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# the devil likes to sing

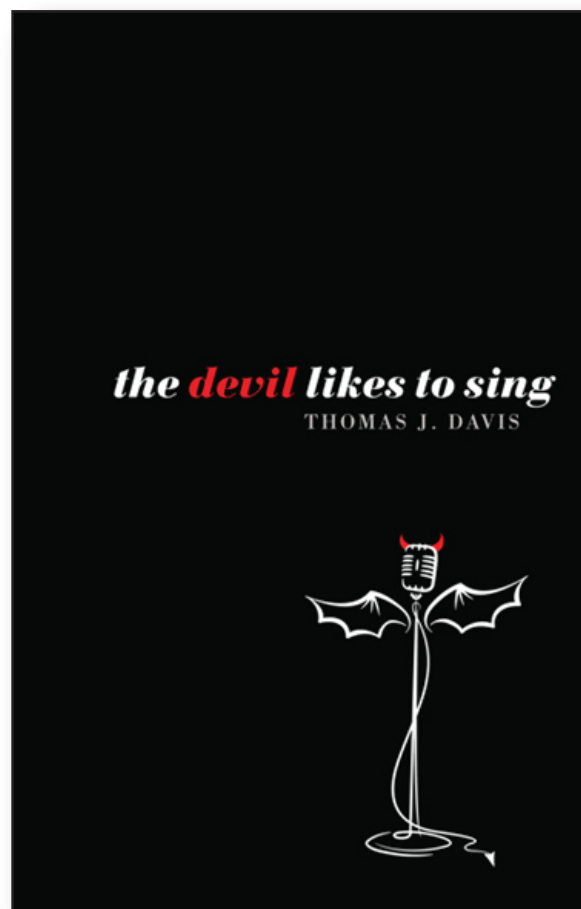
THOMAS J. DAVIS

It's C. S. Lewis (*The Screwtape Letters*) meets Christopher Moore (*Lamb*) in this quirky fable about human aspirations and the nature of temptation.

Timothy McFarland is a failed theology student turned gift book writer. His *101 Good Things about Christmas* has sold millions. But Timothy finds that his success has changed nothing; in fact, he seems more stuck in his life than ever. Wanting to be more than a rich hack, he is confronted by Lucifer, a Wagner-loving devil who offers to mold Timothy into a serious writer by teaching him to take a colder look at life.

And it works. Timothy is published in the right literary and commercial venues, and there's talk of *The Great American Novel*. Along the way, Timothy and the devil are having a grand time, talking religion, catching bad Elvis impersonators at the casinos, and watching devil-cam, Lucifer's ultimate home video network. But there's a final step Timothy must take. Can he write coolly about a tragedy that unfolds before his eyes, as the devil urges? Will he take on the full weight of the devil's writing gift and make it his own? All he has to do is change who he really is.

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"*The Devil Likes to Sing* is sinfully delicious, clever, funny, thoughtful, and dare I say it, redemptive. It ranks with Twain for wit and satire. The devil, having suffered bad press for centuries, is finally given the creative respect he so richly deserves."

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"If it's true that the serpent is the shrewdest of all animals, then Thomas Davis has a bit of snake in him. *The Devil Likes to Sing* is scandalously crafty. So much so that one has to wonder . . ."

TRIPP YORK, Author of *The Devil Wears Nada*

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THE DEVIL  
LIKES TO SING

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THOMAS J. DAVIS



CASCADE *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

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My thanks to those who encouraged me along the way—  
friends who patiently listened to me talk about the “devil”  
book (and especially Philip Goff, who always laughed at the  
right places) and readers whose positive words kept me going.

“The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

1 PETER 5:8

“The devil . . . is a liar and the father of lies.”

JOHN 8:44

All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
And courage never to submit or yield:  
And what is else not to be overcome?  
That Glory never shall his wrath or might  
Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace  
With suppliant knee . . .

JOHN MILTON, *PARADISE LOST* (BOOK I, 106–12)

He [Satan] stood upon the waves a Twenty seven fold mighty Demon  
Gorgeous & beautiful: . . .

WILLIAM BLAKE, *MILTON* (BOOK THE SECOND)

# I

The devil likes to sing. That surprised me. And he's funny. Not always a laugh-out-loud funny, but funny nonetheless, a "I know what you're saying, man" kind of funny. The first time I heard him say "Honest to God," I looked at him in shock. He gave a sly smile, almost self-deprecating, but not quite, and said, "Ooops." Then in that angelic tenor voice (if I'd ever thought the devil might sing I'd have imagined him a low-register bass) he sang, "When a man is honest, he's a liar; but what Satan says, it's sure as fire; true as earth, strong as iron; the devil, man, he's no liar."

He had a million songs like that, but he didn't really have a songwriter's gift. He's more of a cover man. On some of those, he could blow you away, especially on the sad songs. Or Germanic opera—his tenor could make your spine tingle. His favorite was Wagner because of the *Ring* cycle, especially *Siegfried*. The devil loves all things related to the Norse vision of the world: tragic, fatalistic, grim.

I never really figured out when he first started to shadow me. I'd felt a presence for a while, like someone stood looking over my shoulder all the time. Then one day he just appeared—and I wasn't surprised. That was the kicker. It's almost as if, before that day when he stood (sat, really) before me, I knew he was there. Looking back on it, I should have freaked out. But I didn't. Even

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now it seems that that whole period was too normal, wrongfully normal—how can the devil be shadowing your every step and that seem normal? But that’s how it felt.

Our first talk—and the first time I really saw him—came as I had finished *101 Good Things about Labor Day*. I know that because Jill had left me just before I completed the book—if you can call it a book—and one of the first things I talked to the devil about was Jill. When people asked how Jill and I split up, I always answered, “Happened over Labor Day.” A private joke.

I’d always wanted to be a serious writer. Friends would laugh and say they’d rather be like me—a rich writer. But what they meant was a rich hack.

I’d spent two years too many pursuing a doctorate in the history of theology. I’d done the course work, pulled through the five killer doctoral examinations, and I’d done all right. But I could never pull off the thesis.

I tried. I even got three chapters finished. But my committee crucified me, so to speak, at the oral examination. At the University of Chicago Divinity School, at least when I was there, the oral came half way through the dissertation to catch any real problems. Apparently my work was problematic. But I kept plugging away for another two years, trying to walk a tightrope for my committee—a rather old-fashioned church historian, a postmodernist (or maybe he was a post-postmodernist; I was never clear on this as I kept my intellectual head firmly buried in the sands of the fourth and fifth centuries), and a feminist theologian. What a committee, with me constantly teetering along on a tightrope, like I was in the middle of a Leon Russell song. What could I have been thinking? I should have known better. And writing on St. Augustine, of all people. God, I was naive!

So, I turned my part-time job into a full-time one: I wrote abstracts for an index to theological periodical literature. I’d grown to love Hyde Park, where the University of Chicago sits, so I stayed, just like so many poor bastards who never finished their PhDs but still loved the idea of being—in an almost mystical sense—an educated person in an educated environment. Or maybe they were



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just like me—too lazy to move, too ashamed to go back home with nothing to show for seven years of work and tens of thousands of dollars spent.

I met Jill where we worked; she was a librarian by training and a computer specialist by the necessities of employment, meaning that her two courses in computer applications made her the most qualified person in the office to keep the systems up and running. So, through trial and error and too few continuing education events at company cost, she struggled to manage the computer systems we used to put out our product.

We were an odd pair; me from Tennessee, a little town called Harriman, just off I-40. My family, for a couple of generations, worked at the Oak Ridge nuclear facility. I used to hear my grandfathers on both sides of the family joke about what they called the flashlight benefit—that is, they never need to buy flashlights because they all glowed in the dark. The joke lost its punch as one family member after another died of cancer.

Jill came from the Dells area in Wisconsin; her family had made its money catering to tourists. Her mom ran the miniature golf park and her dad ran a fleet of “ducks,” those odd amphibious military vehicles that looked like tanks but could navigate through water as well. Great for a quick survey of the scenery.

Besides being “duck” runners, Jill’s family was Catholic. Nothing wrong with that, but my family had embraced homespun Methodism for several generations, very revival come-to-Jesus oriented. And even though I thought I had moved beyond that type of parochial religion to something broader (I was studying Augustine, after all), I still couldn’t quite swallow the crazy-for-the-saints attitude of her family.

They lived on a hundred acres. I swear, there were more shrines per acre there than any place in Europe during the Middle Ages, that’d be my guess. The substantial money they made went to building little chapels all over their property. Each one was a work of quality, beautifully appointed inside and out, enough room for five or six adults to fit comfortably inside. Each chapel had a

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kneeler, a place to light candles, and quite good statuettes of the various saints. They had a fortune in shrines.

Jill's mom, after she retired, held nun day on Mondays and Thursdays, when she'd bring out a cohort of sisters from the local convent and they'd do the chapels, praying the rosary, lighting the candles. That tells you how many of those things they had—it took two full days of hard praying to do all of them, and Jill's mom thought it a shame to let such nice chapels go for more than a week without being used.

Which is to say, a boy who grew up thinking that all you needed was a heart strangely warmed, as that Methodist saint John Wesley preached, probably shouldn't count on fitting into that type of religious world.

Jill no longer felt comfortable with her family's take on true salvation either, and so we were not married in the Church; of course, that meant we were not married at all, in the eyes of Jill's parents. I was the son of a bitch who caused their daughter to live in mortal sin, so I never made it too high on the "son-in-law's we're glad to have" list.

Of course, Jill may have been a bit of a lapsed Catholic, but that didn't mean she'd put up with some Protestant parading around in a robe doing her wedding. She was still Catholic enough to think that, if it was going to be a religious service, it should be performed by someone ordained properly; that is, by a bishop who stood within the line of apostolic succession. So, my family got rubbed the wrong way as well, because I was the miracle child, the only one born to a couple who were never supposed to have children. "Are you going to deny your mother the opportunity to see her only child properly, reverently, and respectably married?" My mother did, in fact, talk like that. Few people in Harriman did, but she taught English at the high school, and sometimes her words came out sounding like a textbook.

Jill and I eloped and essentially created a situation where no one, on either side of the family, liked either of us very much, though they still loved us because their religion said they had to,

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no matter the terrible thing we had done to them. I know this to be the case because they told us.

Everyone should have a happy wedding, but because we carried the expectations of both our families on our shoulders the weight of guilt took the shine off the day a little. We were happy, but maybe not as joyful as we could have been. I tried to ease the tension with a joke. "Why was the boy melon sad?"

Her eyes rolled. "Not a down-home attempt at humor," she muttered.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Why was the boy melon sad?"

She gave in. "Why?" she asked impatiently, expecting not to laugh. That's always bad when you're trying to tell a joke.

"Because his girlfriend said, 'I can't elope.'" I waited for a laugh; I thought, since it was our wedding day, she'd indulge me with a pity laugh at least. Nothing.

I tried too hard. "Get it? Can't elope. Melons. Canteloupe." I gave her a big grin. She returned a blank look.

I moved on with what I considered to be a better joke.

"What did the French chef say to his pretty assistant?" I asked, a bit too expectantly, given her previous reaction.

She simply arched an eyebrow.

"How about a little quiche, baby?"

With puppy dog eyes, I looked toward her, yearning for approval. The silence made me think perhaps she had not gotten the joke.

"Quiche. Kiss. Get it? They sound a little alike."

She sighed and gave me a pity smile.

Seven years later we went our separate ways. Well, she went her separate way. I stayed pretty much where I was.

Of course, that's because where I was meant a nice penthouse apartment overlooking Lake Michigan, just up from the Museum of Science and Industry on Lake Shore Drive. My books had made me a fairly well-to-do person; though I was an enigma in Hyde Park. Grey matter practically boiled out of the heads of all the professors, students, and ex-students associated with the University. I had been part of that world. But now I was a hanger on, and a

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bad one at that, because of my gift book writing. The intellectuals scorned me; others envied me. I should have moved, but I couldn't. Jill said that was what was wrong—I was stuck, and it didn't have to do just with physical location.

She left, letting me know that emotionally, mentally, artistically (though she said that with a bit of irony, I think), spiritually, and in every other way I was stunted. A scrub tree in the great forest of life. I wanted to be more; she said I was too comfortable to be more. Maybe she was right.

So there I sat, trying to put the final couple of pages together for my book, *101 Good Things about Labor Day*. Six years before, I had a cute idea: *101 Good Things about Christmas*. Even Jill thought it was cute. Though no graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, my drawing had a wispy quality to it that drew people's attention to it for a few seconds before they moved on. But, turns out, that sort of time span makes for great commercial property. A few seconds is all most folks are willing to give to a drawing.

For fun, saying it'd make us rich, I'd thrown the first book together. Full of sweet little nothings, Christmas confections, for the Christmas consumer. Every page started the same: "One good thing about Christmas is . . ." The sayings were centered on the page, surrounded by a border that illustrated the words. "One good thing about Christmas is, if you decorate the old-fashioned way with popcorn and candy canes, you can eat the decorations." Trees marched around the edges of the page, all done up in little candy canes and strings of popcorn. The book had 101 pages of that kind of stuff, each page devoted to one saying.

There are nine million copies in print now.

So the "101 industry," as I started calling it, began. We did the major holidays—Thanksgiving, Easter, etc. Then we started in on the minor holidays. By the time I hit Labor Day, I thought I'd die from the saccharine sweetness. But there was no way out. My agent and publisher, realizing that the holidays were at an end, had come up with an idea (and a contract) for the next series: the days of the week. After Labor Day, I had to start almost immediately on *101 Good Things about Friday*.

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So I sat there at my computer, filing through the “suggestions” people had sent me via my website for *Friday*. After about the fourth “101” book, I told my agent the ideas had flown the coop. At his suggestion, my website invited “Good Thoughts about Good Days.” Not only had I become a hack; basically, I had turned into a plagiaristic hack who simply tweaked the least bad of the ideas that came in on my webpage. Of course, that meant I had to sit down and read through the material. Hell might have been hotter, but I was pretty sure it would at least have been more interesting. Maybe that’s when I became aware of the devil’s presence enough that I could see him. Or hear him, as it were.

I had my receiver tuned in to WFMT, the fine arts station in Chicago and required listening, especially if you were trying to overcome your hillbilly image and fit in with the UC intelligentsia. Turned out to be a lost cause for me, but I ended up actually liking much of what the station had to offer—Celtic music on occasion, symphonic and chamber music, some of the talk shows. But not opera. I *hate* opera. Those sopranos make me feel like I’m taking a beating at the hands of a spear-toting, horned-helmeted Viking woman.

Sunday, of all days. I loved listening to St. Paul Sundays. I had just heard the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra finish up a nice baroque piece. The host announced that Sir Neville Marriner and the St. Martin-in-the-Fields orchestra were next. I loved ol’ Neville. So I relaxed in my seat, waiting for some soothing music to carry me away from my troubles.

But then, singing started.

*Zwangvolle Plage!*  
*Müh’ ohne Zweck!*

Two lines were enough for me to realize an opera had started. I grabbed my remote and turned in my chair to switch the receiver to another station. And there he sat, next to my stereo. Singing. The devil himself.

## 2

“What the hell . . .” I started.

“No need to be rude, my dear Timothy.” A smile flashed across his face, “I may call you ‘Timothy,’ mightn’t I?”

“Uh, well, sure,” I stumbled over the words.

Somehow, I knew. I knew it was him. Like an appointment you’ve made but forgotten until the person shows up on your doorstep. Surprised but not surprised. Or better, taken aback before realizing that, yes, he’s supposed to be here.

He sat there in a black pinstripe suit, a rich red shirt, and a gray tie. He wore black patent leather shoes. Very sharp. He looked as if he had stepped off the cover of the defunct *George* magazine—a JFK Jr. look-a-like, though his eyebrows were a bit thinner, his nose a little more narrow. Still, those observations came later. All I knew at the moment was that Jr. had come back to life and was sitting in my living room, singing opera. But I knew it wasn’t little JFK.

“People always know,” the devil said, an avuncular air about him, as if taking the gosh darn naive nephew under his wing to explain a few things about the world. “Who I am, that is. You do know who I am, don’t you, my young Timothy?”

“Yes, yes, I think I do know,” I replied.

“Who, then?” he playfully asked.

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I took a long look at him. He must have noticed that my eyes rested on the top of his forehead. A guffaw escaped him.

“Oh, come on, Timothy,” the devil laughed, enjoying himself. “Don’t be so clichéd.” Then the smile slid down into a frown, and he shook his head at me, chastising my lack of sophistication.

Okay, so I was looking for little horns.

“Come on, say it. Look me in the eye and tell me who you think I am.”

And I did. I never did it again, not until the end of our time together. But I looked him straight in the eye, long and hard. At first, it was like falling into a deep well, but the further I fell in, the more I realized, in the distance, fires burned; not like bonfires, but like suns ablaze.

And then I was out. I mostly avoided looking too long into his eyes after that, except for once.

“You’re the devil,” I finally said.

A sigh blew past his lips. “Such a name for one as I,” he said. “Though I knew you were going to say that, especially after I saw you looking for horns.” He again took on his avuncular air. “You did study Augustine, didn’t you, Timothy? And yet, still so literal minded.”

“What would you like to be called?” I asked.

“Lucifer,” the devil pronounced. “Call me Lucifer.”

I tried to do as he asked, but in my mind I always thought of him as the devil, pure and simple. And, what the heck, that’s how he sometimes referred to himself, his early protests to the contrary.

I tried to one-up him with what little I knew of biblical scholarship. “Lucifer’s a misnomer, you know,” I started, taking on my most authoritative voice. “Isaiah 14:12 refers to a Babylonian king, not to the devil. ‘Lucifer’ comes from Saint Jerome’s translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, and literally refers to Venus, the ‘day star.’ The term itself has been dropped in most English translations of the Bible since the King James Version. And . . .”

*Zwangvolle Plage!  
Müh’ ohne Zweck!*

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The devil could be like that sometimes, just interrupt you when you're talking. And usually by singing; very loudly.

I stopped parading my scant bit of scholarship and started listening again.

"Good," the devil said. "Do you have any idea how pedantic you sound when you try to explain things? And it runs through all your writing, except for gift books, which is practically like not writing at all." This time the sly smile that slithered across his face had an edge to it.

"Jerome had it right, at least in his heart, seeing the hidden metaphor, the secret meaning," the devil explained. "Man, I remember those days. Going round and round with him about how to translate this word, how to translate that word. And I even remember . . ."

"Wait a minute," it was my turn to butt in. "You're telling me you knew St. Jerome?"

"Knew him? Loved the guy!" the devil declared. "Now Jerome, he had an air about him, a no-nonsense approach that I appreciate. A hard man, he could be, in the service of his god.

"Yes, he did right; 'day star' for me. The voice of light, the soul of fire. Forget your small-time exegetes; keep with the greats, kid, and learn from them. They're the ones who go for insight, for truth; scholarship, that's for weenies who are too afraid to look reality in the face. I am Lucifer."

He seemed proud to say the word.

"*You* helped translate the Vulgate?" I asked, incredulity punching the words. Jerome had translated the Bible into Latin, and it stood, unchallenged, as the Western church's Bible for over a thousand years. It was the basis for all medieval and Renaissance religious art.

"Why surprised?" the devil asked. "I've known most of the great theologians. Helped them, best I could. Strengthened them. Toughened their minds. Theology's no child's game, you know."

He gave me a sideways look. Then he continued.



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“Truth, hard truth, that’s where I help. I’ll give you an example,” he said, putting his fingers to his lips, pursing them as if in deep thought.

“You know Michelangelo’s Moses, hillbilly boy?”

“Of course,” I said, irritation bubbling up inside me. I didn’t like being reminded of my roots, especially when someone used so-called high culture to try to catch me off guard.

“It’s a statue,” I said, “of Moses seated with the Ten Commandments he’s brought down from Mt. Sinai. In the Bible, it says Moses came down from the mountain, and the skin of his face was radiant. By most accounts,” I said, though not wanting to state it as a fact, because I was pretty sure the devil was out to trip me up, “Jerome mistranslated the Hebrew word for ‘radiant’ as ‘horns.’ That’s why there’s horns instead of a halo on the statue.”

The devil squealed with delight. “Delicious, isn’t it? We wrestled with that one for days. But finally Jerome came around. A man who brings commandments from God? What a trip!” His eyes brightened, experiencing the thrill of some victory had long ago.

“Don’t you see?” the devil asked. “A man who speaks for God, holding God’s commands in his hands. That’s something that makes for power! Moses had a tool, and he used it. Yes sir, Jerome finally *got* it. At the heart of every man is a desire for power, and when that power comes, even in the guise of a god’s gift—or especially when it comes in the guise of a god’s gift—it turns that man into a force. A force to bend men’s wills; a force to impose order. Darkness creeps into the heart, and little by little, the light goes out.”

The devil exulted in his conquest. “With my help, Jerome finally saw through to reality. Fundamentally, any being who obtains the tools of real power becomes a god unto himself. Jerome knew: coming off that mountain, Moses reflected, more than anything else, everything I stand for.”

He laughed to himself. “No, the critics be damned. Jerome knew *exactly* what he was doing when he wrote down that Moses came off the mountain with horns. He finally got the story!”

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I simply fluttered my hands in the air, as if to shoo away everything the devil had said. Yet, as I got to know him, I realized that, in some way, he did know the great doctors of theology; I just wasn't sure how much he had contributed to their work. According to him, quite a bit: order, rules, principles, the sort of things that make for an unbending syllogism that, once you're locked into it, you can't fight your way out.

"But you'll find out more about me as we get to know one another," the devil continued. "Let's talk about you. A rich, fairly good looking if a little pudgy, considerate fellow like you sitting here all alone. Pretty bright, if not brilliant. You want more; you don't have it. A self-described *hack*."

Then the devil came closer, laying a hand on my shoulder.

"It's not just a word that describes what you do, my dear Timothy," he explained. "It's who you are. Bit by bit, tedious gift book after another, you're hacking away at your essence. Pretty soon, there won't be anything left."

Then that tenor voice started up again, the third time.

*Zwangvolle Plage!*

*Müh' ohne Zweck!*

A flash of light (the devil is such a show-off at times), and the devil stood before me in a doctoral gown, hood and cap included. A blackboard had appeared beside him, and the words of his song had been written there.

"Timothy," he said, in a voice that eerily matched that of my dissertation advisor. "Translate, please." He rapped the board hard with an old-time wooden pointer.

"Er . . ." I started.

"F!" he cried. "Timothy," he said, his voice heavy with disappointment, "how can you have read the great Germanic literature on Augustine? This is easy stuff, and you hesitate?"

He had caught me there. Though my Latin finally, after years, had become passable, I never really learned German. I had to take the German exam three times before passing it. Everyone in the

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divinity school had to pass French and German. The third try constituted a miracle; I have no clue how I passed.

“Timothy,” he said in a sing-song voice, “I know your secret.”

I immediately turned red.

“Shame, shame, shame, shame on you!” he sang, a disco beat in the background.

“Too much to do, not enough time to learn,” I said, grabbing the first excuse that came to mind.

I knew he knew. I had to pepper my aborted dissertation with occasional notes to the German scholarship on Augustine. I tried my best to find English translations of the German and then painstakingly look up each word in a German-English dictionary to make sure I wasn’t making any huge mistakes. Then I’d paraphrase, occasionally making the translation so clumsy that my committee could draw no other conclusion but that I had translated the lines myself. Those few books and articles they drew my attention to that had not been translated into English I paid a PhD candidate in the German department to translate for me. Thankfully, not much of that, or it would have broken my very small piggy bank.

I sighed. “A few words, a phrase here and there, an idiom that got stuck in my head for some reason,” I admitted, “that’s all the German I know.”

“No wonder you don’t like opera, then,” the devil said. “You don’t get it. Of course, Italian would be nice, but, by and large, give me Germanic opera, Wagnerian opera, that’s a vision of the world for you!”

He used his pointer, this time more delicately pointing to the words he had written on the board and translating:

*Wearisome torment!*

*Aimless effort!*

So we sat there while the devil gave me a mini-lecture on Wagner’s *Ring* tetralogy. I knew of Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelungs*, and I even had a slight notion of what it was about. But I didn’t really know the details.