

Of Genius and Epiphany: *Schlafes Bruder*,
Das Parfum, and *Babette's Feast*

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Introduction

Robert Schneider begins his recent best-selling novel *Schlafes Bruder* (1992) (*Brother of Sleep* [1995]) with an apparently subversive proposition.¹ Suppose someone with extraordinary talent were born into circumstances, and lived a life, which denied him the opportunity to learn the craft necessary to communicate that talent. Had this happened to Leonardo or to Mozart, we would be talking about others in their place. How many geniuses must the world have lost, muses the author, simply because they were not given the chance to learn? Johann Elias Alder ("Elias"), the hero of this novel, is just such a man.

The subversive nature of this question, which attacks the legitimacy of the cultural tradition by revealing its arbitrariness, would appear to correspond with the agenda advanced both by the feminist and the multiculturalist movements. Their argument vilifies the male-dominated, Eurocentric culture of the past two millennia for its systematic elimination of the so-called "other" from the possibility of participating in intellectual and creative pursuits, or by denying the inherent value of their creations. These underprivileged groups were denied access to education and to the public forum. Even if they did produce works of art, entrenched structures prevented these from becoming part of the canon.

While Schneider's character is neither a woman nor strictly speaking the product of a different culture, Elias is nevertheless born into a family and community which effectively exclude him, do not edu-

cate him, and ignore his existence. Using an intentionally antiquated style, the author blames God for the cruelty of giving this child musical talent, while also having him come to the world the son of a farmer in a poor Alpine village in the Vorarlberg. Even though the community is in the middle of early nineteenth-century Europe, its poverty and remoteness do convey the atmosphere of third-world disadvantage. At age five Elias experiences a trauma which changes the color of his pupils from a melancholic rainy-green to a disturbingly glowing yellow. This difference is palpable, especially when he begins maturing more rapidly than normal children, growing adult teeth and having his voice break early. Elias thus becomes the Other and is treated as such by his parents and by the community.

Schneider introduces all the necessary ingredients to produce a story demonstrating either *triumph* in the face of prejudice and other cultural obstacles, or *tragedy* at the flippancy with which genius is tossed aside if it is born disadvantaged or does not present the correct exterior. But Schneider pursues neither of these two possible and currently topical avenues. Rather, he presents a parable which probes classical, idealistic, and essentially traditional attitudes towards the role and power of art, thereby undermining, if not contradicting, the progressive scenario initially constructed. A similar attitude to the power of art is also evident in two other contemporary works: Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: Die Geschichte eines Mörders* (1985) (*Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* [1986]) and Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast* (1950).² All three works are devoted to the study of an artist and genius: Elias is referred to as a *Naturgenie*, a "natural genius" (184) who invented "the most touching music ever heard" (186). Grenouille knows that he is "nothing less than a genius" (43), and becomes "the greatest perfumer of all time" (44). Babette is "known all over Paris as the greatest culinary genius of the age" (58). All three concentrate their heightened and refined aesthetic abilities on a specific sense: hearing, smell, taste. All three works present the reaction of an unsuspecting and untrained audience when confronted with the "great art" produced by the protagonists.

There are, of course, significant differences in the *type* and *character* of the artist-protagonists portrayed in these three works. Süskind's Grenouille is a wretched murderer who uses perfume to enslave, destroy, and ultimately self-destruct. Babette, on the other hand, elevates her humble surroundings with the fine art of cooking. The works differ also in the creative intent of the authors.

Dinesen had supposedly been told that American audiences would be interested in a story about good food (See Langbaum 248 and Pelensky 167); Süskind was apparently writing a postmodern parody of the German *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* while also poking fun at the poetics of Romanticism and the commercialism of modernity. Yet despite these and other differences, there are nonetheless important and perhaps surprising similarities in the theory of art presented by the respective authors which can be reduced to the following statements:

1. Great art may be impossible to define, but it exists, and even the untrained know it when confronted by it;
2. beauty (great art) is objective, in that it transcends the subjectivity of the individual by its ability to convince the multitude;
3. great art bypasses reason, the intellect, and logic by appealing directly to the sub- or unconscious and by producing a moment of epiphany;
4. great art even bypasses prejudice, which results from cultural conditioning: i.e., art transcends culture;
5. there are pre-existing “rules” to great art;
6. these “rules” can be accessed by anyone with the requisite ability (talent);
7. accessing these rules does not necessarily require adherence to or knowledge of a tradition, or a formal education.

All three works present a theory of art which returns to a pre-twentieth-century idealism, and which insists that great art can reveal a vision of transcendental truth.

Historical and Theoretical Background

In their modern incarnation, the preceding notions of art were largely conceived during the eighteenth century, and their German variant in the midst of the so-called *Geniezeit* of the *Sturm und Drang*. The authors and theorists of this movement—reacting against the Enlightenment’s unreasonable stress on the sole power of reason—coined the notion of the *Naturgenie*, the natural genius, who

came to the world fully armed with the poetic spirit and the ability to create great art. Shakespeare was their idol, for he had written great and everlasting works whose originality of form and content suggested that he was no slave to earlier models. He had taught himself, had derived his own "rules." The ancient Greeks did the same, as Lessing tried to prove by showing Aristotle's *Poetics* to have been descriptive rather than normative. This striving for independence from the stifling and arbitrary rules handed down by tradition became a hallmark of the new artist's creed, reflected in Shaftesbury's claim early in the eighteenth century that the poet was a "second *Maker*, a just Prometheus under Jove" (136). Originality, achieved in part by emulating rather than imitating earlier traditions, became a call to arms during the eighteenth century, especially for Germans in search of a distinct national identity. They were determined to use all means, political as well as artistic, to wrest themselves from the dominance of the French Classical tradition. In turning away from the French, they turned to the English, but argued that they were thus coming closer to their own Germanic roots. From the English, they also learned how to create an independent cultural tradition. It is in this sense that the *Sturm und Drang* can be viewed as a pre-romantic movement, though this reading has been challenged on other intellectual grounds.

It was during the subsequent Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that these notions about the artist were pursued further. While authors of the *Sturm und Drang* conceived of themselves as being these natural geniuses, the Romanticist authors began to portray such figures in their works of fiction: in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, for instance. Concurrently, music was elevated, especially in Germany, to be regarded as the supreme art form, almost religious in its mystical nature and impact, international and transcultural in its ability to communicate fundamental human emotions across boundaries. Moreover, it was an art form over which the Germans could claim mastery.

The intense interest devoted to the artist, the role of artists, their sources of inspiration, and the mechanics of creativity was matched by an equally intense scrutiny of the *effect* of art on the senses and on the character of the human recipient. Kant's famous formulation in his third critique holds that beauty is that which pleases "ohne Interesse" 'without interest.' Nietzsche ridiculed Kant's naiveté: how could a man look at the beautiful statue of a nude

woman “without interest”? (303). But Kant was careful to distinguish between subjective perception and the objective—yet unperceivable—thing-in-itself [*Ding an sich*.] He proposed an absolute theory of beauty which transcends—but does not disqualify—the subjectivity of the individual. Beauty has the capacity to convince despite personal interest. Accordingly, it should appeal on a wide scale and cross cultural borders. Beauty is international, universal, and thus *ipso facto* objective.

Schiller was also concerned with the effect of art on its audience. He postulated the educational role of art in building moral character and healing the ruptured and alienated spirit of humanity in a modern world which had lost its transcendental home through the death of God. Art, for Schiller, had a redemptive role and was the necessary ingredient in the (re)creation of the ideal state. This thesis is presented theoretically in his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795) (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*), and poetically in his “An die Freude” (“Ode to Joy”). When Beethoven decided to use Schiller’s poem, the separate but parallel theoretical development of the divine creative genius on the one hand and of art’s redemptive effect on the masses on the other became fused. Contained within his unprecedented combination of voice and instruments in a symphonic work is a representation of art in the process of being born. The fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony begins with the confused and uncertain germ of an idea which grows gradually into its radiant and expansive expression. The jubilant chorus is both the recipient of the theme and the medium through which a moment of epiphany is reached and simultaneously transmitted to the listening audience.

However, without underrating Beethoven’s singular achievement, it was not until Wagner’s opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) that these ideas were depicted in concrete terms. There, we are presented with the natural genius (Walther von Stolzing), the lay and unsuspecting masses (“Das Volk” in the third act) and with those expert in the rules of the pre-existing tradition (the Meistersinger and above all Hans Sachs). All seven theses of art listed above are affirmed in Wagner’s work, as follows:

1. Hans Sachs does not understand how or why Walther’s new music is great, but it *is* great. Moreover, he knows it when he hears it, as does “das Volk.”

2. Walther's prize song is proven to be objectively great by instantly convincing everyone, even his enemies, despite its unconventionality;
3. Walther's song converts all those who hear it by appealing directly to their emotions, and by producing a revelatory moment of sheer ecstasy—epiphany;
4. despite the prejudice of the Meistersinger, they too acclaim Walther's song;
5. though Walther breaks with the rules of the Meistersinger, his singing nevertheless seems to follow as yet unknown rules;
6. Walther has discovered these rules, because he is talented;
7. Walther is self-taught; moreover, he has developed by studying both the masters of the distant past and the sounds of nature (birds, etc.). He is wholly ignorant of the Meistersinger tradition.

Schlafes Bruder, Das Parfum, and Babette's Feast: The Postmodernist Reading

All three of these works were written in a world radically changed from that century filled with the hope that art could lead to the political and ethical redemption of humanity. To paraphrase Adorno, after Auschwitz this hope was gone and, if anything, replaced by the fear that art could be misused to propel the masses into a horrifyingly inhuman hysteria. Indeed, the Nazis used *Meistersinger* to achieve just that. Even before Auschwitz, Thomas Mann—always self-reflexive about the double-edged nature of genius and art—referred to Hitler as a “brother.”³ Not a brother one particularly wanted to have, but a brother nevertheless, spiritually and tactically related to the artist in his genius for arousing and convincing and deluding. Genius was a category for Mann, not a class or a level, neither good nor evil (226). After Auschwitz, the profound disillusionment with modernity, which had already begun in the late eighteenth century and had grown steadily through to the twentieth, became entrenched. This disillusionment is one of the primary triggers for that problematic and undefinable phase referred to as postmodernism. While the jury is still out on a definitive assessment of postmodernism, one

result of its revolt against modernity is a tendency to play with older

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themes. This playing is evident in the knowing and indulgent smile with which contemporary authors incorporate established notions with an eye to parody, spoof, and thereby undermine the Western tradition. But the implied presumption that we have suddenly grown wise overlooks the self-reflexivity which was already embedded in the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. Authors like E.T.A. Hoffmann conveyed in their fiction what Friedrich Schlegel had described theoretically as the need to “self-create and self-annihilate” [*Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung*]. This “self-annihilation” has come of age in postmodernism, and the “self-creative” aspect has often been substituted by an implicitly mocking imitation of previous attempts at originality. Thus postmodernism navigates an uncertain and often contradictory course between progressivity and conservatism.

Given this setting, the difficulty arises in knowing whether any of the three works under discussion can or should be taken seriously. The “comic” element in *Babette’s Feast* has been noted by many (Hannah 149; Aiken 22), as has the mixture of parody and pastiche in *Perfume* (Hoesterey 172-6; Ryan 92).⁴ Schneider’s novel also offers comedy at different levels. His use of a deliberately archaic language, archaic even for the early nineteenth century, accentuates the backwardness of the *place*, despite its location in the geographic center of Europe. *Time* has also stood still in the village, despite the notion that those years represented the apex of the Enlightenment.⁵ There is another ironic parody in that the location Schneider chooses is a small mountain community in the Vorarlberg adjacent to Mozart’s birthplace, Salzburg: far enough away to ensure that Elias is certain to be lost to history, close enough to point to the capriciousness of historical “destiny.” The full cast of strange and unusual village figures, complete with humorously ridiculous names in the vein of Thomas Mann, rounds out the comic component of *Brother of Sleep*.

The intentional play with official history, evident in all three works, is also a postmodern element. They are all set in distinctly and carefully described historical periods, yet focus on protagonists who never existed, even though they are presented as if they had been historically existing persons. The joke is completed by all three authors who show as one of their main points why it is that we should never have heard of these allegedly historical persons. All three protagonists “disappear” at the conclusion of the work: Babette sentenced to live out her life in a remote Norwegian village; Grenouille

torn limb from limb and consumed, until he “had disappeared utterly from the earth” (*Perfume* 263).⁶ Elias is not only buried in a desolate wooded spot so that he “vanished without a trace” (*Brother of Sleep* 215); the village of his birth dies out as a result of multiple disasters: “nature decided to obliterate any thought of the village once and for all” (3).

There are other connections between these works. We already discussed in the beginning how Elias is distinct from those around him, the other. Babette is similarly an “exotic Other” in her new surroundings (Shapiro 246) as much as Grenouille is an outcast from the entire species, given that he has no odor, making him “highly offensive to other people” (Jacobson 203). As a result of this “otherness,” or perhaps as compensation, the authors gave all three protagonists extraordinary abilities. Babette’s is possibly the least “miraculous” of these, though we will discuss later the transformative effect of her cooking on her guests. Grenouille and Elias both experience traumas at an early age: Grenouille at birth, Elias at age five. These traumas are linked to the remarkable physical and intellectual abilities both subsequently develop. Grenouille has an extraordinary sense of smell; Elias hears what no other human can. The baby Grenouille “saw . . . with his nostrils” (17); Elias “not only heard sounds, he also saw them” (33). Accompanying the superhuman capability of a single sense is the development of an intellectual capacity to imagine and combine smells and sounds respectively on an increasingly refined and abstract level. Not only could Grenouille recall smells, he knew “by sheer imagination” how “to arrange new combinations of them, to the point where he created odors that did not exist in the real world”: moreover he is an “autodidact” (26). The Narrator, at a loss to explain to his reader the sheer power of Grenouille’s ability, uses the analogy of the “musical wunderkind” (26). Elias is just that. He can compose music in his head (112) and, when given the opportunity at the novel’s climax to improvise at an organ competition, he produces “inexhaustible combinations” using a “powerful tonal language unlike any master before or after him” (187) attaining a “complexity beyond comprehension” (189). Again searching for a means to describe the indescribable, Schneider calls some of the musical invention “immer duftiger” ‘ever more fragrant’ (188/178). All this Elias achieved, even though his only education had been to hear the “fat-fingered chorales of his uncle” (187).

The ultimate refinement of the sensory ability is realized by Grenouille, when he smells a virgin clear across Paris and follows the scent until he reaches and murders her (*Perfume* 38-44). It is her fragrant smell which sets him on his lifelong quest to be the greatest perfumer in history, to create the world's greatest perfume. He does so by murdering a series of virgins in and around the city of Grasse, capturing their scent by distillation. The new perfume he mixes as his *chef d'oeuvre* is one which compels people to *love* the wearer (240). An identical juxtaposition occurs in *Brother of Sleep*, when Elias again at some distance hears the "soft heartbeat of an unborn child, a fetus, a human female" (35-36). A few months later, he hears the heartbeat of this girl once again at the moment of her birth. Though he, like Grenouille, is very far from the girl, the sound of the heart beating "made him think he could see paradise. . . . It was the sound of love": this is his moment of epiphany (51). In an inversion of Grenouille's activities, Elias invents music "that captured the fragrance" of this girl (102). This juxtaposition of art and love can also be found in Babette's cooking, which turns dinner "into a kind of love affair—into a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!" (58).

The reference to Romanticism within *Babette's Feast* sets up Michael Shapiro's postmodernist reading, also implied by Robert Langbaum's comment that Dinesen was "a master of *pastiche*" (1). The link with Romanticism is even more marked in Susan Aiken's comparison of Babette's discourse on art to the "simultaneous self-annihilation and self-creation" with which Dinesen often toyed (22-23). Despite the 1870s setting of *Babette's Feast*, the prominent reference to the love duet between Don Giovanni and Zerlina in Mozart's opera—including even an extract from the musical score—establishes a tangible connection with the Romantic tradition (*Babette* 31-35). Similarly, the "by no means accidental" (Ryan 97) referentiality of *Perfume* to Romanticism has been noted by most and discussed at length (see for example Hoesterey 174-75 and Parkes 312). While the novel is set earlier in the mid eighteenth century, its style "responds constructively" to the Romantic view of art (Whitinger 223). The extended yet evidently sarcastic incorporation and adaptation of well-known (canonical) works from the German Romantic period has been cited as one of the clearest traits of the work's postmodernism: "Grenouille . . . turns to an artistic activity

that caricatures the aesthetic idealism of the romantic tradition" (Whitinger 226).

The Romanticist setting of *Brother of Sleep* is even less accidental. Elias is born in 1803 and dies in 1825 at the age of twenty-two. These years correspond not only with literary Romanticism, but also with the most productive period in Beethoven's (1770-1827) and Franz Schubert's (1797-1828) lives.⁷ While Beethoven is considered by music historians as the transitional figure between Viennese Classicism and Romanticism, Schubert is generally regarded as the first Romantic composer. In addition, the novel contains echoes of Romantic themes, such as Elias's frequent solitary sojourns into the woods: what the German Romanticists referred to as *Waldeinsamkeit*. Like Siegfried, who drinks the blood of the dragon he slays and can suddenly understand the birds, Elias—aided by his extraordinary hearing—also develops the ability to communicate with animals by producing sound frequencies outside the normal human range. Then there is the hopeless attraction Elias feels for the simple but appealing and virginal girl—Elsbeth—who becomes pregnant by a coarse brute, and is forced to marry him as a consequence. The author also contrasts the sublime refinement of Elias's musical imagination with the dull, stupid, hopelessly unenlightened farmers, and thus plays on the Romantic topos of the artist surrounded by philistines.

Given the historical context of early nineteenth-century Europe and the stress on Romanticism as the dominant paradigm, Schneider dooms Elias to fail by putting him in a situation where he is clearly behind the times. As already noted, Elias grows up in a village and has no way to move to a town where his talent might be recognized. Even worse, the only instrument to which he has access is the organ. But the heyday of the organ had passed with the ending of the Baroque period, around 1750. Elias's contemporaries, Beethoven and Schubert, had in the meantime completed the scene shift of innovative musical development to the piano and the orchestra. The notion that Elias's environment is behind the times becomes clearer at the organ festival where he is told to "extemporize on a chorale" and to execute a "three-voiced fugue according to the old rules" (179). Even though Elias then produces "a powerful tonal language unlike any master before or after him," his potential contribution to musical history cannot but fail since it is not being presented in a progressive format.

The postmodernist reading of the foregoing would insist that this forms part of Schneider's joke: the juxtaposition of plausible

and yet highly unlikely or slightly non-fitting elements, many of which are historically or culturally grounded. Also, the use of predictable and cliché-ridden Romantic themes, inserted as if from a list—though perhaps not quite as crassly as Süskind—partakes in this play. The serious side of this joke is a postmodernist critique of modernity's insistence both on innovation as a necessary ingredient for artistic worth, and on the simultaneous demand that such innovation be presented formally using up-to-date means. There are echoes here of the Frankfurt School and subsequent critiques of the Enlightenment's totalitarian streak, despite the Enlightenment's rhetorical stance of open-mindedness.⁸ At the same time, the fact that Elias is born some twenty years after the publication of Kant's essay on the Enlightenment underscores the ridiculousness of Kant's assertion that he was living in the age of Enlightenment. Either way, the (postmodern) point in *Brother of Sleep* seems to be that "modernity" is just not working.

Beyond Postmodernism

As discussed earlier, a convincing case has already been made by others for a postmodernist reading of *Babette's Feast* and of *Perfume*. Using similar criteria, the preceding shows that the same case can be made for *Brother of Sleep*. Beyond the points raised above, all three works are written in a style which, given modernist strides in novel-writing, instantly conveys a certain datedness which is also evident in most popular fiction. There is in each an all-knowing narrator who imparts the story in a linear and clearly formulated yet playful manner. Moreover, all three, by focusing on the human-animal senses and augmenting their power, undermine the logocentrism of modern Western culture. However, while the postmodern banner is broad and vague enough to incorporate all of the traits mentioned without much difficulty, it is nonetheless insufficient to categorize these works as being exclusively postmodern because of the way all three works explore the effect of art on its audience.

The intuition that there is something more to *Perfume*, that it transcends postmodernism, is suggested by Süskind's "irony beyond irony" (Jacobson 204), a parody which "involves homage" and "goes beyond 'mockery'" (Whitinger 222). Richard Gray has argued that *Perfume* "moves well beyond a mere clever retreading of . . . the self-indulgent playfulness of postmodern pastiche," even

though his “well beyond” actually entails a move *back* to the Frankfurt School (490). This meta-element of “beyondness” is also contained within the narrative in that Grenouille’s *chef d’œuvre* transcends any normal conception of perfume. Babette’s feast similarly transcends the category of cooking and becomes “a meal beyond imagining” (Aiken 22), just as Dinesen’s lighthearted style nevertheless culminates in a profoundly moving moment. The same is true for *Brother of Sleep*.⁹ While describing Elias’s improvisation at the organ, the narrator interjects: “But in the language of music there is a phenomenon little studied until now. The inexhaustible combination of chords is dominated by constellations which, when they ring out, arouse something in the listener that basically has nothing to do with music” (187). In other words, great music—whatever that may be—appeals directly to the senses and can create an effect on the recipient augmenting or even transcending the standard range of human emotions.

When Aristotle discusses the ideal effect of tragedy—an imitation of an action that is “of a certain magnitude”—he talks of catharsis, the purging of emotions (61). Aristotle stresses magnitude, repeating the concept again in a subsequent discussion of tragedy (65) and also when defining beauty: “for beauty depends on magnitude” in order to produce the required effect which, in the case of tragedy, is catharsis (66). Instead of catharsis, James Joyce speaks in terms of “epiphany,” but is describing something similar. “Epiphany” originally refers to the manifestation of Christ to the wise men; Joyce uses the term to mean “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of a gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Joyce 288).¹⁰ As such it is a phenomenon artists experience themselves, an experience they can in turn (re-)create and impart to their audience. It is in such moments of epiphany that a fleeting insight can reveal the possibility of transcendental truth. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s protagonist, Stephen Daedalus, discusses his own aesthetic theory which is heavily indebted to Aquinas and thus, also, to Aristotle. When seized by “the esthetic emotion,” says Daedalus, “the mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing” (205). There are certainly differences between Aristotle’s catharsis and Joyce’s epiphany, not least of which that Aristotle was concerned with “great” dramatic works, whereas Joyce argues that the most insignificant moment could trigger an epiphany. Moreover, whereas

epiphany can strike a passive recipient out of the blue, catharsis seems to involve a slow buildup and the active participation of the audience. Nevertheless, both ideas are connected with the potential for art to lift us out of ourselves, resulting in a heightened awareness and a sublime feeling. All three of our works entail such a cathartic moment of epiphany. Babette's guests "had seen the universe as it really is" and "had been given one hour of the millennium" (62). In *Perfume*, "a miracle" occurs when Grenouille uses his perfume to avoid execution, by convincing the crowd to love him (238).¹¹ Elias gives a "magical performance" (193) during which "Truth was suddenly apparent" (183) and "Nature was made music" (185) rising "higher and higher into the paradisaal state" (188).

According to the poetics proposed by Daedelus, the effect of Grenouille's perfume would reveal that it was "improper art," because "the feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts" (Joyce 205). Using this definition, Babette and Elias are producing "proper art," whereas Grenouille's perfume could be categorized as "pornographic." By the same token, the intentions of the artists also differ: while Babette simply wants "leave to do her utmost" (68), and Elias is trying to communicate the entire complexity of human existence, Grenouille wants to control people for his own sinister purposes. This further sets *Perfume* apart from the other two works, and legitimately leads interpreters to the conclusion that the novel is a metaphor for Hitler's ability to sway the masses (Donahue 39; Gray 504; Parkes 314). Notwithstanding, there is remarkable cohesion between the three works in the way the audience reacts. In *Babette's Feast*, "Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened" (61). This loosening is most evident in *Perfume*, where women "ripped open their blouses, bared their breasts, cried out hysterically, threw themselves on the ground with skirts hitched high" and where the men rapidly followed suit, leading to a wild mass orgy (239). During Elias's performance, the people's "masks had melted off" (183) and, afterwards, the audience shouted in exultant jubilation; their "faces beamed in the gleaming major key with which Elias had ended" (192). "Ich sehe den Himmel" 'I can see heaven!' cries out an audience member (*Bruder* 179; *Brother* 189). In all three works,

people "open up" and become freed from established norms and conventions, and from everyday patterns. That all three works are describing a paranormal response is evident in the blissfully hypnotic state into which the people find themselves transported, where they lose track of time and all memory of the event afterwards: "try as they might, they could not remember themselves any of the dishes that had been served" (*Babette's Feast* 64). "None of the guests had any clear remembrance of it" (61). Many of Grasse's inhabitants "truly could not recall" the events later; "the town had forgotten it . . . so totally that travelers who passed through in the days that followed and casually inquired about Grasse's infamous murderer of young maidens found not a single sane person who could give them any information" (*Perfume* 246-47). "Afterwards no one was able to say how long Elias Alder had really played" (*Brother of Sleep* 186).

As Grenouille surveys the masses lying prostrate at his feet, his "cynical smirk" reflects his postmodern "contempt" at the "stupid" people who had been so manipulated by "his counterfeit aura" (239-41). Grenouille's story is indeed a step-by-step account of the "construction" that is art. But does the artificiality of art make invalid the effect it has on an audience? Is one naive to be moved by sublime music, or by delicate flavors and textures, or by arousing aromas? Indeed, is this something that can even be avoided? The authors of all three works would seem to be partaking in an older, more idealistic theory of art, despite or perhaps because of their postmodern vantage point. They are expressing the belief that art bypasses logocentric rationality, opening up a vision of some fundamental yet indescribable truth.

In Conclusion

As the preceding discussion shows, *Babette's Feast*, *Perfume*, and *Brother of Sleep* present a philosophy of art which in large part satisfies the seven theses listed earlier.¹² What conclusions can and should one draw, given that these works insist on the possibility that there is an objective greatness to art in an age when the doubt of such a quality has become accepted? How does one reconcile the comic element of *Babette's Feast*, including the information that it was written to serve the American public's interest in food, with the sincerity of the homage to French cuisine and its effect on the diner? Further, how does one reconcile Robert Schneider's apparent cri-

tique of European socio-cultural hegemony—embedded in Elias’s necessary failure—with the lyrical description of the wonders of Western art music? Even given Patrick Süskind’s more consistently parodic approach and (presumably) intent, there is no question in *Perfume* that there is such a thing as greatness, and that, when confronted with such a quality, an audience must respond.

It would surely be too simple to suggest that these authors have merely slid back into a late Romantic complacency.¹³ Nevertheless, one needs to inquire into this resurgent idealization of art which has appeared so relatively soon after Auschwitz and the accompanying movements both theoretical and artistic which professed a world of absolute relativism, disharmony, and even chaos. There is none of that in these works. Here genius exists without question.¹⁴ True, genius is depicted painstakingly developing and perfecting its art. In the case of *Babette’s Feast*—which is a short story—the reader is presented with the results only, but can presume an equally arduous period of training and artistic development. For both Grenouille and Elias, genius is a divine gift spurred into action by life’s circumstances: a combination of nature and nurture. While Grenouille is driven by immense hate, Schneider’s point seems to be that Elias’s genius was a given; the question was whether society and history would recognize it as such and respond accordingly. In both cases, however, the eighteenth-century notion of the genius as a Promethean figure seems to be reestablished. Similarly, the concept of “greatness” in art is revived, along with an equally unquestioning depiction of its objective quality. The difference between these works and their precursors from Romanticism, however, is that the transformation induced by art is only momentary. While Romantics in the tradition of Schiller were convinced that (great) art could lead to the salvation of humanity, these works invoke the transitory spirit of Joyce’s epiphany. The audience is transformed *by* the moment, but also *for* the moment only. Dinesen leads us to assume that everything in Berlevaag will be as before; in Grasse, “soon life returned completely to normal” (*Perfume* 247); despite Elias’s success “man is inconstant, and tomorrow he forgets what yesterday he solemnly vowed” (*Brother of Sleep* 193).

When pondering these issues, it would be a mistake to overlook the general reading public for whom these works were written. While there is evidence that Dinesen was interested in popular appeal, we can only assume—given his reluctance to give interviews

or comment on his work—that Süskind was writing for a wide audience. There are, of course, several elements in these works, especially in *Perfume*, which appeal to the popular imagination, including the idealistic image of the artist/genius. Did these authors create such artist types merely to satisfy public demand? I think not. Such flippancy, if not disingenuousness, would not be in accordance with the seriousness which pervades all three works beneath the humor.¹⁵ Are these authors guilty of an unreflected portrayal of genius and the effect of art? Such an evaluation would be difficult to sustain, given the carefully structured narratives in all three works.

If there is “something more” to these works which transcends the sophistry of postmodernism and the cynicism it has engendered, then maybe it is an expression of that “Hoffnung jenseits der Hoffnungslosigkeit” ‘hope beyond hopelessness’ which Thomas Mann refers to near the conclusion of *Doctor Faustus*: the destination *beyond* the despair resulting from the crisis of modern Western culture (657).¹⁶ Of course, here again, it is hard to take anything in *Perfume* seriously, ending as it does with the frenzied crowd tearing Grenouille limb from limb and consuming him “aus Liebe” ‘out of love’ (*Parfum* 320; *Perfume* 255)—a grotesque answer to the question Thomas Mann poses at the very end of *Magic Mountain*: “Wird . . . einmal die Liebe steigen?” (756) ‘will love someday rise?’ (706). Even *Brother of Sleep* ends only with the highly tentative “Was meint Liebe?” ‘What does love mean?’ (*Bruder* 204; *Brother* 215). The connection between these two contemporary German works and those of Thomas Mann is not coincidental. Not only was Mann keenly aware of the problematic nature of art, especially in modernity, he also stressed the link between Germanness, Romanticism, and the ultimate plunge into the abyss of National Socialism. Both Schneider and Süskind are emerging from this legacy by using humor to work their way from under the burdens of history. The signs of healing are present.

In the penultimate sentence of *Doctor Faustus*, written in the shadow of Germany’s darkest hour, Mann again asks a question: “Wann wird aus letzter Hoffnungslosigkeit, ein Wunder, das über den Glauben geht, das Licht der Hoffnung tagen?” (682) ‘When, out of uttermost hopelessness—a miracle beyond the power of belief—will the light of hope dawn?’ (510). All three works, in their different ways, suggest a restoration of hope which transcends the rude awakening that has been the legacy of modernity. Genius and epiphany

play a central role in all of them. But this hope is not the sentimental variety of earlier times, rather, as Thomas Mann formulated it, a hope beyond the hopelessness, a hope without which the future is inconceivable.

Notes

1. A recent *Spiegel* article, "Schreib den Mist um!" (July 27, 1996), states that the novel has been printed in almost one million copies, has been translated into fifteen languages, and awaits translation in eleven more. It has been turned into a film by Joseph Vilsmaier, and an operatic rendition was premiered in Zürich in 1996 (150).

Quotes from *Brother of Sleep* and *Perfume* will be taken from their English translations in the main text; page numbers of the German version will precede the English.

2. "Babette's Feast" was originally published in English by *Ladies' Home Journal* 67 (June 1950), and was translated by Dinesen into Danish under the title "Babettes Gæstebud" (Copenhagen: Fremad, 1955). It was subsequently included in the collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Random House, 1958).

Mirjam Schaub has already mentioned parallel motifs between *Brother of Sleep* and *Perfume* (190-91).

3. See Thomas Mann, "Ein Bruder." Written in 1939, the essay was first published as "Bruder Hitler" 'Brother Hitler.'

4. Judith Ryan also discusses the distinction between parody and pastiche (92).

5. See also Schaub 191-92 for a discussion of the comic elements in *Brother of Sleep*, including a detailed analysis of the style and language, which she calls "Saug-glocken Stil" (191-92).

6. See also Ryan's discussion of the play with "history" in *Perfume* (96-97).

7. Beethoven was also twenty-two when he first made a name for himself in Vienna.

8. See Richard Gray, "The Dialectic of 'Enscenment'," for a thorough discussion of *Perfume* in terms of the Frankfurt School, especially the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Gray argues that *Perfume* is written in this tradition and is thus not postmodern. However, "postmodernism" incorporates a negative assessment of the results of rational Enlightenment philosophy, an idea for which the Frankfurt School was an important precursor. Thus one does not necessarily rule out the other.

9. Reviewing for *Der Spiegel*, Martin Doerry asks “Kitsch? Persiflage?” and answers “Weder - noch” ‘neither-nor’ (256).

10. Quoted from *Stephen Hero*, extracts of which are in the cited critical edition of *Portrait of the Artist*.

11. See also Thurman, who describes the “epiphany, that mystical high which the guests achieve at Babette’s table” (329), or what Aiken calls “at once a resurrection and a kind of secular Eucharist” (22). Gray notes that the first “murder triggers in Grenouille an epiphany of rebirth” (496).

12. The following is a brief recapitulation of the seven theses, with the relevant details inserted from the three works under discussion:

- i. The great art produced by the three protagonists cannot be defined, not even by the authors themselves, but its existence is clear to both reader and fictional audience;
- ii. the “objective” greatness of the art produced by the protagonists is not questioned by the authors, and is demonstrated by its power to convince the fictional audience;
- iii. the “great art” of the protagonists produces a moment of epiphany which bypasses reason;
- iv. the “great art” overpowers the prejudice of the puritanical Norwegians against enjoying food; the intent of the citizens of Grasse to execute the murderer; the knowledge of the clergy that Elias is an uneducated village bumpkin;
- v. there are pre-existing “rules” to great art. None of the highly original protagonists actually “invents” anything, but rather they draw on the existing and reformulate it in unique ways;
- vi. Grenouille, and especially Elias, prove that “anyone” can access these rules. All they have is the requisite talent and drive. Both are born into circumstances of extreme disadvantage, although Grenouille is at least fortunate enough to find himself in Paris;
- vii. while we know nothing of Babette’s training, neither Grenouille nor Elias received formal education. Grenouille was admittedly an apprentice, but his mastery was self-developed. Elias made his own rules and unknowingly adhered to a tradition only insofar as it was “natural” to do so. Grenouille devised his own methods, but ended up recreating a pre-existing scent. Babette uses pre-existing ingredients but invented unique ways of using and combining them.

13. Writing for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Thomas Rietzschel talks of *Brother of Sleep*’s “reine Ästhetik” ‘pure aesthetics,’ which evokes “einen zweiten *Fin de siècle*” ‘a second *Fin de siècle*.’ Later, he seems to be likening the novel to a resurgence of Biedermeier with the suggestion that it expresses “eine tiefe Sehnsucht nach den Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit” ‘a deep longing for the raptures of normalcy.’

14. See Doerry: "Und Schneider läßt keinen Zweifel daran, daß sein Protagonist wirklich ein Genie ist" 'and Schneider leaves no doubt that his protagonist really is a genius' (256).

15. Rietzschel senses no ironic distance in Schneider's style, which though true on occasion, oversimplifies the case. On the other hand, Mirjam Schaub sees "Distanz und Ironie" 'Distance and Irony' (192).

16. Thomas Rietzschel also suggests that *Brother of Sleep* transcends *Doctor Faustus* by observing: "instinktiv weicht er [Elias] dem Teufelspakt des Doktor Faustus ab" 'He [Elias] instinctively evades the devil's pact of Doctor Faustus.'

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