

Jean Paul After Modernism

Larson Powell

Much on the earth is indifferent to me now,
except the sky above it --Jean Paul¹

I. Exodus from the province

Every time one begins another book of Jean Paul one is bluntly confronted with the question: why do I read this at all? The shock not only of the sheer difficulty of comprehension--a problem for native speakers as well--but also of the frequently repulsive grotesquerie, the high-flown sentimental enthusiasms, the formlessness, does not let up throughout, so that one can scarcely read continuously; there is hardly any *ductus* of narration or thought, only a series of crabbed and knotty metaphors and *conceitti*, a tangle of barbed wire for the mind. Reading becomes thus, as was the writing, a repetition of trauma, but one unsublimated by artistic mask. One is at the margins of art, looking into the void it is normally meant to conceal: the unremitting negation of *mens sana in corpore sano*, of the later Goethe's obsequiousness to social hierarchy, of classicizing, useful pedagogical function. Like his contemporary Hölderlin, Jean Paul was an outsider to his age; yet unlike Hölderlin (who was excavated from neglect by Norbert von Hellingrath on the eve of World War One), he was not rediscovered by modernism, and his eccentricity remains untamed and unframed by the canon. Only a few smaller works (such as *Leben des vergnügten Schulmeisterlein Wutz*) are still read; the sprawling extent of his major novels, especially *Der Titan*, has been as off-putting as their wild style. No other German writer has approached madness in such monumental extremity: not Musil, nor Kafka; among postwar writers, one might think of two other unread books, Wollschläger's *Herzgewächse* or Jelinek's *Kinder der Toten* (the similarities to Jelinek do not end there). The only comparable figure would be Joyce.

That Jean Paul stands in anachronistic proximity to modernity redefines the latter itself: not by offering legitimizing historical predecessors--as Wagner heard in Gesualdo, or Boulez in Dufay's isorhythmic motets--but rather by taking the modern beyond all isms, beyond history itself. What happens to modernism when it is exploded out of history, from which it borrowed its Marxian ineluctable necessity? (One is reminded of Brian Ferneyhough's odd matter-of-fact indifference to music from the 18th and 19th centuries, the so-called canon, that which, according to Adorno, modernism was meant to inherit and continue. Ferneyhough, in other words, is no longer interested in placing himself as the necessary continuation of that canon, as were Schönberg, Webern and Boulez.) Where is Jean Paul, if not a classical author? It is his lack of reception or resonance that leaves him still open and thus contemporary: precisely in a period as infinitely impoverished and forsaken as the present. When there is nothing contemporary to read, when *there is so little present* and thus little palpable connection to any past, Jean Paul may become legible. (Friedrich Dürrenmatt saw something of this aspect of Jean Paul: "I cannot escape the suspicion that Jean Paul was in fact a realist, so much so that

¹ *Leben Fibels*, cit. in Gert Ueding, *Jean Paul* (Munich: Beck, 1993), p. 79.

he corresponds to no reality. For the one reason that we live in another reality, as in another cosmos."²) As Albano says to the Princess in Rome: "No, we have no present, the past must give birth to the future without one."³ Given that our current lack of a present means an increasing blindness to history, it is a question of *which* past will do this.

The absence of a present was Jean Paul's paradoxical "experience" of provincial reactionary Germany in the late 18th century, from which he could escape neither to the revolutionary longing of Hölderlin's Hyperion nor to Goethe's ideal Antiquity. The Provinces are a Cabinet of Curiosities of twisted human deformity, of unhopeful monsters of ignorance, superstition and stunted infantile quirkiness, portrayed again and again in the weird eccentric figures of Jean Paul's work. They are a portrait gallery of humanity in that state of nature to which the "dialectics of Enlightenment" has since again returned them. So now the mad grin of the cathedral gargoyle, the toothless leer of Breughel's peasantry, are all over the newspaper front pages, their mouths always wide open in a scream outbidding Bacon: the universal pathos formula (in Aby Warburg's sense), whether in the 'success' of the prize-winning sportsmen or entertainers, or the women caught with obscene voyeurism by photographers at the precise moment of outcry over war suffering. The grotesquerie is no longer limited to America: in France, too, we have the dwarf-rant of Houellebecq, a Pavlovian bundle of unthinking reflex, who writes less than he is written by pure resentment, producing whiny and rancorous clichés mouthed less with pretended conviction than a last feeble urge to provoke. Our time seems fated to produce little but angry and helpless satire.

The home of provincial ignorance and ahistoricity remains, however, America, so that it is not difficult for an American to understand how suffocating the German provinces were for Jean Paul. It is the prison of so-called common sense, the businessman's philistinism, now as ever. Jean Paul saved himself from bitterness by seeing this as an anthropological constant. "The pryncedom of Scheerau, like human understanding, runs everywhere into limits."⁴ Jean Paul's word for understanding is *Verstand*, meaning reason at its lowest level, that of calculating self-interest, the anthropological lowest common denominator, and the entropy of civilization. The rule of *Verstand* is one where all aesthetic experience becomes incomprehensible. How does one write in such circumstances--or: what happens to the imagination there?

The difficulties of writing in the backwoods are so multiple that one hardly knows where to begin combating them. First is that of *how to avoid mere satire*, in a world where no more realism is possible, since one can hardly find our current ruling Mafiosi as fascinating as Balzac saw his energetic antihero Vautrin, or Brecht his charming thug Mackie Messer, and any attempt at objective description cannot escape the grotesque, coupled with "impotent hatred" (Stendhal) at one's inability to alter it. This is the pitfall of Sinclair Lewis, Ambrose Bierce, and the later Twain, as of so many contemporary writers from America to the former Soviet East. This sort of satire is not only flat and fatiguing, resulting in cartoon and caricature, but also ultimately knows itself complicit with its object: the tirades and jeremiads of Lewis are finally made only of Elmer Gantry's preacher's rhetoric, and offer no way out. Satire, in this form, becomes only a

² "Über Jean Paul," in H. L. Arnold, ed., *Text und Kritik Sonderband Jean Paul*, 3rd ed., (Munich: Text und Kritik, 1983), p. 6.

³ *Der Titan* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983), 104. Zykel, p. 617.

⁴ Cited in Wolf Koepke, *Erfolglosigkeit: Zum Frühwerk Jean Pauls* (Munich: Fink, 1977), p. 297.

form of masochism and self-hatred, the irate finger-pointing of the adolescent against his parents, never reaching the properly aesthetic at all. As a poem of Mörike has it, "im Katzenjammer ruft man keine Götter" (one does not call on the gods to help with aches and pains): daily life among the Brobdingnagians is nothing but *Katzenjammer*.

For the second difficulty of a provincial author is how to take any pleasure or interest in life--their absence being what poisons Lewis. This is acknowledged by Jean Paul in the "Billet to My Friends" before *Quintus Fixlein's* preface, where he states that "with this biography the author wants, dear friends, not so much to give pleasure as to teach you how to enjoy one."⁵ Without this minimal Epicurean moment, there is no objective or real world there at all, nothing for interest or appetite to apprehend. How take pleasure in this world without becoming part of it?

The third problem is that of claiming authorship as such. Leibgeber describes this at one moment in *Siebenkäs*, where he presents himself as the product of *une horrible naissance* (Mallarmé), albeit in humorous form. Leibgeber was born on a ship amidst a tempest, an allegory for life after death.

...no one (except me) had so hard a time of it until he had even the beginnings of a name, the foundation and binomial root of a baptismal name, to which later on the other *great* name was added, and a bit of Christendom came over me, as much as a confirm and catechumen can grasp who is still a babe and stupid.⁶

The difficulty of making one's name, of *being born* is the problem of many of Jean Paul's heroes, and it is staged in endless variations: death and rebirth, theatrical masked balls and comic doubles. Until one has been born--established oneself as author, acquired a mask and a role--one is vulnerable to the past, which always wants to devour one in the Gnostic maw of parental prehistory.⁷ This is the true face of so-called "family values," a matriarchal Iron Maiden to deny the mere individual any way out of the arbitrarily private. In the provinces, there reigns "that purely personal and *puerile* attitude which distinguishes the frontier attitude everywhere,"⁸ and this is raised to the level of Categorical Imperative by legalistic Anglo-American individualism, where no aesthetic judgment or form can ever claim any trans-individual validity, where there is no escape from the petit-bourgeois aggression of mere "opinion." (To claim any such validity would be, as they all remind us now, *totalitarian* and *intolerant*.)

Humor provides Jean Paul with this way out. (One wonders if the analogy to Twain, who also made his name as author through humor, could be pursued; certainly humor is, especially in film, one of the most original American contributions to culture.) Humor provides the essential *distance from oneself* without which one cannot write: a

⁵ *Leben des Quintus Fixlein* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), p. 4.

⁶ *Siebenkäs* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1987), p. 377.

⁷ Thus Kurt Wölfel compared Jean Paul's novels to those of the Baroque, wherein the hero's prehistory constantly threatens to devour his present, until he manages to work through the burden of that past (*Jean Paul-Studien*, [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989], p. 64). To be trapped in the provinces, as was Jean Paul, is to be cut off from a cultured public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) that would allow one, as author, to become who one is, and escape the accident of one's birth and past. Since the surrounding culture does not perform that work for one, not granting one any level of cultural or historical distance from the merely personal, each individual must re-enact that labor of Exodus from the family and the personal on his or her own. Goethe achieved this via his fictitious classicism.

⁸W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (NY: Random House, 1969), p. 44.

distance exemplified in the courtly culture and poise of France, against which Americanism as creed bears the undying grudge of *Ressentiment*. The moment of charlatanism in Goethe lay in his heroic invention of such a courtly posture in impossible isolation; Henry James had to flee to find any such social *persona*. Jean Paul's posture of humoristic inversion is summed up in an untranslatably dense footnote to *Attila Schmelzle's Trip to Flätz*:

I say however No. May man set himself as his hat--just when he doesn't need himself and the latter--and in both cases to spare them, so long on their heads, until something is worn again.⁹

The wording is not less awkward in German: in every case one must still (provisory) *translate* into a language of sense. "May one stand on one's head until one can make sense again," is one half, but it is inextricably intertwined with the other, which is "may one wear one's hat upside down until there is a meaningful order of social convention one can respect." The "hat" of role and convention and the substance ("head") of reflection are, in a grammatically dizzy sentence, inseparable from each other. This is not a mere bit of academic Modernist complexity for its own sake, but rather an exposure of the artifice, the effort necessary for any author to achieve exodus from mere self and intent.

II. Mortal humor

Humor is as destructive in its negation as satire, but it is more than the latter, since it is here the *minimal form of metaphysics*. Without elevating art to the successor of religion (as did Goethe, or Wagner and Rilke after him), it keeps open that difference from all mere world without which imagination and desire cannot survive. Rather than promising redemption and reconciliation in the here and now, it is, like Stendhal's variant of irony, the double of the *promesse de bonheur*: thus eschatological or millenarian. Its desperate, manic frenzy barely manages to conceal the hysteria and terror beneath.

For humor serves to mask a paradoxical experience of fear, or panic: that of the young Jean Paul who "saw his own I." Fear (*Angst, angoisse*) is *the* anti-aesthetic experience: the unbinding of all drive from desire or object into free-floating libido. To make art out of fear is thus inherently impossible: the paradox lies at the base of Jean Paul's illegibly crabbed metaphors, his turgid erudition, his endless authorial interventions, his sentimental flowery dreams and visions, his overall disunity of style.

Beyond this surface level, there is the problem of how to give temporal shape and objectivity (*res extensa*) to the absolute panic immobility of fear, which is nothing more than the arrest of time in infinite self-reflection (*res cogitans*). The narrative form of humor is the splitting of the ego, to which Freud devoted a late and unfinished essay,¹⁰ later beloved of Lacan, who however elevated it to a structural and thus excessively general principle of subjectivity. In Jean Paul it wears a very specific local signature. The

⁹ (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), p. 30. The construction appears as a combination of zeugma and syllepsis, but not quite reducible to either (for an analysis of comparable figures, see Hermann Meyer's essay "Jean Pauls *Flegeljahre*," reprinted in Insel edition of *Flegeljahre* (Frankfurt: 1986), p. 562.

¹⁰ "Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process," 1938 ("Die Ichspaltung im Abwehrvorgang"), in *Studienausgabe in neun Bänden*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1970), pp. 389-394.

split ego of the humorist is neither the synthesis of "poetry and truth" (Goethe's autobiography) nor yet the spectacular, uncanny *Doppelgänger* of E. T. A. Hoffmann (*The Devil's Elixirs*). Its unity can be found only in and beyond (or through) death.

Death is therefore the overcoming of panic fear and the birth of the unitary subject. Thus many of Jean Paul's characters anticipate their own ends in a proleptical experience of death. It is in *Siebenkäs* that this is most clearly staged (after rehearsals in the earlier novels *The Invisible Lodge* and *Hesperus*). In order to free himself from a failed marriage, Siebenkäs fakes his own death and then flees to take up a job in far-away Vaduz, aided by his twin Leibgeber (*Leibgeber* means, in German, "body giver": the name is thus an allegory for authorship as returning one to the body one must lose through mortal transience.) Yet the fake begins to seem eerily real to him. Siebenkäs is out for a walk on the eve of his staged death:

It seemed to him, as if something were singing to him from the deep red of the evening: "Wandering skeleton with strings drawn over your bony hand, you don't play yourself: the breath of wide life wafts sonorously over the Aeolian harp, and you are played." But the obscure error quickly sank down, and he thought: "I sound and play at the same time--I am thought and think--the green shell does not hold together my dryad, my *spiritus rector* (my spirit), but rather the latter the former--the life of the body depends as much on the spirit as conversely."¹¹

We can hear in this passage echoes of Fichte's revolutionary idealism, well known to Jean Paul; but unlike Kleist, whose reading of Kant brought him to the edge of madness (and beyond), Jean Paul manages here to tame his terror with a gentle acceptance. This must have been a favorite passage of Jean Paul's later admirer Oskar Loerke, for whom this chthonic Song of Death was a constant melodic accompaniment, from early poems like "Melancholia" (1916) to the late *The Stone Path*:

Whoever has not for the first, the second, the third time
Met himself as the earth meets the corpse
He is only tolerated
Yet not blessed.¹²

When Siebenkäs' double Leibgeber sees the former's gravestone, he has a shudder of recognition anticipating Joseph K.'s in *The Trial*, and gives a Hamlet-like speech:

Thus the grave inscription is the *versio interlinearis* of a life in small type? -- The heart does not rest until it is thus enchased in gold? -- You hidden infinite one, make the grave into a souffleur's box and tell me what I should think of the whole theater!¹³

After his mock death, the solitary Siebenkäs was linked to humanity through no other tie than the rope that moves the bell for the dead and the coffin--and his bed was only a broader catafalque for him--and every joy seemed to him a theft from a strange leafless heart. -- And thus the trunk of his life, as with that of many flowers, was drawn ever more deeply downwards, and its summit became a concealed root.¹⁴

¹¹ *Siebenkäs*, p. 489.

¹² Loerke, *Die Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 129, 538.

¹³ *Siebenkäs*, p. 535.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 563-564.

This destruction of the idol of the mere self is similarly figured in Albano's crushing of a wax copy of his own face, in *Der Titan*. That Walt (in *Flegeljahre*) could not do this means he will never free himself from his own illusions.¹⁵ Without this death, life is nothing but a dream, an illusion, at once dark--as it is for most of Albano's life ("a night where the moon is beneath the earth," *Titan*, p. 595)--and yet also potentially a "glass gate to heaven" (*Titan*, 700). If Siebenkäs is lucky enough to be guided by Leibgeber to his own theatrical death, he is also sufficiently active to be able to perform the one heroic act necessary for Jean Paul's impossible fantasies: namely to *conceal his reflective infinitude*, if only for one bluffing moment, and momentarily collude with the illusion of existence, in order to be able to exist. This happens after he has "died" and realizes what pain his disappearance has caused his beloved Nathalie, and wonders whether he should not write her and expose the entire machination for what it is. Yet he does not do so, and Jean Paul narrates this with the extreme terseness he reserves for all such decisive moments in the action: "Briefly he was silent." (In German it is three words: *Kurz er schwieg*.)¹⁶ It is this silence that allows him to appear as the cathartic ghost of himself at his own grave to the mourning Nathalie, giving her a therapeutic shock that answers her catatonic frozenness during their first amorous meeting and snapping her out of it, back into life.

Albano's death is different, for he kills less himself (except in the wax puppet episode, where he revisits his childhood *in order to destroy it*, much as one might put a stake in a vampire's heart: for his childhood has proven undying, devouring his present and preventing him from ever entering manhood) than, unwittingly, his father. He does so in part by a comical *faux pas* with a woman who is in love with him, mistaking her for his father's beloved and alienating both. Beyond this, however, his story is one of the *destruction of his paternity* and the heroic delusions it has entailed. Near the end of *Der Titan*, Siebenkäs dissolves Albano's Name of the Father with a historical-etymological excursus (866). The dissolution of the father, named Don Cesara, is also one of Caesarism as such, of Albano's heroic and failed desire to emulate the Romans. Like Rome, Albano's father is a figure of death: he uses his brother as a "Father of Death," a fake monk, a mechanic who stages constant Baroque scenes of *memento mori*, and he himself resembles nothing so much as Mozart's *Commendatore* (in *Don Giovanni*).¹⁷ Rome is itself a necropolis, a City of the Dead, as Albano sees it one morning:

In the morning world, great silent Rome lay spread out below him, not a living city, a lonely monstrous magical garden of the old hidden heroic spirits, lain out on twelve hills. -- The de-peopled pleasure garden of the spirits announced itself through the green meadows and cypresses among the palaces, and through the broad, open stairs and columns and bridges, through the ruins and lofty fountains and the garden of Adonis and the green mountains and temples of the gods; the broad paths had died out; the windows were gated shut; on the roofs, the stone dead gazed at each other--only the glittering waters were moving, and a single nightingale sighed, as if it would die last.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Der Titan*, p. 714; compare *Flegeljahre* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1986), p. 423, where Walt could not "coldly crush a wax doll with his thumbs."

¹⁶ *Siebenkäs* p. 571.

¹⁷ The comparison was made by Bernard Böschstein, p. 346 in "Jean Pauls Romankonzeption," in Uwe Schweikert, ed., *Jean Paul* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 330-352.

¹⁸ *Der Titan*, pp. 637-638. The image of the "people-less garden" also returns in a poem of Loerke's, "The Longest Day": "The world is silent to you as if secretly de-peopled" (*Die Gedichte*, p. 253).

This is not the fantastic historical ruin of Eichendorff's more familiar medievalizing "Auf einer Burg" ("In A Castle," set by Schumann in the *Liederkreis*, op. 39), where the "old knight" is only "sleeping," and the fragmentary past might thus come alive via imagination and empathy. Albano must destroy Rome again, albeit unknowingly: by the end of the novel, "everywhere there lay in his path the twitching spiders' legs that had been torn out of the crushed tarantula of the past" (*Der Titan*, p. 875). Thus the task of Jean Paul the novelist is also one of reviving and exorcizing this past, as he states earlier in the book:

...do I not form all these images of bliss, like the Greeks, as if in imitation of the marble sarcophagi of your upturned sleeping prehistory? Am I not the *Archimimus*, who plays before you a copy of the decayed forms which your soul buried? ...And how much I have hurt you all! -- But I have hurt myself too: for how could I fare better than all of you?¹⁹

Like Albano, the author himself has not only "deserts" (Nietzsche) in himself, but ruins:

There are people full of colossal remains, like the earth itself; in their deep, already cold hearts there lie petrified flower-images of a better time.²⁰

The task of writing becomes one of exorcizing this prehistory, destroying the collective Pompeii within. Thus the end of *Titan* is in a sense a more optimistic version of the conclusion of Don Quixote: if the latter must awaken to the illusoriness of his ideals, Albano can awaken to the illusoriness of his unfreedom: the last words of the novel are from Albano's sister Julienne: "Wake up, my siblings!"—and these are addressed to the reader, the human "family," as well. Thus also the abrupt end of *Siebenkäs* is simultaneous with the end of the main character's sufferings: only pain can be narrated, for joy has no time. The release from pain can result in astonishing passages of prose poetry, transparent as the dark similes of intrigue and Baroque brooding on earthly *vanitas* are obscure. These passages can only be compared to the "breakthroughs" Adorno saw as central to Mahler's anti-architectonic sense of form.

Most astonishing among these breakthroughs is the narrator's abrupt intervention into the narrative of *Siebenkäs*. The latter character has just indulged in a typical bit of self-lacerating self-blame for his wife Lenette's unhappiness. All at once the author bursts in:

But he did himself now more injustice than otherwise to Lenette. I will right now make a gift unto the world of my thoughts on the matter. Love is the perihelion of girls, indeed it is the passage of such a Venus through the sun of a more ideal world. In this time of their lofty style, they love everything we do, even the sciences and the whole best world within one's breast; and they scorn what we do, even clothes and novelties. During these springtimes, these nightingales sing until the solstice: their wedding day is their longest day. Then the devil takes if not everything, then at least a little bit each day. The bast bonds of marriage tie down the wings of poetry, and the marriage bed is, for the imagination, an angels' dungeon and a prison with bread and water.²¹

¹⁹ *Der Titan*, p. 233.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 631.

²¹ *Siebenkäs*, p. 568.

One would have to read this as an anticipation not only of Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*, but also of Kierkegaard's and Kafka's final refusal to marry. The tremendous sense of release felt here by the reader--removed all at once from the oppressive narrative of everyday marital misfortune--is paralleled, within the story, by Siebenkäs' relief at being able to *let down his mask* to the Count of Vaduz and admit his death was a sham. The release here is a *release from art itself*, from the burdensome mask of narration and fiction, allowing the author to step forth as a Prospero who has drowned his books. The authority of the author must be exorcized just as much as the Father's Name in *Der Titan*. Even history itself, the illusion of the present, must similarly be destroyed. At one point in *Siebenkäs*, the present is described as a "brood of vermin":

Never touch the brood of vermin of your times, or you will become its food; a million worms are equivalent to a good dragon.²²

Do not be of your time, Jean Paul admonishes the reader. This means, for a reader now, the end of the "higher conformity" typical of so much art after 1945, whether Benn's Radar-Thinker, Sollers' *écriture traçante* (a writing that does no more than provide a seismograph of the present, no longer being "alienated"), or Stockhausen's absolute conscious present of short-wave radio broadcasts (in *Kurzwellen*). Does this mean that art is as, for Adorno, what philosophy once was: that "which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it"--in the avant-garde--"was missed"...? Again: this is the minimal form of metaphysics, in humor, but without positive (religious) transcendence except in experience itself.

III. Paradoxes of happiness

It is this slender and unlikely chance at experience that allows one to read at all, and that makes of Jean Paul something other than a mere academic crossword puzzle, another game of so-called "self-reference." For self-reference is not the fatuous and complaisant game of the academic in the library, but rather an abyss, a form of madness, one only thinly papered over by erudition (here Jean Paul's own). To see one's own I, as does Schoppe in *Der Titan*, is literally terrifying and must be exorcized, like Jean Paul's own paradoxical experiences of death (November 1790), or his vision of his own I. Writing becomes not only an exploration of this, but also an answer, an impossible and thus heroic prescription for happiness *malgré tout*. In this didactic and rational moment, he remains a classical Enlightenment figure.

The forms of happiness are multiple and contradictory. On the one hand, there is simple existence itself, perceived most sharply after the passage of madness, like the Angel of Death, or Baudelaire's "wind from the wing of imbecility" felt near his own end:

For a minute, Albano stumbled, and it seemed to him as if the garden and the sky and everything were a soft bank of fog, as if nothing existed, as if he had not lived. This arsenic-like miasma was at once blown away from his suffocating breast by the breath of

²² Ibid., p. 148.

the librarian Schoppe, who whistled cheerfully up to his bedroom window; now his life became warm again, the earth returned, and existence *was*.²³

Like Walt in *Flegeljahre*, Albano could "thank God, that there was still some present on earth."²⁴ Walt's journey on foot through the small towns and villages of the German provinces, which is the center of the novel, is thus undertaken with the hope of "wanting and seeing nothing other than what he had at that moment--constantly to arrive with every step--to bed himself down in every gold-green forest of pleasure, even if it stood behind him."²⁵ This is the magical world of the transfigured everyday later described in certain of Eduard Mörike's poems ("Fussreise"). Yet even this simple and absolute present emerges as paradoxical, because it depends not only on a willed effort, but also on Vult's theatrical machinations behind the scene.²⁶ This paradoxical combination of plan with spontaneous feeling may distantly remind one of Stendhal, another ambivalent figure caught between Enlightenment rationality and Romantic sensation.²⁷ At the moment where Walt seems to experience an absolute mystical *nunc stans* where the future is in the present, that present appears as an allegorical mask, namely Vult's, who has pre-arranged all of this in a letter to his brother and double:

"It was the first time in my life," Walt wrote [in his diary], "that I approached the strange sensation of seeing so clearly beyond a present into a future and having future hours twice, now and once."²⁸

Thus one should be warned about the danger of these sorts of ecstasies, for they are inevitably followed by collapses into despair or terror:

Man should always fear innermost rapture, and never entirely and madly believe that such a soft, gentle heavenly dew, as this is, could find on the stormy earth and in its wind-canyons those rare windstill moments wherein alone he sinks into solid open flower-chalices, as if the bright formed pearl on the grey sea of clouds.²⁹

To protect against this, one should form one's wishes to their objective complement:

...everything mental or spiritual (*Geistige*) moulds itself so apparently on the natural, as our freedom does onto the necessity of nature.³⁰

²³ *Der Titan*, p. 51.

²⁴ *Flegeljahre*, p. 361.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁶ Vult is Walt's twin brother, the cynical-humorist pendant to Walt's naïve sentimentality, thus comparable to Leibgeber in *Siebenkäs*. Like Leibgeber, Vult is the active member of the couple, and Walt, like Siebenkäs, the contemplative. This is the complementary relation then fictionalized by Schumann in his pair of Florestan and Eusebius.

²⁷ Most often in Stendhal, this duality is enclosed within one person (as in Julien Sorel); but in *Lucien Leuwen*, there is a Jean Paul-like doubling of cynical, rational calculation (Leuwen's father) and passivity (Lucien himself): Lucien allows his life to be caught up in his father's machinations, yet is paradoxically most "himself" when in their grip.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 322-323.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Thus "what man needs for the finest happiness" is a "contradiction of wishes"³¹: this is the opposite of the calculated passivity of Walt's trip, where the will itself becomes the object of happiness. What supports this happiness is something even more slender than the "rope that moves the bell for the dead" linking Siebenkäs to humanity.

Say nothing here against the thin spider's web that bears us and our happiness [or fortune, *Glück*]; if we have spun it out from our insides and drawn out as does the spider, it holds us up rather well, and like the spider we hang assured in the middle of it, and the storm wind blows us and the net unharmed back and forth.³²

There are islands of such clarity and calm in Jean Paul, oases amid the darkness and obscurity, such as the "still place" in Walt's Rosenthal, or the passages describing the beginning of Albano's and Roquairol's friendship, or the landscape descriptions of an imaginary Italy in *Der Titan*, and which can only be read as prose poetry or experienced as music. These passages "become something more than text, something we don't find again in the text, which disappoints us when we read it again, like a symphony heard too often."³³ But there are also aphorisms one can read again, since they are never exhausted by any one reading:

Humanity is a constellation where *one* star often paints half the picture.³⁴

That is: where *one* friend determines the state of the race. On the political situation in Germany:

Our diamond of freedom has gone from our ring to a dragon's head, where it will not glitter until we are in the dragon's tail.
I don't know if I have expressed myself obscurely, but hope so.³⁵

Indeed he has. The dragon is perhaps a Hobbesian Leviathan of State, the head of which is the first Estate, and the tail the third.

Strangest of all are the *Heischesätze* in the preface to volume two of *Siebenkäs*. A *Heischesatz* is defined as a postulate, a sentence expressing the demand for the realization of something, usually in the subjunctive form (*May he do x!*). Jean Paul begins his preface by noting "I may postulate the following in a syllogism, and via similes." After a characterization of Young's *Night Thoughts*, which paint their readers with the ink of death, although those readers still fail to see their own mortality in the book, Jean Paul goes on to add:

From this one may easily conclude that a poet on the fifth or the fiftieth floor can produce songs, but no marriage and no household, not to mention a good house: isn't he like the canaries who need a bigger cage to make a home in than to sing?

³¹ Ibid, p. 484.

³² *Siebenkäs*, p. 335.

³³ Dürrenmatt, p. 9.

³⁴ *Der Titan*, p. 280.

³⁵ *Flegeljahre*, p. 442.

The gist of this seems to be a critique of Romanticism: Jean Paul wants a literature that not only offers the sublime--Gothic thrills and chills--like Young with his "songs," but also teaches one ("classically," in the manner of the Enlightenment) how to live. Yet this is stated in a manner which is anything but clear itself. The obscurity of the "logic" is only aggravated by a footnote:

Since the above syllogism must have its coherence: I have tried to give it a little by mere words and transitions and linked the members of the logical deduction through the thread of speech; and one may take this for a segmented worm, of which every member is its own, privatizing, idiopathic worm.³⁶

The writer is like Vult, who later on in *Flegeljahre* admits he finds words before their meanings. Although this conceit is witty, it is more than a joke. It is also a characteristic of the novels themselves, and one different from the familiar idea that Jean Paul is only a discontinuous series of "idylls" (Rudolf Alexander Schröder) or "poems" (Stefan George). The aphorism or maxim is the telos of Enlightenment writing: the esoteric underside of its rational universalism, the secret of reason itself. Jean Paul's aphorisms are however different from, for instance, those which end *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* ("From Makarius' Diary"). Their density anticipates Karl Kraus, at times quite directly, as in Walt's "progression of fifths from burden to pleasure," which in German is a pun: *von Last zu Lust*. This is later reversed by Kraus' pun in "Christlicher Umlaut" ("Christian Ablaut"), from pleasure to burden.³⁷ Writing in his autobiography about his father, who was a teacher, Jean Paul notes that through increasing his income, a person in such a position

can approach a high state official, whose five staff-lines of hits [*Treffer*] are performed through the whole score of the chamber with all pausing of the instruments.³⁸

The chamber here would seem to be the official room (*Saal*) of the state employee, and the instruments those of civil servant. What are the "hits," though? Is it implied here that the commands or orders of the civil servant are still carried out even when he himself is not writing? Later on in the same work, Jean Paul describes childhood evenings where his father would write commentaries into his Bible:

...or he would have a grid-lined folio notebook in front of him, in which he would compose an entire church music right amidst the noise of his children: in both cases, but especially in the latter one, I would watch him write and was particularly happy, when through pauses of many an instrument whole quarter-pages were filled.³⁹

This means that *rests* for individual instruments allow the father to compose his music more quickly, to fill out musical time. There is something slightly inane and absurd, or at least mechanical, about the child's joy in this: the mere fact of filling pages is seen as an accomplishment, even when they are filled with empty silence. The father's composition has something *Wutz*-like about it: the idyll of an activity that is only a rest.

³⁶ *Siebenkäs.*, pp. 146-147.

³⁷ *Flegeljahre*, p. 279; Kraus, *Aphorismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 54.

³⁸ *Selberlebensbeschreibung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1989), p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

By extrapolation, it appears as if--in the preceding quote--the high state official still collects his salary, or is obeyed, even when one of his positions is at rest, since he has so many small jobs (as cleric or teacher) that he is always playing one instrument of state. This too is a form of happiness, for through this self-multiplication one can complement oneself as Vult does Walt, or Roquairol and Schoppe do Albano, and each of these separate parts of one's life becomes "its own, privatizing, idiopathic worm." The riddle of Jean Paul becomes thus one of a totality of life that can never be seen as such--in contradistinction to middle-period Goethe--yet is still implied as horizon, as corrective to partial subjectivity--as opposed to the Romantics. One cannot read him, one does not know why, nor is one sure one actually has ever definitively read him;⁴⁰ one knows one will never finish reading, and yet one reads. After the end of modernist utopias, we are all in the position of outsiders, placing marginal figures like Jean Paul, at the edge not only of History, but also of Art, in a different perspective. Jean Paul, too (again like Stendhal!), lived to see the defeat of the Revolution and the return of reaction, and thus could not believe in any sort of linear historical teleology, any more than he could narrate an ordinary *Bildungsroman*. His gift to posterity may be, along with an infinitude of reflective individuality (as conceived of by Romantics like Schlegel), a posture at once aesthetic and, very obliquely, ethical. It is one offering not only with regard to all ideologies and *isms*, but also relative to an impending darkness in the human future he termed *Dämmerung*,⁴¹ a possible last refuge: the stance of *disbelief*.

⁴⁰ "We read on, enraptured. Once we reach the end, we can hardly remember details," Emil Staiger, "Jean Paul: *Titan*," in Schweikert, ed., p. 131.

⁴¹ See the political pamphlet *Dämmerungen für Deutschland* by Jean Paul (Tübingen: J.G. Cotta, 1809), dating from the dark days after Napoleon's defeat of Prussia in 1807. In German, *Dämmerung* is both dawn and dusk, or twilight.