident that certain essays were written to some degree to placate his critics, as he later distanced himself from the essay with the self-explanatory title ‘Why I Have Embraced Islam’, for example, and omitted it from later editions of *Imaginary Homelands* (Gurnah 2007, p. 52). However, it is of no consequence to this thesis whether Rushdie was sincere about his claims in ‘In Good Faith’ or if he thought that the central conflict of the Rushdie affair was really about control over discourse as *Haroun* indicates. Instead, what is important is that when Rushdie sought to retain control over his diabolical text after its reception began turning his life into a ‘Faustian contract in reverse’, he had to enter public debate.
It is true, as Webster highlights, that in Rushdie’s published reflections on *The Satanic Verses* ‘Rushdie evinces a seemingly complete and unquestioning faith in the reliability of artists’ intentions as a guide to the work of art they have produced’, requiring him to ignore ‘almost the entire history of twentieth-century literary criticism’ (1990, p. 89). Rushdie’s complaint that ‘[i]t is not… the book it has been made out to be, that book containing “nothing but filth and insults and abuse”’ (Rushdie 1991b, p. 395) did not stop Muslim readers from being offended, people being killed, or himself being forced into hiding. Rushdie’s insistence on his own interpretation of the stakes of the Rushdie affair meant that he was not as apologetic as his critics would have liked. Significantly, though, this did not deter critics and commentators from continuing the discussion in what can be described as communicative reason.

Thus, *The Satanic Verses* is particularly notable amongst the examples of diabolical literature I have discussed, because unlike the works of Wilde, Nabokov, Bulgakov, Mann and Eco, it brought the modernist conviction that literature has diabolic potential out of the artistic and into the public sphere. The year after the *fatwa* Mazrui observed, ‘[a] book can be a lethal weapon. A pen writing three provocative paragraphs in London could let loose a flood of dangerous consequences half a world away. When is a writer guilty of manslaughter? Could it conceivably be at the moment of writing itself?’ (1990, p. 132). Because of Rushdie’s controversial novel, the questions that had been asked by writers of diabolical literature through their work—Can literature take the place of religion? Should readers take literature seriously? Does literature have to be moral? What responsibilities do writers have?—suddenly became questions for public debate.
Conclusion

Since the Rushdie affair, there have been novels that interrogate the morality of literature in some way, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000), in which a woman oppressed by her familial obligations and domineering husband attempts to assert her autonomy through writing that comes to symbolise, instead, her betrayal of her sister; Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), a narrative presided over by a self-aware narrator and authorial God who realises that her complete control over the novel means that she cannot achieve atonement for her crimes in life by making amends for them in art; and Peter Carey’s *My Life as a Fake* (2003), the story of a man who creates a literary hoax—the poetry of ‘Bob McCorkle’—to embarrass the Australian literary establishment, which then comes alive to haunt him. While the morality of literature is explored in each of these texts, there is no suggestion that literature may be diabolical.

Intriguingly, some of the reviews of *My Life as a Fake* collected on Carey’s website imply that there is a diabolical element to the text: ‘Carey is as diabolical as the hoaxes that his book includes’, according to *The New York Times*; while *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* describes it as ‘[a] devilishly engrossing meditation on illusion’ and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* asserts that the novel is ‘sinfully delightful’ (Carey n.d.). There are indeed references to the Devil in the novel, with the character Tina mistaking the perpetrator of the literary hoax, her father, for the Devil; and the narrator Sarah remembering that, in regards to Milton and *Paradise Lost*, ‘it was Satan for whom the poet felt sympathy’ (Carey 2003, p. 295) as she fantasises about reading the unattainable poetry of Bob McCorkle. These traces of the Devil, however, contribute very little to the plot or the symbolism.

Even though the association between the Devil and literature is apparently engrained in the critical consciousness, the overarching metaphor that Carey is working with is not *literature is diabolical*. Instead, as the novel’s epigraph from Mary Shelley’s novel foreshadows, Carey entertains the idea that artistic creation is akin to Frankenstein’s monster. The references to the Devil reinforce *that* metaphor: like Milton, Frankenstein’s monster sympathised with the Devil (Shelley 1996, p. 87). Similarly, McEwan restrains the focus of his novel to the idea that the author is like God, rather than considering how the author might be like the Devil; and Atwood is
specifically interested in the ways language can be used to deceive intentionally and unintentionally, an idea encapsulated by the image of the blind assassin. Such writers are still self-consciously concerned with the question of the morality of literature, but their works are not examples of diabolical literature. It appears that since the Rushdie affair, the Devil is more likely to appear in popular fiction and in literature with religious concerns.

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, diabolical literature is a subset of literary modernism that uses the Devil symbol to reflect on the nature of literature itself. Bookended by the overwhelmingly positive views towards literature promulgated at the end of the nineteenth century and the interrogation of long-standing assumptions about the place of literature in the late twentieth century after the Rushdie affair began, diabolical literature engages in a loose dialogue about the ways in which literature may be said to be devilish. The metaphorical conflation of diabolism with divinity in these texts is consequently a means of putting forward the view that it is ultimately impossible to generalise about the nature of literature. Although literary modernism often provocatively brings out the diabolic potential of literature, other works may indeed ‘interpret life for us… console us… [and] sustain us’ (1958b, p. 502), as Arnold believed it was capable of. Texts should therefore be considered individually if their potential insights are to be integrated into society.

To summarise the reasoning behind my interpretation of the significance of diabolical literature, in the Theoretical Chapter I showed that the philosophy of Habermas, and the studies on the Devil of Russell, Almond and Muchembled, indicate that the resurgence of literary devils in the twentieth century is not the result of a revival of religious faith. Instead, the Devil frequently appears in works questioning the morality of literature because the relegation of religion to private life from its powerful role in public life by secularism necessitated an interrogation of potential replacements for religion. The Devil symbol, which connotes ‘evil’ in Christianity and ‘heroic rebellion’ amongst a significant part of the artistic sphere, captures the ambivalence about the morality of literature that many writers seem to have felt in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modernism, with its emphasis on innovation and self-consciousness, foregrounded its concern that the means by which it sought to achieve progress might instead be diabolical temptation. Works in the category of
diabolical literature, then, do not just feature or allude to the Devil, but transfer the properties of the Devil onto the text in order to work through the issue. They are diabolical not because they celebrate evil, but because they question the ability of literature to take a moral stance.

As a conceptual metaphor realised throughout the text, the claim that ‘literature is diabolical’ is only a starting point for these authors’ discussions of the nature of literature and its morality. Thus, in Chapter One I demonstrated how Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* puts forward the view that reading literature can be like making a deal with the Devil if the reader treats the work as a comment on life. Wilde argued, in his non-fiction works, at his trial and implicitly through his fiction, that everything can be represented in literature, because questions of morality cannot be appropriately applied to art. However, like Dorian, readers may not adhere to this principle. Thus, Wilde responded to Arnold’s overvaluation of literature by paradoxically privileging the literary form and warning against its temptations. For Wilde, as for many later modernists, literature was both diabolical and divine. Literature can entertain, inspire and develop self-knowledge, and is therefore essential to human life—it just could not take the role that Arnold had designated for it.

Although Barbara K. Olson (1997) reaches different conclusions about the significance of ‘authorial divinity’ in modernist works, she rightly argues that the technique of omniscient narration positions the author as authorial God. In Chapter Three I showed that Nabokov took advantage of this idea in *Lolita* by writing his narrator, Humbert Humbert, as a self-conscious authorial God unconscious of the fact that the novel is not his creation, but Nabokov’s. While Wilde suggests that literature is not inherently diabolical, but can be if used inappropriately by the reader, Nabokov shows that literature can be made diabolical if the author so chooses. The increased self-consciousness of modernism compared to aestheticism is evident in this, as Nabokov’s position lacks the optimism of Wilde’s that literature will not be judged in terms of morality by readers. Nabokov knowingly plays with his readers and sets ‘traps’ in order to explicate how literature, while it can inspire and improve the reader, can also be diabolical.

Modernism, then, brings the authorial presence to the forefront of the text. As such, in Chapter Three and Chapter Four of the thesis, I showed how two mid-century
modernist authors offered opposing arguments for the morality of being a writer in times of political turmoil. In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov embraces the adversarial role of the Devil, writing through a devilish narrator. Because of his fundamental disagreement with the policies of the Soviet government—and particularly their condemnation of fantastic literature—Bulgakov celebrates the potential of literature to be like the Devil and challenge the ruling party. The radically different context of Bulgakov’s novel shows both the suitability of the Devil as a metaphor for modernist literature, and the complexity of the symbol itself. Along with Rushdie’s and Eco’s responses to the issue of literature’s diabolism, Bulgakov’s is one of the most positive portrayals of the morality of literature in diabolical literature. This is because he seems to have believed that the rigidity and humourlessness of the Soviet Union needed the challenge that diabolical literature represents, severing the association between diabolical and dangerous. Writing diabolical literature is therefore the responsibility of a moral writer in his situation.

Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, conversely, is more wary about the dangers of literature. While Nabokov, Bulgakov, Eco and Rushdie grant themselves absolute power over their narratives as authorial gods, Mann suggests that the morality of literature is compromised by recognised and unrecognised flaws of the author, as well as factors beyond the author’s control. *Doctor Faustus* attests to the moral complexity of writing in times of war, rather than involving oneself. Mann has a more rigid definition of diabolical or divine than any of the other writers of diabolical literature, making it all the more troubling when the two cannot be distinguished. In a sense the antithesis of Arnold and his nineteenth-century contemporaries who glorified literature, Mann’s novel promotes the suspicion that even literature that aspires to be moral and ethical can be tainted by the diabolic. Unwilling to forgo writing, though, Mann is ultimately ambivalent about its morality.

The two subsequent diabolical texts respond to a vastly different context to that of Mann or Bulgakov. In Chapter Five, I explored Eco’s innovative response to the pressure that mid to late twentieth-century theory placed on readers and writers of modernist literature. He draws comparisons between the theory of ‘the death of the author’ and the medieval belief in the approaching apocalypse, and suggests that the anxiety surrounding the former is as unwarranted as the fears around the latter. Thus,
in *The Name of the Rose*, he remedies the fearful attitude of the medieval Church towards secular literature as temptations of the Devil with an endorsement of the values associated with a Devil stripped of theological meaning, the Western literary Devil: ambiguity, unlimited semiosis, opposition to authority and, most importantly, laughter. Eco does not elevate literature to the heir of religion, but echoes Wilde’s view that literature’s crucial role in society depends on it not being taken too seriously.

As I elucidated in Chapter Six, the view that literature is the heir to religion is probably, in the late twentieth century, most associated with Rushdie. Rushdie consciously drew on Bulgakov’s project of writing a moral challenge in the guise of the Devil, so that his retelling of the ‘satanic verses’ story can be read as seeking to undermine Islamic beliefs. In *The Satanic Verses*, secular worldviews and values are presented as equally important as—or perhaps even more important than—religious ones, so that Rushdie was accused by his critics of attempting to write a rival, secular Qur’an. However, in his 1990 essay ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ he admitted that while he privileges the egalitarian nature of literature over the rigidity of religious faiths, and considers literature more useful in modernity than religion, the attributes of literature that make it so unique are what make it unsuitable to replace religion. Thus, Rushdie’s perspective that modernity needs the expression of multiple points of view through literature, rather than one unquestionable perspective of religion, is amenable to Habermas’ theory of communicative action, which was shown at work when the issues underpinning the Rushdie affair were debated in public.

Diabolical literature effectively ended after the questions that drove those works began to be asked in journal articles, newspapers, television programs, and conversation around the time of the *fatwa*. Ironically, as many had not even read the book,\(^{38}\) it was actually a discussion about the concerns of diabolical literature—the morality of modernist literature and the congruent responsibilities of the writer—more than it was about *The Satanic Verses* itself. Diabolical literature is therefore integral in understanding the way in which modernist suspicion of language is related to a

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\(^{38}\) Notably, the politician who instigated the scandal around *The Satanic Verses* in India, Syed Shahabuddin, proudly admitted in an open letter that he had not read the book: ‘I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is’ (cited in Appignanesi & Maitland 1989, p. 4).
discomfort regarding the authority of the artistic sphere and the idea that literature should be the replacement for religion. This issue became a source of debate for those within the artistic sphere and those outside of it at the end of the twentieth century.

The Rushdie affair showed that a text may be the impetus for communicative reason even if it cannot be said to be part of the process itself. The debates surrounding *The Satanic Verses* can be understood as attempts to straighten out the ‘pseudocommunication’—or communication distorted by the Western literary tradition—that presupposed that literature must be exceedingly beneficial to society and therefore ‘divine’, or that it is exceedingly (or excitingly) dangerous because of its ‘diabolical’ nature. The modernists’ self-conscious metaphorical discussion of their view of literature as both diabolical and divine is the precursor of this critique of the assumptions of the artistic sphere. Instead of taking on the role of religion, literature played a part in Habermas’ communicative action by instigating a process of communicative reason. This, it seems, is the appropriate role for literature in modernity.

As the dialogue around the Rushdie affair was the culmination of a long process of judging literature in terms of categories drawn from religion, ‘diabolical’ and ‘divine’, my thesis responds to questions opened up by particular new studies into religion and modernism. Pericles Lewis (2010) proposes that the references to religion in ostensibly secular modernist texts can be attributed to a desire for social and spiritual connection to remedy the declining religious community. His study convincingly argues that modernists used religious concepts alongside experimental literary techniques to reach readers in ways akin to religious experience. However, it leaves unanswered the question of how modernist writers felt about the responsibility of this task. My study shows that key modernist works self-consciously interrogated their own suitability for the role.

Gregory Erickson (2007) asks what effect the long influence of Christianity and its comparatively rapid decline has had on modernism. Focusing on the concept of God, Erickson finds that it, or he, continues to have a pervasive but covert and complex presence in modernist texts. ‘Rather than replace religion or mark God’s absence’, he contends, ‘modernism borrows and relies upon theological foundations to “make” its own theology’ (Erickson 2007, p. 205). The Judeo-Christian culture that
grounds modernism shapes its language and way of thinking, so that the idea of God, for instance, is appropriated and transformed (often unintentionally) by modernists. While the Devil symbol that I track in this thesis is used intentionally, the philosophical framework that Erickson sets out offers a starting point for explaining why a symbol with a religious referent is used as a metaphor for the dangers of literature.

Thus, Erickson’s, Lewis’ and my own study are partial responses to the broad question still demanding answers: ‘how does literary modernism deal with the resonances of theology and the decline of institutionalised religion?’ The use of the conceptual metaphor literature is diabolical to investigate the morality of literature and determine its role in modernity is only one of these strategies.

Significantly, the understanding of the Devil found in diabolical literature owes more to its literary incarnation in the Western literary tradition than its religious referent. Though the influence of both devils and the complexity of the issue mean that the modernists can only ever offer an equivocal answer, the literary devil’s influence ensures that it leans more towards positivity than negativity. The concerns that are explored through these works tend to be treated with levity or playfulness, because there is not one author of diabolical literature who sees literature as a legitimate replacement for religion — only as a complement to modern life. The most negative portrayal of the morality of literature, Doctor Faustus, must therefore be understood in terms of its proximity to what many still call evil — the Holocaust — which brings Mann’s vision of the Devil back towards the Christian Devil, as the personification of evil, rather than the heroic and rebellious literary Devil. Nevertheless, Mann could still not completely condemn literature as he perceived its potentially redemptive function. Diabolical literature is a metaphorical dialogue around the morality of literature in which authors offer variants of the idea that while literature is indispensable to modernity, it is not moral, consistent, or trustworthy enough to replace religion. For the writers who champion the Western literary Devil, though, that is how it should be.
APPENDIX

On Excluding Dostoevsky

There is another author whose works some may argue belong in the category of diabolical literature: namely, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Weiner has made a similar argument, and the influence of the scene of Ivan’s dialogue with the Devil in *The Brothers Karamazov* (2004) [1880] on *The Master and Margarita* and *Doctor Faustus* is clearly evident—suggesting it may be part of the same dialogue. 39 *Demons* (1994) [1872] (also translated as *Devils, The Devils or The Possessed*) even highlights that the demonic ideas ‘possessing’ the nihilist protagonists are transmitted through spoken and especially written words. However, I have excluded Dostoevsky’s works from my analysis because of three key differences between his work and diabolical literature. Namely, though Mikhail Bakhtin’s landmark analysis of Dostoevsky’s work draws out some similarities between it and literary modernism, Dostoevsky’s novels lack the self-consciousness of diabolical literature; the focus of novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Demons* is the external world, not the literary form; and the thematisation of literature as demonic (as opposed to diabolical) is only peripheral to broader questions about the interrelation between politics, religion, and morality. I briefly elucidate my reasoning here to justify my exclusion of Dostoevsky and thereby clarify the category of diabolical literature further.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin proposed that Dostoevsky’s artistic choices were even more important to his novels than the ideological engagement that critics had, until that point, considered central (1984, pp. 3-4). Moreover, critics’ attempts to deduce Dostoevsky’s own beliefs from his novels would prove fruitless, as his novels are ‘polyphonic’:

> What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of*

39 Mann’s Devil, like Dostoevsky’s, constantly changes his appearance—which Russell contends is also an allusion to Goethe’s *Faust* (1986, p. 163)—and engages Adrian in a dialogue, reciting Adrian’s ideas as his own. Similarly, both Dostoevsky’s Devil and Bulgakov’s Woland discuss the proofs of the existence of God.
consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (p. 6)

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky breaks with established forms of the novel in order to create a dialogue on political, social and religious matters, inviting the reader to become a participant (Bakhtin 1984, p. 18). This approach to characterisation and point of view pre-empts modernism in its attempt to broaden the potential of the novelistic form. In addition, Bakhtin suggests that ‘[t]he epoch itself made the polyphonic novel possible’ (1984, p. 12) with the complexity and contradictoriness of life in nineteenth-century Russia demanding a literary form that could adequately respond to the epoch: mirroring the origins of modernism.

Devilish and demonic characters are central to The Brothers Karamazov and Demons. On a superficial level, then, they seem like they might meet the requirements of diabolical literature. However, Bakhtin’s insistence that Dostoevsky’s novels are a product of his epoch indicates that they cannot be responding to the overvaluation of literature as represented by Arnold, as I have suggested that diabolical literature does. The Master and Margarita may be ‘the exception that proves the rule’ of diabolical literature, but this exception does not stretch so far as to include Dostoevsky. Bulgakov’s novel is heavily influenced by Western literary values and shares the self-consciousness of modernism. Dostoevsky’s works, conversely, quote Western literature, but remain within the tradition of Russian novels and focus on Russian identity. If Bakhtin is right in saying that Dostoevsky’s novels create a dialogue, as I believe he is, then it is a different dialogue from that entered into by diabolical literature.

It is therefore significant that Bakhtin contends that the concept of self-consciousness is central in Dostoevsky—but refers to a different type of self-consciousness. Diabolical literature, as I demonstrated throughout this thesis, is self-conscious about its own form, status as literature, and possible effect on the reader. In Dostoevsky, ‘[s]elf-consciousness… [is] the artistic dominant governing the construction of a character’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 50). Dostoevskian characters reflect on

40 Arguably, Crime and Punishment (1964) [1866] could also be included, but I do not discuss this text for the sake of brevity.
the ideas that they represent or uphold, and how these ideas shape the way they see the world. This cannot be conflated with modernist literary self-consciousness.

However, I cannot conclude my reasoning here, as there are other critics who have suggested that there is a characterisation of literature as demonic or diabolical in Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky’s *Demons* is a key example in Weiner’s *By Authors Possessed* of his claim that certain Russian novels evoke the anxiety that authorship is dangerously close to diabolism. Weiner interprets the ‘demons’ (or ‘devils’, in his translation) of the title as the nihilist characters and the radical ideas that they spread through words and print (1998, p. 94). As the nihilist ideas of the 1860s and 1870s were the heritage of 1840s liberalism—a movement in which Dostoevsky had taken part—Weiner surmises that Dostoevsky’s narrative of the diffusion of demonic ideas is infused with his guilt, tainting the image of the author (1998, p. 94). This is exacerbated by the very act of writing about these ideas and their temptations as well as their effects, which insinuates that the implied author is similarly involved with the demonic (Weiner 1998, pp. 95-6).

Weiner argues that the idea that writing might be more closely associated with the Devil than with God was treated very seriously by Dostoevsky, because of ‘the fact that Dostoevsky is a profoundly Christian writer’ (1998, p. 99). As such, the novel is both a dialogue on the influential ideas of the 1860s and 1870s and a mediation on the relation between ethics and aesthetics. Dostoevsky attempts to find a compromise between the demands of these two spheres by balancing his depiction of ‘demonic’ ideas with sacred narratives and depictions of Russian religious art, a technique practised in *Demons* and perfected in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Weiner 1998, pp. 97-8).

Taken alone, the chapter from *Demons* excluded by the censors, ‘At Tikhon’s’, seems to suggest that a work can simultaneously be diabolical literature and be concerned with the conflict between the sacred and the profane. In this scene, Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, an influential figure amongst the nihilists, visits Bishop Tikhon to confess his sins. Stavrogin has written them into a narrative, which he requests Tikhon read so that he will know how Stavrogin tricked a mother into whipping her prepubescent daughter, raped the girl and drove her to suicide, married his wife as a joke, killed men in duels, and was responsible for a poisoning. Tikhon’s
response is to insist that Stavrogin join a monastery and, most importantly, not publish his narrative. ‘[C]onquer this desire as well, set aside your pages and your intention—and then you will overcome everything’ (Dostoevsky 1994, p. 712), he pleads. Tikhon refers to the sin of pride associated with authorship, but given the novel’s other use of the concept of demons, there is also a clear threat of Stavrogin’s literary confession of his crimes infecting others. This means that ‘[t]he antidote to this devastating contagion of words’ is ‘the refusal to print or give voice to demonic narratives’—a choice that would prevent, as Weiner observes, the writing of novels like Dostoevsky’s (1998, p. 94). Tikhon’s response suggests that there may be an anxiety about the morality of writing underlying Dostoevsky’s work that is as strong as that of Mann’s, which I discussed in Chapter Four.

Dostoevsky did not rewrite the chapter enough to appease the censors. Even though the chapter is now left out of standard editions of Demons (Leatherbarrow 2000, p. 298), the narrative appears complete despite its loss. The anxiety that literature may have devilish qualities, therefore, is evident in Demons (and The Brothers Karamazov), but it is only one theme of the novel rather than a concern that consumes and structures its entirety. To return to Bakhtin’s analysis, though Dostoevsky’s novels are innovatively polyphonic, they are still ultimately realist—not modernist. Dostoevsky used a radical new technique not to comment on the nature of literary form, but to better represent the influence of ideas on everyday life.

As such, Weiner’s interpretation actually strengthens my case for excluding Dostoevsky. The Devil is used by authors of diabolical literature as a secular symbol, but in Dostoevsky’s works the Devil (and demons) are representative of Orthodox beliefs. The dialogues on the nihilist and liberal ideas in Demons and on sin, goodness, and morality in The Brothers Karamazov are really about how one should act in nineteenth-century Russia with its particular political and economic situation, tension between atheists and Orthodox Christians, and the influence of new ideas coming from the West. The potential of literature to draw a reader away from ethical standards is indeed a concern, but is only one of many temptations the Russian individual must confront.

Weiner is right to refer to the troubling quality of Dostoevsky’s works as demonic, rather than diabolical, because it does not use the conceptual metaphor
literature is diabolical, but rather evokes the sense that his characters exist in a world full of numerous demonic temptations: religious, political and otherwise. Although ‘At Tikhon’s’ thematises the morally questionable status of literature, it is not overtly self-referential. Thus, the Devil only appears in a metaphorical sense in Dostoevsky’s works—with the exception of Ivan’s hallucination in The Brothers Karamazov—because the novel is about life, not art. For Dostoevsky, who was a religious man, ‘Satan was not a literary device or problem’ (Panichas 1965, p. 13), but a force with a distinct reality that worked through people, and sometimes literature. Dostoevsky’s conflation of political evils and supernatural evil, evident in the title of Demons, is intentional, because he saw Russianness and belief in God as inseparable. The Western ideologies that threatened this union of faith and national identity were akin to demonism (Leatherbarrow 2000, pp. 209-332).

The atheist Ivan’s statement in The Brothers Karamazov that, ‘if the devil does not exist, and man has therefore created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness’ (Dostoevsky 2004, p. 239) is indicative of a focus on the relation between the Devil and humankind, not the Devil and literature. While Weiner correctly shows that Dostoevsky’s novel exhibits some anxiety about the possibility that literature is demonic, this is only peripheral to Dostoevsky’s interrogation of the demonic or devilish ideas that influence human actions. Ultimately, I have chosen not to discuss Dostoevsky’s work in this thesis because I believe it lacks the self-consciousness of modernism (and Wilde’s aestheticism), does not use the Devil as conceptual metaphor, and is concerned with life, not literary form. The dialogues Dostoevsky instigates in his novels are not involved in the same conversation as that of diabolical literature.

Demonic is also a more appropriate term because of the Russian folk tradition of multiple demons and devils, which I discussed in Chapter Four.
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