**Laughing with Bergson:**

**Vital Laughter in Thomas Mann’s “Der kleine Herr Friedemann”**

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Thomas Mann’s novella “Der kleine Herr Friedemann,” first published in May 1987 in *Die neue Rundschau*, features two decisive moments of laughter: the novella’s conclusion and the narrative climax—Gerda’s response to the titular character’s love confession:

Und dann, plötzlich, mit einem Ruck, mit einem kurzen, stolzen, verächtlichen Lachen hatte sie ihre Hände seinen heißen Fingern entrissen, hatte ihn am Arm gepackt, ihn seitwärts vollends zu Boden geschleudert, war aufgesprungen und in der Allee verschwunden (Mann, *GKFA* 118).

Despite being a distinctive feature of the novella’s climax and conclusion, laughter has not been analyzed yet in the scholarship of this novella.[[1]](#endnote-1) Similarly, studies on laughter in modernism overlook Thomas Mann’s works. Studies on modernism have primarily studied laughter in Anglophone and French modernists, such as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, James Joyce, and Georges Bataille; few works discuss German literature from the period. As a result, our understanding of laughter in Mann’s oeuvre and the historically specific characterization of laughter in German modernism has been limited to a handful of texts on laughter in *Doktor Faustus* (1947)—Mark Roche’s analysis of Nietzschean laughter and Karl Keppler’s study—and Anca Parvulescu and James Nikopoulos’s analysis of Herman Hesse and Franz Kafka, respectively.[[2]](#endnote-2) Compared to the research on English modernism, we have an incomplete image of the connection between contemporary and influential characterizations of laughter, such as Henri Bergson’s *Le rire* (1900) and German literature.

Addressing this gap in the scholarship and in order to expand our understanding of the similarities and differences between the meaning of laughter in German modernism and contemporary theories of laughter, I analyze the representation of laughter in “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” in the light of Bergson’s characterization of laughter. Concretely, I discuss all instances of laughter in the novella—there are five scenes in total—emphasizing the decisive laughter of the novella’s climax and concluding lines. The study proposes that Mann’s novella can be productively viewed through the lens of modernist discourses of laughter insofar as it stages narratively some of the dichotomies and concepts that Bergson developed briefly afterwards in his theory. The novella parallels Henri Bergson’s contemporary theory of laughter, revealing a discursive concomitance concerning laughter between Mann and Bergson. Specifically, the novella characterizes laughter in relation to vitalism and superiority and in opposition to rigidity—relations and concepts that occupy a central place in Bergson’s book. However, while the parallels between “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” and Bergson’s theory are the main finding of this paper, the study also identifies some differences between Mann and Bergson’s conceptions of laughter. I argue that these differences are a product of the narrator’s ironic description, which accentuates seemingly contradictory elements within the main characters—a technique Mann expanded in later works, notably *Der Zauberberg* (1924). The ironic characterization of laughter and the novella’s laughing character produces a more ambivalent conception of laughter (and, by extension, vitalism) than Bergson’s stark dichotomies. Identifying these differences contributes to our understanding of Mann’s conception and uses of laughter and, potentially, to the specific nature of laughter in the German literature of this period.

**Bergson’s Vital Laughter**

Research on Bergson often starts by declaring Bergson’s unmeasurable influence in his lifetime—describing “Bergsonism” and his eventual Nobel Prize—and acknowledging the rejection of his thought after the First World War and subsequent obscurity after the Second World War. While Bergson’s thought was neglected for much of the twentieth century, in the last few decades, “there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in Bergson’s ideas” (Sinclair 2), an interest that extends to his understanding of laughter. Scholars document *Le rire*’s popularity and sizeable international response in the period, discuss the validity of his theory of laughter, and the relation of this work to the rest of his oeuvre, arguing that it plays a pivotal role in Bergson’s thought. Scholars also correct the view that reduces his theory of laughter to a conservative variation of the superiority theory, a metatheory of laughter that considers that laughter emerges from a normative condition of superiority towards the laughable object.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Adam Lovasz mentions, Bergson’s theory agglutinates elements from the main metatheories of laughter: the mentioned superiority theory, the theory that sees incongruity as the cause of laughter, and the “relief” theory, which conceives laughter as a mechanism that releases tension (229; cf. Sinclair, 135–6).

In addition, recent works reveal the connection between Bergson’s theory of laughter and his context. Tullio Pagano states that Bergson’s arguments implicitly refer to his historical context. For example, phrases such as the “réglementation automatique de la société” evoke the increasing rationalization (and consequent reification) that European societies were experiencing at the turn of the century (Pagano 47). Similarly, Ian Wilkie and Natalie Diddams discuss the influence of cinema and mechanical reproduction on Bergson’s theory of laughter. Despite Bergson’s metaphysical objective, his approach is grounded in and responds to the experience of modernity and, crucially, discourses on cultural degeneration product of the processes of modernization; these aspects also influence “Der kleine Herr Friedemann.” The same *Zeitgeist* permeates Mann’s and Bergson’s work, including their reflections on and literary representation of laughter.

I speak of *Zeitgeist* to show the concomitances between these authors and not a unilateral direct influence, from philosopher to literary author—impossible for “Der kleine Herr Friedemann, as it precedes Bergson’s text by three years —or vice versa.[[4]](#endnote-4) Indeed, research often frames the relation between Bergson’s thought and Mann’s work by their contemporaneity and the exposure to similar impulses in terms of concepts of time and other philosophical ideas. We see this most notably in Beate Pinkerneil’s study of Mann and Bergson’s historical simultaneity (253) and Tim Sommer’s recent discussion on the concept of time in *Der Zauberberg* (25–6). As Mann said after reading Richard Thieberger’s Bergsonian analysis of this novel: “wieviel Kameradschaft doch Zeitgenossenschaft ohne Weiteres schon bedeutet” (Thieberger 7). However, despite Mann’s observation that he “habe nie etwas von Bergson gelesen” (quoted in Thieberger 7), one could make the argument of direct influence for Mann’s later work: Mann had a translated copy of *Le rire*, published in 1914, in his personal library, as indicated by the Thomas Mann Archiv in Zürich. Admittedly, as Pinkerneil acknowledges based on the lack of notes after a handful of pages (257), Mann’s reading was probably incomplete. Mann only marked a passage describing that laughter involves insensibility and indifference, which the German translation associates with coldness (Bergson, *Das Lachen* 7; *Le rire* 3; cf. Pinkerneil 257). Although the engagement with Bergson’s book was not extensive, it shows Mann’s interest in the subject of laughter, and, more importantly, Mann’s reading of the book demonstrates the prevalence and impact of Bergson’s thought in the period. Bergson’s influence was not limited to the philosophical concept of the *durée*, but extended to his theory of laughter—in effect, since *Le rire* is the only book by Bergson in Mann’s library, it is also the only Bergsonian text we know Mann had read.

Due to Bergson’s influence in the period and the relation between his theory of laughter and the context, it is conceivable to consider Bergson’s theory representative of a pre-First World War understanding of laughter. Namely, through Bergson, we can perceive the period’s mutual interest in laughter and vitalism.

Bergson’s book articulates a theory of laughter in connection to vitalism. As F. C. T. Moore contends, Bergson overlooks the materiality of laughter (e.g., the action of opening the mouth or exhaling) and only focuses on laughter’s function, context, and causes (86). Thus, Bergson does not ground laughter’s connection to vitalism on the material aspects of laughter but a metaphysical principle.[[5]](#endnote-5) Signalling the later concept of *élan vital,* Bergson views life as a principle demanding physical and spiritual flexibility.[[6]](#endnote-6) Bergson argues that life demands “une attention constamment en éveil, qui discerne les contours de la situation présente, c’est aussi une certaine élasticité du corps et de l’esprit” (*Le rire* 14). Specifically, life requires tension and elasticity. The response of life to any mechanical rigidity, to any “*raideur de mécanique*” (Bergson, *Le rire* 8; italics on the original) that threatens the vital principles of tension and elasticity of society is laughter. Consequently, laughter “serves social life” (Sinclair 145), possessing a social objective of “perfectionnement général” (Bergson, *Le rire* 16). Under this conception, perfectibility is achieved through the laughter’s correction of rigidity, which restores tension and elasticity. Bergson’s notion of rigidity is broad, encompassing physical and psychological aspects:

Toute *raideur* du caractère, de l’esprit et même du corps, sera donc suspecte à la société, parce qu’elle est le signe possible d’une activité qui s’endort et aussi d’une activité qui s’isole, qui tend à s’écarter du centre commun autour duquel la société gravite, d’une excentricité enfin. (*Le rire* 15; italics on the original)

For Bergson, costumes and clothes, as disguises, are a form of physical inelasticity. While everyday life shrouds this aspect, Bergson argues that clothes are a mechanical element introduced into life; they are fixed elements covering a living entity, restricting its movement, and tying it to a rigid form. Similarly, caricatures reveal a rigid element in human faces: the exaggerated aspects contradict the idea of tension and change, suggesting that they are static body parts. Besides costumes and caricatures, Bergson’s few examples of physical rigidity are unfortunate and offensive, such as race and disability.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The inelasticity of character and mind, what we could call ideological rigidity, is more compelling and productive. Bergson considers that habits and customs reveal inflexibility in a person’s behavior: a rigid subject acts and follows ideas mechanically without considering life’s demands of adaptation. Ideological rigidity involves distraction and behaving automatically. Jargon, for example, is a form of ideological rigidity but also a form of linguistic rigidity. The judge that behaves in all contexts as a judge, utilizing technical terminology when doing everyday activities, constitutes an example of ideological rigidity. The quote also includes another element, apparently disconnected from the others: antisocial tendencies. Bergson considers them an example of rigidity because they represent a form of ideological inflexibility: to be isolated shows a desire to act in accord with a fixed idea and a rejection of the vital principle of tension and change.

While phrases related to the repression and correction of eccentricities and deviations superficially imply a conservative conception of laughter, the concept of “perfectionnement général” refers to a state of tension and elasticity, of constant adaptation. Life is not repetition but “un effort constant d’adaptation réciproque” (Bergson, *Le rire* 15). The function of the *élan vital* motored laughter or vital laughter is not to preserve a determined status quo but instead to add fluidity and dynamism, correcting rigidity and automatisms. Consequently, laughter’s function is generally positive and beneficial. Laughter itself, however, is not. Bergson considers laughter not a benevolent action but a cruel and humiliating gesture. Bergson’s laughter involves an abstract position of superiority: specifically, laughter reveals life’s superiority over the individual. When a person laughs at someone, they act as a vessel of the *élan vital*. Vital laughter is the manifestation of a collective consciousness representing the intentions of “society” or “life” (Sinclair 146), and laughter always expresses superiority on behalf of this vital principle.

Bergson’s laughter, then, represents the superiority of the vital flux and responds to physical and ideological rigidity. Bergson conceives vital laughter as a reaction and a solution to the technological modernization in continental Europe, the mechanization of life due to these technological advancements, and the fin-de-siècle’s general claims of cultural and mental degeneration and decadence. More specifically, in *Le rire*, Bergson is concerned with dehumanization: “*Nous rions toutes les fois qu’une personne nous donne l’impression d’une chose*” (*Le rire* 44; italics in the original). While mechanistic theories of science, technology, and society can dehumanize people, ossifying them in definitions, photographs, and social classifications, laughter is alive (Bergson, *Le rire* 1); it resists this process of mechanization and, in turn, can reinstitute the vital principles of elasticity and tension, restoring the humanity lost by positivist and naturalist thought. Although they do not frame it as a reaction to dehumanization, Sara Crangle and Pagano single out the restorative quality of Bergson’s conception of laughter (112; 47).

Bergson’s conjunction of vitalism and laughter reacts to these different processes of dehumanization. As Eugene Lunn noted, dehumanization is one of the major dimensions of modernist aesthetic and social thought (34; 37). Indeed, the same modernist concern informs Mann’s novella and, by extension, its conception of laughter.

**Gerda’s Vital Laughter**

“Der kleine Herr Friedemann” constitutes a productive case study on modernist laughter not only because Thomas Mann is one of the most celebrated and widely read authors of that period but also because laughter is a central concern for this novella. Although scenes of laughter in this novella are scarce—laughter appears five times—they are nevertheless decisive: laughter forms part of the description of one of the main characters, the narrative climax, and the conclusion of the novella.

“Der kleine Herr Friedemann” follows the life of Friedemann, a man disfigured by a childhood accident, who renounced love and ultimately all contact with women, to his eventual demise after meeting Gerda von Rinnlingen, whose mere presence severely disrupts his peace. The novella ends with Friedemann’s suicide, an event framed by Gerda’s laughter and, afterwards, by muffled laughter, presumably coming from a nearby avenue.

Gerda von Rinnlingen is the novella’s laughing character: laughter is another part of her personality communicated through other characters. For instance, a minor character includes Gerda’s laughter in a list of her undesirable traits. Frau Hagenström, the spectator to the arrival of Gerda and her husband, tells Friedemann’s sisters the following:

Sehen Sie, sie ist durchaus nicht häßlich, man könnte sie sogar hübsch finden: und dennoch entbehrt sie jedes weiblichen Reizes, *und ihrem Blick, ihrem Lachen, ihren Bewegungen fehlt alles, was Männer lieben*. Sie ist nicht kokett, und ich bin, Gott weiß es, die letzte, die das nicht lobenswert fände; aber darf eine so junge Frau – sie ist vierundzwanzig Jahre alt – die natürliche anmutige Anziehungskraft… vollkommen vermissen lassen? Liebste, ich bin nicht zungenfertig, aber ich weiß, was ich meine. Unsere Herren sind jetzt noch wie vor den Kopf geschlagen: Sie werden sehen, daß sie sich nach ein paar Wochen gänzlich dégoutiert von ihr abwenden… (Mann, *GKFA* 95; italics added)

According to Frau Hagenström, there is an unsettling element in Gerda’s character and actions, eliciting both fascination and contempt. Gerda is a “non-conforming” figure (Boehringer 247): her laughter is part of this characteristic. Gerda’s laughter is not customary of what men expect of women, but, at the same time, it is attractive.

Like Frau Hagenström, scholars dedicate much critical attention to Gerda. The resonance of this character with the later Gerda Buddenbrook from *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (1901) contributed to the general interpretation of this novella as a literary breakthrough that anticipates some of the essential topics and motifs of Mann’s later works. For example, the relationship between physical decay and intellectual and artistic growth or the general conflict between society and aesthetically inclined characters. As Yahya Elsaghe notes (274; see also Heftrich; Matter), in his Princeton lectures, Mann outlines the reading of “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” as a crucial precursor to his later works and themes, specifically the motif of the individual’s struggle with their passions. Mann understands Friedemann within this motif: “The chief figure [Friedemann] is a man whom nature has treated like a stepmother, but he finds himself able to come to terms with his fate in a wisely gently peaceful philosophic way, and he has attuned his life entirely to repose, contemplation, and peace” (*On Myself* 141). While Mann’s remarks about Friedemann betray sympathy, his description of Gerda is predominantly negative: “Die Erscheinung einer merkwürdig schönen und dabei kalten und grausamen Frau bedeutet den Einbruch der Leidenschaft in dieses behütete Leben, die den ganzen Bau umstürzt und den stillen Helden selbst vernichtet” (*GW* XIII 135).

Many scholars influenced by Mann’s remarks on Gerda’s cruelty and coldness have viewed Gerda as a character embodying negative attributes, frequently presenting Gerda as a fin-de-siècle *femme fatale*. Scholars interpreted Gerda as a figure who represents cultural decadence (Runge; Reed; Lawson; Dumbadze), a Schopenhauerian ascetic (Kristiansen), and a product of the influence of Nietzsche’s misogyny (Kurzke). Others, however, perceive Gerda as a more positively charged character, representing a violent vitalism in contrast to Friedemann’s quiet renunciation of life’s pleasures (Kluge; Vaget; Parkes-Perret) or a figure that defies, to a certain extent, gender conventions (Boehringer). Recently, the figure of Gerda has been reassessed. On the one hand, Ernest Schonfield offers a new approach to this character by inscribing the novella in the genre of Wagnerian melodrama. Schonfield considers that the novella’s use of leitmotifs and gestures serves to stage a melodramatic encounter with otherness—Gerda. Ultimately, Schonfield contends that Gerda’s otherness cannot be assimilated by the narrator and Friedeman, accentuating the character’s autonomy. On the other hand, Gerta Valentine challenges what she deems the “critical orthodoxy” that considers that Mann, as an intellectual writer, was not interested in human entities and could not create credible women (2). Arguing that Mann’s female characters question female stereotypes prevalent in their sociocultural contexts, such as the figure of the *femme fatale*, in order to assert a measure of human autonomy, Valentine considers Gerda the first historical example of a challenging female character in Mann’s writing.

While the scholarship does not discuss laughter, these readings contextualize the novella’s relation with vital laughter. From different perspectives, many interpretations depict Gerda as an uncontainable character. As an allegory of vitality or as a challenging woman, Gerda resists arrest; in other words, rigidity. Gerda’s laughter, especially in the climax, mirrors this characteristic.

After painfully admitting that his ascetic life, his idea of replacing love for aesthetic pleasure was nothing more than “Lüge und Einbildung” (Mann, *GKFA* 117), Friedemann takes Gerda’s hand and confusingly mumbles his inability to resist her. Finally, after some hesitation, Gerda frees herself from Friedemann’s approach:

Und dann, plötzlich, mit einem Ruck, mit einem kurzen, stolzen, verächtlichen Lachen hatte sie ihre Hände seinen heißen Fingern entrissen, hatte ihn am Arm gepackt, ihn seitwärts vollends zu Boden geschleudert, war aufgesprungen und in der Allee verschwunden (Mann, *GKFA* 118).

Following Mann’s authorial remarks, Kristensen describes Gerda’s reaction as a moment of purposeful violence and tyrannical behavior, betraying this character’s “frigidity” and asceticism (428). Others view Gerda’s response more positively, perceiving her rejection of Friedemann as a moment of resistance to the male character’s objectifying gaze (Valentine 23). This last position seems more plausible when considering the narrative perspective of the novella: as readers, our knowledge of Gerda is scarce and incomplete; the perspective severely limits our access to her interiority. The novella largely follows the perception of the male protagonist and never presents Gerda from a disinterested perspective or her own point of view—Gerda is always subject to external character-bound perspectives. Although not expressed in narratological terms, Gerhard Kluge and Joan Silberman mention this in passing (504; 134); Schonfield and Valentine also recognize this, considering that this narrative distance asserts Gerda’s elusiveness and autonomy, respectively.

This limited access to Gerda extends to her laughter. Gerda’s laughter has this elusive autonomy identified in Gerda by Schonfield and Valentine. Her laughter escapes explanation and remains perplexing: the narrator does not clarify its cause. While it has no exact cause other than Friedemann—and we do not know what about Friedemann provokes this response—Gerda’s laugh in this scene is both a proud and contemptuous laugh. Laughter addresses two different subjects in a single gesture: the pride expressed in her laugh points to the laughing subject, while the contempt refers to the laughing object, the laughable subject—Friedemann.

Like Bergson’s vital laughter, Gerda’s laughter evokes a violent form of superiority. The adjectives signal this superiority, while the spatial position of the character accentuates it. Gerda’s response highlights the height difference between both characters: Friedemann is kneeling and, later, on the ground. The final scene of laughter—the novella’s conclusion—presents the same relation between perplexing (non-humorous) laughter, superiority, and vitalism.

After Gerda’s rejection, Friedemann drowns himself, and when the splashes made by Friedemann’s last struggle before perishing subside, the sound of laughter arises: “Bei dem Aufklatschen des Wassers waren die Grillen einen Augenblick verstummt. Nun setzte ihr Zirpen wieder ein, der Park rauschte leise auf, und durch die lange Allee herunter klang gedämpftes Lachen” (Mann, *GKFA* 119).

While still conveying a sense of superiority over Friedemann, even after his death, this laughter’s source is ambiguous. Who is laughing? Is it Gerda, another group of people (including Gerda or not) or perhaps life, here represented by nature? Gerda and her husband organize a party that starts in their house and eventually moves to the garden and, later, the avenue. Laughter continues down this avenue, but it could come from the avenue—to where Gerda returns—or from the surrounding nature of the garden. On the one hand, since Gerda leaves Friedemann in the direction of the avenue, where the party continues, the attendees (and Gerda) are plausibly the laughers. Vital laughter restores the subject to the life continuum, to the organic movement of the *élan vital*, which in this case would be the society of the party. On the other hand, nature as the laughing subject—in line with Mann’s interest in the combination of myth and psychology—offers another subject connected to the vital flux. The renewed movement and sounds from the park reinforce the interpretation of nature or life as the last laughing subject: laughter emerges when Friedemann perishes, and the motion of life begins anew.

Mann’s retrospective comments on this novella favor this last interpretation. *On Myself*, Mann says that this novella presents the same “Grund-Motiv” as his Joseph tetralogy. As Terence J. Reed notes (49), this motif is articulated in *Joseph in Ägypten*. The motif is “die Idee der Heimsuchung, des Einburchs trunken zerstörender und vernichtender Mächte in ein Gefaßtes und mit allen seine Hoffnungen auf Würde und ein bedingtes Glück der Fassung verschworenes Leben.” More significantly and linking the novella’s ending scene and Bergson’s vital laughter, the destructive intrusion of life involves laughter: “des den treuen Kunstbau lachend hinfegenden Lebens” (*GW* V, 1802).

Despite the ambiguity between society and nature as the laughing subject in this final scene, laughter has a collective subject connected to the vital flux in both cases. Importantly, further relating the novella to Bergson’s characterization of laughter, laughter in the novella, especially the last laugh, responds to a dichotomy between elasticity and rigidity.

**Laughable Rigidity**

Bergson’s theory considers that laughter responds to rigidity in service of tension and elasticity. But what is mechanical and opposed to the *élan vital* in “Der kleine Herr Friedemann”? What type of rigidity motivates the novella’s laughter?

Gerda’s laughter, reported by the envious gossip of Frau Hagenström, answers to customs, cultural constructions, and expectations of female behavior. Tradition and customs are, for Bergson, one example of rigidity insofar as they are automatic repetitions and the absence of adaptation. As Lovasz succinctly comments, for Bergson, “[t]hose who remain stuck in their occupations […] are laughable, but so is a society that sticks people in place” (221).

Frau Hagenström’s perspective is customary: she has a fixed notion of an ideal wife. As Gerhard Kluge and Michael Boehringer stress, this ancillary character functions as a mouthpiece for conventional standards of femininity. She objects to Gerda’s uncustomary treatment of her husband, especially criticizing how Gerda addresses him (Mann, *GKFA* 96). Gerda’s behavior, including her laughter, responds to this corseted context of habits and customs. Following Bergson’s premises, gender conventions would be a form of ideological rigidity. In opposition to this society of traditions, habits and conventions, Gerda’s non-conforming laughter introduces flexibility into the rigid world, novelty, and, importantly, change, even to the narrative—Gerda’s appearance is what introduces tension to the narrative.

The first textual appearance of Gerda further supports her challenge to gender norms and expectations. The first time Friedemann sees Gerda, she appears using a whip and controlling the horses of her “Jagdwagen,” while a servant sits idly behind her, with his arms crossed (Mann, *GKFA* 97). Scholars have perceived Gerda’s connection to sensuality and power in this episode. Ford B. Parkes-Perret associates Gerda with Aphrodite through the image of the yellow hunting car and the colors (gold and red) usually present in Gerda’s description. Parkes-Perret also considers that the name “Gerda” evokes the whip, *Gerte*, of this first appearance (280–1). Responding to this interpretation from a psychoanalytical perspective, Lewis Lawson changes the sexually charged Aphrodite for Medusa and her destructive and paralyzing gaze, asserting that Friedemann sees a grotesque mother figure in Gerda (57). Due to the height difference, how she greets Friedemann and her control of the carriage, Boehringer contends that in this scene, Gerda claims a masculine position of power, reducing Friedemann to a “‘feminine’ subservient position” (247). Despite the partial disagreement in symbol and interpretation, scholars view Gerda as a non-conforming and powerful character. Perhaps in line with a context that articulated—as we can see early in naturalist literature, such as Zola’s *Nana* (1880), and later, much more subtly in Kafka’s *In der Strafkolonie* (1919)—the perceived degeneration of Western civilizations with the threat of feminization or emasculation of men, the novella presents a “superior” woman that challenges customs, possessing both masculine and feminine, repulsing and fascinating traits. Indeed, the height difference noted by Boehringer physically represents this superiority. Like the climactic scene where Gerda laughs at and rejects Friedemann, Gerda’s first apparition emphasizes the character’s height difference: her carriage forces the already small Friedemann to look up to her.

Gerda defies customary rigidity; that is, she represents ideological elasticity, introducing tension into the fabric of society and the narrative. However, Gerda’s elasticity is also physical: her body manifests elasticity and tension, opposing Bergsonian rigidity. Hans Rudolf Vaget identifies a *Zitternmotif* in the novella, specifically in Gerda’s characterization. The narrator depicts Gerda’s face as trembling: her lips constantly move while her eyes waver. Due to her wavering eyes and her insistent and peculiar mouth movement, the narrator renders Gerda’s face in constant flux, in permanent change. Gerda’s first description expresses this combination of uncertainty and movement: “ob aber ihr Mund schön war, konnte man nicht erkennen, den sie schob unaufhörlich die Unterlippe vor und wieder zurück, indem sie sie an der Oberklippe scheuerte” (Mann, *GKFA* 97). Gerda’s facial elasticity is a focal point of ambiguity; even Friedemann’s objectifying perception cannot restrain her in a single, clearly defined emotion, such as compassion or revulsion. Friedemann cannot determine Gerda’s thoughts and beauty—for Stephen Joy, her gender identity (470)— from her physical features, and, because her face conveys a caring and mocking personality simultaneously, he cannot fix Gerda in a role. Further adding to Gerda’s connection to vitalism, the *Zitternmotif* connects her to nature, to the river close to her garden: “auf dem zitternden Wasser” (Mann, *GKFA* 111). The association with a water bank reinforces Gerda’s destructive vitalism, as this space marks Friedemann’s death.

Gerda opposes ideological and physical rigidity—the novella’s laughing character is pure elasticity and tension. In line with Bergson’s characterization, the novella’s rigid figure is not the laughing subject but the laughable object: the decadent male character.

More than a critique of the supposed European feminization or threat of emasculation, the novella confronts Friedemann with laughter because of his inflexibility, his refusal to adapt and actively form part of the changing life. The titular character is the laughable rigidity: he is an aesthetic ascetic who sublimates sexuality and passions through the enjoyment of art. As Kristiansen argues, connecting this character to Schopenhauer’s doctrine of salvation through asceticism, Friedemann attempts to domesticate life (399). Friedemann’s reflections on his future life evoke this ideal of life domestication: Friedemann conceives the passage of time as a process without change, expecting with *Seelenfrieden* the substitution of years (Mann, *GKFA* 94). Friedemann’s reflections center on peace (which is part of his name, *Friede*) and tranquility; that is, static values: “Ach, Ruhe, Ruhe war es ja, was er wollte! Aber nicht die Ruhe im leeren und tauben Nichts, sondern ein sanftbesonnter Friede, erfüllt von guten, stillen Gedanken.” (Mann, *GKFA*111). While psychoanalytical interpretations of the novella often appear to reduce literary analysis to a process of identifying family members, authors such as Silberman and Lawson correctly perceive Friedemann’s ambivalent gestures toward Gerda as a resistance to change (see also Schonfield 154).[[8]](#endnote-8) Specifically, Friedemann’s inarticulate and non-committal attempts to communicate with Gerda express his reluctance to modify his ascetic life.

Friedemann’s rigidity is mainly ideological. At this point, Mann departs from Bergson’s assessment of disability which suggests that disability is a form of rigidity and, thus, laughable. Although Bergson’s position is marginally more nuanced––he claims that laughter demands insensibility and laments that this fact often makes laughter unethical––Bergson’s theory is undeniably insensible in this regard. Indeed, Bergson’s position is problematic due to his lexical choices—the dichotomy for Bergson is between “difformités” people and “bien conformée” persons—and because of the underlying semantic connections to vitalism (*Le rire* 18). The belief in the vital flux centers on an ideal able bodied subject as the subject that laughs and can laugh at others. As Lovasz rightfully notes (206), an unarticulated parameter of Bergson’s theory of laughter is ableism.

Bergson argues that certain conditions, such as kyphosis or a myopathic gait, are laughable because able subjects could imitate them (*Le rire* 17–8). For Bergson, the possibility of imitation intuitively suggests that these physical divergences have their origin in rigidity: a rounded upper back would suggest a bad habit or position held for too long, and a facial tic, a static and repeated element in the variability of human faces. Bergson’s theory finds disabled people laughable because of their perceived lack of dynamism, which purportedly refers to an impaired connection with the life flux. Mann’s novella, instead, locates the laughable rigidity in the body parts unaffected by Friedemann’s childhood accident: his hands and face.

Friedemann’s hands and face possess some characteristics of masks: they conceal his inner turmoils under a static appearance.[[9]](#endnote-9) In contrast to Gerda’s ever-moving eyes and lips, Friedemann presents a constant serious semblance: “einen weichgeschnittenen Mund” in his beautiful, quiescent face (Mann, *GKFA* 89). The narrator also describes the lack of change in his face through the years: “Der kleine Herr Friedemann trug keinen Bart, und sein Gesicht hatte sich fast gar nicht verändert; nur dass die Züge ein wenig schärfer geworden waren” (Mann, *GKFA* 94). His face is invariable, fixed; it only gets sharper.

When outlining a fragmentary history of disruptive laughter, Parvulescu comments that the civilizing process of modernity corrects laughter into a smile, banishing the passion of laughter and its “event-like quality” to the realm of seriousness and *gravitas* (*Laughter* 6–7). Modernity, Parvulescu contends, transforms spontaneous and eruptive laughter into a severe and subdued smile. While Bergson neglects the difference between smiling and laughter, Mann associates smiling with seriousness and rigidity; specifically, smiling expresses Friedemann’s domestication of life and, thus, his rigidity. When thinking about his life and the future he expected before meeting Gerda, Friedemann continues his meditation on an invariable life:

Er dachte an jenen Nachmittag seines dreißigsten Geburtstages, als er, glücklich im Besitze des Friedens, ohne Furcht und Hoffnung über den Rest seines Lebens hinzublicken geglaubt hatte. Kein Licht und keinen Schatten hatte er da gesehen, sondern in mildem Dämmerschein hatte alles vor ihm gelegen, bis es dort hinten, unmerklich fast, im Dunkel verschwamm, *und mit einem ruhigen und überlegenen Lächeln hatte er den Jahren entgegen gesehen, die noch zu kommen hatten* – wie lange war das her? (Mann, *GKFA* 111; italics added)

Vital laughter is the superiority of life over the individual; Friedemann’s calm smile is the superiority of the domestication of life. As Kluge and Kristiansen comment, Friedemann’s association with mute tones (“Kein Licht und keinen Schatten;” “mild Dämmerschein”) stylistically reinforce Friedemann’s desire for stability—for rigidity. In contrast, the narrator often associates Gerda with vibrant colors (e.g., her red dress and golden hair). However, Kristiansen correctly observes—in an example of the narrator’s particular distribution of attributes—that darker tones also frame Gerda (e.g., her poorly lit room, the blue shadows around her eyes) (413).

The logic of elasticity and rigidity also operates in the novella’s last laughter. Friedemann’s death, his head floating grotesquely in the water, opposes the surrounding joviality: the crickets’ chirping, the movement within the park and the muffled sound of laughter coming from the avenue or nature. The *Allee* in this novella is the space of the *élan vital*, with its overpowering nature and the trembling river—as mentioned, the river presents the same *Zitternmotif* identified by Vaget in Gerda. The avenue is also the place of reflection on life in the novella. The quoted reflection on peace and tranquility occurs here, and before that there is a moment of ironic prolepsis: “War es nicht das beste, noch einmal um sich zu blicken und dann hinunter in das stille Wasser zu gehen, um nach einem kurzen Leiden befreit und hinübergerettet zu sein in die Ruhe?” (Mann, *GKFA* 111). It is not insignificant considering the strict narrative economy of novellas that the ideal death for Friedeman involves still water and calmness and not, of course, the abrupt development of the actual ending and the subsequent laughter.

Before Gerda’s laughter in the climax and the final anonymous laughter that closes the novella, there are two other scenes of laughter. These two moments of laughter involve jokes told by minor characters. Although Friedemann is not the target of these jokes, both scenes of laughter prepare the narrative climax and foreshadow Gerda’s laughter and the laughter that closes the novella by presenting a compact parallel.[[10]](#endnote-10)

A nameless character tells the first joke “[i]n die eingetretene Stille hinein” and makes everyone leave the room with “fröhlichem Gelächter” (Mann, *GKFA* 114). Although the narrator does not describe the joke, it does not affect Friedemann; his mood is morbidly fixed: “In einer schlaffen Haltung saß er und sah sie an. Es war nichts Leidenschaftliches in seinem Blick und kaum ein Schmerz; etwas Stumpfes und Totes lag darin, eine dumpfe, kraft- und willenlose Hingabe” (Mann, *GKFA* 115). Here laughter breaks a stiff and awkward social situation. Considering the associations between stillness and Friedemann, Gerda’s laughter, which disrupts Friedemann’s rigid “confession,” replicates this scene. Gerda’s rejection of Friedemann also includes the same two moments of this scene: a moment of laughter and a moment of departure. Guests laugh at the joke and move from the house to the garden, while Gerda laughs at Friedemann and moves from the garden to the avenue. Moreover, in both scenes, Friedemann does not laugh and is the last subject to move out from each space: Friedemann’s rigidity supposes that he only reluctantly changes states (here spaces).

The second scene is a practical joke: another secondary character makes paper boats and floats them in a fountain, producing “allgemeinem Gelächter” (Mann, *GKFA* 116). This joke anticipates the novella’s final scene of laughter by presenting a harmless variation of a body floating in the water while eliciting laughter in others. Moreover, the position in the narrative supports this parallel. This section—the last part of the novella—opens with a floating paper boat and joyful laughter and closes with Friedemann’s head floating in the water and muffled laughter.

The narrator does not specify if Friedemann could participate in (or see) the second joke. Thus, Friedemann’s reaction or lack thereof to this second joke can only be speculative. In contrast, it is not speculation that Friedemann will turn in the subsequent scenes of laughter, prepared by both jokes, from a bystander to a laughable object.

A detachment from life is laughable for the modernist author and the modernist philosopher. To laugh is to be alive and participate in the vital flux of nature, which involves elasticity and tension. From this perspective, Friedemann’s desire to wall himself off from that change becomes laughable; his ideological and physical rigidity is laughable. Admittedly, it is possible to consider that Friedemann becomes ridiculous because he changes and suspends his ascetic life, thus making him laughable because of the futility of his endeavor and not precisely because of his rigidity and detachment from life. Alternatively, as critics that follow Mann’s authorial remarks and perceive Gerda as a *femme fatale* suggest, Friedemann is not laughable but made laughable by this violent and destructive woman. Both positions, however, overlook crucial elements from Friedemann’s breakdown.

On the one hand, as Valentine notes, Friedemann brings his own demise: the breakdown is a “self-break”; it is not imposed by Gerda (22). As another type of outsider, Gerda tries, in effect, to connect with Friedemann. Gerda’s amiable intentions are evident by her offer to play music together. Gerda rejects Friedemann but does not condemn him: Friedemann turns himself into a laughable entity. On the other hand, Friedemann is not laughable because he changes and abandons his previous ascetic state; Friedemann is laughable because the change is not substantial or willful. The psychoanalytical readings of the novella have convincingly discussed this aspect of Friedemann’s personality and subsequent breakdown. Silbermann lucidly comments that Friedemann is not committed to the change; he does not depart from his previous thought patterns (137).

Friedemann’s confession is no confession, and it does not suppose a modification of his character. The confession is another example of rigidity and repetition: Friedemann expects Gerda to declare what he is unwilling to pronounce. He mumbles mechanically mumbles phrases he had uttered before in his reflections near the river, leaving the act of confession to Gerda. Friedemman only grabs Gerda’s hand and says: “Sie [Gerda] wissen es ja ... Lass mich ... Ich kann nicht mehr ... Mein Gott ... Mein Gott …” (Mann, *GKFA* 118). Even in his confession, Friedemann is, to a degree, still rigid and cannot act fluidly; he is still separated from life.

**Different Laughs**

Laughter in the novella presents numerous points of contact with the contemporary understanding materialized in *Le rire*. Similar to Bergson’s theory, the novella establishes a dialogue between laughter and vitalism and conceives laughter as a response out of superiority to ideological rigidity. The characterization of laughter in Mann’s novella and Bergson’s theory, however, is not identical: there are differences that, while not negating the observed parallels, nuance the novella’s treatment of laughter.

In her study on novellas, Florence Goyet argues that novellas organize the characterization process through contrasts and extremes. Concretely, “[characters] are what they are *prodigiously*—every state, every quality, every feeling is carried to the ultimate.” Ultimately, novellas operate with “unequivocal entities: paragons of virtue or vice” (16; italics in the original). This assessment—previously utilized by Miguel Vedda in relation to other German novellas—applies to Mann’s novella: its characters are undoubtedly extreme, and the ending is an example of an ultimate resolution. Friedemann’s rigidity and strict renunciation of love lead to his death. Friedemann’s family’s physical decay and decadence are similarly absolute. The narrator suggests that due to their physical appearance, Friedemann’s sisters offer no alternative to the end of this pre-German unification lineage (Elsaghe 288). However, while “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” operates with extreme characters, the distribution of characteristics is ironic: it introduces elements that contradict and challenge a superficial reading, creating spaces of ambiguity.

The novella’s characterization constantly connects extremes. The narrator operates with contrasts but systematically inserts elements from one pole into its opposite. The description of Gerda’s face, for example, repeatedly highlights specific elements that contradict—or suggest an opposite interpretation of—her beauty or her allegorical relation to vitalism. Gerda’s nervous and constant movement of her mouth, lips, and eyes, in addition to the blue shadows surrounding her eyes, suggest a latent disease. Furthermore, in contrast with the consistent association of Friedemann to subdued tones, the combination of vibrant and dark colors mentioned before adds ambiguity to Gerda’s character. This ironic characterization produces a subject that simultaneously invites vitalist and—due to this association with disease—decadent interpretations.

The narrator’s ironic characterization qualifies laughter’s connection to vitalism. While Kluge depicts Gerda as a character that represents “des grossen und grausamen Lebens” (495), Kristiansen appropriately points out that this position trivializes elements that challenge this interpretation (413). Specifically, Kluge’s vitalist interpretation conflicts with Gerda’s apparent nervous disposition. However, as discussed, some of these nervous signs can also indicate the elasticity and tension of the *élan vital*. For instance, Gerda’s eyes can simultaneously be signs of latent disease and—through the *Zitternmotif*—symbols of her connection to nature, more precisely, movement. The vitalism of Gerda as a laughing character is, then, more nebulous than Bergson’s stark dichotomies. If Bergson’s *élan vital* rests in elasticity and ableism, Gerda’s vitalism only expresses the first component: elasticity and tension. Life in this novella means motion and adaptation, not health and vitality. Kluge’s assessment is correct as long as we understand life as elasticity, as only one part of the *élan vital*.

This ironic characterization also supposes that Gerda’s position of superiority is relative and not absolute: narratively, Gerda’s superiority is only relative to Friedemann’s rigidity and not his physical condition. While not explored by Bergson, Gerda’s elasticity regarding gender conventions could also motivate Gerda’s laughing superiority. Namely, her condition as an outsider to a rigid society establishes her superiority in this context.

Gerda’s relative superiority reveals a difference from Bergson’s treatment of dehumanization. Vital laughter responds to attempts at dehumanization: Gerda defies physical and ideological rigidity in the novella’s society, particularly Friedemann’s objectifying desire. Furthermore, the climax’s and the conclusion’s laughter seemingly restore her to the vital flux and society. However, Mann recognizes that the conjunction of vitalism and laughter still involves a form of dehumanization: laughter restores the laughing subject, not its object. Contrary to the restorative quality of Bergson’s laughter, Gerda’s laughter does not revitalize Friedemann; instead, it turns him into an object. The novella suggests, then, that vital laughter’s humanizing potential is, like Gerda’s connection to vitalism, markedly ambivalent.

In line with the restriction of the *élan vital* to elasticity, a minor difference is that the novella primarily focuses on ideological rigidity and not physical rigidity. The novella also departs in its understanding of rigidity as it does not view Friedemann’s disability as part of his laughable rigidity. The novella, instead, locates Friedemann’s physical rigidity in the body parts unaffected by his childhood accident. Friedemann’s face and hands mirror his character: they are impervious to change and resemble objects in their inflexibility.

Finally, laughter in the novella is not always an expression of superiority. Laughter also conveys joy and sociability—the two instances of laughter at the party of the ending show this social aspect of laughter. While I indicate the ironic superiority of the ending laughter as a triumph of life over the rigid character, this scene is still a moment of joyful and social laughter. This is a crucial difference between the novella and Bergson’s theory. Bergson’s theory includes elements from other metatheories, but superiority is the main component of his characterization. In addition, like most metatheories of laughter and their focus on sudden instances of humor (Beard 62), it neglects the social aspect of laughter.

**Conclusion**

“Der kleine Herr Friedemann” presents numerous points of contact with Henri Bergson’s contemporary theory of laughter. Similar to Bergson’s *Le rire*, the novella connects laughter to superiority and vitalism and consistently characterizes laughter as a response to rigidity. Notably, the novella’s laughing character possesses some attributes from Bergson’s vitalist conception of laughter: Gerda embodies physical and ideological elasticity, and her laughter responds to Friedemann’s rigidity. Additionally, the dichotomy between elasticity and rigidity, an essential aspect of Bergson’s theory, is remarkably productive in the novella. This dichotomy applies to Gerda’s relation to Friedemann and the fictional society. In effect, rigidity defines Friedemann’s character: crucially, his death articulates the dichotomy of stillness and laughter.

These parallels reveal that both authors share a considerably close understanding of laughter. As mentioned, this is not a case of unilateral influence but a product of their contemporaneity, of the shared modernist *Zeitgeist* that links Mann and Bergson’s thought. Mann’s narrator, however, nuances this characterization of laughter, balancing the dichotomies present in Bergson’s theory. The novella’s ironic characterization draws attention to traits that challenge Gerda’s vitality, qualifying Gerda’s association with vitalism. As a result, Gerda’s vital laughter expresses only one part of Bergson’s *élan vital*—elasticity, not vitality. Additionally, while Bergson postulates laughter as an antidote to different forms of dehumanization, the novella suggests that laughter is an ambivalent treatment, as it dehumanizes Friedemann, the laughing object of the novella. Furthermore, the novella recognizes other possible understandings of laughter besides superiority. Concretely, laughter can also be an expression of sociability and joviality, even if it retains an element of superiority as in the ending laughter.

These differences are specific to this text, but they might reveal aspects of the distinct cultural meaning of laughter in German modernism. Namely, while the relation between vitalism and laughter is present in other literatures from the period, often in contact with primitivist discourses, this novella shows an ambivalent engagement with this connection, suspecting that derisive laughter might emerge not from physical differences but ideological rigidity. Furthermore, the novella suggests that laughter’s connection to vitalism and superiority might be more relative and concrete than Bergson’s abstract principle of *élan vital*. To a certain extent, since it focuses on two outsiders, the novella approximates Michel Foucault’s notion of microphysics of power. While society and, especially, other women ostracize Gerda, she subjects another outsider, Friedemann, to the humiliating and exclusionary act of laughter. In the end, as Boehringer contends, this act restores society’s norms; Gerda’s laughter dehumanizes Friedemann and reaffirms his condition as an outsider.

“Der kleine Herr Friedemann,” as Mann himself and most critics argue, prepares the literary terrain for Mann’s later work, presenting recurrent topics in his oeuvre. The development of these topics, however, is not static, with each work introducing variations on the same motifs and themes. The same applies to the motif of laughter. Mann’s interest in laughter is dynamic: laughter does not represent the same and does not have the same associations in later works.[[11]](#endnote-11) As a result, differences and variations in the characterization of laughter should be analyzed in detail, especially in light of contextual changes and the generalized rejection of vitalism and Bergson’s thought after the First World War.[[12]](#endnote-12)

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1. Given its perspective, Stephen Joy’s *oral* examination of Mann’s early work is laconic in this regard. Following Frau Hagenström’s remarks, Joy only says that Gerda’s laughter expresses gender ambivalence: Gerda’s laughter “is bound up with the concept of lack – an ambiguous absence in presence that symbolises Gerda’s apparent hermaphroditism” (469). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some studies peripherally touch on laughter in Thomas Mann’s work and German modernism in general. We could include Beate Pinkerneil’s Bergsonian analysis of Mann’s work and Peter André Alt, Jens Ewen and Martin Swales’s discussions on irony and parody. However, Robert Provine’s comment about the majority of the classic “theories” of laughter—repeated by Crangle and Parvulescu in their books (110; *Laughter* 3)—is valid here: these works are surveys about humor and comedy, but not studies on laughter. Laughter and humor certainly overlap, but not all laughter is humorous, as the climax of “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” paradigmatically shows. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I utilize “meta-theory of laughter” following Mary Beard’s use. Beard contends that due to the sheer profusion of views and speculation about laughter, a “second order” level of theorizing has developed “which divides theories of laughter into three main strands, with key theorists taken to represent each one” (37). Beard rightly observes that while generally valid, these metatheories are often an oversimplification that rarely reflects the “uncertain, and sometimes self-contradictory complexity” of the texts on laughter (41). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. While Mann’s novella precedes Bergson’s book on laughter, Bergson’s interest in laughter precedes Mann’s novella. Bergson’s interest began, at least, in 1884, with a conference on the subject (Sinclair 15; 133). Unfortunately, there is no record of Bergson’s intervention; only a review in a local newspaper (see “Le Rire: Conférence de M. Bergson” in Bergson, Henri, *Melánges*, pp. 313–15). Additionally, while published in 1900, *Le Rire*’s content derives from three articles published in 1899 in *Revue de Paris*, as stated in both prefaces. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The physicality of laughter will be highlighted in the characterizations produced after the Second World War. Ingvild Saelid Gilhus remarks that there is a fundamental reassessment of laughter during the twentieth century, with “uniformly positive” evaluations of laughter that understand it as “a means to make human beings whole and in harmony with their bodies and with society” (101). Gilhus considers that this positive reassessment began with Sigmund Freud’s meditations on laughter in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905), which fall within the meta theory of relief. Although this might be the origin of this shift in valuation, considering the often cited examples of this reassessment (Mijail Bahktin, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva), it is more precise to talk about the latter half of the twentieth century. Relief theories are plausibly the origin of the interest in the psychological and physiological benefits of laughter, but detailed inquiries (and characterizations of laughter as a possible medicine) can similarly be located in the last decades of the twentieth century. For example, Norman Cousins’s *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration* was published in 1979. See Louie, Dexter et al. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Scholars consider that *Le rire* plays a pivotal role in Bergson’s thought, anticipating concepts and developments from later texts, such as the notion of *élan vital* from *L’Évolution créatrice* (1907) (Pinkerneil 251, Sinclair 134). The connection of laughter with this concept is preserved even in the last edition of *Le rire* (the 23rd edition from 1924). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bergson contends that racial differences are an extension of the rigidity of a disguise. Specifically, Bergson says that black people can be laughable because they could produce the impression of a disguise. As Sinclair states, Bergson’s treatment of the example is political and philosophically naïve and offensive, revealing a key limitation of his theory: the recurse to a metaphysical concept such as the *élan vital* supposes that the theory cannot explain racist jokes (138–9). However, this also reveals, as does his discussion on disability, another implicit premise in his thought. Bergson’s theory of laughter has as a parameter of rigidity an implicit ideal of an able bodied and Caucasian subject. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lawson’s thesis is an example of this trend insofar as it reads Mann’s works in the exclusive light of certain biographical assumptions (e.g., Mann’s anxiety about his mother’s love). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mann also utilizes the image of masks when referring to this novella in a letter to Otto Grautoff of 6 April 1987: “Seit dem “Kleinen Herrn Friedemann” vermag ich plötzlich die diskreten Formen und Masken zu finden, in denen ich mit meinen Erlebnissen unter die Leute gehen kann […]”. (quoted in Reed and Herwig 45–46) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. These are not the only narrative parallels in the novella. The most evident is the framing between Friedemann’s first fall—the childhood accident—and his second fall—his suicide. Intoxication (alcohol in both cases), a woman, and a narrative perspective not tied to Friedemann connect the two falls, while Friedemann’s volition distinguishes them. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. At least, this is the case of *Doktor Faustus*. Roche shows that, in this novel, Mann, reacting to another context, associates laughter with evil. Roche connects Nietzsche’s laughter and philosophy to this novel’s Nietzschean figure, Adrian Leverkühn. Due to Mann’s lifelong interest in Nietzsche, one could argue that Nietzsche’s conception of laughter clarifies the use of laughter in “Der kleine Herr Friedemann” more than Bergson’s theory While Nietzsche’s influence is certainly fit to explain the laughs of Adrian Leverkühn, Bergson’s theory of laughter is more representative of the modernist *Zeitgeist* behind Mann’s early work. As Lydia Amir shows by contrasting Mann’s *Betrachtungen* and the later “Nietzsches Philosophie im Licht unserer Erfahrung,” from 1947, Mann’s reception of Nietzsche crucially changes through his career (10). Concretely, Mann’s interest in Nietzsche’s thoughts on laughter is more prevalent in his later works, an aspect that is consistent with Roche’s analysis of *Doktor Faustus*. In addition, despite Gerda’s often described cruelty, the association with evil is not as clearly present in this novella. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The crisis of vitalism and “Bergsonism” could shed light on the shifting conception of laughter in Thomas Mann and other German modernists, especially the movement from vitalist and essentially positive notions of laughter to the more negative and ironic depictions of this action that James Nikopoulos recognizes in T. S. Eliot or James Joyce. See Burwick and Douglass. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)