ARVED ASHBY

MY 1980S GAYBOY PLAYLIST



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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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ARVED ASHBY

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Susan was kind enough, even after the tough slog of reading drafts, to insist more than once that I get back up in the author's saddle after discouragements and distractions had knocked me off. Without her urgings, this project would have been abandoned years back. As it is, the honesty and humor in these pages can be traced back to her and her example. I'll shout it out loud, if it isn't obvious from the text itself, that just about every one of these pages was influenced by Susan's and Fred's work, just as the project as a whole was inspired by Maggie Nelson — her *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* especially. Fred and Susan have been writing about music and the sexual subject for decades, and have been rewarded with the wrath — some of it quite crazed — of a few outspoken philistines.

A less direct but significant imprint came from Ralph Locke, who proffered the word "pleasure" when we were deliberating over the title of our book in 2003. The volume appeared the

following year as *The Pleasure of Modernist Music* (2004). It seemed something of a prank two decades ago to invoke *jouissance* in the title of an academic music publication, let alone one centering on music that few people actually like (let alone find pleasure-able). But Ralph's simple prompt had the beneficial effect, once the modernist volume was done, of pulling me even closer to Barthes. I soon found my thoughts orbiting around Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text, A Lover's Discourse,* and "The Grain of the Voice," and pondering the questions in the present book. While Fred Maus and I were discussing his wonderful chapter for *The Pleasure of Modernist Music,* an essay on "Musical and Sexual Categories," we found ourselves wondering if intolerance of sexual difference overlaps with musical prejudice — if such parallels can be generalized. We arrived at contrasting answers to the question, but our discussion planted additional seeds in my own mind for the present book. *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* started stirring to life with a graduate seminar, "Music and Queer Desire," that I led in 2019, and then most of the text was drafted in autumn 2022 and summer 2023. For their interest and friendship and support over the course of those labors, I thank Ila Nagar, Thông Nguyen, Eftychia Papanikolaou, Mary Collins, Marc Chan, Scott Seaman, Nancy Alkire, and my old friends Amy Bauer and Hyun Park. I'm also grateful to my School of Music colleagues Ryan Skinner and Eugenia Costa-Giomi for repeatedly asking after the book betwixt and between the work spurts.

As finally assembled, my project sent several frontline university presses running for the hills, some of them probably scared off by the sex. Scared off for another reason was one house that defines and prides itself with queer studies publishing. Their acquisitions editor told me explicitly that my formative gayboy repertory would have to be limited to popular music if I wanted to appear on their list. So much for diversity. Puritanical approaches and zero-sum thinking are suddenly everywhere. But at this point I thank those acquisitions editors for their lack of enthusiasm, since the rebuff has had the fortunate effect of sharpening this book in both tone and content, and

distancing it ever further from academic-disciplinary respectability. And now here we are, finally in print. *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* would probably have never seen the light of day in this newly honed version if it weren't for the trust and mettle of Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, editorial knights in gently shining armor. Vincent also came up with the perfect cover, one that helps to suggest and situate my subject with a single charming if also ironic image. In addition to other punctum folk, I also thank Scott Barker for his copyeditor's eye. *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* couldn't have found a better home than punctum and their — as I admiringly call it — gleeful, genre-queer, and even rather mad playground of empathies and ideas. *Vive leur difference!*

To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.
— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

In human hetero sex, the bits only go one way. Human hetero sex is more like a lecture than a conversation.
— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind*

The role of theory is precisely to demystify dominant discourses and the category of the universal.
— Joanna Bourke, *Theorizing Sexual Violence*

To the memory of Ned Rorem

Introduction

No, this isn't my only — let alone *the* only — playlist for gayness as lived forty years ago. Since I was a music junkie who was just as neck-deep in 1980s materialism as I was awash in late-adolescent hormones, I had many more such inventories — too many to count, probably.

And the one gayboy playlist that I offer here could have been longer. Even now in my head I'm adding selections that would be more plausible than those that follow. I've chosen not to include ballsy chanteuses, such as Madonna ("Like a Virgin," "Vogue," "Holiday," "Material Girl") or Cher ("If I Could Turn Back Time"). There's no queer camaraderie, such as Sister Sledge singing "We Are Family," or soulful male dramaturgs, such as George Michael ("I Want Your Sex") and Freddie Mercury ("I Want to Break Free" with Queen, "Under Pressure" with David Bowie).

The analgesic synth-pop of the Pet Shop Boys ("West End Girls," "It's a Sin") did almost make the cut. (John Gill went so far as to give the first chapter of his book *Queer Noises* the title "Pet Shop Boys, Naturally."[1]) I also at one point cast a fond glance back at the freewheeling misfitry of Cyndi Lau-

1 John Gill, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Music* (Cassell, 1995), 1.

per ("Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," "She's So Unusual"). For a splash of queeny esoterica, I should have had the early queercore band Anti-Scrunti Faction or — as an AIDS-commemorative item — Umberto Giordano's opera *Andrea Chénier* (whose aria "La mamma morta" was lip-synched by Tom Hanks playing AIDS-sufferer Andrew Beckett in *Philadelphia*). Looking further back in time, I suppose the book could have used a top-ten rock song, such as Heart's "Magic Man," a track that moved and titillated me in the late 1970s by evoking a potent masculine ethos from a woman's point of view.

As it is, my eight-item inventory is as anomalous as this gayboy himself was atypical — symptomatic neither of my closeted demographic nor even of my individual self on any given day. This book does little or no representing, which means there is no queer-anthem genre history, except as critique. My eight choices here — arranged in rough chronological order of when I discovered them — are idiosyncratic and personal, maybe even vexing for queer readers. But that's all toward a point, since my own gay coming-of-age was — even more than usual? — atypical, remote, and outwardly uneventful. I sometimes wonder how and when, or even if, such actualization ever happened. There were no heroes there and then, no three-inch headlines, no flaming arrows, no affirmations hollered through bullhorns. Gay liberation was an abstract, urban idea, indeed an exotic distant shore this landlocked lad had barely ever heard of, starting as it did with coastal big-city events, such as the Stonewall uprising and Harvey Milk's ascent to public office. And big-city books have been written about the music that accompanied the movement. (For the record, it was R & B and Motown songs that topped Stonewall's top ten in June 1969, according to the Stonewall Veterans' Association. The club's gay-fave tracks at the time of the history-making riots were by Diana Ross and the Supremes, Spiral Starecase, Sly and the Family Stone, and The Fifth Dimension.[2])

2 *Stonewall Veterans' Association,* https://www.stonewallvets.org/songsofStonewall-1.htm.

But I grew up far from the West Village and from San Francisco. "A good place to raise your kids" was where I came of age in the 1970s and early '80s: an upper-Midwest exurb outskirt. We lived off an arrow-straight country road with improbably narrow gravel shoulders, an asphalt vector that separated hectares of identical cornfields. A big deal was made of the Stumpf fiddle in school presentations. *Hee-Haw* and the *Alvin Styczynski Polka Show* were what I remember seeing on TV, alongside *McMillan & Wife* featuring Rock Hudson's pillow-talk debriefings with wife and fellow detective Susan Saint James. So there was plenty of hetero hayseed-ery, but no access to gay cultural practice, as queer scholar and Chicago native David M. Halperin called it, or to Daniel Harris's "gay culture" in the singular.[3] For one thing, I'm not sure my small hometown ever met up with disco and its queer culture of — as so described — boundless, liberating expression. Maybe because, if Gill was right in *Queer Noises,* such electronic dance music promised a queer deliverance that boonies gayboys like me couldn't picture, let alone desire. Gill, writing in a vein of paradisiacal bombast, called disco "the one form of music which […] is bound up in something that closely resembles Roland Barthes' notion of 'jouissance,' that is, rapture, bliss, or transcendence."[4]

Back then, even before MTV was mainstream, and long before the internet, "homosexuality" was the only widely current word for sexual difference — a term the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* second edition, had listed among the "sexual deviations" in its larger category of "personality disorders and certain other non-psychotic mental

3 David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 3–32, and Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (Hyperion, 1997), 1–7.

4 Gill, *Queer Noises,* 134. Speaking for myself, I can't see how dance music from the 1970s and '80s can (still) be linked with a queer *jouissance* when the current US president dances(?) again and again on camera to the Village People, even when he has the worst civil rights record of any administration of the past seventy years and has actively repealed many LGBTQ2SIA+ protections. The culture has been torched.

disorders."[5] My campaign for self-understanding, an expedition that is still of course ongoing, has indeed been a divergent and disorderly campaign of one. The 1980s — with its Moral Majority, tortured hairstyles, and death-sentence Kaposi sarcoma blotches — became the time-vessel for my growing up. I am still host to that decade's fears, fantasies, and fetishes. To its weird manners of excess and concealment.

In *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist,* I thematicize seven chapters on eight musical examples that helped articulate queer desires and the passions that seemed at the time monstrous, necessary, all-consuming, and unknowable — and were, in any event, held secret. The musical styles of what I did include in my gay playlist are various, showing some of the restless musical variety and availability of that decade; my examples include grunge, separatist R & B, West Coast rock, an early twentieth-century modernist string quartet, and examples of Romantic European orchestral and piano music.

In *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (1997), Daniel Harris tipped his hat (surely a mauve bowler?) to the Roman Empire and averred that golden-age, postwar gayness prioritized audience over artist, that queer cultural causes were as queer cultural causes *did*. "Up until the 1960s, the performer served as a bellwether, a prophet without a religion, a platform, a cause, a messiah whose disciples were more in love with themselves than they were with their star," writes Harris. "The priority of audience over artist becomes particularly clear in the case of the ultimate idol of the gay masses, Judy Garland."[6] If this is true, then a grunge song from 1989 and a Viennese string quartet from 1926 will serve as queer-music examples just as well as any others, even if Judy was uniquely to the fore as a public figure. We should regard the idea of anthems with healthy suspicion. When it comes to the anthems that are symptomatic of collective identity thinking, we should worry about replacing old hegemonies

5 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* 2nd ed. (American Psychiatric Publishing, 1968), 41, 44.

6 Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture,* 17.

with new ones. But sex and cultural survival are often the subtexts here, and so when the conversation turns to Judy Garland and disco, to demur is to doubt the missionary position. What sociopath could demur from such a basic, positive, healthy, consensus-buoyed necessity for the continuance of civilization?

Queer musical coming-of-age tales have certainly been told before. They usually involve empowering song lyrics and emancipatory pop idols: "How David Bowie Sexually Liberated Us All," says a recent LGBTQ2SIA+ headline in *The Beast*.[7] I did love Bowie, who didn't, but it wasn't for his personas and identification-liberations. (I preferred the blue-eyed soul of *Young Americans* to the manic glam of the earlier *Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* album. Here I sided with critic Lester Bangs in turning a skeptical eye and ear to "all that Ziggy Stardust homo-from-Adelbaran business."[8]) My own examples and musically involved stories are more boring and less likely — making them more queer, maybe, or unconventionally queer, or conventionally queer, clandestine queer, or ancient-queer — and they don't resonate with the deliverance cliché so much as they align with narcosis and fetishism and physical power. Nor do I offer queer readings of canonic musical examples; these were intensely personal articles of music that didn't offer solutions or wholeness or monuments, but did tell some kind of story.

Many (not all) of the musical pieces I obsessed over and leaned on aren't actually songs, which is to say their power doesn't presume the specificity of song texts. When discussions of queer desire and sound get away from verbal matters, things get more complicated but also simpler. I involve music's nonverbal, more direct (but still ulterior) effects on the (or at least on this) individual. So how could textless, instrumental music flesh out a sense of sexual selfhood, before the wide advent of the PC,

7 Tim Teeman, "How David Bowie Sexually Liberated Us All," *The Daily Beast,* January 11, 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-david-bowie-sexually-liberated-us-all.

8 Lester Bangs, "David Bowie: Station to Station," in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung,* ed. Greil Marcus (Anchor Books, 2003), 162.

the music video, and digital consumer technologies? In short, *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* becomes an inquiry into music's nonverbal strengths. I follow some of the tougher yet undiscussed ways that cognizable sound can affect the mind, mold the psyche, and goad the groin. Such music can prove powerfully formative insofar as it can embody physical exertions, suggest power dynamics, trace stories about pleasure, express meaning, and irrefusably penetrate the listener in a way that brings about bliss — not a self-discovery, but a *loss* of self. As queer theorist Leo Bersani said of sex, music can precipitate a "shattering" of the ego, a transformation of human subjectivity through excess stimulation, a climactic psychic reset that manages to circumvent "resistant or defensive ego structures."[9] Here Bersani was influenced by psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, and specifically by Laplanche's idea that sex is first manifest in humans as masochism. The pleasures prove so pleasurable that they become painful, and the pains so painful that they become pleasures. The psyche finds itself overwhelmed. Bersani paraphrases the notion thus:

> Perhaps the only way for the infant to survive the imbalance between external stimuli and the ego structures prepared to receive them is to find the pain of this imbalance pleasurable. This does not mean, incidentally, that [Laplanche's] *ébranlement* is an empirical characteristic of our sexual lives; it means that a masochistic self-shattering was constitutive of our identity as sexual beings, that it is present, always, not primarily in our orgasms but rather in the terrifying but also exhilarating instability of human subjectivity.[10]

If Bersani was invested in the notion of a "shattering" of subjectivity, Halperin kept returning to a singularity of identity;

9 Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986), 39.

10 "A Conversation with Leo Bersani with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman," in Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 174.

he referred to "the cultural practice of homosexuality" with the singular and definite article.[11] My own topics and examples here are centrifugal rather than centripetal, which is to say, they don't emphasize a common, a shareable, center of thought and experience. I imagine Halperin would chalk me up as an unconstructive nonparticipant in the gay project, and Harris would go the other way and claim — Anton Bruckner and Tom Petty?! — that I'm misrepresenting my own minority. But then this is just one more wrinkle in my multilayered being at odds with the world — by being gay, too gay, not gay enough, gay in the wrong ways. It takes a basic point of misalignment and compounds it, folds it over as well as under. I'm talking not least about my twofold sexual contravention, first off that I've not only desired men but also the "wrong" men. From the start, while growing up in my small, God-fearing, and white-bread Midwestern town amidst those cornfields, where everyone looked like I did, my attraction to men of color (before I'd even met a man of color) was a second owner's manual gone missing. And on it goes. Musically too — to have records of the Viennese serialist Alban Berg and nothing by Van Halen was a serious abnegation of the 1980s natural order, especially as classical music was considered faggy, inscrutable in a "that's so gay" sense, and suspect all around. Chapter 5, centering on Berg's *Lyric Suite,* explores these questions of "tribalism" as manifest in marginalized intersections.

I had my first orgasm at age eleven and quickly developed a massive libido, and a big repertoire of sexual thoughts that remained physically unactualized and had no performance venue. As with a flash flood, my infiltrative desires brooked no obstacles in filling every available space. In the absence of sex, meaningful sex education, or even erotic imagery (outside the underwear section of J.C. Penney catalogs), sound became for me the key form of subjectivity, excitement, and psychic exercise. My exploding sexual and musical sensibilities were closely intertwined. Calling them analogous wouldn't do justice to their

11 Halperin, *How to Be Gay,* 13.

closeness. Desiring musical contact was like desiring sexual contact, in that both were unpredictable, vaguely dangerous, and beyond the reach of words. Pioneering feminist musicologist Susan McClary described sexuality as "at the same time the most personal of realms and also the realm most carefully constrained by social order." She then cogently explains art as a social discursive practice that works "to translate into terms of culture the exigencies of the physical," while she foregrounds music as "a mysterious medium within which we seem to encounter our 'own' most private feelings."[12] I was happy, years ago, to see queer music theorist Fred Everett Maus exhorting us to "think of music and sex as sources of intense, individualized pleasure, almost overwhelming and terribly difficult to describe. Think of them as, somehow, very personal but, at the same time, dangerously close to loss of self-control, self-loss."[13] These last two terms really resonated: The music I loved didn't offer Halperin's "shared sense of self," a salve for the soul, or a path to liberation; rather, it compelled me toward a cliff edge overlooking volatility, action, necessary unknowns, new possibility, and vital risk.

McClary and her colleague Lawrence Kramer would, I believe, corroborate a basic given, that the collection of pleasures and expressive and identifying practices that we call music are, at the very least, analogous with those that constitute sex. McClary says explicitly that music scholars have long ignored "self-evident representations of gender and eroticism" as well as the particular formal and tonal principles that have been complicit in Western music's gender and sexual agendas.[14] And another basic given: Such pleasure beliefs are different depending on whom we ask and when and where they lived. Mozart's

12 Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 53.

13 Fred Maus, "Musical and Sexual Categories," in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology,* ed. Arved Ashby (University of Rochester Press, 2004), 166.

14 Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (University of California Press, 2000), ix.

psychic sovereigns weren't the same as Gustav Mahler's. Such questions came to a head in Europe in the age of high Romanticism, a period that — Michel Foucault said in *History of Sexuality* — assigned itself the duty of inserting sex into discourse, of making the truth of the subject the truth of sex. (Foucault professed in *The Use of Pleasure,* volume 2 of his four-part series, that he had initially conceived his multivolume history of sex as "a history of truth."[15]) Kramer traces conceptual and sensual change in a Mozart theme between when the original composer wrote it and when Tchaikovsky appropriated it for a theme and variations. Here Kramer diagnoses a major shift from early bourgeois gratification with *galant* surfaces to postrevolutionary pleasure in flesh and substance: "The passage of history between Mozart's and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's practices tracks a shift from a surface model of pleasure under the sign of the haptic to a depth model of pleasure over the undertones of the erotic."[16] Speaking musically, such redefinitions of pleasure mark a cultural moment that speaks to some and is entirely closed to others.

Live concerts were hard for me to come by in the earlier 1980s, so self-realization came shrink-wrapped and designed for rotating at 33⅓ rpm. I stumbled across much of my adolescent life's soundtrack-excerpts in the shiny corporate milieu of Musicland, a smallish local branch of the Midwest music store chain. Such record shops in late-1970s shopping malls were fairly roomy, carpeted, brightly-lit, public spaces that smelled of cardboard and glue. Drifting hither and yon were amplified grooves from Wham! and the ka-chunk, ka-chunk of price-tag guns. Posters of Shaun Cassidy, Mötley Crüe, and Farrah Fawcett (*the* poster, the Sistine Chapel ceiling of our 1980s Midwest) were on display, their oversize and overteased Caucasian hairdos for all intents and purposes indistinguishable from one another.

15 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure,* trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990), 6–7, 11.

16 Lawrence Kramer, *The Thought of Music* (University of California Press, 2016), 86.

The stores had those wide LP bins set side by side, organized into the most basic, declarative categories. ROCK, POP, COUNTRY, SOUNDTRACKS, ADULT CONTEMPORARY, and CLASSICAL were on the big plastic tabs and bin-sequesterings, broadcasting your musical inclinations for all to see. Musicland was a social space. It was a hangout for patrolling and trolling students, who staked out their home base in the HEAVY METAL section. So much for "a common culture" in these public promenades of taste, as derisively monitored by classmates, who watched you browse under those declarative "CLASSICAL" dividers and no doubt thought of translating the word as "FAGGOT MUSIC" or "TUNES FOR COCKSUCKERS." Havelock Ellis observed way back in 1897 that "it has been extravagantly said that all musicians are inverts; it is certain that various famous musicians […] have been homosexual."[17] Pioneering gay musicologist Philip Brett updated this nearly a century later — "*all* musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room."[18] But rockers of that time weren't among those faggots: "Hard rock in the 1980s was a hedonistic and often intensely creative wellspring of escapism that perfectly encapsulated — and maybe even helped to define — a spectacularly over-the-top decade."[19] The rockers' party-machismo made them more media- and lifestyle-personas, influencers, and public figures than musicians in Ellis's and Brett's narrower senses.

* * *

The year 1990 was for me an *annus mirabilis,* as it was coincidentally for queer music studies. One reason the *1980s Gayboy*

17 Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* vol. 2: *Sexual Inversion* (F.A. Davis Co., 1900), 295.

18 Philip Brett, "Are You Musical? Is It Queer to Be Queer? Philip Brett Charts the Rise of Gay and Lesbian Musicology," *The Musical Times* 135, no. 1816 (1994): 371.

19 Tom Beaujour and Richard Bienstock, *Nöthin' But a Good Time: The Uncensored History of the '80s Hard Rock Explosion* (St. Martin's Press, 2021), back cover.

Playlist narratives stop in that year, more or less, is because that's when I lost my virginity. Also, not entirely coincidentally, this was about the time grunge music began to aggress civilization from the US Northwest, thereby starting the overthrow of heavy metal — the music that had, for all intents and purposes, been shrieking a punitive *THOU SHALT HETEROSEX, YOU GAY-ASS-FUCKER* into my ears for most of my youth. Judas Priest and Van Halen had been sucking the air out of the room for a decade, and now some young, strangely sexy, straggly-haired Washingtonians had opened a few windows. It was possible to breathe again, and my grip started to loosen on my repertory of musical monoliths.

The expression "losing your virginity" is based in the decrepit idea of men acquiring chaste women as their property. The phrase also speaks to old and pathological linkages of sexual desire with psychic lack. But even if we were to ignore those origins, the phrase itself isn't useful. It makes no sense semantically to "lose" a form of absence, to put behind you a *not-doing* of something. (To talk about going on a journey in similar terms, you would say, "I've just lost my geographical fixity and am now in Poughkeepsie.") Even so, it is true that having sex for the first time can incite volcanic changes in your personal epistemology and your hierarchies of desire, reaching far beyond domains of sexual need. (You discover, for instance, that beautiful men can have ugly hang-ups or sexual quirks or, even more disturbingly, inhibitions when they're naked. Also that beautiful men don't always smell beautiful when up close. Or always taste nice, for that matter. My whole *Weltanschauung* changed one day when I kissed the dreamboaty D. and immediately found that his mouth tasted of cauliflower. And every time D. and I returned to lovemaking, the inscrutable vegetable essence rejoined us. But then — as the voice in my head protested reluctantly — Plato had never said anything about cauliflower…) And the whole mythology overlay, the notion of exchanging a thing called "innocence" for a quality of "experience," proves fascinating. Not quite the transaction that William Blake saw in the early 1800s, but still some kind of dualism. In my case, a "loss" of sex-

ual innocence happened to coincide with a jettisoning of musical innocence. I spent the night with R. right around the time I wrote my doctoral candidacy exams in musicology, well before meeting D., and then ran off to Vienna to do archival research on Alban Berg. Several forms of virtuousness were lost in this transition, but then so was a considerable degree of ignorance.

So the year 1990 saw my arrivals as sexual, social, and scholarly debutante, and I should have foreseen how intertwined these big reveals would be. My formational fluxing was pretty much over at that point, officially. Speaking broadly about the discipline, 1990 was the year Philip Brett dug in his heels to get the first conference panel on gay issues scheduled at the Oakland national joint meeting of musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and music theorists. (In McClary's fond recollection, the program committee had "backed down rather than face the prospect of this dignified gentleman standing in the hall voicing his grievances."[20] Sadly, I was too busy trying to read Berg's messy handwriting in the Albertina in Vienna to make my way to the Oakland conference.) That year some earthshaking publications also arrived and changed everything when it came to thinking about musicality as something that might relate to sexuality. For me, the most life-changing writings were those by Eve Sedgwick and by Brett himself. (By my own admission, in the chapters that follow I choose to overlook some key queer-theory writers of the past two decades, for the simple reason that I'm discussing music I knew in the 1980s and to which I've tried to apply theory more-or-less of that time: Sedgwick, Brett, McClary, Maus, Cusick.)

It was through the identity-related institution of musicality that my own ad hoc aural selfhood developed, despite my middling abilities as a musical performer. Brett expanded on this idea in "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet" (1990), an essay that hit me so hard it left me in tears. I felt seen. For Brett,

20 McClary, "Introduction: Remembering Philip Brett," in Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays,* ed. George E. Haggerty (University of California Press, 2006), 3.

a person's musicality is synonymous with their musical subjectivity — an individual selfhood-in-music that nevertheless presumes some socially approved level of musicianship. In its most basic meaning, musicality entails a kind of literacy, even if that is by and for only one person. And then there is the notion of a quiet queer epistemology, as Sedgwick described in her bold *The Epistemology of the Closet* (also 1990). The word comes from the ancient Greek *epistēmē,* "knowledge." Sedgwick looked deeply into the closet as a system of divisions and repressions of knowing, and found unsuspected layers of psychic damage and nefarious, purposeful obscurities. It was Sedgwick who helped me grasp my own queer musicality — as an agency developed within the introverted realm of the inner ear; a queer, malleable, aggrandized, ad hoc musicianship, a musicality of and for an individual that contrasts with conservatory-defined musicianship, not least for the personal, expressive liberties it took with canonic musical texts. I was free to home in on specific passages and groom them, making them just as delicate or forceful, soft or loud, slow or fast as I wanted.

So Sedgwick and Brett were vital sources, joined later by the influential musicologists and theorists Fred Everett Maus, Suzanne Cusick, Paul Attinello, and others. But I was still just as uncomfortable writing about myself — educational authorities had strongly discouraged us from writing with the first person — as I was penning the same kind of boring positivist-intentionalist-philological stuff that I'd been doing since school. (Factual melees where any stab at meaning would be rejoindered with "but would Beethoven have agreed with your interpretation, if he weren't — you know — dead?") The catalyzing moment when everything came together was much later, when I came across Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015). At first I wasn't even sure what I was reading. It soon became evident that the book is a memoir, but of a particular or even peculiar kind. Nelson herself describes the book as an example of autotheory, a genre she defines as "autobiographical writing that exceeds the

boundaries of the 'personal.'" Autobiography, in other words, but *with theory rather than biography as the vehicle.*[21]

A *Los Angeles Times* critic called *The Argonauts* "a book about using the writings of smart, even difficult writers to help us find clarity and precision in our intimate lives, and it's a book about the no less intimate pleasures of the life of the mind."[22] Now I imagine any memoir written by a restless, philosophical mind in a style of brutal honesty almost has to be autotheory by its nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* — personal and intimate — count as the first modern memoir, and they still shock the reader two and a half centuries later. The autotheory genre would seem the domain of the questioning and the marginalized as they negotiate times of crisis. Rousseau's self-reflections stemmed from his increasing alienation with the steamrolling incursions of Enlightenment rationality. At one point in another discussion, Rousseau responded despairingly through his character of the Savoyard Vicar: "In vain do you argue this point with me; I feel it, and it is this feeling which speaks to me more forcibly than the reason which disputes it."[23] For a post-truth time like our own, when *feelings* are being forcefully and deceitfully posed as *reason,* the only solution is to deal in *naked feelings*. I return to that book critic's bull's-eye description of Nelson's *The Argonauts* as chronicling "intimate pleasures of the life of the mind." In my view, there's a place for substantial summaries of earlier authors and ideas in such autotheoretical "mind" accounts, and in such world-making. By her own admission, Nelson took the "auto theory" description from Paul Preciado's *Testo-Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Phar-*

21 Micah McCrary, "Riding the Blinds: Writing Is About Doggedly Following One's Interests without Fixating on Their Outcome," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* April 26, 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riding-the-blinds/.

22 Sara Marcus, "Review: An Intimate Look at a Fluid Family in Maggie Nelson's 'The Argonauts,'" *Los Angeles Times,* April 30, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-maggie-nelson-20150503-story.html.

23 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education,* trans. Barbara Foxley (J.M. Dent and Sons, 1921), 256.

macopornographic Era (2008/2013), a memoir where that author interleaves his subjective observations of body and mind with detailed accounts of industrial history, transitioning hormone treatments, cultural theory, and Marxian economics.[24]

Writers, broadly evoked, are now allowing themselves to work in greater intimacy. The 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature went to Annie Ernaux, the French autobiographer. Critic Adam Gopnik saw the award as a timely validation of memoir as the genre for our hyperpoliticized era. He wrote: "[Ernaux's] ascension marks a recognition that memoir, in all its many faces and poses — direct, self-critical, rueful and comic, engagé and not — is perhaps the leading genre of our time, as much as the novel was for the first half of the twentieth century. We feel a need for verifiable, or at least credible, personal history in a time when so much else seems constructed and untrustworthy."[25] Gopnik said, in essence, the first-person voice of the memoir has taken on new genuineness and urgency for our own time of political spin and post-truth. Intimacy, in short — dropping all my guards so you'll drop yours — has become the only answer to being waist-deep in lies. At her Nobel acceptance, Ernaux explained her own use of the first person, "a form both masculine and feminine," as

> an exploratory tool that captures sensations: those which memory has buried, those which the world around us keeps on giving, everywhere and all the time. The prerequisite of sensation has for me become both the guide and guarantee of the authenticity of my research. But to what end? Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and

24 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo-Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era,* trans. Bruce Benderson (Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

25 Adam Gopnik, "Annie Ernaux's Justly Deserved Nobel: Her Win Marks the Ascendancy of the Memoir as the Leading Genre of Our Time," *The New Yorker,* October 9, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/annie-ernauxs-justly-deserved-nobel.

> thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others. Who could say that love, pain and mourning, shame, are not universal?[26]

McKenzie Wark is another writer who has rethought old presumptions of an objective writing identity. She calls memoir and autobiography "attempts to write the truth of the self," and claims that writers in those genres neglect the actuality that "selfhood itself is a fiction." She then goes Roland Barthes one better, vaulting over Barthes's "death of the author, birth of the reader" cause, to proclaim, "The name of the author in the text is an empty sign that forms a node in the perceptual field, around which unfolds the situation of its making." I've found both Wark and Ernaux valuable while writing *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist,* in that they've helped excuse my author-self from slavish obeisance to old principles of consistency and linear rationalist thinking. Wark goes on to discuss the vague genre divisions between autotheory and autofiction, ultimately settling for the broader notion of "autotextual" writing:

> I think of autotheory as not too different from autofiction. Both are interested in the perceptual. Autofiction is more interested in the affective dimensions of what's perceived; autotheory more the conceptual. It's more interesting to think of autofiction/autotheory as tactics rather than genres, and as a continuity of tactics. I'll call it the "autotextual": These practices made this self. These institutions, these historical circumstances. It chanced these slings and arrows.[27]

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26 Annie Ernaux, Nobel Prize Lecture, December 7, 2022, https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2022/12/ernaux-lecture-english.pdf.

27 McKenzie Wark, "Critical (Auto) Theory," *e-flux Journal* 140 (2023), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/140/572300/critical-auto-theory/. Wark again echoes Barthes's descriptions of author and text when she says, "I'm not the creator-god of this life, this text. I'm just a made thing, like any other made thing — just one that is curious about its making."

So what are these slings and arrows, these crises that lead memoirists to autotheory? Ernaux has worked through debilitating, even crushing forms of gendered shame. Nelson turned to a more exploratory form of autotheory in order to work through questions of pregnancy, love, and family at a time when the so-called Defense of Marriage Act (1996, repealed 2022) ruled and gender fluidity wasn't yet a thing. As for us today, we live in a terrifying time of both mainstream lies (mostly from the right wing, and of a kind that would make even Richard Nixon and Augusto Pinochet blush) and suffocating fact-finding (of the kind that's feeding polls and professional empiricism; "you can prove anything with statistics"). With these two authors and I think with me, there's the sense of a widely read and deeply self-questioning person who lives for the sake of both ideas and pleasure, but who ultimately sacrifices arthritic rationality for the sake of *feeling* and an overriding need to understand the self. In his *Reveries,* Rousseau implicitly contrasted his goal for philosophy with that of other Enlightenment philosophers:

> I have met many men who were more learned in their philosophizing [than I], but their philosophy remained, as it were, external to them. Wanting to know more than other people, they studied the workings of the universe, as they might have studied some machine they had come across, out of sheer curiosity. They studied human nature, in order to speak knowledgeably about it, not in order to know themselves.[28]

Self-knowledge can be energizing, but the goal in autotheory is not to talk about yourself or to "tell your story," but to portray the world in the kind of full, realistic complexity that can only come through the prism of personal experiential scrutiny, as aided and particularized by the intellectual tools of earlier thinkers (and, I would add, by the musical means worked up by important musicians).

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28 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker,* trans. Peter France (Penguin, 1979), 27.

Some are now impugning autotheory in the 2020s. This would-be genre has its critics, but I think they're mistaking subject matter for approach. These critics are too caught up in the "relevance" or not of autotheorists' real-life thematics, and these supposed inconsistencies prevent those critics from seeing the writers' courage, emotional truth, and liberating vulnerabilities. Nelson's focus on pregnancy and family in *The Argonauts,* for instance, is less important than the specific writerly subjectivities precipitated by those experiences. Obsess over the political disempowerment (or whatever) in those details, and you lose the whole point. Ernaux has said that an author fashioning "their story" in any coherent, linear fashion violates the richness of experience that sits with the individual moment: "Self-narrative, in bringing to light a dominant truth that it seeks in order to ensure a continuity of being, always neglects to consider the following: our failure to understand what we experience, at the moment we experience it; the opacity of the present, whereby every sentence and every assertion should be riddled with holes."[29] Nelson's statement in a *Guardian* interview has become a vademecum for me in this respect:

> We're all people and our baggage makes our writing autobiographical, but the important thing is that whatever baggage you have from your life that you bring to intellectual scenarios is not going to keep you from being able to focus on the intellectual work being done.[30]

So many things come together in *The Argonauts*: the "credible history" of memoir, the overall emphasis on ideas rather than facts, and the possibility of talking about intimacy and pleasure and pain — and thus, boundaries of the self — in deep context rather than in the abstract, and, last, the possibility of talking

29 Annie Ernaux, *A Girl's Story,* trans. Alison L. Strayer (Seven Stories Press, 2020), 76.

30 Angela Chen, "Maggie Nelson on Intellectualism and Having 'Baggage,'" *The Guardian,* April 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/14/maggie-nelson-argonauts-intellectualism-having-baggage.

about literature (or, in my case, music) in some kind of self-ethnographic terms, scrutinizing its staunchest reifications in as much detail as one could want.

Sex and music are seldom written about jointly and attentively and in depth. McClary has recently confirmed her long-standing conviction that scholars work to separate music "[from] the world, erotic or otherwise." These days, she even speaks of a purposeful barrier: "These attitudes have constructed a firewall that prohibits historians from venturing in and that even hamstrings musicologists who might wish to communicate aspects of what they know."[31] It proves ever harder to write about music's involvements in the real and everyday. The formalist imperative in Eurocentric music studies, which dates back at least to Eduard Hanslick's treatise *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854) and his later professorship at the University of Vienna, has proved resilient in musical institutions and practices down to the present. Formalism was instituted to combat trivial, arbitrary, and sentimental approaches to musical meaning, and it set itself in opposition to musical amateurism. The score-bound competition culture of music conservatories, a culture that has no counterpart in literary studies, has encouraged even deeper entrenchment of fidelity to musical texts and works — to the point where ideals of interpreting a musical work have become synonymous with "faithfully" or even "perfectly" realizing the text of that work. I described Eurocentric music performance practices along these lines some years back: "*Werktreu* culture demands an 'authentic' realization from the interpreter — authenticity entailing correspondence with an authoritative model." And then the conservatory-driven interpretive culture itself achieved a self-effacing standardization. "Musicality is the word that would now be used to describe this kind of standardization, a kind of institutionalized performers' humanism."[32]

31 Susan McClary, "Tumescence and Detumescence in a Monteverdi Madrigal," in *Making Sense of Music* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 166.

32 Arved Ashby, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (University of California Press, 2010), 96, 158.

These institutional problems have made it tough or even impossible to write musical autotheory that could compare with the extant autotheory centering on literature, critical theory, and philosophy — as written by Preciado, Nelson, and Kris Kraus (her droll and head-spinning *I Love Dick*, 2006). As old epistemologies would have it, there is a chasmic distance between the realm of musical experience and the world of everyday experience. This gap exists in large part because of the specialized vocabulary of music analysis — a vocabulary that constantly runs the risk of excluding nonacademics in ways the terms of verbal and literary and dramatic analysis won't, unless such literary analysis were to restrict itself to such esoterica as, say, enjambment, consistency of spondaic tetrameter, and the legacy of the Pindaric ode. The institutionalized practice of music theory and analysis in the United States worked to codify and professionalize musical languages and structures, such that questions of musical meaning were largely supplanted by questions of music analysis. Analysis was groomed as the only possible account of music's content as Hanslick had defined it so impersonally and reductively: not as emotions or narratives, but as "tonally moving forms."[33] Various music scholars over the decades have lamented this hermetic manner of discourse, among them McClary, Maus, and Marion Guck. In "Terminal Prestige" (1989), McClary encapsulated the issue memorably. In her view, the formalist musical avant-garde believes it "better to go down with the ship than to admit to meaning."[34] And that motto helps explain the philosophy that's made it so perennially difficult to relate music to life in any real detail.

We still have, surviving to this day, the old and resilient notions of "absolute music" versus "extramusical" incursions into musical thinking — whereas, by comparison, it would be absurd to bring up any literary notion of "pure writing" or

33 Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful,* trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Hackett, 1986), 29.

34 Susan McClary, "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 66.

"extraliterary" elements. Some see real-life infiltrations on musical thinking as a begrudging form of *concession,* in the same way Robyn Wiegman believes that Preciado inorganically set up "a virtuoso intrusion of autobiographical confession into the conventions of academic writing itself," whereas Nelson, in Wiegman's view, uses the first person "as a rendering of critical theory as part of the worlding of everyday life."[35] I remember someone somewhere using the odd description "impressionist" to characterize music writing that admits issues of "extramusical" life. Maus refers to "experiential" discussions of music, by which he means talking about music in terms that relate to the listener's life, most of which are based in listening. Maus refers to "professional norms of objectivity" in music scholarship, norms that result in "music scholars fail[ing] to address important experiential qualities." He goes further to describe most musicological discourse as an actual means of obfuscation rather than explanation. For him, scholarly music terms represent "a defense mechanism, a way of evading aspects of musical experience."[36]

Compounding this potential problem is the risk of the reader reading at cross-purposes with the writer. One side of a music autotheory readership might disparage life-writing as indulgent and self-occupied, while the other set of readers could deem the musical discussions pedantic and abstract. Leonard Barkan is a literary scholar who has detailed his own real-life learnings from William Shakespeare in *Reading Shakespeare Reading Me* (2022). When Barkan and I talked about the difficulties of doing autotheory, he pointed out the *music* writer's difficulty in not having the real-world, grounding representativeness that the *literary* writer necessarily shares with their reader. (In short, the literary scholar uses words to talk about thoughts that have already been expressed in words, whereas using musical notes to explain musical notes would work only within a smallish

35 Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Autotheory Theory," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 2.

36 Fred Maus, "Music, Gender, and Sexuality," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction,* 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2012), 325.

cohort of music theorists. In truth, musical discussions outside academia tend to rely heavily on metaphorical language. And literary writing can be self-representing, in the sense that a character in a novel can represent particular thematic traits, such as promiscuity or stupid idealism, and thereby show more or less clearly how those constructs fare in the world of living humans. But a musical theme can't do any of these things, or can't do so clearly.) "I think you have a harder row to hoe," Leonard reassured or rather consoled me, "as a musicologist who also wants to be self-presenting as I do with literature (especially drama), which already in and of itself emerges as personal material with its own built-in verisimilitude — whether one believes in the illusion of reality or not."[37]

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My 1980s Gayboy Playlist is a single-author book on music, musicality, human beauty, and sex, and this purview makes it unique (and also ticklish). Astonishing as it is, scholars have infrequently related music to sex — let alone to queer sex — in any direct way. In more cynical moments, I wonder how musicologists manage to reproduce. When authors have discussed sex and music together, they've usually depended on biographical-historical contexts rather than conceptual, theoretical, or autoethnographic work. (In other words, they've worked to develop a queer hermeneutics that will allow for new gay readings of the work of gay musicians, or queer understandings of lesbian composers.) So the focus has been mostly on the queer object rather than the queer subject. Even if a few individual essays have touched on the subject of music and sex (including those authors above), I believe such a discussion needs the extended scope of a monograph. *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* is the first such book to address the specifics of a queer subjectivity as it variously mediates between sexuality and musicality. Two authors explored such issues in the 1990s, but neither was a musicologist

37 Leonard Barkan, text message to author, February 27, 2024.

or music academic, and their musical discussions as such could be frustrating. Wayne Koestenbaum started in this direction with his aphoristic *The Queen's Throat* (1993). And then there is D.A. Miller's *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (1998), which is predominantly cultural theory and genre history: a joint substantiation and interrogation of gay stereotypes. (To paraphrase him into my own summational terms, Miller begins his book by saying, yes, a queer affection for Broadway shows does indeed stand as a love that "dares speak its name," and it does so loudly and repeatedly.)

Bluntness without cruelty has never been more important than now. Sensuality isn't amenable to terms from the social sciences, therefore I try to avoid social science jargon. (It's astonishing to see scholars of sexuality, gender, and desire stoop to neutering and incapacitating their subjects with such terminology. If musicological and music analysis terms such as "historically informed performance" and "metrical dissonance" badly suit a visceral and invasive form of expression like music, then what about chilly and abstruse jargon such as "heteronormativity" and "sexual object choice"?) Since music is very much a bodily form of expression, I don't shy away from talking about sex acts, kinks, power plays, or body parts. I don't resist four-letter words. Even recent queer theorists can sound Victorian in the lengths they take to avoid talking about sex. Halperin comes right out and — by way of agreeing with such avoidance, mind you — states the implicit fear behind this: To focus on queer sex is to be reductive and to cater to homophobia. To talk about bodies and cocks is to perpetuate century-old notions that there is something "fundamentally wrong" with queer people. "In this context," Halperin writes, "it seemed necessary to close off the entire topic of gay subjectivity to respectable inquiry, so as to prevent gayness from ever again being understood as a sickness. In pursuit of that goal, the lesbian and gay movement has produced a remarkably plausible and persuasive new definition of

homosexuality in political rather than psychological terms."[38] I couldn't disagree more, especially given today's neoconservative emphasis on social homogeneity. I side here not with Halperin but with Bersani, who came out swinging against Halperin's defeatism and refused to foist shame onto the queer body, especially when it came to penetration and pleasure. We now live in a time when Queer Pride has become, at most, an empty shell of corporate feel-goodism (and suburbanites even find that whitewashed notion difficult to stomach) and legislators in red and purple states work overtime to quash queer visibility. At such a time, it's more important than ever to talk about gay fucking in explicit terms and to do exactly what we wish with polite society's terms of shame and puritanism.

What kind of musics do I discuss, and what are their effects? Songs and symphonies became fixations for me in the 1980s, confronting the need for sexual and emotional intimacy and instead substituting, within the inner ear, aural thrust and a brawny sense of line. Music became a dependency for me during that unknowing part of queer adolescence that Bersani called "our apprenticeship in desiring"[39] — and also a palliative against hostility, jealousy, sexual obsession, the psychic suffocation of the closet, and in my own case clinical depression and tricyclic meds (these two long battling each other for the upper hand). *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* stands as a Bersanian work in that it doesn't "promote" respectability, psychic health, or delivery from suppression. Given my isolation, music was less a ticket to wholeness than it was a fetish: I *got off* on music as an expression that communicated directly; I unlawfully hotwired it for joy rides, without inculcation or analysis. Even the assuring pathways traced by beloved musical works — moving yet again, moving always, from darkness to light, or, better said, from tension to peace — became addictions rather than lessons

38 David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), 2.

39 Leo Bersani, "Prologue," in *Is the Rectum a Grave?,* 6.

to be learned. Musical objects became partners in intimacy or perpetrators of more (pleasurably) brutal experiences.

In writing this book, I initially explored but ended up sidelining one Bersanian and Sedgwickian project: pointing out marginalizing and pathologizing terminologies. Sedgwick made clear that everyday words are the primary means by which straight epistemologies do their oppressive dirty work and perpetuate "heterosexist" power structures. She underlined "the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public."[40] Queer sex, in other words, is habitually constructed and discussed in terms that automatically, before the fact, undermine any aspiration it might have to dignity and openness. Ursula K. Le Guin said much the same about epistemologies more broadly, without using that term: "This is why utterance is magic. Words do have power. Names have power. Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it."[41] I ultimately failed to pursue such wordage-projects as fully as they deserve, for the simple reason that — to return to Barkan's description — the act of "hoeing [my] harder row as a musicologist who also wants to be self-presenting" threatened to become outright impossible if I were to undertake it at the same time I interrogated the very language being used. Still, there does remain a good smattering of terminological and semantic discussions in this book, not least in chapter 1, where I restrict myself to the term "homosexual" in talking about Tchaikovsky, interrogating that seemingly indelible term at the same time as I acknowledge that it wasn't a word Tchaikovsky would have recognized.

40 Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 71.

41 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Telling Is Listening," in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Shambhala, 2004), 199.

To be honest, it was my own anger at failing in that subversive, anticloset terminological project that led me to the guerilla tactic of using the words "fuck" and "cock" quite a bit. If it's a choice between, first, perpetuating destructive "epistemologies of the closet" that will defeat me before I start and, second, violating the rules of polite discourse, I'll pick the second every time. (Supposed vulgarities that worked well for Bersani thirty years ago in his Harvard University Press books should, I hope, work for me today. But then he was a scholar of French novels and poetry while music's comfy abstractions, the wholesome trade-school and family-values character of its mechanics and instruction, have dissuaded musicians from having the frank and inquisitive discussions that happen every day in literature. It's enough to drive us music discussants mad: this curtain of blank, virtuous insularity drawn around an expressive form that can utterly change the mind and the body.) Moreover, "cock" is for me less a vulgarity than an affectionate nickname. It shows a healthy familiarity with the penis. But then I also use four-letter words for pragmatic style reasons. To wit, these are the most common and most emotionally engaged words for sexual intercourse and male sex organs in the twenty-first century. The more formal words are doctors' or sexologists' terms, and beyond that they're hopelessly coy, as I hear them. Moreover, the exclusion of vernacular sex terms from academic writing represents a form of class chauvinism. It suggests the lower classes have base sexploitations, while those who know their Latinate words manage to stay respectable between the sheets. Using polysyllables is akin to turning off the lights before you get down and dirty, because clarity of vision is a sin. And it's for just such reasons of propriety and concealment that the King's English — not the Queen's, surely — has no equivalent to the transitive verb "to fuck." (You can *fuck* a person, but there's no way to *intercourse* them.) And of course we owe this modesty of terms to the assumed fact that upper-crust folks don't treat each other like slabs of meat in their private moments.

For my queer readers of whichever sexual identity–perspective, I do admit to making a hash of the term "queer," and I

apologize for willfully — and no doubt self-servingly — neglecting lesbian, bisexual, and transgender perspectives. At the same time, I hope it's clear that I'm trying to let in some air by using certain terms playfully and ironically. It's just plain fun to enunciate the word "homosexual" as if you were the Duke of Edinburgh speaking with deep, bowel-roiling distaste (that is, with the "x" before an unstressed vowel properly enunciated, as expected in the King's English, thus said as a "ks" rather than a "gz"). But in most instances, I try instead to use "gayness," which is a neologism but preferable when irony is off the table. Last, when I use the words "fag" or "faggot," I do so ironically but also in a period sense, the sense that this was the most common term I myself heard when growing up. Part of that period-meaning comes from two shades of the word's meaning in the Midwest in the 1970s and '80s; that a "faggot" needs to get over himself, and conversely that a "faggot" is a male whom the speaker fears and doesn't understand (most likely in the sense of having no idea how a man could possibly have sex with another man). And as a word it's unique for its pejorative and divisive slant, for the undertow of (self-)loathing that Larry Kramer captured in his novel *Faggots*. Kramer penned this send-up in 1978, applying thick slatherings of sexual negativity, and presaging the disgust that AIDS would unleash all too soon.

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One reason I've decided to write *My 1980s Gayboy Playlist* subjectively in the first person is that politicians and other aspiring despots are ramping up efforts to purge individual subjectivities and make difference less visible. Some of this vulgar fascism is just an open matter of quashing civil rights and civil liberties, rationalized with the assertion that being a citizen is above all a privilege. To assert such privilege is to say that the abstraction that is our nation somehow takes priority over the realities and needs of the people who constitute it. This nationalist about-face has happened quite suddenly. At first when I started writing about a culture of the closet, my work seemed out of step with

increasingly progressive mindsets and shifting public opinion, whereby — for instance — the US Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 and the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges,* 2015). And then, as recently as 2022, in a rare act of bipartisan pleasance, Congress passed the Respect for Marriage Act (H.R. 8404), thereby protecting same-sex and interracial marriages from any "originalist" judicial reviews of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) decisions.

But all that now seems a century ago. As I write this, a wave of regressive anti-queer legislation is being passed by legislatures in many US states, including the one I live in: Ohio. In its national survey, the ACLU lists 525 anti-LGBTQ2SIA+ bills at various stages in just the first months of 2026.[42] Most of these motions have proceeded from the cynical idea that being queer qualifies as a special interest or even a radical and externally imposed ideology rather than a matter of survival and livelihood. Ultimately, these restrictive measures are no longer about rights and civic life, but are cynical at their core — zero-sum political scheming, efforts to dehumanize part of the population. I can't believe the legislators really care that much about these issues as such, except for the opportunities they provide to divide the electorate and appeal to their conservative base.

Just as alarming, the Ohio legislature — driven by a Republican supermajority — has passed legislation giving themselves unprecedented control over higher education in the state. Senate Bill 1, effective as law as of June 27, 2025, eliminates minority undergraduate majors, prohibits diversity initiatives, jeopardizes diversity scholarships, polices classroom discussions, establishes post-tenure reviews, gives a retrenchment provision that prevents unions from bargaining over tenure, and bans faculty strikes (now how did that get in there?). Most appallingly, it bars what the sponsors call "controversial beliefs or policies" from the classroom. Such are defined only in circular, self-serv-

42 "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2026," *ACLU,* https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2026.

ing fashion: "'Controversial belief or policy' means any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion."[43] Now just who deemed these clear-cut issues "controversial," and when? If climate, foreign policy, and marriage (at the least) are controversial and restricted subjects, then we're all doomed before we start. (And the Jeffrey Epstein mess now brings up the question: If abortion counts as controversial, are payola, sex-trafficking, and statutory rape also off limits? This is a necessary question, since Epstein money and even his sexual legacy are all over central Ohio.)

The chutzpah of these right-wing politicians is glaring, with Epstein-tainted largesse slipped into pockets of some of these same right-wing "anti-controversy" senators. I would describe their m.o. as follows: Isolate enlightened, commonsense concerns that they and their donors find politically (and financially, sometimes ideologically) inconvenient, and then call those points "controversial" often enough that, having sown enough confusion with the public, they can publicly pass off their lies as truths. And then, when their lies are so thick on the ground they can almost stand on them, they declare said topics "controversial" and write laws to protect those lies as free speech.

These Ohio Republican state senators deal in a deathly combination of duplicity and arbitrariness. They are salaried servants of the public trust — a naïve statement, yes — who choose instead to deal in gaslighting, myopia, vendettas, divisiveness, despair, illness, and death. Ours is a time when one in five Ohio children face hunger, one in seven LGBTQ2SIA+ youth in the state attempted suicide in 2022, and the opioid epidemic is still wreaking widespread misery in the state. At such a time of real mortal suffering, it's oh so great to see "the party of small government" diverting time and money to their own "free speech"

43 "Senate Bill 1 Documents," *The Ohio Legislature 136th General Assembly,* https://search-prod.lis.state.oh.us/solarapi/v1/general_assembly_135/bills/sb83/IN/00/sb83_00_IN?format=pdf.

and "parents' rights" campaigns; to enforce their own unpopular, destructive, and contrary-to-logic views; and to try to teach professional educators how to teach.[44]

Diversity, as a principle and a practice, has quickly gone from golden idol to whipping boy. As part of Senate Bill 1, the Republican-controlled Ohio legislature is channeling $10 million in taxpayer funds to an "Intellectual Diversity Center" at The Ohio State University, in addition to spending $14 million for similar projects at four other state schools.[45] Let's be honest: "Diversity" only appears here as a Republican co-option, as a way of flipping the middle finger to progressives and their affirmative action policies, as a strategy for delightedly skewering those crazy liberals with their own sword. Cultural conservatives are modeling their approach on viruses: deceive, invade, corrupt, multiply, and kill. These "Intellectual Diversity Centers" are neither intellectual nor diverse, and they're certainly not about productive discourse. They are really about artificially inseminating humanist educational environments with counterproductive, regressive, tone-deaf, and ultimately antihumanist voices.[46] They are essentially a right-wing investment in retaliatory

44 "Ohio," *Feeding America,* https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/ohio, and "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health Ohio," *The Trevor Project,* https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Trevor-Project-2022-National-Survey-on-LGBTQ-Youth-Mental-Health-by-State-Ohio.pdf.

45 Megan Henry, "State Budget Creates $24 Million 'Intellectual Diversity' Centers at Five Ohio Universities," *Ohio Capital Journal,* July 18, 2023, https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2023/07/18/state-budget-creates-24-million-intellectual-diversity-centers-at-five-ohio-universities/.

46 The numbers have just come in as I go to press, and they show students voting "no" with their feet to such academic encroachments. By the state's own figures, in 2025 the Chase Center for Civics, Culture and Society at Ohio State in Columbus enrolled only 159 students on a campus of more than 67 thousand. In short: after lamenting what they call "liberal bias" and over-endowed minority interests, and after forcing cancellation of many programs with smaller enrollments, Republicans have written an actual law to … over-endow a minority interest on campus, moreover an intrusive one with considerably less relevance. Morgan Trau, "Ohio GOP Lawmakers' University Civics Centers Aren't Popular. They Want to Require Attendance," *Ohio Capital Journal,* July 7, 2026, https://ohiocapi-

violation and perversion of the whole diversity idea. And that first word — maybe "intellectual diversity" also encompasses an *absence* of intellect? In which case, yes, it's an appropriate term for the Republican plan.

In brief, we've arrived at a state of war and self-righteous cruelty, playing out against a changed political landscape where it's become more necessary than ever for singularity to be strategically visible and outspoken. To resist all the aggressive conformity and post-truth obscurantism, it's high time for difference of whatever kind to stand up, stand out, and be counted. Compliance is collusion. So please count this book as one person's response to the power grabs. Read these chapters as rather self-occupied paeans to humanity in its widest texture of the rough and the irregular.

Legislators in some states to Ohio's south have become even bigger culture war fascists over the past decade, and are trying to resuscitate the closet as a political, educational, cultural, and psychic institution. They're starting from the antediluvian belief that gayness is in itself more sexual than straightness. They've regressed to the pre-Foucault notion that same-sex attraction amounts to a special interest, even a perversion. As a cautionary tale against such "grooming" paranoias, my book shows a few of the damages that can result from a young person's queer desires going undiscussed and unacknowledged. I explore, in other words, some further ramifications of our still current "epistemology of the closet." Rather than tracing a narrative of joyful liberation, I demonstrate — without sinking into traumatology, I hope — some of the deep and treacherous intricacies that can come from sexual disenfranchisement and denial at a young age. Defunding LGBTQ2SIA+ education and support organizations, paving over rainbow crosswalks, and quashing pornography won't make queers go away. Such repressive tactics will only make queers ever queerer. A colleague has asked if I've written a kind of closet-survival manual, or even somehow advocated

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taljournal.com/2026/07/07/ohio-republican-lawmakers-university-civics-centers-arent-popular-they-want-to-require-attendance/.

for the closet. Sad that anyone could get such an impression, I replied with an emphatic no. In this book, I speak of the closet in the sense that Sedgwick broached it as a matter of epistemology, and like her I doubt queer people will ever free themselves of it — because the world has been structured and parsed and verbalized in opposition to their interests and their joys.

The clocks of time and progress are being turned backward; I can hear the gears grinding ungratefully. In her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet,* Sedgwick rails against similarly intentioned rulings from Ronald Reagan's administration that protected the powerful from any possible remonstrations from the weak. In Sedgwick's case, it was a 1986 US Justice Department ruling that an employer can legally fire an employee with AIDS, so long as the employer says they weren't aware that the virus introduced no known dangers to the workplace — a medical fact that, as Sedgwick says with eye-rolling prose, is spelled out in the ruling itself. Sedgwick then goes on to discuss strategic ignorance in a way that could be thrown at many Republican US politicians today, in Ohio and elsewhere:

> If ignorance is not — as it evidently is not — a single Manichaean, aboriginal maw of darkness from which the heroics of human cognition can occasionally wrestle facts, insights, freedoms, progress, perhaps there exists instead a plethora of ignorances, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution. Insofar as ignorance is ignorance *of* a knowledge — a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth — these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. We should not assume that their doubletting with knowledges means, however, that they obey identical laws identically or follow the same circulatory paths at the same pace.[47]

47 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 8 (italics in original).

These are wise words, choice words, golden words, used to confront right-wing policies of *distract, deflect, and obscure.* When we face such strategic ignorances as deployed by specific "regimes of truth," Sedgwick tells us our attempts to use reason are futile: "A writer who appeals too directly to the redemptive potential of simply upping the cognitive wattage on any question of power seems, now, naïve." Within what she calls "the cyclonic epistemological undertows that encompass power in general and issues of homosexual desire in particular," she draws the final and simple conclusion that "powerful people don't have to be acute or right […] obtuseness itself arms the powerful against their enemies."[48] So, just as Sedgwick discovered about thirty years ago, we will find it difficult to fight "regimes of truth" by summoning yet additional truths. But we can stay visible while we develop a constructive interest in plural ignorances and find new tools against strategic obtuseness. This book doesn't try to "up the cognitive wattage" by arguing and reasoning its way through proof-worthy truths, but I hope it will allay — somewhere, somehow, with someone — at least some small measure of blindness, obtuseness, brutality, or outright stupidity. Just helping my readers discover some new kinds of music would, I think, make the world a better place. Because each musicality carries with it distinct, and often surprising, human and sexual epistemologies. Hopeful, would-be converts to Bruckner and Prince, please come forward and claim your prize.

48 Ibid., 7.

1

Love's Balletic Inverse

(Tchaikovsky, "Arabian Dance" and
Pas de deux from *The Nutcracker,* Act 2)

He was my first, as the saying goes, my inaugural musical crush. I must have been twelve when Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's style pricked up my ears. My article of bewitchment was probably the First Piano Concerto, but memory softens when thinking back to your first love. The concerto's generic title belied its immediacy. Those bold horns at the start — all stern and annunciatory, not quite vulgar, tramping downward with such urgency. I wondered at the time: How could a *whatsis-no.-1* speak with such a powerful voice? I must be hearing at least a *whatsis-no.-19.*

Cajoling, serenading, imploring, and prodding, Tchaikovsky's works were not to be ignored. In truth, I still can't talk about this music impartially, let alone critically. What I offer here instead is a retrospective exploration of love (and lust) through hearing. To borrow poet and queer theorist Wayne Koestenbaum's words on his own must-have opera-queen moments, "I have sacrificed objectivity. In its place, I give you objectivity's opposite: gush, abandon, naiveté. In retelling these arias and phrases, I hope to release *listening,* a fairy prince or princess, from its mute spell."[1]

1 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon Press, 1993), 198 (italics in original).

(I liked Koestenbaum's enchantment prospects so much I even co-opted his twisty motto: "Degenerate, *c'est moi*.")

How sad that people's trysts are usually sparked by visual rather than aural attractions, but then listening is — somehow, in some perverse way — thought to be a more passive thing than looking. (Consider the fact that there is no ear-equivalent to a person's *probing gaze*. The ears don't penetrate the world, but are penetrated by it.) It behooves us all to become better hear-ers, just as we can all afford to be better lovers, and to invest our ears with greater power and agency. As a music aficionado I can sound less like a fan than an addict — not someone who *writes* their own big and compelling mystery, but instead finds himself *written by* it. And my own queerness might in fact begin and end right here: with these two impressionable ears, open to and indeed eager for arousal and sensuality.

Tchaikovsky's style, right from the beginning, was so forcefully meaningful — not just in the concertos but also, as I soon discovered, in his ballets and symphonies — that it sounded like passionate speech. I'm sorely aware of the synesthetic contradictions when I invoke a music that speaks, that speaks quite literally, not just in a way describable through the figure of speech that music can in fact speak. But I felt in Tchaikovsky's case I knew the person who spoke through these sounds, knew his tone of voice (at times strident or desperate), his smile (narrow and fleeting, as I imagined it), his physical tics (maybe a nervous left hand when distracted and smoking), his fears and his wants.

Musicians and choreographers have described Tchaikovsky performance as more a matter of communing with the composer than interpreting his works in the usual sense of "reading" them. It might just sound like sentimental delusion, but if this is a delusion, it's a strangely persistent one. The great Georgian American choreographer George Balanchine was a beloved and influential choreographer of *Sleeping Beauty* and especially the *Nutcracker,* which he popularized as a ballet in the United States. "To speak about Tchaikovsky," said Balanchine, "it's not enough to have studied his works. You have to feel his music as

if it were your own; you have to talk with Tchaikovsky himself."[2] Balanchine didn't mean "talking" with the composer of the *Nutcracker* in the sense of digging up his grave or consulting mediums in dimly lit hovels, but rather connecting, knowing, identifying, possessing, communing, sharing. More recently, the Russian-born pianist Evgeny Sudbin has upended the common criticism that Tchaikovsky's interpreters risk exaggerating his emotional scale. To the contrary, Sudbin says musicians run the risk of inhibiting the expressive directness that inheres in his works:

> Listening for hours non-stop to recordings of Tchaikovsky's music was how I was first introduced to classical music (and fell in love with it). To this day, I am not certain that I can think of any other composer whose music displays the rawness and vulnerability of human emotions to a similar degree. […] Nothing stands in the way of it and this presents certain challenges when it comes to interpretation: as a performer one does "stand in the way" of the composer and his or her music, like a filter, and not always to the benefit of the work.[3]

Sudbin's caution against obstructive reticence applies not only to musical interpretations of Tchaikovsky's compositions but also to verbal explanations of them. To gush is to gay, as someone must have said somewhere. And so that "as if my own" relationship with Pyotr Ilyich, though accompanied by the requisite pangs of self-doubt and self-consciousness, has suited and helped define me. In *The Queen's Throat,* Koestenbaum tells us how one breed of queens, those who self-define against opera, overflow normal enthusiasm-conduits. These showy and passionate altar girls to *Norma* and Birgit Nilsson, they bar no holds. (A metaphor from wrestling seems apropos.) Gay lovers of Tchaikovsky

2 Solomon Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky: Interviews with George Balanchine, t*rans. Antonina W. Bouis (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 28.

3 Yevgeny Sudbin, liner note for *Romeo and Juliet: Tchaikovsky on the Piano* (BIS Records, 2022), 4–5.

don't constitute such a fandom, but why ever not? *Aimez-vous Tchaikovsky?* for his emotional whorishness and affective profligacy? Maybe the eminent Columbia University musicologist Paul Henry Lang was secretly trying to instigate a Tchaikovsky queendom in 1941 when he warned folks away from "the tearful sentimentalism of his melancholy, from which he can pass without warning into the most gross and brutal gaudiness."[4] Such passionate confidences sound great to me. And from a comrade in arms! This composer divulged himself emotionally, and I can only effuse — overflow, spill out, ejaculate — in my turn. That's what friends are for.

Does my reluctance to subject Tchaikovsky to objective inquiry, and by analogy my inability to rise above my own desires, mean I've failed as a self-sufficient mind? My groupie status could mean I'm just irrational, or sentimental, or passive and reactive, or — to state these points in a gendered way — feminine rather than masculine in approach. Music theorist Fred Everett Maus tells us: "To choose alternative modes of expression is to leave the mainstream and risk or invite or accept an attribution of femininity, most likely through other attributions that are coded as feminine (such as 'not rigorous,' 'unprofessional,' 'subjective')."[5] Whichever the answer, I find myself impaled on a sociosexual duality. I speak as a gay music academic in a subdiscipline — musicology — that tends in the twenty-first century to define itself according to either empiricism (as in music cognition) or the social sciences (anthropology and identity politics). I'm tired of trying to talk about music in irrefutable, "airtight" terms — as if I was doing mathematical proofs or working with peptides. Having worked in such a chilly and butch milieu, I'm fatigued by the machinery of instrumental reason that's been demasculinizing or remasculinizing me, or just calling me out for being wrong, or deciding whether it's time to shower me with its good graces of disciplinary tolerance.

4 Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (W.W. Norton, 1941), 950.
5 Fred Everett Maus, "Defensive Discourse in Writing about Music," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 17, no. 1 (2020): 69.

Or my own inclination toward something like a "Tchaikovsky telepathic union," a tie-in that other musicians seem to share, might be a basic empathy reflex for the man's musical shows of vulnerability (what Lang calls his "tearful sentimentality"). In recent decades, social psychologists have concluded that displays of weakness tend not to elicit suspicions of failure or ethical lapse, as individuals who surrender control might suspect, but rather other people admire the person's courage in risking exposure. The psychologists Anna Bruk, Sabine G. Scholl, and Herbert Bless have coined the term "the beautiful mess effect" for this disparity between expectation and reality, with their two conflicting adjectives demonstrating the conflict inherent in this emotional venture: "The capacity to be open to showing vulnerability is vital for our satisfaction of the fundamental need for love and belonging."[6]

The same goes for my unashamed love of music and my eagerness to talk about it in terms of affection, excitement, or any other such unapproved terms. I agree with music theorist Marion Guck when she called professional musicality a kind of condescension: "Most theorists and musicologists, whether old or new, are not comfortable with 'music loving.' Or perhaps I should say I think that no one is comfortable with 'loving.' We do not call ourselves music lovers; we call amateurs music-lovers."[7] Along similar thematics of loving "in the wrong way," queer theorist Jack Halberstam — speaking not as a music person, take note — says failure often proves revelatory because it can lead, not to disenfranchisement, but to alternatives: to ways of sidestepping the soul-killing awfulness that is "approved methods of knowing."[8]

And how to define loving? Or, better asked: How to differentiate the many varieties of loving in magnanimous or at least

6 Anna Bruk, Sabine G. Scholl, and Herbert Bless, "Beautiful Mess Effect: Self–Other Differences in Evaluation of Showing Vulnerability," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115, no. 2 (2018): 195.

7 Marion Guck, "Music Loving, Or the Relationship with the Piece," *Music Theory Online* 2, no. 2 (1996): para. 7.

8 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

respectful ways? I believe the distinction drawn between matters "musical" and "sexual" is just a glitch in our modern "processes of specification," to use queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's word.[9] I've been confronted with the familiar nonquestion: *What's sex got to do with music?* And another, *How does a gay song sound different from a regular song?* And then there's the challenge: *Tchaikovsky wasn't an activist, was he?* These queries are in themselves inaccurate, based on delusive terms and historical mispresumptions. Maybe our whole cultural-semantic Venn diagram is wrong, and we would be better to ask, *What's music got to do with sex?* I would say making a neat separation between musical thoughts and sexual ones is as arbitrary as Manichaean cleavage of homo- from heterosexual identities: at most a convenience, an instance of epistemological corner-cutting. Why do we keep on slicing and dicing human experience like this?

So here's raising a glass to failure. And — fie! — a loud and reclaimed *sod off!* to those puritans and those arbiters who've appointed themselves guards of our discipline. May you all be cursed to live out the rest of your days without ever again being cheered by the "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy."

Tchaikovsky himself internalized such second-guessing — that vulnerability again. He was thin-skinned and hated some of his own most brilliant music, sometimes because it could get *too* beautiful, and beauty was considered a weakness even back then. (We wouldn't want pulchritude to spill out onto the street and scare the horses, would we?) He actually memorized Eduard Hanslick's infamous review: "Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear."[10] But it is to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's musical scat that my soul yearns and returns — to reexperience his emotional pungency, his beautiful and medicinal and fecal failures, to see how he surmounted his doubts in

9 Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 9.

10 Quoted in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time,* 2nd ed. (Coleman-Ross, 1965), 207.

such lovely and philanthropic ways. And so, over the decades, Tchaikovsky's work became my textbook example of the incompatibility between adoration and critique, but then all the worse for critique! (And I now I have to ask myself why I've written the above in past tense: I'm nothing if not a faithful lover, at least in matters musical. The Piano Concerto No. 1 still bewitches, even if I do like it slower these days).

* * *

So I've loved Tchaikovsky's music jealously, indeed protectively, and for a long time. Our bond was fraternal even as it straddled the centuries. His later twentieth-century status as the paterfamilias of gay composers — no outing required, no scrutiny of correspondence needed — was just an added bonus. Pyotr Ilyich was, in essence, a gay musician pen pal who took me into his confidence through the ineffable, trans-psychic-historic, creator-listener connections that music allows. When I took up the project in my early adolescence of reading more to bring him into better focus, I was actually defining myself. My relationship deepened and twisted a bit in 1981 when I read a book chapter by the Pulitzer Prize–winning music critic Harold C. Schonberg, "Surcharged Emotionalism: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky." Schonberg's *The Lives of the Great Composers* was the first music book on my shelf after *John Thompson's Modern Course for the Piano, The Golden Encyclopedia of Music,* and Bernard Gavoty's biography of Frédéric Chopin. Before coming across this chapter, my Tchaikovsky love had been *unknowing,* by which I mean narrowly *musical.* (I've long since realized that my processes of understanding and knowing are, just like my practices of desiring, different from most others. Some tentative stabs at answering this big question appear above, and indeed in many of the pages that follow.)

One of Schonberg's statements stood out, sounding neither encyclopedic nor specifically music-related: "There is a certain kind of homosexual who derides women, while there is another, more feminine type, who loves women (except physically) and

thinks like a woman." Tchaikovsky, so submitted Schonberg, "was one of the latter."[11] This was an astonishing, algebraic, zero-sum play of discrete, plus-minus sexual variables — of man and woman, love and derision. But by this Darwinian sexual algebra Schonberg was, bless him, able to get around the usual platitudes of "great" cachet, "modern" weightiness, and "golden" eminence. And it allowed him to approach hitherto skirted-around questions of Tchaikovsky's "homosexuality." By contrast, the closest the *Golden Encyclopedia of Music* (1968) got to this composer's sexual makeup was to call him "a warm, sensitive human being," one who was "completely unsuited for marriage."[12] In other words, not close at all.

"Homosexual" was at best a distant concept when I was young. Before seeing the word in Schonberg's account of Tchaikovsky, I'd considered it a medical term — a term used by clinicians in white lab coats or bearded psychoanalysts in Freudian mold. When I was growing up, "homosexuality" was still an entry under "Sexual Deviations" in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (commonly called the *DSM*). This standard medical reference counted homosexuals among those "individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward objects other than people of the opposite sex, toward sexual acts not usually associated with coitus, or toward coitus

11 Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers* (W.W. Norton, 1981), 361. Schonberg deleted these "types of homosexual" and "thinks like a woman" discussions from later editions of his book. Weighing in decades later on Schonberg's sexual perspectives, Michael S. Sherry finds *Lives of the Great Composers* (in its 1970 edition) plain-speaking rather than chauvinist: "Schonberg's book showed no overt homophobia. Explicit on matters once only insinuated, he wrote that Tchaikovsky was 'terrified lest his homosexuality become open knowledge' and that he disliked using the 'hysteria' in Tchaikovsky's music to discount him as a 'weeping machine'"; see Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 189.

12 Norman Lloyd, "Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyitch," in *The Golden Encyclopedia of Music* (Golden Press, 1968), 587.

performed under bizarre circumstances as in necrophilia, pedophilia, sexual sadism, and fetishism."[13]

So homosexuality, as the *DSM* saw it, was defined in a strangely circular fashion; it consisted of "bizarre" practices with men being objectified in "unusual," meaning unfeeling and noncognizant and most essentially *nonmanly,* ways. This thinking could relate to nineteenth-century Western European legal issues of same-sex consent, and the belief — as documented for instance by forensic medical scientist Auguste Ambroise Tardieu in *Étude Médico-Legale sur les Attentats aux Mœurs* (1857) — that homosexuals were not of sound mind and therefore could not legally agree to sex.[14] These are just two examples of how the idea of "homosexuality" was insanity, an aporia, a logical impasse or an insurmountable contradiction. As queer literary theorist Leo Bersani saw matters several decades ago, the term "homosexual" was verbum non gratum on all sides, a censure uttered by repulsed Christians, and a political-terminological trap in the view of queer people and their supporters. (I use the word "trap" in the Judith Butler sense, as an imperative to performance. She referred to gender as "the trap that one is inevitably in," a trap that asks an individual "[the] question of how to work [it]."[15]) The word "homosexual" means both everything and nothing. Avoidance of the term on various sides signaled to Bersani a "definitional crisis" in what homosexuality really was. "No one wants to be called a homosexual," he said.[16]

If Tchaikovsky was my mentor and taught me affective empathy, Schonberg had me pondering the specific desires and empathies that this paterfamilias of gay composers and I had in common. Besides a "homosexual" need for men, Pyotr Ily-

13 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* 2nd ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 1968), 44.

14 See William A. Peniston, "Love and Death in Gay Paris: Homosexuality and Criminality in the 1870s," in *Homosexuality in Modern France,* ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (Oxford University Press, 1996), 128–45.

15 Liz Kotz, "The Body You Want: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Artforum* 31, no. 3 (1992): 84.

16 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.

ich and I were also turned on by brawny symphonic rhetoric and orchestral euphony — by both musculature and softness in sound. Schonberg called Tchaikovsky a womanly thinker, but it was more common for midcentury critics to call him a "hysteric." Here the etymology goes back to the nineteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Hysterics were implicitly horny women who wre so unfulfilled in such misunderstood ways that they were said to scream and contort and speak in tongues. Writing in 1941, Paul Henry Lang had found nothing of Beethoven's or Brahms's hale and hearty teleological victories in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. He instead detected failure and hysteria — the weakness of the unreasoning and undersexed female, the repetitive and wandering uterine disease of yore. "There is no trace of development in the symphonic sense," Lang wrote in *Music in Western Civilization,* "but merely a succession of repetitions and a sequence of climactic runs that often become hysterical."[17]

When he talked about Tchaikovsky's work in terms of agency and dignity, Schonberg also parted ways with the biographer Rosa Newmarch, who had detected — as early as 1900 — a "monotonous vein of sentimental melancholy." Newmarch was saying here that Tchaikovsky's style was self-concerned rather than broadly empathetic: "It is subjective and sometimes artificial," something to be described in Byronesque or Chateaubriand terms as "la belle mélancholie" rather than "la tristesse de la vérité, which shows so grimly in modern realism."[18] Here Newmarch contrasted Tchaikovsky's Russian melancholy with that of the more manly Modest Mussorgsky, whose sense of woe "is objective and called into being by the sufferings of others." (Tchaikovsky himself considered Mussorgsky's music vulgar and ugly.) As evidence for the defense, Newmarch might have mentioned "Golitsin's Exile" from Mussorgsky's opera *Khovan-*

17 Lang, *Music in Western Civilization,* 949.

18 Rosa Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works, with Extracts from His Writings, and the Diary of His Tour Abroad in 1888* (John Lane, 1900), 30–31.

shchina, a number that's not sentimental, but rather unspeakably bleak in its portrayal of the liberal Prince Golitsin being banished. In this music I can hear the impossibility of speech, the oppressiveness, the heartbreak and loneliness, even the lachrymose creak of the weighed-down sled atop the snow. This is what sorrowful empathy, "the suffering of Mother Russia," sounds like in musical terms.

The statement might surprise: It's tough to be a homosexual musician, difficult in the sense that it's so easy to exploit your own alienation to serve the publicly acceptable expressive ends of so-called musicality. One of these difficulties is counterintuitive; namely, that music, gay musicologist Philip Brett emphasized powerfully thirty years ago, lends itself *too* well — even vocationally! — to these kinds of implicit and self-destructive confessions. An example comes in the form of a typical entry from Tchaikovsky's diary: "My heart is full. It craves to pour itself out in music."[19] Turn-of-the-century British sexologist and homosexual rights activist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) heard Tchaikovsky's last symphonies, the Fifth and Sixth, as "revelations of their respective makers' inner self [sic]." He spoke more generally of Tchaikovsky as an artist who chose to "deal with life as a Personal Problem" and in doing so could "only attain to equanimity and strength by accepting the consolation of beauty" rather than engaging in "rebellion against the seduction of beauty."[20] The composer's sorrow, in other words, stemmed from self-occupation rather than sociocultural alienation. And it could only be resolved by recognizing his own vulnerabilities. Instead of addressing homosexuality as a social problem by marching and protesting and soapboxing (as if such things were

19 Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* ed. Philip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (Routledge, 1994), 9–26, esp. 16–18, and Alexandra Orlova, *Tchaikovsky: A Self-Portrait* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 71.

20 Havelock Ellis, *Impressions and Comments, Second Series 1914–1920* (Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 135–36.

possible in Tsarist Russia), Tchaikovsky chose to write beautiful, meaning very subjective and expressive, tunes.

I can't get around Ellis's odd expression. Is "the consolation of beauty" another term for seduction? Is Tchaikovsky's aesthetic based in sex? I would identify even more closely with his music if it were so, since I've always found it easy to separate beauty from feelings of love, but not from the need for heated rutting. As a possible euphemism, "the consolation of beauty" makes me think of the "comfort women" who were pressed into sexual slavery for the Japanese army in World War II. (The Japanese word *ianfu* 慰安婦 could also translate to more Ellis-ian terms as "consoling women.") Does this healing beauty mean comeliness (aesthetic attraction) or eroticism (that is, sexual attraction)? Ellis believed it involved both, and did so inextricably. He referred to "the extreme sexual importance of beauty" and said, "The sexual element in the constitution of beauty is well recognized even by those writers who concern themselves exclusively with the aesthetic conception of beauty or with its relation to culture."[21] Turning to another artist-invert, Ellis wrote that homosexual emotion "had profound influence on Michelangelo's art, impelling him to find every kind of human beauty in the male form, and only a grave dignity or tenderness, divorced from every quality that is sexually desirable, in the female form."[22]

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21 Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* vol. 4: *Sexual Selection in Man* (F.A. Davis Co., 1926), 140, 137.

22 Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion: A Critical Edition,* ed. Ivan Crozier (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 108. This recent critical edition of Ellis's important text shows continuing interest in him and his battles against Victorian laws and mores, but Ellis's eugenics beliefs have discouraged today's scholars from engaging with his ideas more broadly. For an overview of his pioneering ideas on homosexual desire and his attempts to reconcile them with the increasing dominance of Freudian analytic theory, see Ivan Dalley Crozier, "Taking Prisoners: Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and the Construction of Homosexuality, 1897–1951," *Social History of Medicine* 13, no. 3 (2000): 447–66.

If Tchaikovsky was a woman and a confessor, he was also a melodist — a creator of the most magnificent melodies. Succulent tunes, tunes to die for. (But rarely sugary. That *marche miniature* from the Suite No. 1 for Orchestra, op. 43 is atypical: purest confectionery.) And these three Tchaikovsky roles become intertwined. Melancholy or not, derisive or loving, Pyotr Ilyich had this one compositional superpower: writing unforgettable, kiss-and-tell tunes. "They say that Tchaikovsky is great at nothing but wonderful melodies," Balanchine protested too-muchly. "That's not true!"[23] And it's in one of his last compositions, the *Nutcracker* ballet, that Tchaikovsky channeled his wonderful melodicism into effusions of adult longing and childlike vulnerability. According to Ellis, Tchaikovsky's gorgeous themes showed him "accepting the consolation of beauty," musically speaking. We return here to gender, since melody has historically been considered feminine, as witness the gender of the noun in several European languages: *la mélodie, die Melodie, la melodia.* Tchaikovsky's succulent and randy tunes convey — implicitly, ravishingly — his love of beauty, his vulnerability and shame, his *belle mélancholie.*

Schonberg subtitled his Tchaikovsky chapter "Surcharged Emotionalism," then gave the photo caption "Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky: An inexhaustible, supersensuous fund of melody." (He meant to say "supercharged" instead of "surcharged," surely.) Yet writers have barely looked at this aspect of Tchaikovsky's gift. Musicologist Henry Zajaczkowski hears that melodic aptitude as a kind of abstraction, independent of any possible crutches, cues, or heuristics: "Whatever the reasons may be for the propulsive strength of much of Tchaikovsky's melodic writing, the fact remains that that strength is so fundamental that it needs no extra-musical, intellectual prop to support it."[24] Godgiven, innate, childlike, and redolent of Mozart's perfect genius, Tchaikovsky's melodic gift — Zajaczkowski says — is in fact

23 Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky,* 117.

24 Henry Zajaczkowski, *Tchaikovsky's Musical Style* (UMI Research Press, 1987), 138.

more "absolute" and abstract than any monumental or "developmental" things this composer attempted in his numbered symphonies. Musicologists as different as Carl Dahlhaus and Susan McClary have described the first movement of the Fourth Symphony as trying an impossible reconciliation between Russian melodicism and Beethovenesque monumentality, thereby making Tchaikovsky's "failed marriage" symphony his most riven, his most fatally neurotic composition. The piece tries to be something it cannot.

Going in a more specifically sensual direction than Ellis or Zajaczkowski, Soviet musicologist Boris Assafyev pointed to "that peculiar flavor of [Tchaikovsky's] lyricism which seems to caress the soul."[25] There's a lot to unpack in this statement, with its hints of sacred and profane. Assafyev's description, couched in terms of the listener's deep psyche, touches on romance or even sex, since caressing means affectionate fondling, soft touching, cuddling. We could ask Assafyev, "But when would a soul want caressing?" just as we might ask Ellis, "What causes a musical subject to need consolation?" This music would seem to be needful or need-addressing. When Assafyev talked about Tchaikovsky "generalizing" into musical notes an array of "caresses, compassion, sympathy, maternal or conjugal affection, and spiritual support," he agreed to Ellis's notion of life as a "Personal Problem." But Assafyev then deflected the "problem" back onto social questions: "In this sense Tchaikovsky, the most impressionable of men, showed himself to be a penetrating realistic psychologist. Tchaikovsky's lyricism emanates from a profound insight into the spiritual life of the men and women of an epoch of heightening nervous sensibility and tends toward feelings of sympathy and compassion evoked by ties of kinship and love."[26]

So, soul-caressing requires not just melodies but also emotional argument, good pacing, and empathetic storytelling. Here Assafyev contrasts Tchaikovsky with Schubert, also a

25 Boris Assafyev, "The Great Russian Composer," in *Russian Symphony: Thoughts about Tchaikovsky* (Philosophical Library, 1947), 8–9.

26 Ibid., 9.

gifted melodist but one who "rarely succeeded in compelling the listener to follow the inner emotional path of his musical conception."[27] (Lang resisted being "compelled" by Tchaikovsky's "emotional path" in the Fourth Symphony, but it seems Schubert left Assafyev feeling shortchanged of "hysteria.") In the Andante cantabile second movement of the Fifth Symphony, as Ellis heard it, Tchaikovsky's now-famous horn melody enacts the "consolation of beauty" as part of a moving trajectory, an "inner emotional path." This solace is acquiesced to rather than "repelled," Ellis says, and it thereby "encourages and sustains."[28] The consolation seems to arrive when the horn melody returns, quietly transformed, at the end of the movement. A short motive is spun off from the tune, and then — turning gently and indeed consolingly as it drops — repeats a dozen times in counterpoint with itself as it slowly comes to rest and finally arrives at one of Tchaikovsky's most gorgeous cadences. Whenever I hear this movement modeling beauty's consolation and the fragility of same, I'm reminded of an 1891 letter that Tchaikovsky penned to his emotionally unstable nephew Bob, whom he was then fixated on as the love of his life: "Bob! I adore you. Do you remember, I told you that even greater than my joy at beholding you with my own eyes is my suffering when I am without you."[29]

The *Nutcracker* ballet, one of Tchaikovsky's last large works, written a year and a half before the *Pathétique* Symphony, is a tale of childhood and fantasy — the main reason its melodies are less fatalistic, burdened, or heroic than those in his other ballets. *Nutcracker* is one of his most beloved creations, but it's also an unlikely and insidious mix. The ballet holds his most soul-wrenchingly desirous musical statements, and also some of his darkest inspirations, yet it's possessed of a consistent intimacy. This music stakes out an unsettling, liminal world containing candied landscapes, glittering gaiety, cruelty, darkness, and

27 Ibid., 12.

28 Ellis, *Impressions and Comments, Second Series,* 135.

29 Tchaikovsky to Vladimir "Bob" Davydov, 8/20 March 1891, trans. Brett Langston, https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4342.

death. One of the strangest aspects of the *Nutcracker,* stemming from the original story by the German early Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, is its cohabitating the incompatible worlds of children's play and devoted romantic love, two diametric realms where dolefulness and doom are in short supply. (Here I can't even begin to understand Igor Stravinsky's estimation of *Nutcracker,* recalled by Balanchine in terms of "just an entertaining spectacle, understandable without tons of words" and a pageant with "no heavy psychology in it."[30] Sir, those legions of gayboys who have wept over the adult Nutcracker Prince will beg to differ.) These weird childhood–romantic tensions are put into play already in act 1, when the child Clara saves the Nutcracker from the warring Mouse Army by throwing a well-aimed slipper. (Number 7 scene: "The Battle," prefaced by one of Tchaikovsky's most tumescent yet simplistic orchestral crescendos.) And then Tchaikovsky accompanies the Mouse King's cortege with the darkest but also shortest of all funeral marches.

The melodies of the *Nutcracker* tend to be intimate rather than theatrical, not nervous and frenzied in the monumental, juiced-up symphonic manner of this composer's later symphonies. In this way they reflect the ballet's childhood basis, meaning the *Nutcracker* doesn't deal in the self-loathings and deathly prognostications heard in Tchaikovsky's "hysterical" and "heavily laden" late symphonies or his other ballets. (Nowhere to be seen are the doomed-love trope that we find in *Swan Lake,* the poisonous sorcery and battle between good and evil that drive *Sleeping Beauty,* or the "fatal power" of fate that insistently surfaces in the Fourth Symphony.) The *Nutcracker* melodies are simpler than they are lush or fateful or hysterical or voluptuous, but at the same time they seem vital and breathing, as reactive as psychic beings. They exhibit thought and feeling, as if they were cognizant, hypersensitive organisms. These innocent melodies sound somehow confessional, naked, vulnerable, like unprotected embryos of sentiment. At the same time, they sing sensuously of desire and needfulness.

30 Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky,* 179.

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I think it's fair and useful to translate Ellis into more colloquial terms. Since he saw Tchaikovsky beholden to sexually charged beauty, he was presenting the Andante cantabile second movement of the Fifth Symphony as a one-night stand, a consolation to be engaged once and only once, its aftertaste then dusting our future encounters with hints of sweetness. But the consolation of *human* beauty can leave a bitter — that is, nonconsolatory — taste. When it comes to people of marginalized sexuality — people who are habitually denied access to beauty — such beauty, if imbuing a person, is less likely to induce a state of consolation than a sense of ephemera and cutting, stinging jealousy.

Tchaikovsky's musical contribution aside, the *Nutcracker* ballet couldn't help but be a strange thing considering its intermixture of Hoffmann, and his uncanny, fantastic, and at times frightening and surreal imagination, with the classical and refined visions of the French Russian choreographer Marius Petipa. In Tchaikovsky's time, Petipa was *premier maître de ballet* of the Russian Imperial Theatres. His career at the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg spanned almost six decades, a crucial span when he essentially defined modern classical Russian ballet. He guided many of the most renowned performers and created ballets that still hold a vital place in the Russian dance repertoire around the world. The Petipa Society summarizes his influence across "the Golden Age of Russian Ballet" by saying that he "flooded the Imperial Ballet repertoire with some of his greatest works," and defined stage roles, formal motions, and dramaturgies that "continue to dominate every classical ballet company repertoire to this day."[31] In particular, Petipa collaborated with Tchaikovsky to transform the institution of classical ballet in the late nineteenth century through their landmarks *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and *The Nutcracker* (1892), along with Petipa's influential 1895 revival of *Swan Lake*. In *Nutcracker,* Petipa planned the basic dramatic division between the Stahlbaum

31 *The Marius Petipa Society,* http://www,petipasociety.com/about/.

domestic space in act 1 and the courtly Land of Sweets in act 2. (But when it comes to the moment-to-moment spectacles and stage specifics, it should be said that current productions of *The Nutcracker,* at least those in the United States, rely more on Balanchine's twentieth-century choreography than Petipa's. Yet another added wrinkle is that Petipa became ill during the original production, and so his assistant Lev Ivanov did much of the first Mariinsky choreography.)

As staged, the *Nutcracker* ballet hosts magnificent creative tensions between story, music, and stage roles. These uneasy poignancies converge in the "Arabian Dance" (in act 2, number 15 in the scenario). We should remember that Petipa treated Tchaikovsky more as an assistant to the stage spectacle than a true collaborator, and their relationship could be less than collegial. This act 2 "Arabian Dance" has a courtly spectacle aspect, courtesy of Petipa and his French heritage, as imported ultimately from the courtly French Baroque balletic entertainments of Louis XIV. Which means the "Arabian Dance" music and movements are queeny, royal formalizations to be beheld, to be witnessed by a group and not voyeuristically peered upon as an individual lap dance in a private corner somewhere. I'd certainly heard and loved the "Arabian Dance" from early on, especially as Tchaikovsky included it in his own concert abridgment of the ballet that makes up the *Nutcracker Suite*. But considered as a perennial ballet spectacle, *Nutcracker* has in recent decades, through later twentieth-century modern eroticizations of ballet, been suffused with unsettling evocations of male beauty.

When I saw the "Arabian Dance" number danced by one particular young solo ballerino in the later 1980s, probably the first time I saw and heard the ballet in the theater, the quiet and ineffably lovely melody left me eviscerated rather than "consoled." And my own strong visceral reaction left me questioning Havelock Ellis's peaceable notions of beauty. That evening some decades ago, I was surprised the sound of my loins being ripped asunder didn't drown out this fairly soft music. But then who was responsible for the psychosexual violence? After all these conjoined and supplanted visions of beauty, was it Tchaikovsky,

the choreographer of the evening, or that specific dancer who did most of my loin-ripping? I think the answer would have to be an evasive yes, followed by a warning *not to offend Eve Sedgwick by asking such particularizing questions.* (The horror-flick entrails image conflicts with the shiny familial joys of the Advent season. But then welcome to Christmas in My Own Private Idaho, specifically the obligatory *Nutcracker* evening where I sit in the theater, having a good time but also crossing my legs out of modesty.)

What happens on stage in the "Arabian Dance"? It represents coffee (*café*) in the grand divertissement of act 2, where the number comes between the "Spanish Dance" that introduces chocolate (number 14) and the "Chinese Dance" that signifies tea (number 16). All these addictive things! When I saw the "Arabian Dance" at the Sarasota Ballet, the ballerino brought out a cake, placed it on the stage, and then danced around it. The "Arabian Dance" often becomes the most exoticist point in this string of Petipa's stereotyped tableaux. I saw in the program that that evening's "Arabian" dancer was in fact Korean, one visible minority standing in for another. Whatever his provenance, he was beautiful and walked the perfect fulcrum between strength and grace as he wrote poetry onstage with his tendril-like arms and legs. I became engorged with desire, a steel-sharp privation. I needed him. And at the same time I resented him, felt an unfamiliar cruelty stirring to life in places specific but not easily locatable. He was a glorious tumor to be removed.

The "Arabian Dance" is the least joyful of all the *Nutcracker* numbers, and I've sometimes thought it'd be good underscoring for a slowish suicide: a bleed-out on the kitchen floor, perhaps. Or maybe for killing yourself in a warm bath, where the crimson arabesques flowing out into water would be a choreography in their own right. I feel a special need to "place" the number because this particular "Arabian Dance" appears as a beautiful enigma in Petipa's act 2, which is mostly a series of nationalistic tableaux, everything otherwise glittering and crystal-clear. Tchaikovsky's music here presents a poisonous and paradoxical collaboration of alienation and sensuousness. The number

wants for narrative or romantic context: Who is this unsmiling "Arab," and what's in his heart besides coffee? (Petipa specified in his own scenario as he delivered it to the composer: "Coffee. Arabia. The kingdom of Yemen. Coffee mocha. Oriental Dance. From 24 to 32 bars of charming and voluptuous music."[32] His last pair of adjectives seems contradictory, but maybe that conflict is where the emotional rot resides.) The apparent emotional disengagement must be implicated in Tchaikovsky's exoticist response to Petipa and the choreographer's stipulation of an "oriental dance." But then the unremitting, unchanging vamp puts me in mind of a Bernard Herrmann cue for Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Vertigo,* specifically the hypnotic music for the scene where Scottie trails the strange and glamorous Madeleine through Nob Hill in downtown San Francisco. Music that's about waiting and quiet expectation, but with no progress toward an arrival. Music that goes nowhere. Music that could loop for eternity, while unknown human machinations go humming along beyond our understanding.

Tchaikovsky's music seems an unnuanced and unchanging emotional flatline — intensely lonely, even catatonic — which makes its melodic beauty all the more heartbreaking. This is the only *Nutcracker* number consistently in minor. It's also in a moderate tempo (*commodo*), and is mostly restricted to dynamics of *mezzoforte* and below. All that scalewise, stepwise, slithering motion in parallel thirds, with no leaps or plunges to show the smallest glimmer of life or mojo. That unchanging but asymmetrical vamp in the lower strings. The methodical squeezes-in and squeezes-out of those crescendos and decrescendos. (The surprise turn to G major in the closing measures seems a mere "Picardy third" formality. An obligatory and empty corrective to the melody's surprise drop about two minutes in from G major to G minor, where the first violins had coldly, quietly, heart-laceratingly slipped from B-natural to B♭. *La belle mélancholie,* indeed. Or maybe, more accurately, *la mélancholie corrosive*?) As

32 Roland John Wiley, *Tchaikovsky's Ballets: "Swan Lake," "Sleeping Beauty," "Nutcracker"* (Clarendon, 1985), 375.

if to preclude any possibility of emotional and romantic engagement, any "consolation of beauty," Tchaikovsky didn't write this tune himself. He co-opted a Georgian lullaby — Georgia understood to be closer to central Asia than to Europe — and then surrounded it mostly with solo woodwinds (clarinets, English horn, bassoons, oboe) playing in their gloomy lower registers.

Did I mention suicide? My soul needed caressing. I was under a heavy regimen of prescribed lithium at that time, but the boy dancer somehow pulled emotional life from me and my catatonic loneliness — my clinical-depressive severance from body and spirit. This lack of emotional trajectory in the "Arabian Dance" had left me both distressed and intensely needful of this one dancer. The next day, I found myself buying the biggest rosebud at a florist's, and then mailing it to the young man in care of the ballet company office. (I still remember how the expectant blossom was so big it resisted the envelope I was shoving it into.) I wrote and included a simplistic note, something like "you are a beautiful man, and you danced a beautiful dance." Verbal poetry would have been irrelevant. But then who knows if the young man was in the event alarmed, flattered, or just confused by the gift. (Come to think of it, now I do vaguely remember an awkward follow-up phone call, and a concerned party interceding to disrupt what seemed a potential stalking.) I acted out the vignette as if it had been authored by a third person, as if a puppet master was pulling strings. I suppose stalkers use such metaphors, and mine do have a police-interrogation-room ring to them. Especially since an 1868 antisodomy law remained in force in Florida until it was struck down by a US Supreme Court ruling — *Lawrence v. Texas,* 539 U.S. 558 (2003). As of this writing, the Florida state legislature still hasn't repealed the statute.

So my "Arabian" was such a dancer. But I'm sure that if he hadn't danced *to such a melody,* no roses would have been involved. Remarkable things spring from fateful synergies. The red rosebud seemed apropos as an allusion to both stifled passion and Tchaikovskyan musical-theatrical glamour (note *amour*/love at the root). I expected no answer to the mailed blossom; it was somewhere between an offering to a deity and an

ejaculation spurted out into the dark ether in the middle of the night when the ejaculator, feeling alone and irrelevant, knows no direction or purpose apart from his own hot *homage*. (Would Petipa have approved such formalized ritual?) But that night, I did entertain a balletic fantasy of my dancer sneaking into my room — silently but expectantly — still in his stage tights and gold-embroidered ballet jacket, as if his dance would continue. Maybe the rose was a note in a bottle, a scented and disguised grace, a tombstone stab at counteracting the painful ephemerality of the boy's solo. Susan Leigh Foster reminds us that music and dance, like sex itself, flit away from our grasp — they all but invite possessive jealousies, and have nostalgia already built in to them. "But the erotic pleasure associated with dance was tinged by feelings of loss," writes Foster. "Like sexual intercourse, dancing enticed and aroused the participant or viewer, but then disappeared. Like flirtation it left no evidence of its existence once enacted. The enthusiasm generated by dance, therefore, contained a kind of patronizing, because fully knowledgeable, awareness of its fragility. The praise dance garnered entailed a nihilistic indulgence in its transience."[33] Or maybe this "Arabian Dance" became a nihilistic indulgence in my own queerness, with the "perpetual vanishing point" (as critic Marcia Siegel called dance, as a whole) made synonymous with the social illegibility that is sexual difference?[34]

I don't know that I was anticipating anything specific from my "Arabian" dancer that night. But if there had been a nocturnal *pas de deux* in my bedroom, I wanted him to lead so I could happily follow.…

Is a melody ephemeral? Is there something intrinsically homosexual, womanly, or transient about tunefulness? "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" was a song written in 1919 by Irving Berlin — born Israel Beilin in Belorussia, at the time Tchaikovsky

33 Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography & Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 198.

34 Marcia B. Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (Saturday Review Press, 1972), 1.

was writing his Fifth Symphony, not far away. Berlin's lyric suggests that tunes are lovely and irresistible, but also fuckable, forgettable, and interchangeable as objects. "I have an ear for music, / And I have an eye for a maid. / I like a pretty girlie, / With each pretty tune that's played." (Musicologist Jeffrey Magee tells us that "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" became a vital song in the American musical theater canon, serving as "a paradigm for the tenor-and-parade-of-girls number replayed in countless revues, nightclub floor shows, and beauty pageants for decades to come."[35]) Commentators have long described melody as a takeaway, an easy lay, an encounter hinging on momentary pleasure; it so often serves as a vehicle for empathy, identification, beauty, nostalgia, and ownership. Gino Stefani, in an article on tunefulness as a popular or public aspect, refers to melody as "what people appropriate most in music." It carries the basic connotation of being "'sweet,' 'pleasurable' music." Stefani concludes with a reference to ownership: "So far as everyone appropriates melody and identifies himself with it, melody has a tendency to become *public property.*"[36] Music theorist Edward T. Cone quotes Edmund Gurney on a distinctive characteristic of melody, something that stands apart from other musical aspects, such as harmony or rhythm, "and that is our sense of entire oneness with it, of its being as it were a mode of our own life." Gurney talks about melody in terms of "possibilities for impression," and says that though a melody can be loved by multiple listeners for the same reasons, "our sense of it nevertheless is not as of an external presentation, but of something evolved within ourselves by a special activity of our own."[37]

In this category, the homosexual composer's lyricism could be a sublimation of his self-loathing, or compensation for it, or a rising-above it. Or maybe the melodiousness was itself the habit, the psychic weakness, the irrefusable indulgence, the

35 Jeffrey Magee, *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 97.

36 Gino Stefani, "Melody: A Popular Perspective," *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (1987): 22 (italics in original).

37 Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (Basic Books, 1966), 166.

structural perversion, the musical faggotry? Scholar Roland John Wiley draws attention to Tchaikovsky's "perpetual […] tension between arresting beauty and trenchant discourse." When this composer chose to write symphonies and thus subject himself to masculinist and academic strictures, his gift for profligate beauties became an actual problem. "His muse," Wiley writes, "too generously provided themes which in striking effect or sheer beauty forestall development." Wiley says Tchaikovsky's chronic structural "problem" had become clear already in his First Symphony; namely, "how to create unity in the whole by linking the outer movements, while *indulging a penchant for beauty* in the inner ones."[38] And then, in contrast to Tchaikovsky's melodious "consolations of beauty," he also had a gift for darker swan songs — enacting that mythical bird's call, lovely and graceful in the throes of death. The archetypal homosexual songster, "a bard of his own sorrows" maybe, is said to sing sweetly of sadness and demise, especially as he approaches extinction. (In particular the *Pathétique* Symphony, which Ellis characterized as "a homosexual tragedy" already in 1897, seems to follow Tennyson's "Dying Swan": "The wild swan's death-hymn took the soul / Of that waste place with joy / Hidden in sorrow." It's worth remembering the etymology here — "swan" likely originated from the Latin *sonus,* meaning "sound," via the Old English *swinn,* meaning "melody.")

If the "consolation of beauty" melodies invoke life, the "swan songs" — for instance, the motto-theme heard in all movements of the Fifth Symphony and the main idea in the finale of the Sixth — are deathly but also self-regarding and, to return to Newmarch's words, "subjective and artificial." They seem to embrace the ephemeral aspects of queer life: the trysts in public facilities, the two-night relationships, the quickness with which young homosexuals retire from the club scene. They are disposable. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz famously observed, "We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the

38 Roland John Wiley, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich," *Grove Music Online,* https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51766 (my italics).

intention to be lost." Muñoz went on to propose the paradigm where queer evidence lies with ephemera: "Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor."[39] I have trouble not reading this statement in a nihilistic light. Muñoz seems to lead us toward the corollary conclusion that to be homosexual means to embrace your own death. Or at the very least to learn to accept the impermanence of your emotions and to consider your ejaculations as your progeny. Even if my Sarasota *Nutcracker* rosebud did find itself a vase of water, I doubt it had a long life. But it must have kept its bloom longer than the five minutes that my "Arabian" boy occupied the stage that evening. And even now, I wonder how long sexual relations with my Eastern ballerino might have lasted: hours? weeks? years?

By the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud considered homosexuality a form of narcissism, and narcissism in turn a syndrome of unknowing youth. Such allusions to willfulness, youthfulness, and susceptibility made Tchaikovsky and his art sound all the more indelibly "homosexual." Early in his theoretical career, Freud accounted for homosexuality as "a variation of sexual functioning produced by a certain arrest of sexual development." He discussed homosexuality as regressive libido, as a self-preservational ego-drive that's unable to move on to a person of the opposite sex — indeed as a form of narcissism, as a disguised version of self-love. On the subject of narcissism, Freud wrote in "On Narcissism," "The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us."[40] Along these lines, Virgil Thomson, the blunt American music critic and composer

39 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 65.

40 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916),* ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1953), 89.

who cultivated zero interest in *la belle mélancholie,* dismissed Tchaikovsky as "mainly an evocation of adolescence."[41] So the self-centered, masturbating or cruising homosexual, the overheated composer of the ballet *Swan Lake* just needed — by this old institutionalized view — to grow up. And to stop indulging himself with the gilded looking glass, the mirror-mirror self-regard, that was melodicism.

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I've talked about various aspects of Tchaikovsky's music that make it so hugely relatable and empathetic, so easy to follow and identify with. To recap: I've explored its hyperexpressiveness and supersensuous nature, its speaking or imploring quality, its theatricality and empathetic aspects, its tendency to an anthropomorphic sense of feeling and personal vulnerability. Here I'd mention the senses the music imparts of accepting "consolation," eliciting tears, performing "caresses," representing desire, and modeling a close familial relation with the listener, as when Balanchine said he considered Tchaikovsky an artist's father figure. This is the crux of the matter, the reason for Eduard Hanslick's alarm. These aspects converge in the ideas of musical *persona* and *agency*. Edward T. Cone writes of this musical *persona* as a singular authority that the listener hears as "a unity," an "inner life," "a constant presence," and "a wider intelligence at work" behind the sounding music.[42] The persona isn't congruent with any particular historical account of the flesh-and-blood composer or any specific analytic familiarity the listener might have with the piece. Nor is the persona transferred to or supplanted by the performer of the moment, but it is embodied in the music as a heard experience. If there's any specific musical aspect that can help facilitate the listener's "identification" with the example

41 Virgil Thomson, *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 410.
42 Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (University of California Press, 1974), 14.

at hand, it is "prominence of the melody."[43] And yet, according to Cone, such a *persona* becomes more difficult and composite if sung words or programmatic texts are involved, and is, if anything, more readily accessible in instrumental music than vocal.

At the same time, Cone talks about melody as a "virtual agent" in music that urges the listener to sing along inwardly and empathetically with the musical work, thereby engaging them in both body and mind: "By inwardly singing, [the listener] promotes the agent to what we might call a potential character, personified through the medium of an imaginary human voice."[44] I would say Tchaikovsky's melodies can be specifically desirous and vocal-sounding; his instrumental lines can model need and lyricism. In one of his Young People's Concerts, Leonard Bernstein discussed a repetitious passage in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, a later stage of the development section (starting about eleven minutes in), the very same section that Paul Henry Lang thought hysterical. To illustrate his point that this music models imploring speech, Bernstein set the sequenced three-note figure with the lyric "I want it!, I want it!, I want it!" and asked his audience to think of the passage as if "and again you said, louder and more excited, 'I want it!' and louder 'I want it!' until it seemed that something would break inside you and there's nothing left to do but cry?"[45]

What Cone talks about as the "experiencing subject of the instrumental composition" is a protean presence, and in Tchaikovsky's case (whether we're speaking of the man himself or the "virtual persona" behind his compositions) that presence becomes all the more rich and mutable because of the liminal boundaries and boundary crossings and erasings common in homosexuality. Schonberg was plain-spokenly journalistic in referring to Tchaikovsky as a classifiable "homosexual," but in discussing the musical implications of this composer's same-

43 Ibid., 119.

44 Ibid.

45 Leonard Bernstein, "What Does Music Mean?," *Leonard Bernstein Office*, originally aired January 18, 1958, https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/what-does-music-mean.

sex attractions he came to rely on the old, Freudian notion of homosexuality as gender transposition. Specifically, the trope can be traced back to Ellis's discussions of *inversion* where the homosexual is understood as a "woman's soul trapped in a man's body." As such, the invert class was a transition between the pre-Foucauldian understanding of same-sex attraction as a particular *behavior* and the twentieth-century conception of the homosexual as a *type of person*. Sedgwick cites Christopher Craft in explaining the inversion notion as "the preservation of an essential heterosexuality within desire itself, […] the current that runs between one male self and one female self, in whatever sex of bodies these selves may be manifested."[46] If Sedgwick resists — for obvious reasons — this old idea of desire as indissolubly linked to difference, and indeed subsisting in gender difference, she also refutes the notion that homosexuality represents a love of "the same" (as per the Greek *homo-*, rather than the Latin noun *homo*). She is insistent: No, a homosexual is neither a woman desiring under a man's guise nor a man who wants sex with himself (which would be the narcissist's pleasure).

Schonberg's thinking went in another direction. He claimed — in line with inversion theory, though he didn't use that term — that Tchaikovsky's great ballet melodies show him identifying with his female stage protagonists. He said, following up on Tchaikovsky's penchant for "long-arched, proud, and sensuous melodies given to the ballerina," that such pairings of a sensuous tune with a dancing female character showed how "Tchaikovsky and the ballerina were one" in musical-theatrical terms.[47] These "sensuous melodies" are musical evidence of his empathy across genders. But this raises questions of sexual desire and where such desire becomes manifest in ballet, as a music-theatrical genre and across its history. When the invert comes to manifest his "woman's soul trapped in a man's body," it's the trapped-ness itself that causes the maladjustment of desire

46 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 87.
47 Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers,* 361.

and thus the sexual perversion. I would disagree with Schonberg here and say those melodies (at least the ones I hear as desirous) can't be vicariously ballerina-womanly, since women characters aren't the ones wanting sex in these ballets. Princess Odette, Princess Aurora, and young Clara are the very opposite of hysterics. Indeed, they're the ones who can usually see past spells, ruses, and deceptions. So instead of these melodies showing identification with the prima ballerina, I hear them as embodying the implicit *desirability* of the primo ballerino. The theater is a place for fantasizing, and these able-bodied men are stage avatars for Tchaikovskyan desire.

Tchaikovsky is, in partnership with Petipa, inseparable from classical ballet's rebirth in the nineteenth century, a fact that links his music — posthumously, in retrospect — with male turnout and ravishing musculatures. Wiley says of his score for *Swan Lake* that it "redefined the place of music in classical ballet." Critic Tim Ashley recently claimed that "his ballets, among the greatest ever composed, dominate the repertory worldwide and brought new seriousness and integrity to a genre previously dismissed as slight." But then ballet-ness would seem an innate, unsquelchable quality in Tchaikovsky's musical style across the board. (Star violinist Joshua Bell writes of that smelly Violin Concerto: "I think it's the most intimate, elegant, almost 'balletic' warhorse I know!"[48]) These many assertions of Tchaikovsky's balletic nature can't be restricted to discussions of rhythm, melody, development, and form. Rather, it also has to involve the questions of gender and sexuality that ballet asks as a genre. I myself hear and differentiate Tchaikovsky's melodies in balletic terms, and in terms of stagings of desire. More specifically, the intense vulnerability and openness of this composer's melodies make an ungodly *frisson* when coordinated with the

48 Wiley, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich"; Tim Ashley, "Tchaikovsky: Where to Start with His Music," *The Guardian,* October 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/oct/21/tchaikovsky-where-to-start-with-his-music; and Linda Kobler, "Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto," liner note for *Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto with Joshua Bell and Michael Tilson Thomas* (Sony, 2005).

late twentieth-century classical ballerino's openness on stage, his near-nudity before a crowd — a kind of exhibitionism by request? — and amenability to being visually owned by his audience.

Here role-playing becomes the most basic subject, and melody and the theater — Tchaikovsky's essential habit and habitat — become relevant. Balletomane and English literature scholar Peter Stoneley describes the gender artifice and otherwise essentially fabricated ethos of classical ballet: "The excessively worked dimorphism — the *pas de deux* of delicate feminine and noble masculine — indicates a mastery of convention rather than a spontaneous expression of natural male and female. The balletic identity is always intensely conscious of its own constructed-ness, and it constantly monitors the quality of its impersonation."[49] In his Tchaikovsky chapter, Schonberg referred to classical ballet as having a "homosexual ambiance."[50] It does draw a chasmic difference between masculine and feminine, and it invokes the rare situation where male characters (in this case, stage figures) present themselves as open to being desired. There is a startling openness to male postures and dress in classical ballet. This can be taken as an affront to the hetero male ego and its impenetrability. It can be foreign, even frightening to nonhomosexuals, to see a man openly enacting availability and vulnerability rather than empowered desire.[51]

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49 Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (Routledge, 2007), 12.

50 Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers,* 361.

51 Mark Harris forgets about ballet when he locates the Rubicon-crossing of male eroticism not with Vaslav Nijinsky and tights and the matinee-idol Nureyev, but with underwear ads of the 1980s. In defining the juncture, Rudolf Harris focuses on Bruce Weber's 1983 photo of pole vaulter Tom Hintnaus for Calvin Klein jockey briefs and chooses to talk about a universal, irrefusable eroticism rather than male objectification and vulnerability: "The [Hintnaus] image marked a revolution: It forced straight men to accept the fact that a madly fit man in nothing but tighty-whities was definitionally erotic." Mark Harris, "Notes on the Culture: Gay Men Have Long Been Obsessed with Their Muscles. Now Everyone Is," *The New York Times,* August 9, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/09/t-magazine/gay-men-muscles-body-culture.html.

Thus ballet's "homosexual ambiance" and Tchaikovsky's characteristically vivid presentation of what Cone called "a musical persona that is the experiencing subject of the entire composition, in whose thought the play, or narrative, or reverie, takes place — whose inner life the music communicates by means of symbolic gesture."[52] Enhancing the exhibitionistic anatomy and "pulled-up" look are of course the white tights that have become standard issue in classical ballet. White tights are revealing, but at the same time they have the queer effect of idealizing male musculature à la Michelangelo or Gian Lorenzo Bernini or Paul Cadmus while they bind the cock and other protrusions and can even appear — from a fetishist's perspective — as a kind of high-class, ultra-snug bondage suit. *Green's Dictionary of Slang* gives its second definition of "basket" as "(gay) the male genitals; the bulge caused by their display in tight trousers."[53] When the male wears either skin-tight bondage or ballet tights, constraint of the cock and flattening of the groin has the reverse-psychology effect of allowing the onlooker to imagine his cock as springing out even more strongly and proudly, vector-like, more erect and longer and up and away from the body — promising to be a true instrument of penetration and daring, like one of dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's legendary leaps.

White tights help fetishize the male dancer's every muscle and even display his foreskin status for all to see. (Cue Robin Williams's ageless quip about ballet being a show where "men wear pants so tight, you can tell their religion."[54] Consider also male ballet dancers' concern over their penis heads being visible onstage as "the outline" — as it's called in the field.) Contrast this revelation-aspect of ballet with the genital "tucking" that drag queens undertake every time they get into costume. If you'd rather think of the ballerino as expressing his own desire, then consider his bulge and his "outline" as literal evidence that

52 Cone, *The Composer's Voice,* 94.

53 *Green's Dictionary of Slang,* s.v. "basket," https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/e2ffoga.

54 Robin Williams, *A Night at the Met* (Columbia, 1986).

desire represents excess rather than — as per the conventional understanding of sexual need, going as far back as Plato — as lack. Pondering "the politics of desire," queer theorist Jonathan Kemp writes: "It has become clear that something is lacking in 'lack.' And that something is the productive, creative, imaginative excess of bodies that matter."[55]

The notion of sexual inversion becomes especially useful in understanding Tchaikovsky's ballet music as something costumed and danced and enacted and pantomimed. Sedgwick turned to inversion dynamics while discussing narratives by Marcel Proust and Willa Cather, and explored a dualism of same-sex-desiring tropes that she called "gender liminality" and "gender separatism."[56] What would Sedgwick have made of classical ballet as a narrative form for the stage? In discussing Proust's "highly chiasmic organization of homo/heterosexual definition" in *Remembrance of Things Past,* she actually turns to dance similes. She finds a "choreography of crossings, identifications, and momentary symmetries, [a] hummingbird ballet of within and without the parenthesis."[57] Ballet does strongly — *ostensibly* — divide the sexes as regards dramatic roles, technique, and body shape. As regards stage costumes, ballet was perhaps the only venue where formal attire revealed more of the male physique than the female. It's these stark and ossified divisions that make the genre of drag ballet possible, and moreover funny — consider the cross-dressing Ballets de Trocadero, and Matthew Bourne's hugely successful gay reinvention of *Swan Lake* (1995).

When Schonberg eulogized Tchaikovsky's "long-arched, proud, and sensuous melodies given to the ballerina," he related those melodies to the ballerina's stage posture and comportment. In this he must have been considering the great New York City Ballet danseuse Suzanne Farrell (b. 1945), who was

55 Jonathan Kemp, *Homotopia? Gay Identity, Sameness & The Politics of Desire* (punctum books, 2015), 134.

56 Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 171–72.

57 Ibid., 174.

Balanchine's muse in the 1960s. That influential choreographer formed Farrell into a geometric abstraction, less a feeling person on stage than a configurational immaculacy. Balanchine himself later described Farrell as "a clean dancer, no mistakes," and praised her for "exactness of execution."[58] Stoneley explains the post-Balanchine female soloist: "The quality of the prima ballerina is related to her ability to attain purity of line. That is to say, she must dance in a way that emphasizes poise, and that creates a sense of coordination and of clear, unbroken shapes. It is easier to project an impressive sense of line with lean limbs, and hence the female dancer's preoccupation with weight."[59] At the same time, the male ballet soloist — at least in that artifice of classical, Vaganova-method ballet, known as *turn-out* — worked not to create clean geometries, but to make butt, groin, and legs entirely available to the eyes. Stoneley draws the following contrast between late twentieth-century ballerina and ballerino: "What kind of a pleasure can one man take in another's body, and, especially, in this body? [Classical balletic] turn-out seems to make a display of the genitals, while the muscular roundness and 'pulled-up' look of the male dancer's buttocks might seem to have made its own invitation. […] The queer potential of the ballet, then, can be understood in terms of its presentation of the body as a stylised object, and of the male body in particular as a conspicuously desirable object."[60]

* * *

When he danced Tchaikovsky, the Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev (1938–1993) was quite the persona: a perfect storm

58 Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky,* 150.

59 Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet,* 14.

60 Ibid., 11, 13. The sign of "pulled-up" gluteals seem to have long currency in supposed homosexual semiotics. Among Tardieu's six "characteristic signs" of passive sodomy was what he called "excessive development of the buttocks." Did Tardieu never visit a West Hollywood gym? See Scott Long, "When Doctors Torture: The Anus and the State in Egypt and Beyond," *Health and Human Rights* 7, no. 2 (2004): 118.

of eroticism, expression, and availability. Every performance involving Nureyev ultimately centered on him. Biographer Julie Kavanagh comments on his appearances in Adolphe Adam's *Giselle* in Petipa's choreography: "When he danced Albrecht the character ceased to be a supporting role, because all eyes were on him."[61] My own eyes were certainly and intoxicatedly there, especially when Rudik danced Tchaikovsky, and particularly in his 1966 video production of *Swan Lake* from Vienna. For someone of my generation who found a tutu synonymous with kitsch and a ballerina's *pointe* work to be stiff and linear (not in a good way), Nureyev was the dancer who definitively "corrected" classical ballet's emphasis on female dance stars and protagonists. And yet he was everywhere unconventional.

Modern dance legend Martha Graham described Rudik in terms of a characteristic theatrical "brutality, even savagery." English dance critic Richard Buckle prized him for "his fascinating face," strong personality, and "interpretive power," concluding in 1966 that he "was more amazing for his expressive qualities than for his dancing."[62] Similarly, the legendary danseuse Tamara Karsavina, the first Firebird and the partner to Nijinsky in Sergei Diaghilev's celebrated *Spectre de la Rose* (1911), thought Nureyev a dancer of such tremendous "nerve" that one didn't notice his tendency to "land badly."[63] Kavanagh emphasized Nureyev's "oriental sinuosity and ballerina borrowings," in reference to his exotic Tatar mien and his appropriations — considered odd or even suspect at the start of his career — of female ballet techniques. All was declarative for Rudik, each performance a one-night stand with himself in a Fifth Avenue store window. He made his big London debut stealing the show as Albrecht in *Giselle*. In his stagings of *Swan Lake,* he reengineered the dramatic scenario to make his own character of Prince Siegfried the central protagonist. Unhappy with the lesser promi-

61 Julie Kavanagh, *Nureyev: The Life* (Pantheon, 2007), 85.

62 Richard Buckle, *Buckle at the Ballet: Selected Criticism* (Atheneum, 1980), 115.

63 Kavanagh, *Nureyev,* 194.

nence of the Nutcracker Prince in *Nutcracker,* he just folded the role of Drosselmeyer into the Prince, and of course danced that joint-protagonist himself as a central and Machiavellian role of strangely Freudian proportions. (It's surprising he didn't also write new music for the ballet while he was at it.)

Reconfigured suchly, the Tchaikovsky ballets did give Nureyev a juicy forum for demonstrating his conviction that artistic creativity is "very much akin to sex, sexual drive or sexual appetite if you wish."[64] (His rumored love of anal sex left you wondering if there were any evenings where he did find it physically difficult to get out on stage.) Schonberg praised Tchaikovsky the invert for his "long-arched, proud, and sensuous melodies given to the ballerina," consummate melodies that showed how "Tchaikovsky and the ballerina were one," but what I was attending to were the maddening conflations of composer and dancer personas in Nureyev's Tchaikovsky videos — including Norman Campbell's 1972 film of his *Sleeping Beauty* with the National Ballet of Canada, and the still from this production that fronted Eugene Ormandy's 1973 RCA album with the Philadelphia Orchestra. That photo showed the star's bastardly fetching arrogance and — from the waist down, at least — every tendon and striation in his developed, meaty musculature. (For a gayboy living in the 1970s rural outskirts, such ballerino images were the closest thing he could find to gay porn.)

To judge from "the outline" on proud display here, Rudik must have been wearing a sheer belt under those tights. Nureyev had insisted, even back in Stalin's Leningrad when tights were considered "Western" and bourgeois, on dancing in the scandalous, flesh-hugging leggings that revealed everything. Kavanagh recollects a *Don Quixote* in the Kirov where Nureyev was even more adamant than usual: "'Only without pants,' he remarked implacably. Finally Rudolf got his way and appeared onstage to a chorus of gasps. He looked naked! He was bound to be dismissed, just as Nijinsky had been fifty years earlier for daring in the presence of the dowager empress to wear 'an indecent and

64 Ibid., 190–91.

improper costume' of Baroque-style tights without the traditional covering of a pair of trunks."[65] He rejected the standard-issue stage "trousers" as "ugly," but in truth hated them as instruments of modesty: Tights would bare all of Rudolf Nureyev for all the world to see, and Nureyev thought he absolutely had to be seen — and that included the outline of his cock.

Nureyev was also a pioneer of balletic inversion. For much of ballet's history, male dancers had been two-dimensional objects: stage props and understated foils for star ballerinas, such as Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler, and Elena Andreyanova. Incurring changes away from this were three Russian men who had sex with men, dance visionaries who prepared the way for the explosive male solo roles and stars of the twentieth century. The last of these three was Nureyev, and the first two — paving Nureyev's way as animalistic matinee idol — were Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950). Diaghilev was an impresario and founder of the soon-to-be-legendary Ballets Russes in Paris, and Nijinsky was one of his primary dancers — and later, a cutting-edge choreographer for the troupe. With Nijinsky and other men as his vehicles for "modern" change, Diaghilev instituted the first male-hero roles in ballet. (The dancer, writer, and Nureyev-intimate Robert Tracy conveniently omitted Nijinsky when he said that Rudolf "did more to emancipate the role of the male dancer than anyone else."[66]) Diaghilev's taste for scandal, stage spectacle, and gender fluidity served him well in this project. Dance historian Lynn Garafola recounts the shift from gender-differentiated Romanticism toward queerly regendered modernism:

> This hero, who made his first appearance with Vaslav Nijinsky, differed markedly from the princes of the nineteenth-century Russian repertory that formed the early dancers

65 Ibid., 89–90.

66 Robert Tracy with Carolyn Soutar, "Nureyev and Me," *The Guardian,* January 30, 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jan/30/dance.artsfeatures.

> and choreographers of the *Ballets Russes.* No longer merely a consort to the ballerina or the exponent of a chivalric ideal of masculinity, he was a protagonist in his own right, projecting an image of sexual heterodoxy that left a deep imprint not only on the ballets of the Diaghilev period but also on their audiences. From the androgynes of *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911) and *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912) to the deco gods of *La Chatte* (1927), *Apollon Musagète* (1928), and *Prodigal Son* (1929), Diaghilev's heroes traced a spectrum of male roles that transcended conventions of gender while presenting the male body in a way that was frankly erotic. Ballet after ballet celebrated its physique, dramatized its athletic prowess, and paraded its sexual availability.[67]

This was Nureyev, as seen against his creative matrix. He had too much animus to qualify as a Pretty Boy. He felt he deserved more than the French and imperial Russian traditions of "consort and support," and he furthered Diaghilev's project of eroticizing the male body. Kavanagh summarized Rudik's lack of rapport with the famous classical works: He considered them "to be ballerinas' ballets, with the prince employed as no more than a foil and *porteur*. 'Petipa didn't want to make men dance. *At all,*' [Rudolf] said. 'Just walk or stand like statues onstage.' His lack of conviction in the Petipa repertory was tangible."[68]

Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, and then Nureyev played with and deconstructed "inversion" on the dance stage by liberating the "woman's soul trapped in the male dancer's body," by, as it were, refeminizing the same, and by blurring gender lines altogether. No doubt envious of the prima ballerina's spotlight, Nureyev scrutinized the women and copied elements of their technique. Dance critic Joan Acocella writes of Nureyev's early career: "He cultivated a highly pulled-up torso

67 Lynn Garafola, "Reconfiguring the Sexes," in *The Ballets Russes and Its World,* ed. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer (Yale University Press, 1999), 245–46.

68 Kavanagh, *Nureyev,* 111.

and did elaborate, wafting arm movements. To make his legs look longer, he stood on a high half-point. Everything about him was stretched, angled, 'placed' — like a ballerina. Today, this look is standard for men, in Russia and in the West, but in the Soviet nineteen-fifties it was considered effeminate. When he made his début in 'Giselle,' a fellow-dancer said, 'We had a girl and another girl as the boy.'"[69]

Gay sexual allure is mutable and expansive in classical ballet, and what I was finding sexually exciting were the forceful ambiguities. Musically speaking, it was Tchaikovsky's juxtaposition of visceral expressive intensity and gender ambivalence that spoke to me. In an attempt to fall in with inversion theory and its active *frisson* of fulfillments and pleasures — or maybe just to go all the way in my project of self-definition as invert — I remember once as an adolescent putting on my mother's bra and panties (oversize, all-about-function, and standard-issue; no lingerie couture there). But when I viewed myself in the mirror, my own disinterest was keen. To up the ante, I even tried mimicking the modestly demure and knees-tightly-together pose, hips slightly rotated — the very opposite of balletic turnout — that J.C. Penney underwear models used to evidence their feminine modesty. It seemed I was more aroused by seeing others "do" inversion than "trying" it myself. As a teen, I found Nijinsky erotic as the androgynous flower in *Spectre de la Rose* (1911). I masturbated over the old, grainy photos of his almost inscrutable, dress-drag-kink — with his flower-petal bows, his half-closed eyes, and his curved and demure lips. (The photo appeared in that otherwise modest *Golden Encyclopedia of Music*.) At the same time as Nijinsky's liminal sexuality intrigued me in pubescence, I was electrified by Nureyev's nonliminal virility (ballerina-encroachments aside), by his bounding muscularity and high cheekbones as well as his perilous grin and his fierce, stage-filling Tatar pride. (This despite the fact that

69 Joan Acocella, "Wild Thing: Rudolf Nureyev, Onstage and Off," *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2007, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/08/wild-thing-2.

I never saw him perform live, but then videos are more conducive to fantasy.) Here I'd found a dancer who gave visual voice to the sexual drive that I heard in so much music. Rudolf Nureyev helped me realize that Tchaikovsky didn't just touch and move this adolescent, he *pushed and pulled* me in a way that was very nearly physical.

I've mentioned Edward T. Cone's idea of unified and unifying personas. The persona as he understood it was a musical presence to the exclusion of being a sexual or theatrical presence — the latter two he said indulged in "imaginary role playing while listening."[70] Cone was of course concerned with compositional-musical personas and how the listener relates to them, but he did consider the physical, seen aspects of music performance to be conducive to "the listener's successful identification with the musical persona […] observation of the physical gestures of the players can facilitate the empathetic reactions of the auditors to the symbolic gestures of the music."[71] Cone also admits that a convincing musical performance, to the extent that it projects "an artistic persona," does depend "on the power of personality."[72] In a way that seems rather arbitrary and rationalizing, Cone is eager to separate between dance that acts as an enhancement to the music and dance that distracts from it. He references the dancer as "one auditor who identifies himself with music in a special way, who responds to it by gesturing not with the hands and feet alone, but with the entire body." The dancer visibly and dynamically searches "for identification with the musical persona," and in so doing "may create for an audience a vivid visual analogue to the symbolic gestures of the music."[73]

But here again I would assert Nureyev's individuality as, among dancers and choreographers, an unusually concerted musical listener. Rudik listened and he heard. His choreogra-

70 Cone, *The Composer's Voice,* 121.
71 Ibid., 137.
72 Ibid., 139.
73 Ibid., 140.

phy was faulted at times for following the music too closely and literally, and here his gestural reactions even to individual notes in figuration was called "fussy" or — as written up by more favorable critics — "musical." Nureyev even ended his career, at a time when he was too sick to dance, with some orchestral conducting engagements. So when he grabbed attention through what Buckle called his "special expressive abilities" — "Nureyev, whose personality is so strong that his slightest gesture can appear portentous"[74] — there's no particular reason to think that in doing so this often glaringly charismatic and sometimes exasperatingly egocentric dancer was blocking out "the composer's voice."

* * *

Following Nureyev's *Swan Lake* of 1966, we have Mikhail Baryshnikov's popular *Nutcracker* production of 1977. If a homosexual balletomane might have been reluctant to escort Rudik into "polite company" circles, he would have been happy to take Baryshnikov (b. 1948) home to mother. Mischa was as impeccable in his technique as Rudik was inconsistent in his, as collegial and far-sighted as Nureyev was self-concerned, and as successful in Hollywood film as Nureyev strongly wished to be. Now consider Mischa dancing the two Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker* melodies, typically supersensuous, that he was born to model: the first face-to-face meeting between Clara and the Nutcracker Prince (number 8, "A Pine Forest in Winter," sometimes referenced as "Journey through the Snow") and their romantic denouement at the end (number 14a, "Dances of the Sugar Plum Fairy and Prince Charming — *Pas de deux*"). The melody of number 8 from the *Nutcracker* (what I'm calling the protagonists' "meet cute") is uniquely intimate in tone, the most tender and confidential musical assertion we've heard so far in the ballet. (Its gentle sighs made me cry as an adolescent, especially arriving after all that hurly-burly in act 1. If Philip Brett would have

74 Buckle, *Buckle at the Ballet,* 208.

begrudged me my *Pathétique* Symphony sob sessions, I doubt he would have protested my wistful *Nutcracker* tears.) Or at least this number, which counts as an implicit *pas de deux,* begins in such privacy. The festivities and magical evocations and holiday dances and rodent battles are all concluded, and this is the first time two characters have been by themselves on stage for any length of time. Clara has saved the Nutcracker's life, he has been transformed into a beautiful prince, and the plot is hereby basically finished, only two-thirds of the way through act 1. All that remains, narrative-wise, is for the couple to travel to the Kingdom of Sweets, followed (in act 2) by a series of courtly entertainments and personages that commemorate their arrival.

These opening bars of number 8 suggest an intimacy that is less sexual than redolent of a warm embrace — not the violence of penetrative sex, but a tangible and mutual comfort, shared by two rather than perpetrated on one, and yet tinges of the existential, unanswerable loneliness still remain. Whenever I hear the passage, I want to follow Assafyev's example and put together an alliterative emotional lexicon. Given the gentle, stepwise melodic motion here, it could be cogently described with a few more words starting with "c":

caressing
caring
carrying
consoling
cossetting
cradling
cushioning

This needful quality comes from the repetitiveness within a rising line, each of the smaller four-note phrases starting on the note the previous one ended with. And then, in a choreographic decision that's close to miraculous (and clearly informed by listening), the Nutcracker Prince and Clara start dancing together — hand in hand — when the melody reappears, now doubled in octaves. My desire for Baryshnikov and his phy-

sique became indissolubly linked with this melody, in a kind of cooperative escalation of meaning. Much of the eroticism was of course Tchaikovsky's doing, but nothing comparable transpires when I see — for example — Davit Karapetyan in the 2008 San Francisco Ballet film. And seeing Baryshnikov dance a lyrical number from, say, *Don Quixote* or *Coppélia* would have elicited nothing like the same erotic charge. So in that sense of an experimental control, the *caressing* that's felt and enjoyed here must be causally related to Tchaikovsky's music. A cooperative venture.

The importance you attach to the "meet cute" melody would hinge on how you interpret its follow-up in the ballet's big, culminating duet, the heartrending *pas de deux* toward the end of act 2. This is the lynchpin of the evening's dramaturgy, and choreographers have radically reinterpreted it in contrasting ways depending on whether they read the ballet as a romance with a happy ending, an odd children's fantasy or morality tale, or something darker in line with Hoffmann. As I hear it, this substantial number marks the consummation of Clara and the Nutcracker Prince's love (or, if Petipa's version of the story is to be entertained, their sad separation). Musically speaking, Tchaikovsky's big act 2 *pas de deux* intimates heartbreak and psychic death, a bittersweet riposte to the uneventful pageantry that preceded it in the second act. Yet the characters who are loving and farewell-ing here are just plot devices, and moreover as fairy tale creatures don't carry emotional freight. The Sugar Plum Fairy rules over the Kingdom of Sweets, simply giving us and the protagonists a grand tour of her glittering and dance-filled realm (which includes the Arab and his coffee, and of course the fairy and her sugar plums), and "her cavalier" is — as the libretto has it — the most inconsequential of all Petipa's danseuse-props. Dancer and writer Daniel Pratt agrees that Petipa's understanding of this *pas de deux* conflicts with Tchaikovsky's — the dance seems to say something very different from the music. (The composer apparently ignored Petipa's request for an "Adage colossal d'effets" — a big and showy ballerina number that doesn't touch the heart.) Indeed, these dissonances between sight and sound

haunted Pratt when he saw Peter Wright's Royal Ballet production, based on Petipa–Ivanov:

> The climactic *pas de deux* for the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier that takes place in the Kingdom of the Sweets flickers in my mind all winter because it poses more questions than it answers. The dance melds pure classicism and stately regality with an emotional sweep that is at odds with these rather one-dimensional characters. Who are these two monarchs and why did Tchaikovsky give them music that encapsulates both light and dark?[75]

So how could these two dramaturgical nonentities exchange such emotions, and offer such musical premonitions of the *Pathétique* Symphony and its "homosexual tragedy"? Tchaikovsky actually composed *against* Petipa in this *pas de deux,* coupling the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier romantically and humanizing the dramatic arc of the ballet after all the stop-and-go, marzipan-and-glitter pageantry of act 2. Nureyev called Tchaikovsky's bluff with the Royal Ballet in 1963, when he (maybe following the Soviet-era choreography of Vasily Vainonen) boldly rewrote Petipa and gave the *pas de deux* to the Nutcracker Prince and Clara — with two adult dancers retained from act 1, and now able to complete their union. Nureyev dramatized the *pas de deux* even further by having the mysterious-magician character of Drosselmeyer — the shadowy conjurer, even darker in the original Hoffmann story — return in act 2 to try to separate the couple and return Clara from the Land of Sweets to real life. The number thereby becomes a *pas de trois* and threatens a splitting of the lovers, threatening the kind of heartbreak-denouement seen in the great tragic romances. Having an adult couple in act 2 also enables us to hear the overwhelming crescendo of the hugely tumescent Christmas Tree in act 1, scene 1 — Tchaikovsky's best impression of a Wagnerian *Liebestod,* and his most

75 Daniel Pratt, "The Sugar Plum pas de deux," *Dancing Times,* December 12, 2018, https://www.dancing-times.co.uk/the-sugar-plum-pas-de-deux/.

simplistic ascending sequence — as the obvious illustration that it is: the young Nutcracker growing the cock he will need for his future involvement in love and war.[76]

The *Nutcracker* film of 1977 featured Baryshnikov's own choreography, but, as I say, he followed Nureyev's reconfiguration of the close of act 2. For a young gayboy watching the movie, the personal heartbreak became complete just as the Tchaikovsky-as-invert analysis finally found itself illustrated in theatrical terms. For the new act 2 *pas de trois* remained the prima ballerina's number, and the possibly tragic choice was hers to make — continue the fantasy with the graceful and luscious Baryshnikov clad all in white, or go back to reality with the wily and dour Drosselmeyer, bald and dressed in black (and possibly, as Hoffmann insinuates in his original story, involved with Clara as a child molester). Clara's choice here is whether or not to give desire what it wants. Pratt hit specifically on the dramatic theme of romantic longing, which becomes almost unbearable in the remade Nureyev/Baryshnikov *pas de deux*: "For one magic Christmas moment, the couple occupies a place where we can pour all of our unseen, wild yearnings so that they can be civilized in front of our eyes. Under the glitter of the tutu, is the glisten of a tear."[77]

I keep coming back to the way Nureyev and Baryshnikov force Clara to choose between fulfillment and pain, beauty and ugliness, which seems to me a specifically gay issue: a choice that gay men face every day. Ellis spoke of Tchaikovsky himself as an artist who chose to "deal with life as a Personal Problem" and in doing so could "only attain to equanimity and strength by accepting the consolation of beauty." So Peter Ilyich just needed

76 Here I can only agree with blogger PetrB, who describes Tchaikovsky's no. 8 "A Pine Forest in Winter" as music "in that vein of imparting something of the near triple-X rated quality of 'adult sensuality' which Tchaikovsky was also amazingly good at." See PetrB, reply to "What is your favorite number from the Nutcracker?," *Talk Classical: Forums,* December 20, 2014, https://www.talkclassical.com/threads/nutcracker-favorite.35473/?post_id=781144.

77 Pratt, "The Sugar Plum pas de deux."

to accept "the consolation of beauty," to pick the smiling, soft, and yet chiseled *danseur* in white, and get on with it.

Someone might object that the dramatic stakes in the *Nutcracker pas de deux* aren't especially high in theatrical terms, at least compared to, say, Prince Siegfried's ruinous vow to wed Odile in act 3 of *Swan Lake.* To that I would repeat Arkadii Klimovitsky's account of the powerful dramatic undertows, the extreme psychological nuances, that Tchaikovsky wrote into his final ballet and opera: "In the ballet there are situations with no external action, in which the primary focus is on previously unnoticed details of the emotional and psychical lives of the dramatis personae. In both [*Nutcracker* and *Iolanta*] Tchaikovsky designs a poetry of the 'not spoken.'"[78] Klimovitsky also tells us of the deep aesthetic value that Russian artists found, even soon after the composer's death, in Tchaikovsky's personal and empathetic narratives of emotion: "The exceptionally strong resonance of Tchaikovsky's music in Russia's symbolist circles was due to the transformation through music of the listener's emotional/spiritual experience into an object of contemplation."[79]

Thus the dramatic scenario of the *pas de deux.* But what is *musically* heartrending in Tchaikovsky's efforts here? He conjures up unquenchable and anxious yearnings already with the opening harp vamp. His repeating bass pattern is formulaic, giving the number a feeling of cold futility that streaks through its velveteen lushness — of providence or fatedness, to use terms from Tchaikovsky's own diaries. Klimovitsky's account of the early twentieth-century Russian symbolist interpretation of Tchaikovsky's act 1 "Waltz of the Snowflakes" could apply just as well to the act 2 *pas de deux*; for these sensitive artists, this music "was about an inexplicable unity of deeply-felt lyricism, unhealthy phantasmagoria, the finest impressionistic sound

78 Arkadii Klimovitsky, "Tchaikovsky and the Russian 'Silver Age,'" in *Tchaikovsky and His World,* ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton University Press, 1998), 327.

79 Ibid., 325.

painting, and melancholy enigma. […] A strict chaconne symbolically represents a fatal reserve, the predetermination of the fates of the characters in the story, and the enchantment of the dance."[80]

The invert's heart starts coming undone already with the second chord of the number. It would be common to drop from G major (the home tonic) to D major or C major (the stone's-throw-distant dominant or subdominant), but here we have the lump-in-the-throat chill of moving straight to E minor (the submediant) before going to A minor, then D major, then back to the home tonic harmony before the pattern repeats. American pop music has conditioned our reaction to the unexpected (and perhaps cruel?) exposure to a minor harmony so soon, and the knowledge that we're predestined to reencounter it through the repeating chord sequence. For an American listener in the later twentieth century, this harmonic opening suggests 1950s doo-wop and its youthful "greasers." Or maybe the Everly Brothers covering the Boudleaux Bryant song "All I Have to Do Is Dream" (1958). This conflicted ballad fantasizes about love, but also points to the dangers of fantasy itself. The lyrics to the verses begin: "When I feel blue in the night / And I need you to hold me tight / Whenever I want you, all I have to do is / Dream / I can make you mine, taste your lips of wine / Anytime, night or day / Only trouble is, gee whiz / I'm dreamin' my life away." When the subject is love, there's something so cold about that drop straight away from the tonic major to the submediant (vi) chord (the minor third coloring the words "when I feel *blue*" and "and I need *you*"). It's not a big leap as the harmonic crow flies, but within the song it still seems such a difficult step emotionally.

And then there's the fact that so much of Tchaikovsky's *pas de deux* melody consists of scalewise descents, set apart by little pockets of insistent repetition that suggest quietly muttering despair. The persona is needing to convince themself of something. Such persistent and regular melodic falls tend to

80 Ibid., 327.

mean what you think they must mean: drooping, giving up, giving in, acquiescing, dying. These descents have close familial resemblance to the descents in the finale of the *Pathétique* Symphony, which followed shortly after the ballet. Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown inexplicably finds the repeated descents in the *Nutcracker pas de deux* methodical and dull. Maybe he doesn't believe in fate, is drunk with would-be critique, or just doesn't believe in hearing? "It is with the Pas de deux (No. 14) that the lack of dramatic motivation makes itself felt with a vengeance. Too much is made of a scale repeated at different levels and with different harmonizations, and it is soon painfully clear that Tchaikovsky was merely providing the accompaniment for a piece of formal decorative dancing."[81] Hello, anyone there? Addressing "melodic descent" more generally in universal melodic terms, Alexander Ringer is smarter in finding spontaneity and instinctiveness in such downward motion. He takes as a given "the broad cultural bases of 'logogenic melody'" and seeks to understand the "verbal, in some instances pre-verbal, modes of social intercourse." It's for good reason — namely, identifying anthropomorphically with the melody — that musicians refer to a "falling" line. And melodies end up beholden to natural laws, just like the rest of us.[82]

And so Tchaikovsky proceeds in his *pas de deux* with melodic rises and falls answering each other, second-guessing each other, sometimes reassuring each other. A short digression follows, with wind solos, triplet vamps in the brass, and quick skitterings-upward. Baryshnikov cunningly models Clara's consolation-of-beauty indecisions on Tchaikovsky's own musical agitations. Then the massed violins reenter, the pace picks up, the melodic units getting shorter, and we come to the mother of all descents (marked *ffff*) in the full orchestra with the trumpets driving the point home. (This is the place where Baryshnikov's

81 David Brown, T*chaikovsky: The Final Years, 1885–1893* (W.W. Norton, 1992), 351.

82 Alexander Ringer, "Melody," *Grove Music Online,* https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000018357.

choreography has Drosselmeyer actually separating the couple. Here the law of melodic gravity becomes the law of psychic human separation, a separation made even more painful by the couple's settled and happy domesticity during the act 2 pageantry. This is also the passage most predictive of the *Pathétique* Symphony finale and its "homosexual tragedy.") But at the repeat of this big descent, with flutes and piccolos wailing away up top, Drosselmeyer hands Clara back over to the Prince and turns his back. The intimate musical self-questionings reconnect with the self-answerings, and the rising sequences now turn unexpectedly to D major (the close dominant harmony). The turn of events here is that Drosselmeyer graciously bids farewell to goddaughter Clara. She then enters a fast pirouette that brings her decisively back over to the Prince's embrace.

* * *

Tchaikovsky's melodies are essays in solicitous nakedness, desiring a one-on-one partnership with the listener. Even at their quietest, they have a succulent randiness; give them just an aural graze, and they bleed gentle nectars. They are pleas for intimacy, as much as the sentences I'm writing here. (And what kind of intimacy do I want from you, gentle reader? Well, what have you got?) Yet I don't want to imply that all Tchaikovsky's music, not even most of his ballet scores, evidence the kind of "musical persona" that's conducive to erotic fantasy. Many of his tunes are folk-inspired or even (as in the "Arabian Dance") folk-lifted. And there are exigent realities in ballet too, as elsewhere in life. (Balanchine said there was no time for sex in ballet performance: "The stage eliminates sex. […] It's pure technique, not sex."[83]) Even within the fantasy enacted in ballet music, or even instrumental music more broadly, the music often lapses into characteristic, pantomime, or narrative modes. Think of Tchaikovsky's hissing cats in *Sleeping Beauty* (no. 24, *Pas de caractère — Le Chat botté et la Chatte blanche*), or the passages in

83 Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky,* 145.

Swan Lake that are only meant to get a set of dancers from one part of the stage to another. A scene's melodic makeup (which can encompass both an absence of melody and the presence of it) will of course change according to those modes.

And sex itself is a complicated, diachronic thing that'd be hard to put on stage. For me, sex doesn't just need the conjugal imperative that comes with melody, it also needs a narrative. One makes love to another person not just as a person, but also as a story. (Sedgwick includes a duality between "scripted" and "spontaneous" modes among the "forms of thinking about sexuality" that came to be supplanted and obscured by the ever-present homosexual–heterosexual dualism. She writes: "Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones."[84] So, given my music-balletic complex, Sedgwick might have dubbed me a *scriptosexual*.) In terms of storytelling, folkloric ballets can seem unsatisfied, the consummation of desires as skin-deep as it is in children's stories. Sex and intimacy become casualties of ballet's stylizations and formalities. The fairy-tale narratives such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Nutcracker,* involving unions and standardized roles and also silence — partners pairing up romantically without the aid of words! — mean that romantic and sexual desires are never truly consummated. In ballet, the foreplay is silent and pantomimed, and given its physical, fairy-tale artificialities, it's harder to imagine how danced figures could actually consummate their desires. Such can be done only melodically.

Theater and sexual theater are their own realms of experience, both of them hinging on fantasy and suspensions of disbelief. The sociologist of culture Murray S. Davis addressed these matters in his engrossing *Smut: Erotic Reality, Obscene Ideology*. Davis proves most revealing when he flips the script, conflates common encounters with imagined ones, and actually refers to fantasy in its different forms as "realities." He bases his first chapter substantially on the work of philosopher Alfred Schutz, who himself pursued a "phenomenological psychology"

84 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 25.

of "inner experience," and from this basis draws a distinction between what he calls "everyday reality" and "erotic reality," the latter defined as experience of the world that is "generated by our actual or potential sexual activities." "Oscillating between these two realities, we continually encounter the difficulty of integrating these two separate aspects of our existence," concludes Davis. "How different human life would be if people remained constantly in only one realm!"[85] Cone likewise talks about music composition as an activity that dovetails on a daily basis with the sounds that "many of us" as musicians "constantly carry around inside our heads."[86] In doing so, he arrives at a description that could also beautifully summarize how sexual fantasy (erotic reality) interrelates with, and at times even overlays, actual sex. Like Davis, Cone thinks of daily life (our everyday reality) as boating over and through and around a stream of imaginations and desires — a current that we sometimes invent extemporaneously, and that is sometimes invented for us via external narratives and scripts.

Applying Cone's ideas of "voice" to "erotic life" specifically, we can substitute *fantasies* for his term *works,* read *to fuck* instead of *to compose,* swap *the lover* for *the composer,* and read *force it into new kinks* over *force it into new paths.* Or at least such parallels work for me as someone whose everyday imagination is so often occupied with extravagant musical and sexual thoughts, and yet who often has difficulty getting those thoughts to inform reality in a socially acceptable way. Specifically, imprecisions in my hearing and inhibitions in my physical expression mean that I have difficulty writing musical fantasies down on paper, just as I have difficulty "writing" erotic imaginings on partners' bodies. (This last problem I attribute to the muted sexual shames I experienced in adolescence.) In his perhaps most salient paragraph,

85 Murray S. Davis, *Smut: Erotic Reality, Obscene Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5, 11, and Alfred Schutz with Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World,* trans. R.M. Zaner and T. Engelhardt (Northwestern University Press, 1973).

86 Cone, *The Composer's Voice,* 157.

Cone describes the musician's sense of musical fantasy in such fashion, implicating both our inner ear and our inner voice:

> It comes to us, unbidden, when we wake up in the morning and remains with us all day during our conscious moments, except when masked by louder sounds. We can let it have its way, or we can direct it to our will; we can force it into new paths, or we can rehearse familiar works; we can listen to it, or we can relegate it to our subconscious; but we can never get rid of it. For one so endowed — or so burdened — to live is to live music. To compose is to control this inner voice, to shape it into new forms, to make it speak for us. To listen to music is to yield our inner voice to the composer's domination. Or better: it is to make the composer's voice our own.[87]

Our inner voice of musical fantasy has correlations with our inner imaginarium of sexual illusion. There's the question of spontaneity and pursuing unique experiences versus following trusted rituals (what Sedgwick called "scripts"); there's the question of virtuosity in performance and faithfulness to protocols; the question of trying to take other people's texts as your own, which is what porno is all about; and, last, allowing your imagination to enhance (or maybe just improve on) reality in real time.

This cross-fertilization in real time between fantasy and the everyday must be central to the lives of many performing musicians and music lovers. American pianist and vocal coach Ken Noda gives an intriguing description of his own personal intertwinings of musicality and what he (rather elusively, maybe even coyly) calls "emotional" fantasy. Speaking as a former child prodigy who decided to stop giving solo concerts, Noda says, "[y]oung people like romance stories and war stories and good-and-evil stories and old movies because their emotional life mostly is and should be fantasy. They put that fantasized emotion into their playing, and it is very convincing. I had an amaz-

87 Ibid.

ing capacity for imagining these feelings, and that's part of what talent is. But it dries up, in everyone."[88] I identify and empathize with Noda's account of different levels of "life" interacting or failing to, but I also find his "imagining feelings" a puzzling or even sad concept. Does Tchaikovsky's so very vibrant repertoire of emotions require imagining — demand actual effort — from musicians? Or does his music *facilitate,* help us tap into our own undercurrents of sentiment that would otherwise lie squelched and unexpressed? Does fantasy really have less currency in older age? In any event, it'd surely be better to follow Davis and just call the multiple realms "realities," especially as calling something fantasy can sound like you're condescending to it.

I do recognize that most people (whether inverts or not, whether old or young) don't go about their daily lives as I do, anticipating and recalling all different manners of musical and sexual connection. But I'd like to suppose we're not all that different, that fantasy and actuality also need each other in the compartmentalized lives of those more normal other people, even as I do take these parallels between musical and sexual fantasy as testimony against Cone's artificial wish to separate the various "identifications," "enhancements," and "personas" from what he calls "the music." Similarly, these Davis-style parallels cast a dubious light on Cone's elevation of "the composer's voice" above all other voices. To argue with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who famously said that "there is no sexual relationship," I can only conclude that my (or our?) relation with music rests on a stronger and more fulfilling foundation than compensatory fantasy.[89] Because Tchaikovsky doesn't work alone. Rudik and Mischa weren't just his interlocutors, but became definitive and viscera-churning Tchaikovsky personas

88 Andrew Solomon, "How Do You Raise a Prodigy?," *The New York Times Magazine,* October 31, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/magazine/how-do-you-raise-a-prodigy.html.

89 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan,* book XX*: Encore 1972–1973. On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (W.W. Norton, 1998).

in themselves, channeling and amplifying his inversive magic and his eroticism.

2

The Beautiful One

(Prince, "The Beautiful Ones")

Prince showed us the power of music, but also the powerlessness of words. Consider the verbal shambles when critic Vinson Cunningham called him "our unbelievable thing," waxing inarticulate in that journal of articulacy, *The New Yorker*.[1] (Cunningham might have been echoing the artist's own self-take from 1986: "I'm just saying that I'm an alternative. I'm something else. And I long to hear something else from everybody."[2]) But then Cunningham's verbal muddle smacks of the conceptual paradoxes of Kantian aesthetics. His description of Prince as a "thing unto itself" sounds like Immanuel Kant's *Ding-an-sich*: the cultural object that is powerful but in the end inscrutable, appearing to us mortals — to us fans, listeners, and critics — only through the dark glass of experience, the scattered minutiae we are allowed to know.

Evasive and Kantian in a different way is "genius," another word often trotted out for Prince. But then "genius" is just a human term for "unbelievable thing" — a way of linking His Purpleness with the visionaries of the past, making him a sub-

1 Vinson Cunningham, "The Impenetrable Genius of Prince," *The New Yorker,* April 25, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/02/the-impenetrable-genius-of-prince.

2 Quoted in Prince, *The Beautiful Ones,* ed. Dan Piepenbring (Spiegel & Grau, 2019), 230.

lime imponderable in our own time. Ohio author and poet Scott Woods cut right to the chase and declared the Purple One a mastermind in the same antediluvian sense of a Leonardo or a Beethoven, a visionary grand enough to evoke the old patronage regime that coincided with slavery in Europe, a master of the harmony of the spheres. "Prince composed music," Woods writes, "in the way Da Vinci unlocked the secrets of motion and the body and the universe."[3] Cunningham ponders the dislocations and anachronisms such an old-world visionary must have suffered in our own fallen world, our nonvisionary time: "What a concept, genius. Especially in an age like ours — secular, rational, disenchanted."[4]

I take a revisionist approach, myself. Instead of saying Prince was unbelievable, or indescribable, or historically dislocated, or a genius, I will call him *beautiful*. This is my queer term for a queer approach to a queer subject (understood here to mean a subject that habitually overturns norms). At the same time I'll not ignore the word's more normalized, greeting-card uses. ("Beautiful" was one of this artist's own favorite words, in description of his mother, for example, and — as detailed below — I take it from the second track on his *Purple Rain* album.) Calling Prince beautiful lets me get away from negative and evasive terms — such as "imponderable," "thing," and "enigma" — and talk about him not only as a mind but also as a body, allowing an approach that relates more directly to my own queer thinking. Because there's no way for me to expunge or hide desire from my thoughts about this music. There's no way for me to talk about song structures, say, since I knew Prince was beautiful way back when I first saw his half-naked *Dirty Mind* image. I was sixteen and knew nothing yet about him or his music — beyond the album cover, which ignited my first sexual apotheosis. A partiality to his songs soon followed.

3 Scott Woods, *Prince and Little Weird Black Boy Gods* (Brick Cave Books, 2018), 6.

4 Cunningham, "The Impenetrable Genius of Prince."

The term "beautiful" can suggest perfection and, at another extreme, physical desirability that stops short of drooling lust, and a hundred qualities in between. I genuflected to the *Dirty Mind* cover as a musically curious and very horny small-town adolescent, and was happy when I later found several other like-minded, happily confused accounts of sexually tinged worship that could have applied to early 1980s Prince. First of these was Thomas Mann playing with Kantian ideals when his protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach first sees the Polish boy Tadzio in *Death in Venice*. Whether noting his blond curls or the blue border to his sailor's outfit, the writer Aschenbach takes refuge from his own desire in visual detail. What seems highly literate talk via ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics really amounts to skirtings and erotic paraphernalia — a repressive's laundry list of fetishes-in-the-making: "'Good, oh, very good indeed!' thought Aschenbach, assuming the patronizing air of the connoisseur to hide, as artists will, their ravishment over a masterpiece." The boy appears to Aschenbach as both divine and alien, being Polish — a Slav, which in an early twentieth-century German's eyes meant another race. And the protagonist takes maybe a hundred more pages of the novella to get past his sacred and profane fetishes, and just come out and say "I love you" to his blond Adonis: "[Aschenbach's] eyes took in the noble form there bordered with blue; and with a rush of enthusiasm he felt that in this spectacle he was catching the beautiful itself, form as the thought of God, the one pure perfection which lives in the mind, and which, in this symbol and likeness, had been placed here quietly and simply as an object of devotion."[5]

Roland Barthes talks some of the same willful obscurantism when he sights a boy at a Paris coffeehouse, but, unlike Mann, he allows himself — since these notes weren't intended for publication, presumably — to address the gender and body of the desired, along with the idea of desire itself: "Later that evening, at the Flore, not far from our table, another boy, angelic, with

5 Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice,* trans. Kenneth Burke (Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 77.

long hair parted in the centre; he looks at me from time to time; I'm attracted by his very white shirt open to reveal his chest; he is reading *Le Monde* and drinking a Ricard, I think; doesn't leave, finally smiles at me; he has coarse hands, which contrast with the softness and delicacy of the rest."[6] Beauty was inseparable from divinity for both Barthes and Mann, two gay authors who were attracted to underage young men and two public figures who were intellectually embedded in European legacies of empire. I suppose Mann's idealism could also apply to Prince as a physical being, as showing "form as the thought of God, the one pure perfection which lives in the mind." Which is to say classical aesthetic principles could be satisfied by numerically relating his proportions and measurements and his elegant leg length, even if that's only a small part of the story. Or, to consider godliness from a pop perspective, we could admire his ab muscles.

And then we have editor and cultural theorist Dodai Stewart, a straight African American woman, doing something very different with the twenty-two-year-old Prince himself on the *Dirty Mind* cover. In writing about the image, Stewart pursues notions of beauty in reverse fashion from Mann. She starts with gender (a question she fails to answer entirely) and goes on to pointillist bodily details of this enigmatic young male, and submits the various points to an inductive proof. Instead of idealism in the form of angels and "the thoughts of God," she invokes the archetypes of a fantasy belly dancer and pinup girl: "A man. Clearly a man. Hairy, mostly naked body, cock bulging beneath a satiny bikini bottom. But those eyes. Rimmed in black, like a fantasy belly dancer. The full, pouty lips of a pinup girl. Long hair. A tiny, svelte thing. Ethnically ambiguous, radiating lust. What is this? A man. Clearly a man. No. Not just a man. A Prince."[7] In a kind of fetishist ritual, Barthes, Mann, and Stewart all take

6 Roland Barthes, *Incidents,* trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Seagull Books, 2010), 150.

7 Dodai Stewart, "On Prince, Blackness, and Sexuality," *Splinter,* April 22, 2016, https://www.splinter.com/on-prince-blackness-and-sexuality-1793856349.

pleasure in reading the man as a cryptic text. Instead of a sexual encounter, they (and we) get a laundry list of physical attributes. (But Stewart attributes more agency to the eroticized subject than the other two writers.) They all ask themselves: Who is this male, and how am I to react to him? And, as is implicit in this last question, what will be a socially acceptable way to react to him? The observers note details of hair and clothing and posture, and wonder about provenance. And then they resort to "literary" words as a means of both allaying and sustaining their own desire.

These three writers share an unusual situation: reacting desirously and visually to untouchable males who didn't (or couldn't or wouldn't be allowed to) present as sex symbols. These writers' desires are "different," and this marginality colors everything they say. As a first sign of their difference, these writers either use the word "beautiful" or seem on the verge of using it. A number of other clumsy words were applied to Prince in his own time, only to indicate a failure of language, or at least of modern Anglo-Saxon languages as they became complicit in psycho-sexual definitions. Most telling here are the notions of kink and androgyny that his fans and critics discussed, terms that, whether used approvingly or disapprovingly, present simulation, compromise, and not-fitting-in as pathologies. And of course those oddities come to infect the music. "Prince's first fully actualized album [*Dirty Mind*] is an unrelenting dance party, its kinky ambiguities blurring lines between genres and genders and pretty much everything else," wrote music critic Barry Walters. "That's why, despite its many colors, the music comes across so gloriously black; why Prince's aura is so righteously flaming; why the singing wraps its pervy purple raincoat around what's feminine."[8]

"Androgynous," "gender-fluid," "flamboyant" … these are fudge terms that try, with only some success, to get away from old masculinist rock-star discourse. (Fudge terms that Walters

8 Barry Walters, "Prince: Dirty Mind," *Pitchfork,* April 29, 2016, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21866-dirty-mind/.

leaves trailing in the dust with his mention of "flaming.") And of course nuancing all this are Prince's understandings of his own blackness and the stylistic and commercial possibilities of Black musicians. To be a pop star is to occupy a role, but maybe the biggest cliché of all is to resist said roles. Prince refused to fall into any easy musical, sexual, and cultural personas, and yet even his refusals failed to become a role. (If I were forced to reduce him, I'd say the Prince of the early 1980s could be seen as an unlikely crossroads — a consciously stylized mutation — between George Clinton and Joni Mitchell. But such a cross stymies the imagination.)

"Sex object" is a term that's rarely, if ever, come up in talking about Prince. Which is strange, considering he took sexual explicitness as his platform — at least on the early 1980s albums ("Do It All Night" and "Head" on *Dirty Mind*; "Jack U Off" on *Controversy*; "Darling Nikki" on *Purple Rain*). (It was Howard Bloom, Prince's PR guy at the time, who upped the ante here and told the press that "Prince sees sex as salvation."[9]) His lyrics did usually connect with sexual experience in a direct, evenhanded, and fulfilling way. Not for him Mötley Crüe's song "Girls, Girls, Girls" (1987) or the juvenile winking of Van Halen's *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* (1991). And yet, strangely enough, Prince himself was never fashioned or sold as a sex object. If he'd been conceived by a novelist, a Kurt Vonnegut maybe, he would have been the one to finally close the ever-elusive circle formed by desire and desirability: the pop star as both desirable and oracle of desire. (Maybe Robert Plant had come closest to closing this circle for me, at least in his role as a gut-bucket, half-naked bluesman in tight jeans, and a too-small woman's blouse that declared both his artistic sensitivity and his security of manhood. Envisioning him thus, I often think of Plant singing the blues single entendre of "Squeeze me, babe, 'till the juice runs down my leg.")

* * *

9 Matt Thorne, *Prince: The Man and His Music* (Agate, 2016), 65.

If Prince wasn't a sex object, he wasn't a pinup either. Encountering his *Dirty Mind* album was the first irrefutable sign that my own tastes were "other." The attraction was toward nonobviousness and nonarchetypes, and away from defaults, models, and paradigms. For me, Prince was a pinup with a difference: I jerked off over the *Dirty Mind* image the same way every other boy in the country wanked over that famous, ever-present Farrah Fawcett poster of the same vintage. (The red swimsuit one that had twelve million happy buyers, starting with Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever.*) The *Dirty Mind* picture wasn't literally a pinup: I couldn't post Prince on my bedroom ceiling, as other boys did with their "fucking Farrah" (as per the alliterative phrase of the time). What a queer and wonderful world that would have been. No, what I did was hide the *Dirty Mind* album on my LP shelf, keeping it adjacent-right to the brightest album spine in the collection for quick and easy access. If I'd somehow found the guts and made Prince my Farrah, it would have been a double transgression: I would have declared myself not only — in the clinical lingo of that place and time — a "homosexual," but a homosexual who wanted "sex" with "colored" men. Putting up the *Dirty Mind* cover would have had my parents sending me to a psychiatrist even sooner than they did. Why, I'd not even met a "colored" person! (Things augured badly, retroactively speaking, when I told my father more than a decade later that I was dating a guy from Bangkok. His reflexive response was a grimace, a wrinkled brow, and a question, "But he's not *dark,* is he?")

The problem with loving things and persons that not many others find likewise love-able in a generalizable, widely sharable sense is that those others wonder if the attraction is nongenuine, even fetishistic. In capitalist societies, especially, desire is a consensual inclination: the more shared, the more immanent, the more identifiable the want. Both aesthetic and sexual "tastes" can be thought perverse. But then why isn't it the opposite, with special and individualized "tastes" considered specially genuine? The suspicion, even opposition, that the person surmounts in having that predilection — this in itself should be proof of its truthfulness.

I hid the *Dirty Mind* album in my shag-carpeted, ranch-home bedroom in the bucolic dairyland countryside not just because it had a half-naked "colored" man on the cover, but also because Black music was a rarity in our house. Duke Ellington, several Ella sings the Great American Songbook records, one old Sarah Vaughan LP from the late 1950s (*Sarah Vaughan in Hi-Fi*). And of course Harry Belafonte doing his Jamaican shtick in the "Banana Boat Song (Day-O)." What we did have was Black-peripheral and white-middle-class: more mall than Mississippi. The closest thing to the blues we had on premises was the old Columbia LP of *Porgy and Bess* highlights with Sidney Poitier on the cover, "Cry" sung by Johnnie Ray (who, as a prerock prognostication of Elvis, was a sometime favorite of my father's), and Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy,* which my brother owned. I also liked to catch Jimmy Smith or Dizzy Gillespie on late-night FM broadcasts from Milwaukee. Billy Preston's pop-funk in top-ten songs such as "Will It Go Round in Circles" haunted my little white transistor radio. In such comfortable white bourgeois company, rhythm and blues would have been a fly in our ointment, and *Dirty Mind* in earshot would have been a wasp's nest. (As, in fact it productively turned out to be in places elsewhere.…)

So I ejaculated over the *Dirty Mind* cover, but not over the music in the album. (What would Tipper Gore have made of these doubly queer reversals, since she and her Parents Music Resource Center [PMRC] confreres fixated on "explicit" verbal meanings? Sorry, semantic clarity never really made me wet, apart from exclamations made in the heat of passion, but then those are verbal gestures that are more a denial of the functionality of language.) The first of my improbabilities on display here is the fact that I usually don't find music conducive to sex — instead of lubricating erogeny, it just gets in the way. Doubling that is the fact that Prince's songs spoke to different desires than his poses, the lyrics going a different way than the flesh. It was Prince's visual uncategorizability that made him erotic to me, while the functioning semantics of his sung texts — the communicating functionality of his words — worked against

desire. And yet my lack of familiarity at that time with any R & B or other form of "Black music" could have made his songs tantalizing in themselves. In the event, what might have made the *Dirty Mind* tracks as alluring and sexy as the sleeve would be some demonstrative sounds, some nonwords that — shrugging off syntax and lexical meaning — aren't part of any language. And of course it says something about me that I can find such vocal-sonic directness (*ugh, mmm, argh!, pfft!*) so sexually powerful, but not verbal attempts at persuasion (*love me, sweet baby baby*…). However, a voice in itself can be erotic by virtue of its grain — Barthes called it — whether the vocalist is "making sense" or not. And yet Donna Summer didn't get the job done, either, when she moaned and groaned her way through her hit song "Bad Girls" (1979).

"The beautiful ones." My thoughts now turn to the — for me — tired and banal aspects of the term. Prince the pinup didn't look much like Farrah, thank God. No slightly forced smile, no easy amenability with head tilted back, no pushover in the posture. No blond highlights brought out with lemon juice to catch more sun. Instead of the traceable nipple that had some protective parents pulling Farrah off their kids' bedroom walls, Prince showed one-third of a naked tit, a whole belly button, no pubic hair, and the vaguest hint of a penile bulge before the photo was cropped down below (not really a "cock bulging beneath a satiny bikini bottom"). Prince was remarkably blank here. Instead of Farrah's I'm-at-your-service grin, Prince's only visible emotional visage is an unassertive pride, a vague and barely visible suffusion that makes him all the more erotic.

I imagine queer sex education — telling LGBTQ2SIA+ kids how to understand their own growing-up processes, instead of how a cock functions — might have arrived in my high school thirty years after I graduated. Back in 1980, seeing and acquiring the *Dirty Mind* album was my own private formative training. Prince recounted that his parents' version of sex ed was to buy him a stack of *Playboy* magazines at an early age — I suppose as self-guided tours of bodies and desires. The *Dirty Mind* cover became my own class, my single-page *Playboy*. Maybe Prince is

posing and demeanoring here in a way that wouldn't have been out of place in some alternative-universe stroke-mag shoot. He himself said the sexual song tableaux in albums such as *Dirty Mind* weren't sketched from experience, but out of wishful thinking. But there are so many other things going on here beyond that sort of sexy playacting, not least the style references. The most astonishing testimony to Prince's precocious versedness in the pinup or stroke-magazine genre is this blankness on the *Dirty Mind* cover that I keep returning to, his openness. He is doing nothing here, soliciting nothing, posturing nothing.

This shot chosen for the *Dirty Mind* album cover was actually just one from Allen Beaulieu's larger photo shoot, one of a few dozen images. The cover should be played against the many unused shots from that same session, shots where intentioning and posturing did flicker to the surface. It's interesting that Prince is grittier (and more naked) in the unused shots, glistening enticingly with sweat and entirely topless in some, grimacing and combatively postured, or standing sideways to better display his cottoned bulge. In the one used for the cover, he is casual or even mentally absent altogether, and of course his upper body is half hidden under the iconic studded trench coat.

With his first several albums, Prince gave us unexpected, intriguing constructions of beauty. And these were implicated in the sexual pleasures celebrated in his lyrics. If *Dirty Mind* was released before the developing "gay plague" had a name, *Purple Rain* came out (as movie and album) at the early peak of AIDS-inspired fear and loathing, in 1984. "The Beautiful Ones" is the third track on *Purple Rain,* also the title of Prince's posthumously published autobiographical sketch. The adjective sounds dated as a nonironic term, even for a twenty-five-year-old writing songs back in 1983. (For similarly honest amorousness, we might have to look a decade earlier to Billy Preston's song "You Are So Beautiful to Me," introduced to the top ten by Joe Cocker. And then there's the weirdly atypical purity of intent to John Lennon's "Beautiful Boy," and the Smashing Pumpkins' "Beautiful.")

When I was growing up in a small town in the Midwest, the ideas, musics, and sex lives of white heterosexuals didn't call for much verbiage — they were under the radar or, better said, they were the radar. Male beauty was especially under-described. It remains true what literary and gender theorists Steven L. Davis and Maglina Lubovich said of beauty, that it is a concept strategized by social agents who are in power. Normative agents in a society are unseen, but at the same time responsible for strategizing ways of seeing the seen:

> Perhaps part of the reason that beauty strikes our ears as strange when applied to men is because beauty is both embodied and visible, and Western patriarchal culture has tended to render white, heterosexual masculinity disembodied and invisible — the *natural* category of subjectivity and citizenship. In other words, the power and privilege of white, heterosexual men has depended upon their status as the unmarked, universal standard against which all "others" are measured, and they have retained their position in patriarchal culture by eschewing visible and bodily markers such as race, class, gender, sexuality and, we would argue, beauty.[10]

Eluding constructs of beauty has been one way white men have held on to cultural, political, and aesthetic power. To which I would add that the audiovisual aspects of *music,* of most styles, which have been commercially and culturally important since the dawn of time and have only become more emphatic, were (and still are) very important in this gender-beauty-power game.

One way that male beauty and desirability has managed to be part of public discourse — at least in gay channels — is through discussion of roles. Said roles have served as portals to public desirability and commercial success; they demonstrate interrelations, musical or sexual or otherwise. As regards sexual

10 Steven L. Davis and Maglina Lubovich, "Introduction," in *Hunks, Hotties, and Pretty Boys: Twentieth-Century Representations of Male Beauty* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 2 (italics in original).

types, gay websites list *skater boy, rocker, straight neighbor, ethnic, surfer, twink, emo boy, prisoner, thug, femboy, college, doctor, black daddy,* and *amateur*. Such persona listings help men connect with their particular conceptions of beauty and erotic scenarios, with their exploratory fantasies and their practiced types. But even in terms of such archetypes, Prince's *Dirty Mind* cover still proves elusive. His image here differs radically from other rock and pop male images of the time. There's no element of late 1970s and early 1980s glam — compare David Bowie, the New York Dolls, Elton John — and its playfulness, sartorial rhetoric, and in-your-face genderfuck. Street gang member doesn't seem very apropos of Prince either, and no working-class milieu is evoked. Punk insolence and New Wave robotics are also nowhere to be seen. So just who or what role is Prince playing in *Dirty Mind*? Other pop, rock, and R & B acts of the time were easier to pigeonhole. Van Halen front man David Lee Roth played a kind of boytoy-jester-stripper-collegiate-rocker, showing carpety chest hair and spandex bulges above his leggings, and at one point wearing pants that displayed his naked butt. (as Prince also did, some years later — I seem to remember lace involved). Or maybe Roth's image was just lothario: He let it be known that he'd taken out a unique kind of paternity insurance, no doubt mostly for publicity's sake. *Time* magazine reported that Roth's "sexually suggestive antics whip pubescent fans into a frenzy and sometimes put naughty ideas into young girls' heads."[11] I myself found him arousing in one or two photos, especially (and ironically) the hairy and sweaty likeness that accompanied the paternity insurance story. But more generally, his aura of obviousness and entitlement was a turnoff. Robert Plant was more interesting, not least because he was a real blues singer — and glowering and edgy into the bargain, including those concert shots where his erection was almost punching its way through his tight, low-rise jeans.

11 E. Graydon Carter, "People," *Time,* August 17, 1981, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,949332,00.html.

Image was all-important. These fleeting pictures of white men as stock sexual beings might have inspired wet dreams, but they didn't captivate. Prince and the *Dirty Mind* cover, a different sort of image entirely, swept them away. Seen as a sexual being on the *Dirty Mind* cover, Prince is the opposite of a cock-rock strutter like Plant or a wolf funkist like Rick James. The lacy detail on Plant's torso-hugging blouses isn't a baroque ornament to intercourse so much as a holdover from 1960s hippie, free-love finery; it's an item in the confidence game of rock-superstar seduction. *Cock rock star Robert Plant couldn't possibly hurt me in bed, because he clads himself in little-girl-chic.* (Zeppelin mythology has it that the stage blouses were actually Plant's trophies from groupies he'd bedded the night before.)

Again, this cryptic quality from Prince — this unlikelihood and unnameability — is what I found so beautiful and sexually arousing. His evasion, his fusion, his originality, his uniqueness. And his status as a non-sex-object. He was the discourse that surrounded him: *I just can't believe all the things people say (controversy) / Am I black or white? Am I straight or gay? (controversy).* To be clear, my excitement wasn't anything involved with my own identity, nothing like the sense of liberation that queer people felt Prince had visited upon them in the 1980s (before he became a Bible-toting Jehovah's Witness). My feelings were not those of the "out" R & B singer Frank Ocean, who said he loved Prince because "he made me feel more comfortable with how I identify sexually, simply by his display of freedom from and irreverence for obviously archaic ideas like gender conformity."[12] How were my feelings different? I had no interest in trying to imitate Prince's nonconformity so much as I was turned on sexually by it, but then I'm often turned on by loners who are elusive and aloof in personality but have an intense sense of purpose. And if that man is also fully in touch with his sexual needs,

12 Quoted by Spencer Kornhaber, "Prince: Gay Icon, Whether He Wanted to Be or Not," *The Atlantic,* April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/prince-gay-homophobia-conservative-liberal-progress/479502/.

the deal is set. (Come to think of it, maybe this "type" is a case of envy, after all.)

So Prince became an icon for gender-fluid fans, in that he showed different ways of refusing norms. But surely he also has cultural significance for leading a queer adolescent like me to a better understanding (and yes, a greater diversity) of his own sexual desires? A sex education, indeed.

I do feel that constructions of Prince's genius in the 1980s were a compensation for his "failure" to fit Black male niches, including, in addition to those above, the physicality or athleticism stereotype. People just didn't know what to do with him. (It's worth remembering that Prince signed his first record deal only two years after the release of the hit blaxploitation flick *Mandingo* [1975], which starred world heavyweight boxer Ken Norton as the titular enslaved person and human stud. No doubt one of the side projects of that movie was to try to turn Norton into a bankable sex object — a décolleté version of *Shaft!* and Richard Roundtree.)

Dodai Stewart also remembered how Prince in 1980 failed to fit the Black male clichés of the time: "In the context of pimping, the black male, a true hustler businessman, is so secure in his sexuality he can indulge in traditionally female grooming, thus *amplifying* his masculinity." At the same time, he styled himself away from gangsta virility: "Some rappers' personas aligned with the age-old oversexed, 'primitive,' mandingo stereotype invented by white slaveowners. Prince *defied* stereotypes, period."[13] Rick James himself, intensely envious of his young colleague, wasn't the only one who saw Prince's opting-out as a failure of some kind: "He doesn't want to be black. My job is to keep reality over this little science fiction creep."[14] (But it's one of Prince's great and transgressive acts of larceny, or at least bricolage, that he did take some things — only those few things he

13 Stewart, "On Prince, Blackness, and Sexuality" (italics in original).

14 In a 1983 interview with *Blues & Soul,* as quoted by Michaelangelo Matos, "Do It All Night: The Story of Prince's *Dirty Mind,*" *Pitchfork,* October 6, 2015, https://pitchfork.com/features/from-the-pitchfork-review/9731-do-it-all-night-the-story-of-princes-dirty-mind/.

wanted, thank you very much — from the neobaroque finery of a masher such as James. The latter ridiculed the younger musician for going on stage in "little girl's bloomers," but his envy was thick on the ground for all to see, and Prince wouldn't have been so gauche as to copy James's leather codpiece.)

Stewart indicated that the feminine aspect to Prince's beauty in the 1980s didn't serve as a compensatory, pimp-style triple affirmation of his manhood. Rather, it was its own *Ding-an-sich*. The Dirty Mind persona was just as suggestive of androgyny as it was of intimacy-in-absentia, in the mind of multiple critics. In a word, here was a quasi-naked, horny male shown in a state of *vulnerability,* stripped of machismo and its usual defenses. (Hilton Als went so far as to point to androgyny as Prince's "stock in trade," his particular "freakishness."[15] Cultural critic and historian Nelson George emphasized how "no black performer since Little Richard had toyed with the heterosexual sensibilities of black America so brazenly."[16] Critics of the time also called him "flamboyant," which in the 1980s was another code word for "queer" — a holdover from press coverage of Liberace.) Consider that this was the same stage getup that famously disgusted hard-rock audiences when Prince and his band opened for the Rolling Stones and other groups at two 1981 Los Angeles gigs. The skin color, bikini underwear, stockings, and lack of manly stage struttings touched a nerve with these hard-rock fans — just the kinds of people I myself went to school with. Two of Prince's band members remembered that,

> the roster was a nightmare — J. Geils, George Thoroughgood [sic]. Just Prince and the Stones would've been different. But this was a serious rock-and-roll crowd. They didn't want to see a black guy in a bikini and trench coat. […] We lasted five minutes before being pummeled with chicken, bottles, a sea of corn, and there were all these fingers. "Fuck you, faggot,"

15 Hilton Als, *White Girls* (McSweeney's, 2013), 199.
16 Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (Pantheon Books, 1988), 176.

> the n-word, everything horrible. Prince took off, and the rest of us [in the band] thought, "What do we do now?"[17]

Beauty is a blank, a question rather than an answer. And as a body, Prince plays the empty signifier in the *Dirty Mind* photo. (Which means his beauty counts as postmodern. Raman Selden refers to the "poststructuralist text as totally at the mercy of the reader's pleasure."[18]) Those seeing the album cover can't miss — as Joni Mitchell remembered them — "those Egyptian eyes, those big, exotic eyes," even if the gaze itself isn't as bedroom-y as on the *Graffiti Bridge* album.[19] But the eyes, as emphasized with eyeliner, are only the start of the *Dirty Mind* cover. The photo is as electrifying for what it *isn't* saying as for what it is. Here Prince is imitating and interrogating the dehumanized malleability that was once gendered female. He isn't modeling a sex solicitation, but rather an invitation to completion. The blankness of look is so later 1960s, so modern-girl. She will surrender herself to your imagination, but somehow retain her dignity in doing so. It really seems as if Prince had read Dennis Potter's pulp-fiction description of the man constructing the woman as he makes her invoke absence as a form of appearing-for-use. In *Blackeyes,* Potter's novel centering on a washed-up author who turns his niece into a book, the sexual conquest becomes a kind of action figure just out of the box: "Her luminous, jet-like eyes said nothing, and so said everything. She was pliable. She was there to be invented, in any posture, any words, over and over again, in ejaculatory longing."[20]

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17 Band members Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman, quoted by Thorne, *Prince,* 67–68.

18 Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory,* 3rd ed. (University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 132.

19 Quoted by Thorne, *Prince,* 17.

20 Dennis Potter, *Blackeyes* (Vintage Books, 1988), 65.

Considering Prince's attire, youth, and aloofness on the album cover, the closest archetype he comes to on *Dirty Mind* is the hustler. Hustling is male prostitution, often done by teen runaways for older men, but usually it's the hustler rather than the john (the customer) who is pleasured and who commits nothing, or indeed condescends to the other. As the mythology has it, the hustler inhabits a position not of despair and subjugation, but of power. Any time he shows his body, he isn't seducing, he is strategizing sex and emotion. Ultimately, the hustler is a beautiful young man — straight, as often as not — who sells humiliation, and he is the one who both takes the money and remains in control. Yet he's different from the prostitute or the dominatrix in that he is the one pleasured; indeed, from start to finish, the encounter is all about him, and his satisfaction is the assumed outcome. But he divulges neither pleasure nor entanglement. Pioneering gay chronicler and novelist Edmund White, in remembering his first encounters with young men for hire in New York and Ohio in the early 1970s, went so far as to recall G.W.F. Hegel's master–slave trope:

> Everywhere I saw nothing but straight couples and families. Never did faunlike eyes flicker toward me through bangs, never did a hairy brute adjust himself and look at a passing lad's butt with an open mouth. There were no gay men in the world, or just a few here and there, hissing, theatrical queens, alcoholic and suicidal. But in Cincinnati there were hired men and the idea that twenty — or even ten — dollars could open their flies and make them lie back with a sneer and flex their muscles excited me. They were like dolls in a toy store that I could play with promiscuously but whose mechanisms would permit them to perform only one action — turn their head or open their arms — and that would exhaust their entire repertory.[21]

21 Edmund White, *My Lives: An Autobiography* (HarperCollins, 2006), 114–15.

> The john buys the boy, and in that sense is in control, but within the encounter it is the john who humiliates himself before the hustler and "services" him. The slave (the john) owns the master (the hustler) and can give precise instructions as to how he wants to be dominated.[22]

> Later I learned that some hustlers preferred their johns to be old and adulatory. Then the john's gratitude would allow the overhead spotlight to narrow and isolate the hustler in a pool of intense desire, transform him into a St. Michael stabbing a St. Theresa left suitably vague in a swirl of shadows, fold upon fold. The hustler generates the passion, he is the one who drips with sweat, his own penis is what he watches swell and stiffen in the mirror. The john merely officiates, like a priest fussing over the chalice.[23]

If the hustler role — placing the beautiful young male center stage — seems tailor-made for male pop stardom, the only musical genre it had any connection with was punk, where the role had a *frisson* with the punk movement's unraveling of the male ego. Iggy Pop is sometimes considered the godfather of punk, and his look of the 1970s was equal parts pretty boy, circus clown, and arrogant hustler. (Paul Trynka offers the sweeping observation in his Pop biography: "Iggy was the most beautiful thing many women, and men, had seen."[24]) It's also worth remembering here that Iggy was so disinterested in his own virility that he performed on stage in obvious makeup and bikini briefs years before Prince did, but of course he was playing to very different audiences and actively flouting rules of stage conduct.

The hustler role would be the only explanation for Prince's *Dirty Mind* getup of just a studded trench coat and black bikini briefs, for this would be the hustler's way of showing potential johns the merchandise (but not too much of it), and suggest-

22 Ibid., 295.
23 Ibid., 226.
24 Paul Trynka, *Iggy Pop: Open Up and Bleed* (Sphere, 2007), 97–98.

ing neither commitment nor vulnerability. Prince was careful with his imagery and his stagings, everything going toward a crafted image. (He was as much auteur for the cover as he was for the tracks inside. The photographer Allen Beaulieu remembered how "he said he wanted to be shot on a bed. I found a bedspring and made that the background. He did everything himself."[25]) If the Prince of *Dirty Mind* was a hustler, he was a hustler seen through the admiring eyes of his own john — his spectator, customer, lover. By all accounts, Prince wasn't comfortable around other males. And that's a remarkable backdrop to up-front testosteronal horniness, which is usually a cock-a-rock competitive play for other men. In short, his sexedness wasn't an alpha thing. (He wrote in his memoir, "The Northside of Mpls. had 2 much testosterone 4 my taste growing up."[26]) He was happy to watch, happy to acquiesce. Prince's early 1980s PR man Bloom said, "Prince is normally afraid of men. You can understand why. Imagine how he must have been treated in school — it must have been brutal."[27] The sex partners he sang about on his early albums were intimidating, girls who were just as beholden to their physical desires, but unafraid to cut loose. As became evident in his song lyrics, Prince had — biographer Matt Thorne said — an "obsession with cruel, unkind, or uninterested lovers."[28]

For audiences at his early gigs in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the most provocative thing was, beyond Prince's skin color and underwear, the amount of naked skin thus colored. The nakedness was salt rubbed into the concertgoers' wounded expectations. The closer the shown skin gets down (or up) toward the groin, the gayer it seemed, such that Prince's getup of bikini

25 Liz Raiss, "The Stories behind Some of Prince's Iconic Early Album Cover Photos: Photographers Joe Giannetti and Allen Beaulieu Explain What It Was Like to Work with the Pop Icon on Three of His Early Album Covers," *Fader,* April 21, 2016, https://www.thefader.com/2016/04/21/prince-dirty-mind-album-cover-photographer-story.

26 Prince, *The Beautiful Ones,* 109.

27 Bloom, quoted in Thorne, *Prince,* 63.

28 Ibid., 54.

undies with over-the-thigh black socks edged toward female boudoir-kink. After all, Farrah had inspired some similar controversy by showing the naked inside of her thigh on that famous poster. But it's significant that in none of the *Dirty Mind* photoshoot images did Prince do the *actual* gay pose of raising the arms behind the head while in a state of undress; that's universal code for *hey-you, your-eyes-(and/or-mouth)-belong-down-here.* (And he did indeed raise his arms for a poster included in a limited-edition *Controversy* LP release. This was another Allen Beaulieu photo, but this time of Prince in the shower, in a clichéd stroke-mag pose. Commenting online, fans laugh off the photo as bad judgment and say that he looks like a drowned rat. A few male fans jokingly say they liked the poster back in the day, but hid it from their girlfriends.)

In short, Prince played against type, visually flaunted a vague polyamorousness, subscribed to no clear franchise or convention. He reconciled perversion with dignity, or refused to acknowledge any division between the two. In playing against type, Prince taught me in his own fashion — personally and tacitly — what it was like to love or lust after something or someone that "didn't fit" easily anywhere. Or, in other words, how very boring it is to be partial to the things people tell you to be partial to. Prince didn't have the high cheekbones and virile swagger of Richard Gere, Tom Selleck, or Johnny Depp. He didn't have the musculature of Tom Cruise. His wasn't an image — at least before his own *Purple Rain* super-stardom and the wider commercialization of punk in the early 1990s — that had commercial potential. Hustler Prince was neither an advertisement nor a page in a Penneys catalog. And yet he was neither hawking nor debasing himself. The *Dirty Mind* photo demonstrates how Prince's beauty, like that of his music, sits between the factional and factious. Always disconcerting, he modeled a ravishing resistance.

If Prince was a hustler, I was his willing john. In retrospect, I now see my *Dirty Mind* album acquisition as the closest thing to a pickup that was possible in rural Wisconsin in 1980, three years after the state legislature had "reduced" consensual sod-

omy from a felony to a misdemeanor charge (now with a lighter maximum penalty of $10,000 in fines and nine months in jail, if charged as an adult).[29] I procured Prince's record from Musicland in the nearby mall (the same record chain that Prince Rogers Nelson himself frequented in Minnesota). Browsing was of the essence, an acceptable and corporate form of cruising. Hooking up was excited by the element of surprise, since there was no way to know until stumbling across them that these albums existed. The internet and targeted marketing weren't around yet, and music was advertised only in trade magazines. I paid money for these pickups, of course. Most importantly, there were secrecy and a titillating shame. I remember checking out the *Dirty Mind* LP only after slipping it nonchalantly beneath Chaka Khan's *What Cha' Gonna Do for Me,* an album I still hope to listen to some day. And then there was the long country drive home with the album lying on the passenger seat, the time where clumsy verbal foreplay (including haggling over price and negotiating likes and dislikes) would have taken place.

* * *

Prince's shirking of convention and franchise, his play with practices both perverse and unnameable, also imbues his singing. The voice is a musician's most immediately personal and revealing aspect. If a person's eyes are their "window to the soul," then their voice is the aural counterpart — except that the voice is also a personal singularity, a kind of thumbprint for the ears. And so it comes as no surprise that Prince's voice was *sui generis,* like so much else about him. It's hard for the listener to locate in his vocal sound any one, two, or three sources. He wasn't a blues singer, or a rock shouter, a pop crooner, or even a well-dictioned Broadway storyteller. Gospel wasn't an obvious legacy in the style. Vinson Cunningham summarizes Prince's unplaceable

29 George Painter, "The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers: The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States — Wisconsin," *Sodomy Laws,* August 10, 2004, https://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/wisconsin.htm.

vocal production as a kind of pop-smorgasbord: "His voice was one of pop music's most distinctive, a mixture of quintessential American expression: the revivalist's falsetto, the crooner's ease, a rasp like David Ruffin's, the occasional exasperated holler. In performance, he joined rock-and-roll insouciance with flamboyant precision (and a perm) like James Brown's, then added a dash of tricksterism borrowed from the blues. What resulted was a unified and inimitable style, rivaled only by Michael Jackson's in terms of its magnetism."[30]

Prince's vocal instrument didn't carry well, or have terribly much character or power in and of itself; he remembered his voice failing early on in his first tours, before he sought advice from R & B singer Al Jarreau and decided to turn up the gain on his stage mic. Be that as it may, the old cliché was true for Prince: The distinctive aspect wasn't the voice itself, but how he used it. "I never considered myself a singer. I saw myself as an instrumentalist who started singing out of necessity."[31] Singers who aren't in love with their own vocal cords tend to have a vulnerability in the sound, or even to add one in the studio. Prince tended to favor his falsetto register even though he was a baritone, which encourages us to intuit some important things about his marginalities. Historically speaking, the term *falsetto* and the high head-voice tessitura are both freighted with unmanly connotations, more so in classical than in popular music. Prince's falsetto wasn't the falsetto of Marvin Gaye in "Got to Give It Up." Neither was it the (stronger) disco falsetto of the Bee Gees nor of Mick Jagger filtering the Bee Gees in his own way in "Miss You." The word *falsetto* derives from the Italian term for "false," but literary theorist and gay studies pioneer Wayne Koestenbaum takes it to mean "feigned." He hears falsetto singing in general as a kind of vocality in drag:

30 Cunningham, "The Impenetrable Genius of Prince."

31 From an interview with *Insider* (1978), cited in Prince, *The Beautiful Ones,* 147.

> Falsetto seems profoundly perverse: a freakish sideshow: the place where voice goes wrong. […] The falsetto is part of the history of effeminacy — a compelling saga yet to be written. Long before anyone knew what a homosexual was, entire cultures knew to mock men who sang unconventionally high.[32]

Koestenbaum was writing from the perspective of opera, not popular music, and so had at the back of his mind the strange legacy of the *castrato* (castrated singer, the music-theater eunuch, the circus freak of secular Roman Catholic musicality). He was, in any event, wrong in several ways. In popular music, falsetto had a long lineage that went back to gospel quartets and rhythm and blues. In truth, Prince's path toward falsetto singing was textbook-typical of a countertenor. This practice starts when the male's voice changes at puberty, but he finds thereafter that the higher boy's range remains the more comfortable one: "[I sing in falsetto] because when my voice changed it went down, and I couldn't get any power out of it. I couldn't get any life, so to speak. [… And] there's something about the word *high* that I like."[33] People who met Prince commonly commented on how surprisingly (conventionally? masculinity-suggesting-ly?) low his speaking voice was. But the things that he happened to find vocally high up rather than down low were energy, power, life, ease.

One Koestenbaum idea that is illuminating here is that falsetto can become a vocal-aural role-playing. At times this was a matter of practicality, with men singing "falsely" high when women weren't available to do soprano or alto parts. And countertenors singing heroic male roles in Italian opera. One of the basic titillations of being queer is the question that comes up right away upon attraction, not, I imagine, an issue that often arises with straight couples: Who will top, and who will be the

32 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon Press, 1993), 164–65.

33 From a 1979 interview in the *Minneapolis Star*, reprinted in Prince, *The Beautiful Ones,* 149.

bottom? And so, the practical question I now ask is, When I saw Prince that day in 1980 and then heard him singing in his "pure 'head'-register," did I want to be hustler or john? And then I realize, on account of the delicious ambiguities: I don't know. I understand now that I felt turned on when the question was impossible or moot or to be determined; the play of domination was titillating enigma. Prince was probably unique in writing a passive narrator so often into his songs, creating a submissive posture so that his love interest could *dominate* him. This in itself was queer, a kind of counterpatriarchal musical SM. In the view of editor and journalist Emma Garland, "[w]omen usually exist in men's songs as passive objects, which is to not exist at all. With Prince, they were addressed with both awe and empathy. He wrote about women as real, powerful, complicated, sensitive, and sexual beings that he could learn from, and who enriched his life."[34]

So, about that domination.… Popular singers of various styles, especially country, have long used what is called a "cry break." This suggests the singer suddenly falling victim to an overpowering emotion that causes his or her voice to crack. That hint of vocal collapse creates an aural pathos. The crack or "cry break" is one of the most immediately moving sounds in popular singing styles, because it creates not only a strong sympathetic response in the listener but also vulnerability through displaying the fault line of an intraregistral "break" in the voice — a lack of vocal continuity, a rift within the body that suggests some trauma or other. The locus classicus of such a cry break would be Hank Williams, Sr.'s iconic "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" (1949). For generations of listeners after his death, Williams's burdened life, substance abuse, and demise at the age of twenty-nine have no doubt colored their hearings of the broken second syllable of the word "lone*some*" and first word of "*hide* his face and cry."

34 Emma Garland, "Prince Wrote about Women in a Way That Most Contemporary Male Artists Still Can't," *Vice,* April 25, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/r7p3gg/prince-and-the-power-of-women.

I now jump four years ahead, going from Prince's *Dirty Mind* album to *Purple Rain,* moving from breakthrough versatility and themes of explicit sexuality to greater range and more baroque showmanship. The *Purple Rain* feature film and soundtrack made him a major star, and moreover revealed him as a visionary and auteur — it was Prince's *Citizen Kane.* In my view, the music on *Purple Rain* shows a sizable leap forward from *Dirty Mind,* betraying more detail and nuance and showing a qualitative leap in technique. Prince had left the hustler persona for the ruffled Georgian sartorial look that he'd probably borrowed from Jimi Hendrix. Instead of a hustler working his turf along the Bowery, he was now a romantic lead in a Jane Austen novel: the rich and handsome Mr. Darcy, maybe. Although the horny-porny shtick of *Dirty Mind* and the two albums that followed were grubby and sweaty and erotic, they weren't sexy. Tipper Gore, Susan Baker, and the 1980s PMRC paranoiacs subscribed to the odd belief that verbal or sung references to sex will instigate sex. Powers of suggestion don't work that way. In any event, by his 1985 interviews Prince was rejecting the porno-aspect of his own songs. He said okay, yes, they were salacious, but at the same time never not about monogamy. It is true and rather silly even for the Reagan era that when the singing protagonist of "Head" disrupts a girl's wedding with really good oral sex, it leads to their own marriage. Nelson George might have asked, just how anti-blues is that?

Intimacy and seductiveness are erotic, and Prince's new capacity for such arrived in 1984 with *Purple Rain*. Musicologists Anne Danielsen and Stan Hawkins, within a discussion of Prince's next studio album, *Around the World in a Day,* draw our aural attention to the voice's constantly variegated sound (as deployed and processed) and how it constitutes a major part of the artist's seductiveness. "Prince's personal narrative," Danielsen and Hawkins write, "is about exhibiting desire in an unapologetic, overt manner, and, importantly, he shows how erotic desire is expressed as much through the act of singing as through language; it is in the altered physical state of singing that we encounter the pleasures of listening and engaging with

corporeality."[35] I home in on the second track from side one of the *Purple Rain* album, the ballad "The Beautiful Ones." Less demonstrative than "Let's Go Crazy," "When Doves Cry," and the title song itself, "The Beautiful Ones" wasn't intended as a single. (Indeed, it made its way onto the album as a replacement for the song "Electric Intercourse.") But the track is a modest marvel of songcraft, tear-inducing both as a composition and as a performance. I've always been a sucker for pleading-lover songs — here the singer is imploring his love to go with him rather than another. Prince's use of falsetto and vocal-break emphasis in "The Beautiful Ones" conveys some degree of melancholy, but it's a sexy melancholy — as you'd expect of a song that begs for love, and incidentally for a spot of reunion-sex.

Baby, baby, baby
What's it gonna be
Baby, baby, baby
Is it him or is it me?
Don't make me waste my time
Don't make me lose my mind, baby.

Baby, baby, baby
Can't you stay with me tonight?
Oh baby, baby, baby
Don't my kisses please you right?
You were so hard to find
The beautiful ones, they hurt you every time.

Never one to obey expectation, Prince uses a highly personal kind of upside-down cry break here. The voice starts high and then flickers to a lower register, tilting provocatively between high head-voice and chest voice. His break seems to fall on D, such that "is it…?" has the clarity and strength of the

35 Anne Danielsen and Stan Hawkins, "'The Right Amount of Odd': Vocal Compulsion, Structure, and Groove in Two Love Songs from *Around the World in a Day*," *Popular Music and Society* 43, no. 3 (2020): 268.

chest voice, while the "…him or is it me?" is in falsetto. This also results in a sudden emphases on the last words of "Don't make me waste my *time*" and "Don't make me lose *my mind*." In short, the brief, excursive stresses are the lower notes, not the higher ones. Instead of the "pinch" that snaps the voice upward to a state of vulnerability as in a cry break, here Prince's voice shunts down to points of startling surety. And, just like that, this upside-down-ness transforms his high-register break from a cry into an expression of desire. Or maybe a desire being satisfied at his time of singing — his baby is presumably in bed with him — since the voice sounds for all the world not asexual or feminine, but rather like a man experiencing that sweetest honey-drip down the back of the throat that encapsulates pure sexual pleasure. (Something like the back-throat honey-drip in his first big hit, "When Doves Cry": I'm speaking of the buzzy, manipulated, and fuzzed-out "yeah" with which that song's vocal opens.)

For this queer listener, there's nothing straight-sounding to this downward honey-drip/cry break in "The Beautiful Ones"; the singer's enjoyment in working the nose and the back of the throat suggests an interest not only in illicit depths of pleasure but also in orifices that the nonsodomic male couldn't handle being penetrated. Moreover, Prince's forceful vocal placements of "time," "mind," and "find" become erotic disclosures of a hungry intensity on the singer's part. He may be begging, but with these dips below the vocal break, I feel he's singing directly to me — maybe while returning my gaze, as he does on many of the album covers — and that he won't take no for an answer. In short, there's the minutest hint of menace on these lower notes; they become thrilling hints that the singer might cut loose from the hidebound institution of the love song and abandon romance for a more intense physical exchange. (It's this same manner of personality that makes Prince's many "baby, baby, baby" entreaties more truthful and tenacious than anyone's. I would have been happy to submit to them.)

In brief, Prince's "The Beautiful Ones" becomes a love plea colored by the kinds of ambiguity and variation that intrigue

me sexually (and intellectually). Acting as a foundation for this is a very straightforward musical structure, one where the harmonic events are so strategically, "classically" placed that the song starts to remind me of the Beatles. (Imagine it sung in close harmony and with Liverpudlian accents, and you'll get my drift.) I'm talking specifically here about the unexpected harmonic shift by a minor third, going from F major to A♭ major to highlight that raising of the emotional stakes at "Don't make me waste my time."

And then the strangely simple, easygoing step back to F major at the da capo, which gives a knowing shrug to the mention of "the beautiful ones, they hurt you every *time*." These sorts of chord shifts by a third are both pleasurable and wrenching — they present a harmonic swing as a kind of change in emotional coloration. A parallel effect is created by all the major sixth chords in the song, a major-key tweak that casts a special color over the music. Likewise, they dull the music's need to go anywhere in particular. Author and musician Scott McCormick writes: "Sixth chords have an inherent lack of identity and purpose that can be riveting — a sixth chord can provide ambiguity, set curiously dark moods, and add a layer of complexity."[36] If Prince is begging here, his plea isn't urgent but leisurely — luxuriant, even.

"The beautiful ones, they hurt you every time." In this track, as is typical for Prince, the beautiful seductiveness ethos proves so luxurious and elegantly pervasive that we find the studio production and mix coming along for the sensuality ride. Anything and everything becomes seductive, so strong is the spell of sex for this artist. A statement from Danielsen and Hawkins on the song "Condition of the Heart" could also apply to "The Beautiful Ones": "The overall impression is that the seductive gestures inherent in vocal compulsion are fetishized by the minutest attention to detail in the mix; this is how Prince sustains a high

36 Scott McCormick, "Sixth Chords Add Moody Complexity to Your Music," *Disc Makers*, January 19, 2021, https://blog.discmakers.com/2021/01/sixth-chords/.

degree of intimacy throughout the song."[37] The abundant song production is yet another way this artist has of pampering us, of indulging us as listeners. And this of course leaves a question dangling for the listener's sense of fantasy: Would Prince be as generous and giving in bed as he is in the studio?

Prince traverses even more varieties of vocal terrain in the second half of the song, which is spoken not sung. "Verbal art and song performance," says ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox, "demand the control of innumerable articulatory nuances that blend text and embodied sound, emotion and the stylization of emotion."[38] Here Prince gives evidence for my own conviction that singing can never be as erotic as speaking, which probably just has to do with the greater number of rules and strictures that apply to song. In particular, his spoken lines "The beautiful ones / Always smash the picture" have a queeny-hussy tinge that my ears hear — purely on account of timbre and the near-lisp enunciation — as a slutty gay man's solicitation of sex. (This gets complicated: Especially as heard by a musician, does such a line in such unpitched delivery arouse by way of my own self-hatred, or my internalized queerness, or my interest — damn the phallus-torpedoes — in antiquated signification and role-playing? It does seem to appeal to my long-buried adolescent conclusion that all gay men by definition want to have sex with one another.) Such eroticism is abetted by the song's avoidance of any feminine pronouns or possessives; "the beautiful ones" that he broken-heartedly references could be men, after all. But then the vocal entreaties become more heated, more "metal" — and what started as a pop ballad ends as a hard-rock number.

I've since tried comparing Prince's falsetto adventures with other pop instances of vocal breaking, sliding, shifting. One number that came to mind was rockabilly artist Chris Isaak's top-ten hit "Wicked Game" (1989), a torch song where — from the first time I heard the track — the singer's stated refusal of

37 Danielsen and Hawkins, "'The Right Amount of Odd,'" 268.

38 Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Duke University Press, 2004), 299.

love aligns with the oh-so-smooth (no break this time!) slide up a fifth at "no, *I* don't wanna fall in love." And then the stylized emotion of the slower tumble down ("… don't wanna fall in love") from declaration of the first-person singular.

> The world was on fire and no one could save me but you
> It's strange what desire will make foolish people do
> I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you
> And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you
> No, I don't wanna fall in love (this world is only gonna break your heart)
> No, I don't wanna fall in love (this world is only gonna break your heart)
> With you
> With you
> (This world is only gonna break your heart)

But any comparisons here are difficult to follow up on. "Wicked Game" is an uninteresting song given a slick studio production. Isaak is more obviously and securely a capital-S singer than Prince was, and the evidently white sound of his voice in combination with the lack of a break (implying wholeness, integrity of the singing body) distances "Wicked Game" from any suggestions of vulnerability — or monstrous intimacy. His repeated vocal ascents up a fifth now sound less like Prince to me than a self-assured dog howling at a cinematic moon.

* * *

Prince was beautiful, but then by a similar (if not necessarily related) sentiment, *Black is beautiful.* I somehow feel a dissonance between these two statements, and wonder if beauty is really the panacea I suggested at the start of this chapter. Certainly, calling someone beautiful can be an act of aggression (try it out with the waitstaff next time you go to a restaurant), just as bringing up love at the wrong time can cause some terror. And since Prince's first albums, the politics of attraction have

become almost as fraught as the politics of hate. (So much for Paul McCartney and "All You Need Is Love" [1967], a song released in an earlier, and maybe more innocent era.) The motto of the "Black is beautiful" movement of the 1960s might sound like a simple equal-opportunity embrace, but it was in fact a separatist rhetoric born of the Jim Crow era. It was primarily an attempt to defuse Black people's own internalized racism of appearance. It was a self-affirmative movement that took root in Harlem when Prince was four years old, specifically with the fashion show titled Naturally '62.[39] (To call this a response to Jim Crow diminishes the ambitions of the event; the Pan-African nationalism and separatism of political activist Marcus Garvey helped mold these first fashion models and stylists who participated, and who became influential in their own right.) In short, "Black is beautiful" might be a phrase loaned to me to say at this time in history, but isn't a declaration that's mine to own and use. And this conclusion would seem to have some far-reaching ramifications.

The Naturally '62 event marks the advent of the afro as a fashion; the "natural hair" hairstyle, proudly and unmistakably Black, had come of age. Hair became a declarative, weighty racial-political issue following World War II. In discussing Black hairstyles and product, Paul Christopher Taylor has differentiated between what he calls "somaesthetics" — that is to say, the body as experienced from within (Taylor mentions "the lived experience of moving and inhabiting — living — the body this way rather than that") — and what he terms "sarkaesthetics" ("the body as experienced from a third-person perspective, through the external senses").[40] The two can be, and indeed often are, in conflict with each other. The soma-processes can become complicit in rules and commercialization and turn into

39 Precious Adesina, "The Birth of the Black Is Beautiful Movement," *BBC*, August 3, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200730-the-birth-of-the-black-is-beautiful-movement.

40 Christopher Taylor, "Dark Lovely Yet And; Or, How to Love Black Bodies While Hating Black People," in *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Wiley, 2016), 107–8.

self-standing rituals, the most obvious example in Black terms being the process of hair straightening and relaxing — of "normalizing" nappy hair or Black hair more broadly. (Conversely, even finding a barber who knows what to do with Black hair or Asian hair, for that matter, can become a political adventure of a sort. Especially when white folks usually have no idea what a Black or Asian person is talking about when the subject of hair difference comes up.)

The afro was Prince's coiffure of choice up until his *Dirty Mind* breakthrough, at which point he relaxed or straightened his hair for most of his remaining career. So this album cover would have been the first time many fans saw him with a nonnappy head. And this "nonnatural hair" declaration conjoined with Prince's fervent intention, with this album, to ensure that he wasn't knee-jerk relegated to the "Black" rhythm and blues market; to show how he wished to — as his PR man Bloom put it — "[break] out of the black ghetto at Warner Brothers."[41] I can see why the critic Nelson George, as a follower of Garvey, would resist the various Prince mythologies. The very title of his book *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* broadcasts his argument, and the fact that Prince was adamant in avoiding consignment to the R&B "ghetto" underlines his. George was appalled to see Prince's "mother" cast as white in the pseudo-biography *Purple Rain,* and to see pale complexions among the Purple One's chosen dancers and band. George even chose to emphasize Prince's own lighter complexion; to him, it smacked of subterfuge, a bait-and-switch: "His features suggested he was a product of the interracial marriages so popular in Minneapolis. But he really wasn't."[42] Prince became more of a Black separatist later in life, as shown by the return to natural hair for the cover of his penultimate album, *Art Official Age* (2014). Before that, his painful legal wrangle with Warner Brothers had left him (appropriately) more distrustful of white-run industry and Randian neoliberal sloganeering: "There's a lot of people who say you gotta learn

41 Quoted by Thorne, *Prince,* 90.
42 George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues,* 174.

to walk before you learn to run. That's slave talk to me. That's something slaves would say."[43]

In Taylor's estimation, "hair aesthetics" became a metonymy for bigger issues of Black assimilation or separatism in the United States. But then race has intertwined with notions of beauty from the start. Taylor returns to Thomas Jefferson's wretched hypocrisy in fathering children with the woman he'd enslaved, Sally Hemmings, while at the same time advocating African repatriation and publicly drawing the — for him — far-reaching, significant conclusion that whites enjoyed "the circumstance of superior beauty" over African Americans. And of course no one forced Jefferson to pursue such conceptual dissonances with his full strength of intellect, or to hold forth on these views. Taylor draws the far-reaching conclusion that "this phase, this high modern racial project, was also an aesthetic project. [… T]he contests over racial meaning that constitute the racial formation process were, from the earliest moments, contests over human beauty."[44] But Taylor's point is that beauty has been a mainstream construct assembled and reassembled over the centuries at the expense of the powerless and other. And one might add that his purview could use some widening, such that beauty of the body has been racialized, certainly, but so has beauty in the art and culture of many marginalized populations. Early in its history, quite a few mainstream cultural figures bitterly opposed rock and roll — in many cases for its perceived lack of beauty, and presumably because it showed white youth falling in a very big way for the Black musical form of electric blues, and its vague, mostly mythological, intimations of sex.

Taylor returns to the concept of "crystallization," an idea that applies equally well to falling in love with a piece of music and falling in love with a particular person. Going back to Stendhal and the 1820s, crystallization is a perception threshold where subjectivity (meaning in personal terms, love; also love

43 Quoted in Prince, *The Beautiful Ones,* 21.
44 Taylor, "Dark Lovely Yet And," 111–12.

in musical terms) takes over and any hope for objectivity goes out the window. Taylor's point here is that Jefferson (and any other white supremacist who impregnated Black women) knew the physical attraction to darker bodies at the same time they officially declared them socially defective. I've heard it said of music, that divisions between "white music" and "Black music" fall away when one is actually listening. You either lose yourself in it, in which case terminologies and taxonomies disappear, or you don't. I would say likewise that sex so fully occupies the senses and the brain that any thoughts such as "my god, I'm fornicating with a white guy" or "so this is sex with a Black man" don't happen during the act itself. There is such a thing as "race play," at least in same-sex practices — playacting where ethnicity becomes a fetish and the person enjoys the charged excitement of calling his partner racially fraught names. Whether it is indeed racist or some kind of vengeful appropriation of hate speech, same-sex "race play" is a categorical denial of crystallization and celebration of what cultural theorist Christina Sharpe calls "monstrous intimacies": racialized social-personal relations that replace what would normally be consent and affection with "violence and forced submission." Such relations often become sexual, thereby preying on and perpetuating the "transgenerational transmission" of "shame and trauma."[45]

Maybe the most haunting depictions of such "monstrous intimacies" — as discussed by Sharpe and Taylor — are American artist Kara Walker's brutish and disturbing silhouette paintings of slaveholder atrocities, many of them sexual. One act is tucked away nonchalantly at the center of her mural *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) (now in the MoMA permanent collection). Her trademark medium is the type of silhouette parlor-images that for centuries intimated cozy times-gone-by familiarity. A critic for *The New York Times* refers to Walker's "cut paper silhouettes, a daring reinvention

45 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

of the genteel Victorian medium into her art." Among the two-dimensional figures of *Gone,* we see the braided "young negress" of the title calmly sucking on a white boy's cock. The boy, who might conceivably be the son or grandson of the plantation owner, seems roughly the same age as the girl. There are no suggestions of force or protest on her part, not even any hints of unhappiness in the action, certainly nothing to offset the blithe and angelic joy on the adolescent boy's face. Her apparent composure is the most disturbing aspect of the whole image. There's horror to be had in this imbalance of emotion and power, and it's exacerbated by the homey innocence of the medium — the silhouettes suggesting a blithe and nostalgic historical amnesia.

It pains me to confess that I find Walker's fellatio image titillating, in spite of everything — including the child-porn aspect. Despite such minimal means, she is virtuoso at capturing bodily postures, grimaces, and affects, such that the viewer can grasp these characters and the soft-sold horrors become even more horrific. Walker's depictive skill makes these two young people's corporal interrelations, the boy's ecstasy in his almost posture-schematic ritual of orifice-skewering, even more provocative. But then the idea strikes me that all queer sexual acts were once considered "monstrous intimacies" in themselves, and that queer people raised in a time of such monstrous constructions will find it difficult to shake the thought of monstrousness enough to reach any intimacy. Or that they might even find themselves taking fullest and deepest possession of their own monstrousness by engaging in role-playing, kink, or BDSM extremes. All of which would be sexual-act equivalents to the queer community appropriating essentialist, hate-speech labels such as "homo" and, well, "queer": "For gay men […], the possibility that objectification may highlight a previously forbidden sexuality is, it is suggested, the very reason why so many gay men make sexual objectification a central feature of their sexual lives."[46] In talking about "monstrous intimacy," Sharpe defines her noun in a para-

46 Niels Teunis, "Sexual Objectification and the Construction of Whiteness in the Gay Male Community," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 3 (2007): 267.

doxical or ironic sense, as a close-quarters satisfaction of desire that abuses power relations. "I use [intimacy] to think through the configurations of relations that arise out of domination and that continue to structure relations across race, sex, ethnicity, and nation. Intimacy is always about desire — and perhaps specifically about what Ann Laura Stoler (1995) calls the 'education of desire' — and the structures that organize and constitute the relationships between past and present and possible futures."[47]

Gay men can be just as set in their ways as anyone else, if not more so. In talking about the paradoxical queer desire for Britney Spears and other pop divas, music theorist Gavin Lee points to the open-secret scenario where "the homonormativity of U.S. white gay male culture, within which racial and economic others are marginal, and females and femininity occupy problematic positions."[48] Gay men have their own objectifying structures for organizing and constituting relationships that cross social and ethnic divides, among them the label of "chocolate queen" for a white man who is sexually attracted to Black men. The possibility of such an explicit role and its reverse role, a gay Black man having "snow queen" preferences, could represent a raising of the "queerness stakes" — something like, okay, if society has labeled me, I might as well go on pursuing and embracing as many niche-labels as possible. How many can I collect?![49] More often than not, there's facetiousness to these absurdist, casual labelings of sexual tastes as side dishes to some larger, sit-down desirousness-dinner. But then, as Sharpe, Taylor, Walker, and maybe Prince himself would say, the history of the North Atlantic dictates that chocolate queen and snow queen couldn't

47 Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies,* 190.

48 Gavin Lee, "Queer Desire Is Not Gay, Gender Is a Fantasy: Ways of Loving Britney," in *Rethinking Difference in Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music: Theory and Politics of Ambiguity,* ed. Gavin Lee (Routledge, 2018), 153.

49 Jason Crockett, "'Damn, I'm Dating a Lot of White Guys': Gay Men's Individual Narratives of Racial Sexual Orientation Development," in *Home and Community for Queer Men of Color: The Intersection of Race and Sexuality,* ed. C. Winter Han and Jesús Gregorio Smith (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 1–29.

be symmetrical equivalents to each other. Indeed, a gay *ménage* of Black and white men involves so many dynamics and cross-dynamics of social, sexual, historical, and political vectors that it's a wonder such relationships ever happen. It's no doubt on account of *crystallization* that they are able to continue.

I imagine many mainstream Americans find the reciprocity politics of queer romantic relations even more obscure than those in interracial couplings. I'm saying that queer Black–white relations represent a potentially queer–queer intersection. Thwarting public assumptions on sexuality is one thing; cutting across thoughtless racial assumptions is yet another. W.E.B. DuBois famously talked in 1903 about a "double-consciousness," and described how for the minority person this "peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" leads to alienation from "one's own kind" and second-guessing one's self.[50] When a member of a minority culture (minority in ethnic, social, sexual, or musical terms) contravenes broad expectation in their way of relating either across a boundary or within a boundary, self-blame and heavy questioning can follow. Emigrating from Hong Kong to Australia as a young boy in the 1970s, writer Kent Chuang remembers coming of age and falling "madly" in love with just the kinds of men he himself was "supposed" to become in his new culture; he was attracted to "big hairy guys […] people I could never be." But most perplexing of all was an against-type tryst he experienced later on, back in Hong Kong: "It was a one night stand, strange, almost bizarre. Naked and looking into another pair of slant eyes, I immediately thought to myself, 'This is incest! God, I'm doing it with myself.'"[51] Incest is a powerful, forbidding metaphor for social transgression. (And yet Chuang persisted with his supposed incest, and in doing so found new pleasures.)

50 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Bedford Books, 1997), 38.

51 Kent Chuang, "Using Chopsticks to Eat Steak," *Journal of Homosexuality* 36, nos. 3–4 (1999): 30, 36.

These fears of having sex with someone who looks like you, these are the fears of a minority assimilationist — as Chuang cheerfully described himself. And they're therefore difficult for a person of a majority culture, or for that matter a Garvey-following separatist, to understand. Stereotypes can become horrific things. Though Prince was no assimilationist, there might be a similarity here between his wish to evade R&B in his own work and Chuang's wish to steer clear of sexual pigeonholes; maybe joining "the black ghetto at Warner Brothers" would have counted as an analogous form of incest. For the marginalized figure, I imagine the sexual goal and the life goal have to be separate from one another. For the queer minority figure, I'm sure trying to negotiate your queerness and your ethnicity at the same time can become a maddening campaign.

… or it could become a cause for play. Interrelated with the tongue-in-cheek labels for even-queerer taste, beauty in the sense described by Naomi Wolf has been co-opted by queer men in terms of drag-queen culture. There, according to David M. Halperin, it can become indistinguishable from appropriation, fun, and parody. When he speaks of a "categorical split," I assume Halperin means the kind of domestic distancing that might happen between close siblings as they come of age under the same roof:

> The categorical split in traditional gay male culture between beauty and camp, between glamour and humor, turns out to be isomorphic with a number of other symmetrical and polarized values, which correlate in turn with a basic opposition between masculine and feminine gender styles.[52]

* * *

I think back to the friendship and spontaneous sexual connections that I had with three musicians starting when I was

52 David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 204–5.

in graduate school, and it leads me to wonder whether these relations could be seen as monstrous intimacies in the current supposedly postracial era. Our shared tastes and affections were as much musical as sexual — so if I had in fact coerced these men into monstrous intimacies, such monstrousness and coercion would also have affected our musical sharings. Surely the musical sympathies were a barometer of other aspects of our relationships. Since I met these men *as* musicians who happened to be Black, there surely must have been some kind of conjoined erotic and musical connectedness: I don't think we would have enjoyed each other in the same ways if we hadn't had such shared interests in music. I also can't imagine that I was occupying any position of power over them — that I was stationed like Kara Walker's slaveholder son — unless my being white and maybe five years older aroused something my lovers had internalized. There were frank discussions of race between me and two of these partners, but none of the three struck me as either a separatist or an assimilationist (to bring up that Manichaean duality). By way of a sort-of ethnography and in order to share a poignant but succinct conversation that I've not seen the likes of elsewhere, I offer one such discussion here. (I've been influenced here by Chuang's own failure to document any conversations he'd had with his own lovers. That would have deeply enhanced his essay.) The conversants here are myself, A.(rved), and the dancer and pianist whom I'll abbreviate as S.:

S: I've still not reconciled my white romantic preferences with my utter disdain for white male privilege. It is the privilege I detest, not the person.

A: Just do it. Andrea Dworkin aside, wouldn't you agree that going to bed with someone isn't assenting to a set of politics?

S: Correct.

A: In fact, to put that person in a position of desirous vulnerability is to have them in your thrall. It's a position of power.

S: And I have long learned that we are all evolved from the same stardust.

A: Yes. We can try to parse things in terms of body types, personality types, skin color, subversion of old peer and family expectations…
S: And I love whether or not we can choose to politicize that.

S. came from a wealthy family, and in his training as a pianist had no interest in learning jazz harmony, despite everyone (including educators) lobbying him to do so. A lovably swoony romantic by nature when I knew him, but with the verbal bearing of an Oxbridge don, S. really wanted to become a Chopin and Liszt interpreter. But he went on to concentrate more on dance than music, perhaps because he felt the former was free from some of these frustrating cultural or educational encumbrances — from the politics of interpreting works (in other words, canonical texts) that educators and peers had told him signified a marauding culture. (In addition to our musical discussions, I remember having a detailed conversation about classical ballet techniques with him.)

And then there was F., who was a passionate cellist and chamber music player, a complex and jealous person who collected hats and had the email username *ravelisgod*. He was one of the most hot-blooded and music-involved people I've ever met, even if not the best player technically. F. was suddenly and permanently enraged when a Black studies class showed him the full scope of injustices, but Maurice Ravel remained a deity. I think Ravel might have been redeemed, in F.'s estimation, by his powerful vocal setting of Évariste de Parny's text "Aoua! méfiez-vous des blancs" (Oh! Beware of white people). Last, there was R., a musician who was very devoted to his clarinet and his violin, is still apparently loved by everyone he's ever met, and had no particular interest in Black artists or African American styles. R. was unflagging in his love of life and affection for all those around him. (He was also very much into bowling, as I remember.)

The different roles that R. and I played in bed could be related to our musical roles, but then that seems intuitive — of course

sexual and musical personas are involved, equally involved, in a person's past and personality. First, I'll say that each of them — as is true of just about every sex partner I've had — approached me rather than the other way around, which might possibly lower any degree of monstrousness. F. was especially assertive both as a player and as a lover, prone to jumping into action and saving any questions for later. In both actions, and in all senses, I've never known someone so ready to pull out their instrument and start pleasuring. He was very much into sharing, even if it meant needing to convince some (not me) that they indeed wanted what was being shared. S. seemed actually to be in love with me, and I did feel an uncompetitive, edenic bliss when we were naked and together. As for R., it was at our first time together that I — raised on the edges of a lily-white Midwestern town — came to understood what it meant to be intimate with someone whose skin color is fundamentally different from your own. (A kind of "This is anti-incest! God, I'm not doing it with myself!" scenario.) It occurred to me that the force and strength and beauty of such intimacies can be truly revealed only when you're naked against white sheets. But at the same time, I realized skin color was — at least for me, speaking as a white male — a red herring: I was more struck at that moment by the fullness of R.'s lips and the translucency of R.'s skin, and how they felt to my fingertips, than I was by its hue. Or maybe that's just an example of rationalization, of swapping one term out for another.

Truth be told, there was a bit of the corny "tasting chocolate" and "but I prefer white chocolate" play-othering-banter that sounded more innocent back then than now — and which I don't think amounted to fetishistic race-play. For his part, R. said without being asked that he was turned on by short white guys. But in actuality, our (implicit) capacities were reciprocal and shifting, with dominating and submissive roles exchanged.

R.: You cooked for me once. It was very good.
A.: That's sweet of you to remember.

R.: I'm not good with dates, but I remember special times with special people. I remember trying to seduce you. I was attracted by your intellectualism.
A.: I hope the ease of conquest didn't disappoint you.
R.: I think about it often, actually. I worked on you pretty good.
A.: Yes, you had me wrapped around your … something …
R.: LOL. I'm glad I can talk to you like a regular guy.
A.: Well, there's no other way we could talk.

I was usually in R.'s thrall, rather than the other way around. And to give the tables of normativity yet another turn, I quietly relished my ability to make him shake and shudder — of having that control over him, and the selfless and gentle acquiescence of his susceptibility. And then, after the two of us had had really satisfying sex, there came a rare sense of trust between us — I later wondered if his affectionate teasing, stopping short of mockery, hid a vulnerable heart.

Music is something held in common by communities, and so it is largely defined and created by our specific social dynamics of sharing and relating — construed according to whether we perpetuate boundaries or disregard them while we're forming those affinities that define us. I loved sharing music with S., F., and R., at different times of course — whether through hearing them play, listening to albums together (at both loud and soft volumes), or discussing music and its powers. (F. brought me to the unexpected realization that long thrift-store trawls for LPs make for truly great foreplay. And he was amused and intrigued by the 1950s André Kostelanetz record that I bought, which could actually qualify as one of the most white-suburbanite albums ever made. In a highly unequal quid pro quo, when F. introduced me to Nina Simone, he changed my life and my decades-long priorities of assigning value in twentieth-century music according to modernity and noisiness.) And so, I've thought about these three fulfilling musical and sexual relationships, and wondered how our queer relations across color lines — our apparent differences of skin color, but not of musical enthusiasms — could

be characterized politically, should we decide to do that. And how musical tastes might have served to symbolize, counter, or encourage our interactions. Were we assimilationists? Or maybe miscegenists? Or just friends-with-benefits who cared about each other and could have happily continued on to longer relationships if life had shuffled us in other ways?

Taylor interjects that attraction can be ethical, can indeed attain the richness of love, when beauty is felt and expressed and crystallization — basically, the truly affectionate bias that arrives in proof of the old edict "love is blind" — can come about. "The physiological impulsion of attraction or desire can blossom into a variety of experientially rich and ethically permissible forms under the right conditions," says Taylor. "But under white supremacy, it all too often gets stunted — perverted — and turns only into exploitative and violent transactions in which the language of beauty and the experience of crystallization — the leap from attraction to aesthetic admiration that we typically equate with romantic experience — are firmly ruled out."[53] This underlines the far-reaching risks and ramifications that any marginalized person, a queer individual especially, involves when they speak of beauty and love — or when they speak of such things to themselves, with honesty.

My own use of the words "love" and "beautiful" has, in all situations and aspects, even today, been forcefully corralled into what Eve Sedgwick called "the epistemology of the closet." When I realized my queer desires as a closeted adolescent, love became an oversize and unknowable word: I was actually afraid to say it. Not only because it sounded like something dewy-eyed and limp-wristed men — which is how I suppose I envisioned aesthetes, never having met any — would utter, but also because I hadn't yet opened myself to notions of what beautiful things could be outside of music itself. When as an adolescent I once blurted out at the dinner table that I "loved" a musical composition by Ralph Vaughan Williams, in what was strangely enough maybe a trial run for declaring my being drawn to members of

53 Taylor, "Dark Lovely Yet And," 118.

my own sex, my father answered, with either confusion or mild sarcasm, I'm not sure which: "So do you want to marry it?"

Even for a heterosexual woman, there's no particularized verbiage in English for desiring men, or for expressing a man's allure. (A patois has been developed in gay porn and on Grindr, and it's hilarious in its grunting primitiveness.) In later twentieth-century American life, "beauty" was more broadly applicable to women than men. "Handsome" has always reeked of Madison Avenue superficiality. "Sexy"? And a queer person had particular issues in discerning and individuating their desired from other people's. The problem of terms for the desired went hand in hand with an inability to locate the desire itself in specific terms. Even in the early twenty-first century, questions of queer and closeted epistemologies aside, saying that I am in love with any music or that such-and-such a piece is *beautiful,* becomes as much a problem to utter as to hear. Especially among academics and intellectuals, loving is for suckers. Given all the inquisitive and disquisitive and deconstructive and contingent ways that we learn, one isn't supposed to love anything. Indeed, to un-love something — to de-couple yourself from an affection for and attraction to something, to criticize or even denounce it — is to understand it. Has love somehow become *complicit* in the world's many forms of social injustice? T. was an additional partner of mine, this time in a longer relationship, and a pianist who showed an impressive gift for "aesthetic admiration" when it came to music he loved, such as Liszt, Chopin, or actually just about anything else.

T.: I'm a gay Black male who loves white guys and classical music … but in today's urban gay culture, I'm supposed to love "my own kind" and listen to hip-hop.
A.: So you and I are confused.
T.: Or sellouts.

And T. allowed himself to know and voice his pleasures. He was the only sex partner I've had who expressed his enjoyment verbally in bed — and his musical loves likewise. I knew his piano

teacher, who told me one day: "It was audibly noticeable, how differently he played Bach that time you were in the room, I don't know why."

* * *

In our heavily politicized current era, a time when any universal notion becomes a polemic, bringing up beauty can amount to a reckless evasion of politics. Indeed, beauty and politics have become mutually exclusive; you can't talk about exquisiteness and oppression in the same sentence. Or, to be more charitable, we could just describe aesthetics as an obsolescence. As the practice of pondering and appreciating beauty, it is the domain of well-to-do white males — a pastime of the idle, beard-stroking descendants of Aristotle. Roger Scruton was a Kant scholar, conservative philosopher, and Cambridge don. He posed the basic question: "Is the pleasure in beauty a sensory or an intellectual pleasure? But then, what is the difference between the two?"[54]

Naomi Wolf offered another sort of answer in the first edition of her epochal *The Beauty Myth* in 1990. Wolf's facts and findings have recently come up for widespread questioning, but this can't reduce the importance of many of her more far-reaching statements. "The beauty myth tells a story," Wolf writes.

> The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary.[55]

54 Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

55 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (HarperCollins, 2002), 12.

With the bulimia crisis of the 1980s and the AIDS epidemic in the same decade, invocations of beauty became invitations to illness and death. When the American filmmaker Howard Brookner was dying of AIDS in 1989, he reiterated a memo saying, "There's so much beauty in the world. I suppose that's what got me into trouble in the first place."[56] I've pondered for years, with considerable anguish, why he did this to himself. Effecting a tone wistful and resigned, Brookner was perhaps offering himself as a sacrifice to a greater good, not to honor the moment of ejaculation, but to commemorate universal ideals in a way that Scruton would understand. (When you are dying, it's no doubt easier and more reassuring to entertain notions of beauty than memories of fucking. There's no guilt or regret to be associated with aesthetics.)

Exquisiteness, high aesthetic value, are unreachable chimeras that become instruments of cultural power. Wolf talks about good looks as another form of coinage: "'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact."[57] Like Taylor, Wolf speaks of the difficulty of crossing or closing the gaps that separate human reality from beautiful essences. She continues with her currency metaphor, saying that immense commercial markets are built on carefully tended feelings of inadequacy: "Ideal beauty is ideal because it does not exist: The action lies in the gap between desire and gratification. Women are not perfect beauties without distance. That space, in a consumer culture, is a lucrative one. The beauty myth moves for men as a mirage; its power lies in its ever-receding nature. When the gap is closed, the lover embraces only his own disillusion."[58] Wolf's references here to "the gap between desire and gratification" and the "ever-

56 Brad Gooch, *Smash Cut: A Memoir of Howard & Art & the '70s & the '80s* (HarperCollins, 2015), 200.

57 Wolf, *The Beauty Myth,* 19.

58 Ibid., 179.

receding nature" of the beauty myth are redolent of aesthetics in art; an ideal is invoked only to be unrealized.

I want to talk about beauty for reasons that are closer to Prince's thinking than Thomas Mann's. For me, the word doesn't stir up notions of divinity; rather, I use the word "beauty" for its sharp, radical incision through so many clichés and academic suppositions. The word is both banal and profound, boorish (calling a twenty-year-old pageant contestant "beautiful") and subversive (calling a male intellectual "beautiful"). According to some feminist cultural theorists, "beautiful" is the most powerfully patriarchal word in the English language — as applied to women, of course. But for queer males, or for that matter for just about anyone apart from straight men, talking about "beauty" can become a kind of epistemological terrorism. And so, I have to say I find it radical and irresponsible and sexy as all hell to call a male cultural fixture beautiful — an "object of devotion" rather than learning and critique. (Here I feel some of the queer and divine exhilaration that Deleuze experienced when he talked about sodomizing analytic philosophy: "What got me by during that period was conceiving of the history of philosophy as a kind of ass-fuck, or what amounts to the same thing, an immaculate conception."[59])

I am heavily in love and lust with this idea of beauty as an antidiscourse, of beauty-as-subversion. (Think terrorism in stiletto heels — no, think sabotage with cascading dreadlocks and form-hugging leather.) It means taking the "Are you a brain or a body?" question that's implicitly asked of women, and throwing it at the great male minds of history. And then I'll go even more for broke with this, at least in the direction of beauty in its most surfacey and irresponsible and banal definition; namely, as physical attractiveness: Isaac Newton was gorgeous (and he kind of was, in Godfrey Kneller's famous 1689 painting), Ludwig Wittgenstein was magnificent (the only hunky philosopher,

59 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix.

as say the internets),[60] and Malcolm X looked both daunting and damned fine in suit and tie. Come to think of it, the blond surfer dude Jesus images that graced lower-middle-class living rooms were always… alluring. These assertions will help us take just a bit less seriously those cultural icons that have become so idea-powerful they might be dangerous. And my assertions do nothing to distract from the cultural weights and historical achievements of these men. Anyone saying otherwise betrays patriarchal notions of beauty and insufferable puritanist guilt — Do you know who you are?

60 Philosopher Norman Malcolm recalled Wittgenstein thus: "His face was lean and brown, his profile was aquiline and strikingly beautiful, his head was covered with a curly mass of brown hair." Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Clarendon Press, 2001), 23.

3

Flowers and Shit

(Chopin, Nocturne in C# Minor, op. 27, no. 1)

tuberose

Frédéric Chopin's Nocturne in B major, op. 62, no. 1 has a floral nickname — as if words could make this painfully exquisite piece any more aromatic! "The tuberose" was popularized as a subtitle by the American critic James Huneker in his 1900 book on this composer: "Opus 62 brings us to a pair in B major and E major inscribed to Madame de Konneritz. The first, the Tuberose Nocturne, is faint with a sick, rich odor. [… I]ts troubled lyrism is appealing."[1] But the word goes further back as a Chopin moniker. Franz Liszt, a frequent performer of his colleague's work and a visionary composer in his own right, was using floral-olfactory terms for Chopin already in 1863. He referred to the "exquisite aroma" of the music, a scent resistant to "the noisome breath of crowds"; he also referenced "the stronger odor of the tuberose."[2]

1 James Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and His Music* (Dover, 1966), 149. Huneker opts for the word "lyrism" rather than the trite term "lyricism" for the same reason he associated this music with an esoteric and debauched flower: He wanted to claim Chopin's piece as an essay in uncommonness.

2 Franz Liszt, *Life of Chopin,* trans. Martha Walker Cook, 4th ed. (Oliver Ditson & Co., 1865), 82.

Floral beauty can seem the most facile of beauties, but our more insipid poets are to blame for that. Flowers are the low-hanging fruit of lyric verse. But the tuberose is no everyday smell, even among exotic flowers. The term "tuberose" came not from the blooms or the leaves, but from the plant's "swollen" (in French, *tubéreuse*) root system — from the misshapen and grotesquely phallic rhizomes that hide below the surface. So the plant even has a visual similarity to penises. The encyclopedic *Complete Language of Flowers* lists "symbolic meanings" of the tuberose bloom as "Dangerous pleasures; Funerary; Pleasures that inevitably cause pain; Sweet voice; Voluptuousness."[3] To later nineteenth-century sensibilities, its sweet and heavy scent was a subterfuge, a departure from sense, an invitation to sin. The odor of the tuberose was so haunting and penetrating that it was likened to the smell of sex itself. Perfumists dispensed the tuberose distillate, along with warnings, to those risking dalliance with cocks. "'I love this flower because it's deceptive,' says master perfumer Sophie Labbé of the tuberose. 'You think she's innocent, but she's not. She's dangerous.' To the Victorians, it was so distressingly seductive that young women were warned not to get too close to the night-blooming blossoms lest an accidental whiff awaken dangerously illicit desire. What makes tuberose so damn sexy? It comes down to chemistry."[4]

That tuberose chemistry isn't typical of flowers more generally; it crosses into skankiness. The aroma carries overtones of shit, complicating its insinuations of beauty, romance, desire, and sex. "Like jasmine and gardenia," beauty and fashion writer Long says, "the flower's aroma has an under-funk of indole, a molecule that's also present in (sorry) feces. This intimation of rot, counterintuitively, is what makes it erotic: Indole is also produced in small amounts by our skin and released during

3 S. Theresa Dietz, *The Complete Language of Flowers: A Definitive and Illustrated History* (Wellfleet Press, 2020), 170.

4 April Long, "Is Tuberose the Sexiest Fragrance Note?," *Town & Country,* September 13, 2019, https://www.townandcountrymag.com/style/beauty-products/a28915433/why-tuberose-is-sexiest-floral-scent/.

sex."[5] Such scents were supplanted in the twentieth century by "cleaner" toiletries, much to the chagrin of fragrance connoisseurs. "It sounds a little weird to shower with soap that mimics the natural funk a human body gets after a few days," says style writer Kara Nesvig. "But to my nose, that jasmine body wash smells glorious: heady, sexy, humid. It also smells a little dirty, something that so many modern perfumes are missing and that the legendary classics had in spades. What's that old adage about everything beautiful having a secret ugliness?"[6]

And so, if Chopin's B major Nocturne from 1846 has been historically likened to a flower with a scent that hints at the indecencies of fornication and sweat and excrement, we should remember that flowers — as beheld by humanity — are often not what they seem. They even serve as instruments of deception. A blossom, as both a botanical thing and an article in human art and culture, marries dissonant elements in making an ornament to courtship, an unlikely erogeneity in polite society. Blooms are at the same time plant gonads, art objects prized for their aesthetic value, metaphors for human beauty (Heinrich Heine's famous love lyric "Du bist wie eine Blume"), and symbols of affection. And so we arrive at the secret pheromonic-musical life of flowers, their dark underbellies. And of course we come to the doubleness of Chopin's B major Nocturne, which is historically linked with both elegant pianism and the conjoined odors of coitus and fertilizer.

Chopin's nocturnes occupy one corner of a narrow, specialized aesthetic where intoxication and disgust commingle. Literary critics and phenomenologists have discussed such spaces where the senses and the stomach connect in ways both synchronous and nauseating. Critical theorist Julia Kristeva referred to a "vortex of summons and repulsion" in *Powers of*

5 Ibid.

6 Kara Nesvig, "Strong Sexy Fragrances That Are Basically Unbridled Loins in a Bottle: Eau de NSFW," *Allure,* August 2, 2017, https://www.allure.com/gallery/strong-sexy-fragrances-that-smell-like-hot-dirty-sex.

Horror.[7] Carolyn Korsmeyer talks about the odd institution of aesthetic disgust as a reminder of "the old rivalry between reason and emotion."[8] The nose has a special role in such conflicted sensual tinglings, since smell is a prime avenue of revulsion. And then maybe it's the habitual congeniality of public, societally friendly music — its hard-wired, very basic disinclination for loathing and aversion — that's behind the lack of "smellability" in the discourse surrounding the art. (The formalist critic Eduard Hanslick resorted to his sense of smell when he castigated Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in 1881, so strong was his disgust: "Friedrich Vischer once observed, speaking of obscene pictures, that they stink to the eye. Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear."[9])

We could borrow a phrase from Charles Baudelaire, the poetic *empereur regnant* of "summons and revulsion," and dub the tuberose a "flower of evil" — a *fleur du mal,* born of sin and at the same time an ornament to it. In fact, I habitually pair Chopin's perfumed botanical poisons broadly speaking — sometimes sickly, sometimes sweet — with Baudelaire's. And then the string of poetic perversions, of resonant aesthetics, starts rolling out. The amorous sadomasochism of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* poems leads me in turn to the brutal, felonious, and similarly provenanced loves in Jean Genet's novels *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*. (Tellingly, Jean-Paul Sartre, the scholar of existentialism and social outsiders, published monographs on both Baudelaire and Genet, the only authors he wrote up in such detail.) And then linking flowers with more specialized sexual byways could lead us to Robert Mapplethorpe's exquisite and pornographic flower photos, which need to be

7 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Léon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

8 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.

9 Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time,* 2nd ed. (University of Washington Press, 1965), 207.

seen alongside his man-on-man leather-sadomasochism shots. Flower-involved or no, Chopin and Baudelaire and Genet were poet-transgressors as a matter of basic nature, renegotiating bourgeois hierarchies of taste, divinity, and vice.[10]

Evil flowers or no, I've always sensed a familial sympathy between Chopin and Baudelaire, a musical-literary relation that has no basis in life or fact, but is none the weaker for that. (The two artists overlapped in Paris, but it's doubtful Baudelaire the connoisseur of whores' rejections ever met Chopin the begloved piano teacher of countesses.) Baudelaire offers us not one but two relevant binarisms in his *Les fleurs du mal* poems. The title shows him orienting his passions between *flowers* and *evil* (or perhaps flowers and *suffering*), but in the largest subsection he shifts between *idéal* and *spleen,* between ecstasy and anguish, as he pursues several paramours. He poeticizes blossoms, but queerly — contrary to Geoffrey Chaucer, Heine, and just about everyone else. The plants Baudelaire focuses on are dark, fringe, and always novel. He professes that "I dream of new flowers, but who can tell / if this eroded swamp of mine affords / the mystic nourishment on which they thrive."[11] These flowers, though fantasized, are like the real thing in that their beauty is birthed from a bed of moist stench. Or more cogently translated — the most gorgeous things are inextricable from beds of shit. (Georges Bataille took a darker turn when, in allusion

10 Translating Baudelaire has always raised such a multiplicity of issues that it becomes an art in itself. In titling his collection *Les fleurs du mal,* specifically in choosing the word *mal,* Baudelaire acknowledged the contrary bitterness of his desire. *Mal* can mean "pain," "melancholy," "suffering," "evil," "sickness," "harm," "ill," "sin," and "wrong." The usual translation of Baudelaire's title is "Flowers of Evil," but these poems could just as easily be titled "Flowers of Sin," "Flowers of Illness," or "Flowers of Suffering." And then how to understand the preposition "of," exactly?

11 Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Richard Howard (David R. Godine, 1982), 20. I've turned to the unrhymed translations by Richard Howard in order to suit my purposes of focusing on individual lines from Baudelaire. For similar reasons, as explained in my main text above, I've elected to reference Baudelaire's volume by its original title *Les fleurs du mal* rather than use any of the English possibilities.

to Baudelaire's *fleurs,* he said that a flower's ineffable beauty so very quickly returns to rot and feces: "Risen from the stench of the manure pile — even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity — the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure."[12])

Flowers are conflicted objects, evanescent seductions, exquisite subterfuges. And when Huneker referred to the tuberose, he pointed us to a conflictedness in Chopin's music more broadly; namely, a stark, unresolved tension between beautiful and ugly, poised and violent, lucid and filthy, poetic and incoherent. The common references to Chopin as an elegant poet of the piano are even more cowardly and unjust than the blasé collegiate depictions of Baudelaire's work as poetry. Literary scholar Elissa Marder's account of Baudelaire reception applies just as well to Chopin. She speaks of "a reticence, or a resistance, on the part of his readers regarding Baudelaire's most dramatic, idiosyncratic, violent, and elusive assaults on classical notions of beauty. It is remarkable how easily he has been assimilated into and recuperated by the very narratives of literary history and aesthetics that also identify him as the turning point in that same history." She goes on to warn readers against "neutraliz[ing] the very aspects of Baudelaire's poetry that are the most forceful, the most inimitable, the most enduring, and the most subversive."[13]

As a Baudelaire parallel to Chopin's "tuberose" Nocturne in B major, I suggest the "Hymn to Beauty" (number 27) from *Les fleurs du mal*. The poet's rhetorical, almost heroic tone here might be closer to Chopin in a more public genre, such as the polonaise or sonata. But there is similarity with Chopin in nocturne mode in that the poet veers away from classical ideals of form and imagery, and summons dirt, ash, stench, spoilage, and physical need in praise of his mistress Jeanne Duval:

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12 Georges Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* ed. and trans. Alan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 10–14.

13 Elissa Marder, "Inhuman Beauty: Baudelaire's Bad Sex," *differences* 27, no. 1 (2016): 2–3.

(27)
Daughter of darkness, slattern deity
rank with musk and nicotine, the spawn
of filthy covens or a shaman's rites
ebony fetish, nameless talisman.… And yet

to wine, to opium even, I prefer
the elixir of your lips on which love flaunts
itself; and in the wasteland of desire
your eyes afford the wells to slake my thirst.

Seal them, those sooty holes from which your soul
rains hellfire too, relentless sorceress!
I am no Styx, to cradle you nine times,

alas! and cannot with some Fury's lust,
to break your spirit and your heart, become
in your bed's inferno … Persephone![14]

Baudelaire's oeuvre was considered unnatural and profane in the nineteenth century. *Les fleurs du mal* was banned in his lifetime for its portrayals of lesbianism and intimations of necrophilia. Critics leveled similar accusations of deviancy at Chopin's work. John Field called the composer "a sickroom talent," and the German critic Ludwig Rellstab implored him — referring specifically to his Nocturne in E♭ major, op. 9 — to give up the "grinning grimace," the "groans" and "twists [of] his whole body," so as "to return to nature."[15] These nonmusicians' agonized descriptions of Chopin sound similar to the syphilitic Baudelaire's own accounts of love — specifically, to the submissive "prisoner" partner, the one who suffers in love matches. "What worse sights than these," asks Baudelaire, "could you encounter at an inquisi-

14 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 32–33.

15 Huneker, *Chopin,* 143. In addressing Chopin's nocturnes, Huneker himself said, "Chopin, seldom exuberantly cheerful, is morbidly sad and complaining in many of the nocturnes" (142).

tion conducted by adept torturers?" Going even further in his similes for submissive love, he offers that electrocution is (just?) one step beyond the altered state brought on by recreational narcotics: "These eyes, rolled back like the sleepwalker's, these limbs whose muscles burst and stiffen as though subject to the action of a galvanic battery — such frightful, such curious phenomena are undoubtedly never obtained from even the most extreme cases of intoxication, of delirium, of opium-taking."[16]

In its basic outlines, Baudelaire's work follows licit pretenses of beauty, yet his poems often give explicit and unflinching account of the sexual "perversions" that Foucault thought endemic to the Romantic era before modernity replaced them with differentiated and hard-wired modern "identities." But can beauty and strangeness really be so antithetical to one another, and loveliness and antinormativity irreconcilable? Literary scholar Barbara Wright says no: "Beauty, for Baudelaire, is always strange […] paradoxical in its combination of extreme opposites and tantalising, at all times, by its elusiveness."[17] And then Baudelaire and Chopin, these two stylish and lucid assailants of classical notions of beauty, performed their most grotesque subversion when they acquiesced (posthumously) to society printing their work on library-grade, acid-free paper and lazily cataloging it as something unified under the moniker of poetry. Walter Benjamin, as a literary scholar and an aesthetic follower of Karl Marx, broke Baudelaire down into a dialectics: "Baudelaire's sensibility is divided between a spiritual, even seraphic pole on one side and an idiosyncratic pole on the other; one is represented by the seraph, the other by the fetish."[18] And so the Baudelairean duality encompasses not only the lov-

16 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals,* trans. Christopher Isherwood (Methuen, 1949), 5.

17 Barbara Wright, "Baudelaire's Poetic Journey in *Les fleurs du mal*," in *Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire,* ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

18 Walter Benjamin, "The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les fleurs du mal,*" in *Selected Writings,* vol. 4: *1938–1940,* ed. Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), 95.

ing and the torturous, but also the sacred and the profane, as overseen by Catholic specters of sin and damnation.

These Baudelairean criteria are the queerest terms for beauty I've ever seen — or rather, the best correlation to a queer person's obsessive, ambivalent, ironic, and fractured relationship with beauty. (Gay American composer Ned Rorem, musical heir to the French songwriters Francis Poulenc and Henri Duparc, the latter contributing the definitive setting of Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage," once wrote: "Perfection is no more a requisite to art than to heroes. Frigidaires are perfect. Beauty limps. My Frigidaire has had to be replaced."[19]) Baudelaire's terms of allure and lust are love letters to *volupté* as penned by an aesthete who implicitly declared, according to Sartre's critical-psychoanalytic portrayal, "I'm someone else, someone different from all of you who are responsible for my sufferings. You can persecute my body, but you can't touch my 'otherness.'"[20] Gay men know a thing or two about persecution and shit as embellishments to the flushed floridness of attraction. I'm speaking of the malodorous mishaps of intense anal sex, which is sometimes thought indispensable to homosexual lovemaking. (I once knew a brilliant and outspoken Yale PhD in classics who would enjoy elaborating on his own experiences with "gay paté." Shit was a badge of honor for him, alongside fluency in Ancient Greek and getting a book published before completing his degree.)

The conflictedness of flowers reaches a climax with gay metaphors for the male anus. In Japan and China, *chrysanthemum* is a metaphor for the anus as a sex organ. A prolapsed rectum, as can result from an intense bout of fisting, is known as the *rosebud* or *rosebutt* because of the tissue's graceful yet tight interfoldings and vivid red hue. Here the flower description is indeed aesthetic, just as imbued with a sense of beauty as Heine's love poem "Du bist wie eine Blume," because the impression of the thing is so very intense that a metaphor is needed. In these

19 Ned Rorem, *The Later Diaries of Ned Rorem, 1961–1972* (North Point Press, 1983), 138.

20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (New Directions, 1950), 20.

cases, surely the metaphor choice isn't as interesting as the metaphorical urge itself: the intensely queer appropriation (or, better said, misappropriation) of classical notions of beauty ("roses are red…") to describe subversive passions. The queer reference to flowers here is an upping of the ante, it's a fuck-you baiting of society for its revulsion at anal sex. Would queers nail their colors to the mast of anal sex (as it were) if it didn't bother normal suburbanites? Or, even more, if it didn't directly mimic (or satirize?) the one, definitive, child-producing hetero-sex act that stands as a bulwark against the apocalyptic dangers of sodomy?

Chopin and Baudelaire, like those perfumists who extracted the tuberose, were artists who dared offense.

Though Baudelaire refers to figures from ancient mythology, such as Persephone and Venus, his terms are clearly less about classical aesthetics than they are about individual experience. He saw desire through the prisms of sin and damnation, not to mention the syphilis that eventually disabled and then killed him. So one might think a person with a Baudelairean view of beauty would have internalized a measure of self-loathing, and his descriptions do have the feel of flesh-familiarity to me. Indeed, I often have the sense that my own understanding of comeliness must have been scripted by Baudelaire, and that he somehow still subsists in my brain, lips, and groin. To many queer people, beauty is a thing often prevaricated, obscured, opposed, torn, kinked, denied, fetishized, ironized, longed for, resisted, and obsessed over. What to do with these sharp dualities and contradictions? Are we to live as Baudelaire lived? How are we to live? Are we to live?

* * *

lushly sentimental; agitated and remorseful; sensuous and dramatic; melancholy and lovely; mystic, crooning; graceful; shallow of content; dreamy, heavenly; tragic; languid, earth-weary; morbid; pathological; unhealthy; treacherous; bewitching and emasculating; faint with a sick, rich odor; beautiful; bejeweled, lugubrious, tropical, Asiatic

Chopin's twenty-one nocturnes are my music: I have assimilated them, and they are the pieces I return to most often and with the greatest pleasure and fulfillment. I've known them intimately for almost fifty years, have played several of them decently enough, and could approximate most of them from memory onto paper, if given enough pencils, erasers, and time. These pieces have always resonated with me, and I with them, with no passings out and in of favor — and therein lies a story. To allow such personal identification and durability, this group of pieces must amount to some kind of alter ego or identity-corollary in sound. *I see myself in it,* as the odd expression goes. *You are what you eat,* exhort people who want us to know exactly what we ingest. Yet the perversities marking the "tuberose" Nocturne also characterize many of the other pieces in Chopin's set, and such terms must then somehow apply to me, too.

As evidence, consider the several dozen descriptors I quote above, at the start of this section — focused but sometimes contradictory terms that writers supplied between about 1850 and 1950 for specific nocturnes by Chopin. The compilation is a strange array of words that both communicate and obscure. These terms might suggest a psychoanalyst's session notes or a drug dream, but were in fact penned by noted pianists and established music scholars. So these are time-honored words, yet they suggest queerness, sickness, and maybe the specific moral rot, spiritual dangers, and social disaffections that have historically been linked with gayness. As used by these music writers and critics, they smack more of paranoia and fear than musicality, yet not, I think, out of an urge to name-call, but out of a real desire to explain and intrigue. (We could write a whole other tract on the *intent* behind these descriptions.) We are the music we love and identify with. (For the moment, I leave aside the point that normal people, instead of holding long aural conversations with Chopin's nocturnes, probably gravitate to early Led Zeppelin, or *Hamilton,* or maybe Lou Reed, Beyoncé, Sousa marches, or Alison Kraus. Or, for that matter, to Beethoven symphonies or Ravel's *Bolero*. Just as I assume most people don't involve themselves in kinds of sex that could satisfy legal defini-

tions of sodomy.) To the extent that I find Chopin's pieces central to emotional and musical life, to the degree that they are me and I am them, I'll go further and call on them to help define my own queerness, to better access my musical and extramusical sensibilities.

Everything hinges on desire and its mad, and mostly subterranean, search for fulfilment. But the nocturnian words above suggest we shouldn't be pursuing dualities of the heart so much as fragmentations of the psyche. Certainly we can give up on the criteria of unity and popular appeal. The terms above tend to avoid the usual art-music tropes of loveliness, unity, and transcendence — not referencing a heavenly, heartstring-tugging, or eternal importance, a better place. Some of the terms suggest belittlement. They remove this music from a mainstream, consigning it instead to marginal roles and places. Such individuating terms, metaphorical in the way they reference the body and sicknesses of spirit and the demeanor of flowers, are so different they hardly seem to describe any coherent thing or collection of things. These queer descriptors impute such subversions as treachery, poison, and castration, and their users deal in obscure paradoxes and willful fates. They smack of fetishism more than culture, at least as Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold famously described culture, as "the best which has been thought and said in the world."[21]

These terms are as irrational as they are expressive. They hint at the *failures* of language at the same time they suggest an utter strength of feeling. They thereby demonstrate the eloquent breakdown of language that — as Roland Barthes put it — ensues when a person talks about someone or something so passionately beloved that an edge is reached. Barthes describes this communication impasse in *A Lover's Discourse*:

> The more I experience the specialty of my desire, the less I can give it a name; to the precision of the target corresponds a

21 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy,* ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 6.

> wavering of the name; what is characteristic of desire, proper to desire, can produce only an impropriety of the utterance.[22]

This desire is a thing exclusive enough to warrant, in his example, a proper name; your language doesn't choke up or collapse when you talk about a passion for locomotives, hip-hop, or traveling. Impropriety doesn't surface when you bring up the subject of cheeseburgers. Rather, words can fail you when your desires turn out both aberrant and specialized. When your thoughts turn to your crush Micah wreathed in smiles and dreadlocks, or the model named Daiji whom you glimpsed in the throes of passion, and even more so when you think of Micah dungeon-strapped to a St. Andrew's cross or Daiji wearing skintight leather. Or maybe your specific allegiance when your mind is in thrall to opiates. To return to Barthes's questioning: "Why is it that I desire So-and-so? Why is it that I desire So-and-so lastingly, longingly? Is it the whole of So-and-so I desire (a silhouette, a shape, a mood)? And, in that case, what is it in this loved body which has the vocation of a fetish for me? What perhaps incredibly tenuous portion — what accident?"[23]

André Gide put this word-failure more succinctly when recalling his pleasure with a boy brought to him by Oscar Wilde. We would now rely on simple criminal lingo and call this child sexual abuse; Gide himself found it harder to locate a term 130 years ago.

> How should there have been any question of love? How should I have allowed desire to dispose of my heart? No scruple clouded my pleasure and no remorse followed it. What name am I to give the rapture I felt as I clasped in my naked arms that perfect little body, so wild, so ardent, so sombrely lascivious?[24]

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22 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 20.

23 Ibid., 20.

24 André Gide, *If It Die: An Autobiography,* trans. Dorothy Bussy (Random House, 1935), 288.

The perverse and pained overtones of these descriptors can then be attributed to the intensity and specificity, by which I mean queerness, of the love that's being described. I want to identify with the bliss that Gide narrates, and he invites me to share in that adoring generality, but then those rotten specifics of his love come to mind — and all those "how should's." So how are we to answer Gide's questions? Maybe we should reply to him by saying that it's fine to be at a loss for words, or to have too many of them in confused array.

Elissa Marder warned us against reading Baudelaire either from the perspective of *idéal* or through the lens of *spleen*; rather, we need to keep both in play, or find a place where multiple words of reference can come to mind whenever, or even find a place beyond verbal jurisdictions. Queer theory resists being consigned to one side of a binarism, or it works to escape binarisms altogether. These various terms for Chopin's nocturnes across history suggest the necessity of antiphonal or fluidly dualistic, rather than binaristic, terms. If these pieces of music are "agitated and remorseful," we need to consider the two terms together, not separately. The value lies perhaps not so much with the individual words as much as in the gaps between them. And so, if our inclinations hold a mirror to ourselves, then these adjectives for Chopin's nocturnes must somehow boil down into a portrait of myself. I am here with my own messily implausible proper nouns, somewhere in this pit of conflicting and volatile adjectives. If the terms listed above are queer, I am likewise queer, at least insofar as I've had a lifelong attachment to the pieces in question.

What accident? It becomes evident in these descriptive-summarizing terms that Chopin's nocturnes are marked by multiple dualities, conflicts, even outright contradictions. It might or might not be a stretch to ask if the conflictedness isn't the queerest aspect of these pieces. Just as there is a myth of "great artworks" as unified and eternal, there is a myth of queer wholeness of body and spirit, that gay people can be as they wish when liberated, when freed from social oppression. That "the freedom to love" is something utterly believed internally as a basis for

making it happen externally, legally. To love your body in a way that means not feeling alienated from it at the same time.

If Chopin's nocturnes qualify as musical classics, I seem to be arguing against the idea of the classics as a reflecting mirror, as places where people go to find themselves — the myth, the pernicious fiction, of cultural artifacts as unified, concordant, wise, stable, whole, victorious. Against the idea of insight. What awarenesses might Chopin's nocturnes instill, or should we speak of them calling up some clear-sighted oblivion? The assumption is that classical works serve as mirror to the reader/listener as a lesson in ethics of some kind. But how can music that is *morbid, pathological, unhealthy,* and *treacherous* exemplify and instill ethics? It's not as if Chopin's nocturnes revealed me to myself, or allowed me to "see my secret feelings reflected" (as the queer classicist Daniel Mendelsohn described his own eureka moment, courtesy of Mary Renault's historical fiction on Alexander the Great[25]). It's in this sense of the nocturnes and what we could call their "uninhabitability" that Frederick Niecks warned us away from the G major Nocturne, op. 39, no. 2, advising us "not to tarry too long in the treacherous atmosphere of this Capua — it bewitches and unmans."[26] (Yet we could stop to ask, Are we to be literally or metaphorically emasculated by these gently swaying 6/8 rhythms? Was Niecks thinking here of the Sirens who tempted Ulysses, or of the castration of Uranus?)

"… but there, for the grace of God, go I." If the queerness of Chopin's nocturnes takes on pathological aspects, I too seem misaligned in my worldly relations to the extent that I'm a lover of these pieces. Music genre becomes a mirror for social situatedness — or a symptom, or a model, and as an expressive vehicle, *one that's almost as powerful as language itself.* Since I have identified with these works for almost half a century, and have done so while connecting with their musical-stylistic twists, it would

25 Daniel Mendelssohn, "The American Boy: A Famous Author, a Young Reader, and a Life-Changing Correspondence," *The New Yorker,* January 7, 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/the-american-boy.

26 Frederick Niecks, *Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician,* vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Novello, 1902), 265.

seem I too have lurking, mystic, and unhealthy aspects, that I am given over to much the same disorder, violence, deceit, and no little amount of contradiction. And I find myself embracing these conditions.

* * *

feminine, almost hysterical

The nocturne is a "night piece" for solo piano, usually involving a long-spun *cantabile* line in the right hand over top a wide-spanning, broken harmonic accompaniment in the left. It's this simple generic formula that allows Chopin his explorations. His nocturnes are sometimes dismissed as his furthest excursion into the maligned category of salon music: heard as sentimental and steeped in aristocratic politesse, an importing of Italian *bel canto s*tyles from the opera house into the domestic space of the parlor. Pianist and author Jan Kleczynski condescendingly described Chopin's examples as "the most charming among the smaller jewels of his poetical casket […] models of elegance and of romantic sadness without affectation."[27]

The piano nocturne is individual yet generalizable as a genre, which is to say, the idiosyncratic work of one creator, yet cohesive enough as a group that any one of them shows a familial relation with the others. You couldn't say that of the symphony, the power ballad, the minuet, or the Scotch reel. And yet today the nocturne is a kind of "marked" genre, one that calls for explanation — you can't just plunk it in someone's ears without saying something about why it sounds the way it does, whether that be nocturnal, *voluptuous,* or *feminine, almost hysterical*. This is music that bears the burden of its genre in a way that Schumannesque "novelettes," "songs of morning" (and other such ad hoc

27 Jan Kleczynski, *The Works of Frederic Chopin, Their Proper Interpretation,* trans. Alfred Whittingham (William Reeves, 1913), 17, 14.

genres), not to mention institutionalized Beethovenian genres such as "symphonies" and "sonatas," do not.[28]

The genre of the piano nocturne was Chopin's brainchild. (The few that preceded and followed Chopin's twenty-one nocturnes, for instance, those by John Field, Carl Czerny, Gabriel Fauré, and Francis Poulenc, are essentially marginal glosses, footnotes — albeit often stunning in themselves — to Chopin's own contribution.) In fact, it's difficult to name another genre that had such a reciprocal connection with any one musician. Following the weird array of critical adjectives, I conclude that the nocturne became a queer genre in Chopin's hands. Maybe to distract from the real issues, earlier scholars have written on the nocturne as a gendered genre — using contemporary accounts to place the nocturne's affinities not with perversity or with gender play, but with female-ness, with "inversion" to use the old Freudian term. In *Chopin at the Boundaries,* musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg reviewed the nocturne's history as gendered feminine. This is most clearly manifest in the "nightly" aspect — the nocturne being by definition a night piece, regardless of whether that meant to be played or listened to after sundown — with night itself gendered as female (*die Nacht, la noche, la nuit, la notte*) on account of its alluring obscurity and sexy irrationality.[29] Chopin's own gender and sexuality aren't especially relevant here, since the individual composer's contribution to a piece represents only the innermost, most hermetic core of musical and social meanings that the piece accrues over time. But it is at least amusing to note here in passing that his often very amorous correspondence with male friends is a perennial issue, flaring up again in the popular press as recently as late 2020. (A

28 These must be the reasons the Nocturne in E♭ major, op. 9, no. 2, has become such common underscoring for so many recent Instagram videos — along with the piece's pallid and unconflicted "drawing-room" charm, foregrounded in a way that's unusual for Chopin.

29 Jeffrey Kallberg, "The Harmony of the Tea Table: Gender and Ideology in the Piano Nocturne," in *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 30–61.

recent CNN headline: "Was Chopin Gay? The Awkward Question in One of the EU's Worst Countries for LGBTQ rights."[30])

In his 1900 book on the composer, James Huneker did take pains to align Chopin the man with things feminine and nocturnal — and in doing so, did violence to (what have since become) sensitive gender constructs. At the same time, Huneker talked down the composer's unusually strong romantic attachments to other men, claiming these were a byproduct of the particular "poetic side" to his status as man of genius. "Chopin loved the night and its soft mysteries as much as did Robert Louis Stevenson, and his nocturnes are true night pieces, some with agitated, remorseful countenance, others seen in profile only, while many are whisperings at dusk," says Huneker. "Most of them are called feminine, a term psychologically false. The poetic side of men of genius is feminine, and in Chopin the feminine note was over emphasized — at times it was almost hysterical — particularly in these nocturnes."[31]

Going back further, musicologist Frederick Niecks also heard pathology in the "effeminate" aspect of the nocturnes. One has to wonder, as regards not only Niecks but a broader array of earlier writers, if Chopin's supposed effeminacy — both compositional and personal-behavioral — was a more discussable stand-in for his queerness (or his "hysteria"). Certainly, when Chopin's critics conflated womanliness and sickness, the stylistic censure seems to go well beyond sexism and gender bias. Niecks referred in his Chopin biography to "the faintness and sickliness to be found in not a few of the composer's pieces, especially in several of the nocturnes […] these dulcet, effeminate compositions illustrate only one side of the master's character." In one of the most celebrated of the set, the Nocturne in D♭ major, op. 27, no. 2, Niecks lauded "the finish and delicacy of execution, the flow of gentle feeling, lightly rippled by melancholy, and spreading

30 Rob Picheta, "Was Chopin Gay? The Awkward Question in One of the EU's Worst Countries for LGBTQ Rights," *CNN,* November 29, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/29/europe/chopin-sexuality-poland-lgbtq-debate-scli-intl/index.html.

31 Huneker, *Chopin,* 228.

out here and there in smooth expansiveness. But all this sweetness enervates; there is poison in it."[32]

Certain male interpretive musicians claimed to be, in essence, antidotes to these poisons. Already in 1880, Jan Kleczynski complained of "numbers of school-girls" who aimed to play Chopin "with that which is called *feeling,*" without being aware "that there is in it strong and noble matter which they debase and degrade *ad lib*."[33] When pianist Arthur Rubinstein recorded the nocturnes (as he did on three occasions, in 1935, 1949, and 1967), his robust interpretive approach was an attempt to purge his countryman's compositions of such feminine enervation, sickliness, and hysteria. He imagined himself a kind of vaccine against Chopinesque sexual inversion: in other words, against maleness confusing itself with femaleness. The liner notes for the 1967 RCA album claim that Rubinstein managed to cure this music and return it to a position of logic, power, and rational design. The writer of this liner note, no doubt working from the pianist's own thoughts, stops just short of saying that Rubinstein rescued Chopin from the insidious castration instituted by earlier pianists. Since Rubinstein was a notorious womanizer, the implication seems to be that femininity was for him a thing to be subjugated, rather than an aesthetic quality—a manner of beauty—to be prized and beheld. For him, gender and music both suffered a phallic lack:

> There is a romantic image connected with the piano music of Chopin, and especially with his nocturnes.… There is a great temptation to turn this wonderful music into a kind of romantic mush, to linger languidly over every turn of phrase until the music falls apart into a series of fleeting wisps of pink clouds. Artur Rubinstein was one of the great figures in putting that portion of the legend to rest. His playing of Chopin was a revelation. Most of all it revealed the strength, the richness of imagination, the sheer genius that lies embed-

32 Niecks, *Frederick Chopin,* 264.
33 Kleczynski, *The Works of Frederic Chopin,* 18.

> ded in the music itself. He gave Chopin stature, made him not merely the beloved panderer to the romantic tastes of the salon but a composer whose every measure was full of daring and powerful musical thrust.[34]

The mid-twentieth-century mindset that wanted a healthy, unpolluted, "powerfully thrusting" Chopin also tried to involve itself in the historical record, specifically in the composer's own correspondence. Shortly after World War II, some lustful (if persistently nonerotic and certainly nonromantic) letters were "discovered" that Chopin supposedly wrote to the countess Delfina Potocka, a piano student he was supposedly having sex with. In one of these letters, the pseudo-Chopin says great musical works are crafted from semen, and cumming only serves to usurp ejaculation of great works: "Let the creator, no matter who he is, get women out of his life, and the strength that builds up in his body will not go into his prick and balls, but will find its way to his brain and perhaps inspire him to create the most elevated works of art. Think, my sweetest Findeleczko, how much of that precious fluid and strength I have lost, ramming you to no purpose."[35]

Into such a potential morass of gender issues steps the recent Chopin pianist, wondering how to play the often forceful middle sections of the nocturnes, and what to make of the brutal contrasts they introduce. These sharp contrasts between the outer sections and the central, contrasting "B" music, these unbridgeable chasms, might or might not be a gender-related conflict. They could represent a Baudelairean battle between

34 Alan Rich's liner notes for *Rubinstein — Chopin — The Nocturnes,* RCA Victor Red Seal, 1968, LSC-7050. Along similar lines, in 2021 critic Stephen Plaistow said of Rubinstein's Chopin that he "conveyed the paramount importance of revealing the music's structural logic and the results were thrilling." Stephen Plaistow, "The 10 Greatest Chopin Pianists," *Gramophone,* May 8, 2021, https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/the-10-greatest-chopin-pianists.

35 Quoted by Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 606.

love and evil (or, as the poet would have it, the indissoluble link between them). Or one might explain these away as garden-variety representations of narrative conflict, but then of what kind? Especially considering the nocturne as a fairly modestly dimensioned domestic genre, the music of these "B" sections can seem emotionally oversize — nonfeminine, maybe? — in its brutal contradiction of the opening melos through intense amelodic figurations (activity that seems to "protest too much, methinks"). Such oppositions between "pink clouds" and "powerful musical thrust" seemed to have become a political issue already with Rubinstein. Alfred Cortot even heard this juxtaposition as a sign of Chopin's artistic maturation beyond the bourgeois, maybe feminine platitudes of early-century salon music. He wrote of the Nocturne in B major, op. 9, no. 3: "More developed and more feverishly agitated in character than the two other pieces of the same Opus, this one is the first to call on the type of dramatically contrasting middle section which we have previously discussed, and which represents Chopin's true contribution to the original 'Fieldian' conception of the Nocturne."[36] (At the same time, Cortot understated the sheer spite and terror in some of these middle sections when he spoke of the "interlude of contrasting character that appears in most of the Nocturnes […] to brighten with a more dramatic or impassioned tone the atmosphere of caressing sweetness and render intimacy."[37])

There are plenty of historical references to the piano nocturne as a feminine or wantonly feminized genre, and therefore presumably a genre needing an infusion of "thrust" (or a good ramming, same difference). There are also implications of a more ambiguous, less dualistic — or maybe less describable — aspect. The English critic J.W. Davison even heard Chopin going beyond the duality of male and female, or even beyond the human, in various genres. He found peculiarity across Chopin's output, a quality that could make his work queer in the

36 Alfred Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* vol. 1 (Editions Salabert, 1977), 13.
37 Ibid., 1:8.

broader sense. Entering this rarefied musical domain of this "poet of the piano," Davison sensed "a feeling as uncommon as beautiful; a treatment as original as felicitous; a melody and a harmony as new, fresh, vigorous and striking as they are utterly unexpected and out of the original track. In taking up one of the works of Chopin you are entering, as it were, a fairyland untrodden by human footsteps — a path hitherto unfrequented but by the great composer himself."[38]

And then there are the (for the most part) peaceful, even consolatory outcomes, which again separate Chopin's nocturnes from just about any other genre he worked in. Gide once said, "Chopin proposes, supposes, insinuates, seduces, persuades; he almost never asserts."[39] I'm most intrigued here by Gide's implausible opposition between seduction and assertion, since it's surely a matter of carnal reality that the person who initiates exchange is usually the one who stays in control, the partner who prescribes and then affirms. (Though Gide's sense of sexual control was no doubt entwined with his self-described pederastic taste for underage boys.) Be that as it may, Gide is accurate when it comes to Chopin's nocturnes, for if there's one quality that tends to separate them from more obviously rhetorical genres, it's their unwillingness to be assertive at the beginnings and endings. These pieces tend to start with gentle intimations, and end with extended, cocooning reassurances. But in the middle sections, anger and cruelty are sometimes given free reign. Honestly speaking, this imbalance and this sequencing of dynamics, quite unique to Chopin's nocturnes, shouldn't work: The listener shouldn't reach the ends of such conflicted pieces with the sense of peace and fulfillment that this composer somehow manages to effect.

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38 Quoted by Huneker, *Chopin,* 253.

39 André Gide, *Notes on Chopin,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (Philosophical Library, 1949), 24.

pain, melancholy, suffering, evil, sickness, harm, illness, sin, wrong

According to Huneker, Kleczynski, and Niecks, the beauties in Chopin's nocturnes are more often "poisonous" than sentimental, more synesthetic than stylistic or "musical." Again, this prefigures Baudelaire, even if no concrete comparisons are possible. (Are Chopin's agonizing dissonances, the quiet musical crimes of passion like those Baudelairean left-hand chords in measures 21 and 23, unlawfully beautiful in the way Baudelaire's amorous queens are of the "tuberose" nocturne in B major? The poet was censored for his accounts of lesbian sex; if some of Chopin's passages are nefarious enough to "bewitch and unman," shouldn't they have also been repressed? But untexted music can never be so explicit.) The 1900 Charles Meunier edition of *Les fleurs du mal* opened with a fearsome rendering of the carnivorous pitcher plant by Carlos Schwabe, while Richard Howard's 1982 translation had as its cover an image of wilting, or even rotting, lilies.[40] Ultimately, the subversions within Chopin's nocturnes end up questioning the whole idea of music as a necessarily poetic and aesthetic form. Does music have to sound good? Must it "play nice" to have listeners? Can it be both foul and flowery? Can it have a taste for flesh?

Chopin addressed his most intense love letters (maybe his *only* love letters, properly speaking) to a male friend at age nineteen. In this correspondence, he evokes his own amorous *fleurs du mal* by using coercive, fearful, kinky, and exotic persuasions to win over his dear Tytus: "I know my love for you is hopeless, and I only scribble this nonsense to make you love me more. […] My feelings for you have to seek out some superhuman means of forcing your heart to respond to them." In one letter, the composer confesses to be afraid of Tytus, but entreats him "to give me your lips, dearest lover. I'm convinced you still love me, and I am as scared of you as ever, like some sort of tyrant, I

40 Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal* (Charles Meunier, 1900), and Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard.

don't know why but I am scared." In another, he presses his contrary, would-be lover Tytus with mention of scented oils: "Even were I to anoint myself with fragrant oils from Byzantium, you would not embrace me — not unless forced to by magnetism. But there are forces in Nature! Today you will dream that you are embracing me!"[41] (My point here isn't to "show" that Chopin was sexually drawn to men, but to show how nonnormative, pathological, or even Baudelairean his romantic perspective was regardless of his specific attractions, and regardless of his tender age. A twenty-first-century theorist of gender and sexuality would use the term "object choice" here in order to de-emphasize even further the question of a this-or-that "orientation.")

The queerness of some of the nocturnes is already audible in their beginnings, before any narrative can assert itself. Even right off, in the first four bars of a few of these pieces, we encounter a mood or mindset that is so deeply melancholic — the melos suffused with such a dark, leaden gray — that it implies some cursed birthright. The closest comparison would be Schubert's despondent, black-as-pitch late style. (Music where the moroseness, if it can be causally connected to anything, is attributed to that composer's syphilitic illnesses and conflicted sexuality.) The Nocturne in C# minor, op. 27, no. 1, starts in such a mood of near-catatonic dejection that it's difficult to imagine the piece progressing anywhere. Cortot, equipped with his arsenal of purple prose and anthropomorphic terms, describes the opening thus:

> Over the slow, almost stagnant undulations of a bass of monotonous rhythm and muffled sonorities, there arises, mournful and as if exhausted by excess of suffering, the wail of a melody apparently unable to detach itself from the new

41 Quoted by Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin,* 151, 152. Whereas Chopin scholars usually try one method or another to deflect attention from the composer's passionate letters to Tytus, Walker tries several evasions. A certain aimless desperation still surfaces in his conclusion: "These are sentiments that should more properly [N.B.] have been addressed to Konstancja [Gladkowska], but were instead directed toward Tytus."

> notes by which it attempts to express its inconsolable grief. The music here, with inexpressive power, suggests, in a way that no words could define, an atmosphere of morbidity and a feeling of utter defeat which weigh heavily on these first lines, whose bruised inflections seem to question a horizon from which hope and sweetness are forever banished.[42]

In a romantic narrative, say that of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Franz Liszt's tone-poem *Tasso Lamento e Trionfo,* such a desolate "excess of suffering" would eventually give way to fulfillment. Bourgeois tastes dissuaded chaos, bitterness, and madness from getting the upper hand. But the personas evoked by Baudelaire and by Chopin-via-Cortot are less melancholy or ill-fated protagonists than figures who have been damned and therefore deprived of redemption before the fact: the *poète maudit,* as the French Symbolists put it. (Cortot's dark picture of this opening music suggests Baudelaire's portrayal of a sun more somber than night itself, in "Spleen IV" from *Les fleurs du mal:* "When skies are low and heavy as a lid / over the mind tormented by disgust, / and hidden in the gloom the sun pours down / on us a daylight dingier than the dark."[43]) Chopin leads to a perturbed middle section that briefly hints at contrasting ideas of victory before the music exhausts itself in a tense recitative and then returns to the opening A material. Cortot instructs the pianist, at this rearrival here at tempo I: "The first theme should return accompanied by the same expressive qualities as before. If anything, it should now, as a contrast to the impetuous drive of the middle section, reveal an even bleaker outlook and an even keener grief, somewhat like the Arioso of Beethoven's Op. 110, when it returns as a color-drained echo of its first appearance."[44] After that, an unexpectedly long coda ends the nocturne on a note of quiet consolation, beginning *calando* — in a process of both quieting and slowing down.

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42 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 40.

43 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 76.

44 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 45.

Kleczynski heard an even darker fate in the opening of Chopin's same C# minor Nocturne, invoking a murder victim hidden under dark and exotic waters: "The Nocturne in C sharp minor appears to me to be the description of a calm night at Venice, where, after a scene of murder, the sea closes over a corpse, and continues to serve as a mirror to the moonlight."[45] In this scenario, there is no protagonist or indeed any human agency whatsoever. Note that Kleczynski's "murder" is not explained, narrated, avenged, or even noticed. The only powers at work here — the only forces that will presumably shape the Venetian tale, such as it is — are the tides, gravity, and the natural processes that follow a watery death.

Nineteenth-century European composers traced passages of the soul in their instrumental pieces, representing their "protagonist" in a theme that would — in quasi-anthropomorphic fashion — be made to undergo tribulations and transformations. And so instrumental pieces after Beethoven often became about themes in this new, quasi-programmatic way. "In musical thought since Beethoven," says music theorist Scott Burnham, "themes and motives have often been conceptualized as dramatic protagonists. This interpretive reflex provides a mode of identity with the theme, a way to be present in the musical experience."[46] Two early examples were the gradually actualized theme in the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony and the recurring *idée fixe* theme in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. Such a musical passage isn't modeled on a flesh and blood person, certainly not on the composer themself. Rather, the subject is — like a protagonist in fiction, such as the courageous Jane Eyre or the suffering Raskolnikov — a characterized abstraction that we are invited to latch onto and empathize with.

And so the thematic protagonist could be another character besides the author. Berlioz's *idée fixe* theme, for instance, symbolizes the artist's elusive and haunting beloved. The main difference between a protagonist in music and in fiction is that the

45 Kleczynski, *The Works of Frederic Chopin,* 15.
46 Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 8–9.

former can't speak, can't relay their intentions, specific emotions, and detailed experiences. Rather, musical protagonists intimate matters through the nondenotative, nonsubstantive expressive qualities of music: through major–minor shifts, harmonic and rhythmic changes, alterations in tone color and melodic contour, and so on. Berlioz wrote of his lovesick symphony:

> Through an odd whim, whenever the beloved image appears before mind's eye of the artist it is linked with a musical thought whose character, passionate but at the same time noble and shy, he finds similar to the one he attributes to his beloved, in which he recognizes a certain quality of passion, but endowed with the nobility and shyness which he credits to the object of his love. This melodic image and the model it reflects pursue him incessantly like a double *idée fixe*.[47]

* * *

dream voices, promising consolation and a hereafter

Most of Chopin's nocturnes trace such a character's trajectory, and end in an atmosphere of transfiguration (or at least an abatement of conflict) that is quite unique to these pieces. No other piano works from this time conclude so predictably. By contrast, Chopin's waltzes, mazurkas, and polonaises tend to end by returning to their starting music; his preludes enact a fragmentation aesthetic; his big, overtly narrative pieces such as the ballades and scherzos play out protagonists' fates of doom and come-uppance. To compare the nocturnes with other piano character-piece groups of medium length — such as, say, Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* or Schumann's *Noveletten* — Chopin's sharp oppositions, between tuneful serenity and high tension followed then by instinctive reconciliation, are all the more

47 Hector Berlioz, *Fantastic Symphony: An Authoritative Score; Historical Background; Analysis; Views and Comments,* ed. Edward T. Cone (W.W. Norton, 1971), 23.

striking. Once again, What is actually happening in these strong juxtapositions? Do these contrasts represent different variants of the same sort of cultural-conceptual dualisms, or are they attempts to undercut any such expectations? Of course, this process is different (in at least some respects) from one piece to another. According to Cortot, the typical passage in Chopin's nocturnes is from "caressing sweetness" to a position of "passion" and "agitation," and then finally to something else yet again. Such a sequence could be imitating a sexual tryst. In any event, Chopin's trajectories can sound more convoluted and ambiguous than the normalized *assertion → conflict → resolution* heard in other compositions of the time. (Robert Schumann, for one, was much more interested in fast, jesting codas and in the structural punning typical of schematized rondo forms.)

We can't locate a model that applies to all Chopin's nocturnes, of course, but one that becomes useful is the ambiguous rite of passage traced in the three "beauties" sections of the *spleen et idéal* portion of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*. Here the poet recollects his affairs with three women (now commonly known as the "White Venus," "Black Venus," and "Green Venus"), and his own psychic motion from love and admiring infatuation, to disillusionment and horror and suffering, to some kind of consolation through ruminations on death, fate, and art, where the original sense of desire returns but now changed and often darkened. The most basic idea would be desire's fragility, the necessity of its suffering change. I've selected a few nonadjacent stanzas from the first of Baudelaire's three affairs to try and give a sense of such a progression:

(20)
For there she lay on the couch, allowing herself
to be adored, a secret smile indulging
the deep and tenacious currents of my love
which rose against her body like a tide.

(26)
You'd sleep with anyone at all, you slut!

(A clue to just how bored you are and just
how brutal boredom makes your soul.) To keep
your teeth incisive for this singular Sport,
you claim a daily ration of… fresh hearts!

(28)
Even when she walks she seems to dance!
Her garments writhe and glisten like long snakes
obedient to the rhythm of the wands
by which a fakir wakens them to grace.

(30)
Yes, you will come to this, my queen,
after the sacraments,
when you rot underground
among the bones already there.

(38)
Mother of memories, absolute mistress,
in you my pleasure is my only task:
not to forget the form of a caress,
the dying fire and the alluring dark-
mother of memories, absolute mistress![48]

Baudelaire writes in the first person, and his poetic voice shifts depending on his ever-changing psychic relation with his beloved. He shows us how terms of love can become dark and bitter when the love is stymied, frustrated, betrayed, unrequited, projected, or fetishistic. And then it becomes clear how, over the centuries, the ostensible "poetic" tone at the surface — the lyrical demeanor, the elegant mechanics of the prosody — has blinded readers to Baudelaire's darker tensions. And yet the boundaries between these moods stay porous, becoming clear only when the lover arrives at one-word exclamations. Even when the poet manages to return to loving and the poem enters

48 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 26, 32, 33, 36, 41.

a state of would-be-resolution, the desired is often blighted by some disease, sin, morbidity, or suspicion.

Les fleurs du mal could be summarized more generally by saying that Baudelairean love is too deep, complex, or even damaged a thing to be consigned to the amorous-narrative conventions of happiness, fulfillment, and normalcy. Whereas Robert Burns's song lyric indulged in the simile that "My luve is like a red red rose / That's newly sprung in june; / O my Luve's like the melodie / That's sweetly play'd in tune," Baudelaire's flower is inseparable from the "eroded swamp" that is his own love. I think what Baudelaire is trying to say is that when love demands absolute-ness, because it's been denied or deflected or shamed in the past, such an aggrandized need for authenticity can become brutality in the realm of words or in dominions of the flesh. In that sense, expressing affection and attraction can turn into a kind of revenge for the many times of denial. As such, queer desire can become conflicted, even self-contradictory.

It's a cliché to liken Chopin's nocturnes to opera arias. (British pianist Stephen Hough declares outright that Chopin's twenty-one pieces constitute a "corpus of some of the finest operatic arias ever written."[49] Yet one would expect Hough, as a queer artist of real sensitivity, to be privy to Chopin's Baudelairean secrets.) Yes, the style of Italian *bel canto* vocality infuses these piano pieces; the cantabile melodic line (as inspired by specific singers in specific Bellini operas) floating over a rudimentary broken-chord accompaniment, suffused with the sort of concentrated emotion that suggests stageworthy intrigue, beauty, and heartbreak. But at the same time, the Baudelairean toxins of the nocturnes are too twisted, dark, and insinuating — often too strange and elusive, and susceptible to misinterpretation — to work in the theater. Much more operatic, at least in terms of expressing unpoisoned or as it were non-fecal love, are the straightforwardly beautiful slow movements of Chopin's First and Second Piano Concertos. These are pianistic "operatic

49 Stephen Hough, liner note for *Chopin Nocturnes* (Hyperion Records, 2021), 3, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/68351-B.pdf.

arias" of a much more conventional, even orthodox, kind. Chopin wrote them when he was only nineteen, and said privately that the Adagio of the Concerto in F minor was a romance, inspired by his affection for his fellow music student Konstancja Gladkowska: "It is perhaps my misfortune that I have already found my ideal, whom I have served faithfully for six months, though without saying a word to her about my feelings."[50] (This one youthful confession is often cited by historians, but it stands as the rare — maybe only — evidence that the composer had an affectionately romantic interest in women. His later relationship with George Sand was consistently unsolicitous, competitive, even contentious. But then Chopin is actually clichéd and unimaginative in the love he evokes in his Konstancja letter. The emotions sound scripted and pro forma. What paramour would want to be *served* in such *faithful* silence, when they could instead be lured onto the sheets by "fragrant oils from Byzantium," that medieval center of perfumist arts?)

These concerto slow movements follow amorous musical normalcies, but this is less a matter of Chopin's youthfulness than it is of the concerto's role as a public genre — involving dozens of musicians rather than just one. Contrast these slow movements with a nocturne that Chopin penned at about the same time. The F major, op. 15, no.1, is one of the most sharply contrasted of Chopin's nocturnes, and it seems to encompass and compartmentalize a sheer, diametric opposition between love and evil, flowers and shit. Here gently rocking *andante cantabile* material played *piano* and *semplice e tranquillo* is brutally interrupted (at measure 25) by naggingly fluttering and restless *con fuoco* music in the tonic minor. Cortot says this opposition represents a state of "dreamy serenity" being interrupted by a "passionate storm," and he describes this juxtaposition as an arbitrary one, showing how "the apparently calm heart may also experience unforeseen tempests."[51] Making this interruption even more cruel is Chopin's premature repetition of it (at

50 Quoted by Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin,* 149.
51 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 23.

measure 37), a resurfacing that not only sounds "early" but also at first literal; betrayal can certainly be suffered more than once, the message seems to be, and if you're enough of a sinner, the torment will revisit you unchanged. The faded, soft-focus, non-Byzantine, completely nonvindictive emotions of Chopin's concertos pale in comparison to this.

I'd like to expand our range of specific nocturne emotion-narratives by offering Cortot's other large-scale juxtaposition-sequences in terms of (1) "melancholy," "plaintive meditation" and "uncontrollable nostalgia" submitting to "a climate of religious music" that is marked by "a fervent succession of devout chords" and then, to end, not "a soothing conclusion" but rather "the feeling of a doubt that persists and of a question that remains unanswered" (op. 37, no. 1); (2) "inconsolable grief" giving way to "more animated exaltation" and then, with the return of the opening music, "an even bleaker outlook and an even keener grief" (op. 27, no. 1); (3) a "broad cantilena" that gives way to a "palpitating character" and "internal animation" (op. 32, no. 2); and (4) "a dream of eternal peace" followed by "disappointed hopes, unrealized aspirations, dreams unfulfilled, all the disturbances of the past which rise up in the repentant soul" and then in the last page "profound assuagement, and a kind of inner acceptance" and then at the close "a feeling of deepest peace" (op. 62, no. 2).[52]

Stranger yet than such impetuously contrasting middle sections in the nocturnes are the two middle sections written in a quiet, homophonic style redolent of vocal church polyphony — an idiom that Cortot heard as Protestant rather than Catholic, because it sounds like four-part hymn settings. This contrasting secondary style of the piece could show the protagonist turning to faith as a refuge from desire. Cortot heard them as expressions of "contrition and fervor." Since Chopin's nocturnes often take on aspects of the nocturnal serenade of one's beloved — a scenario where this composer's gift for melody finds a naturally suited home — Chopin's allusions to religious

52 Ibid., 1, 2, passim.

music could suggest taking refuge from sin and damnation in the church's sanctuary. This would be a contrast with Baudelaire, who invoked God spitefully as a cruel and unjust creator: "Thanks be to God, Who gives us suffering / as sacred remedy for all our sins."[53] Similarly, scholars have remarked on Baudelaire's archaic — or maybe again ironic — references to madness, evil, Satan, and the devil.

The upshot of all this is that Chopin's nocturnes tend to deal in intense amorous feelings — Cortot says at one point that the protagonist written into the nocturnes is a lover, as would agree with their serenade character. And these romantic emotions either start off pained or are beset by crisis, and then usually end in some manner of resolution — in comfort, oblivion, peacefulness of outcome. I'm sure one reason I latched onto these wordless pieces while in my teens is that I intuited them as emotional road maps or narratives of how such sequences can take place. From the start, I heard them as emotional fables from a kindred spirit. How to navigate a painful and maybe "cursed" love that wouldn't be accepted, the lust and jealousy and doubts, but finding my way back to besotted and unrequited worship?

Queer youth need some idea of their place in a larger narrative, some notion of how things will turn out. (This is the question the American "It Gets Better" media campaign tried to answer.) Chopin's nocturnes, though often enigmatic and violently conflicted, ultimately offer a range of conclusions that are heartening but not deceitful — not simplistic or happy in a storybook sense. One of the most consoling endings actually caps off the shadowy C♯ minor, op. 27, no. 1 — the nocturne that caused Kleczynski to envision the Venetian sea "closing over a corpse." In the ending to this piece, two melodic voices intertwine in beautiful close harmony, sounding like two sopranos quietly duetting at the calm close of an operatic scena. In his edition of the music, Cortot describes this peaceful homecoming to a prolonged C♯ major harmony as "the first soothing note sounded by this Nocturne: dream voices, promising consolation

53 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 12.

and a hereafter, float down from the caressing sonorities of this extraordinary ending in major."[54] Chopin's craft with such endings amounts to a rare art, closures that are consolatory but also not inevitable and not immanent, endings that have no right to occur and don't have the compensating forcefulness that suggests a feat of transcendence over difficult odds. At the close of one of his *spleen et idéal* poems, a lament over the physical ugliness of modern humanity, Baudelaire strikes a tone of "arbitrary consolation" that's similar to Chopin's. The unwarranted succor arrives here not in the form of a rescue or a grand deed, but as a short paean to youth, a quick closing ode to fresh and eternal innocence that takes comfort in airy metaphors:

> (5) youth we worship still,
> its frank expression, its untroubled brow,
> its eyes as bright as water; sacred youth
> that shares — unconscious as a singing bird,
> a flower, or the blue sky's radiance —
> its song, its scent, its irresistible warmth![55]

If a theme and harmonic area can musically embody the listener's self-identity — a musical metaphor to be presumed of many noted European writers of sonata forms in the nineteenth century, starting with Beethoven and his *Eroica* — then we need to listen to the music's ways of moving away from and back toward such areas. Susan McClary has discussed the form of the second movement of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, proceeding under the assumption — reached both on biographical and musical grounds — that the composer was queer. Schubert's movement is different from the "nonqueer" norm in basic ways; McClary contrasts Schubert's structure with "the more standard model in which a self strives to define identity through the consolidation of ego boundaries. Instead, each of several moments within [Schubert's] opening theme becomes a pretext for deflec-

54 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 46.
55 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 16.

tion and exploration: the passage drifts through time by means of casual, always pleasurable pivots."[56] The means of "deflection and exploration" here are surprising or uncommon harmonic shifts, especially those that subvert the stronger acoustic relations between chords: harmonic relation by fifth, for instance between subdominant (IV), dominant (V), and tonic (I) sonorities. Voice-leading is also important, to the degree that chromatic (half-step) motion is followed and the piece proceeds through enharmonic relations (notes that are respelled to change their note-identity, such as moving from C♯ to D♭). "The second movement of the 'Unfinished' appears to drift freely through enharmonic and oblique modulations, rather than establishing a clear tonic and pursuing a dynamic sequence of modulations; identities are easily shed, exchanged, fused, and reestablished, as in the magical pivot between E and A♭ major near the end," writes McClary.[57]

Among Chopin's nocturnes, I would say the most "deflective, explorative, drifting, and pleasurable" music — in McClary's sense — is found in the D♭ major, op. 27, no. 2. The protagonist-lover's theme here is languorous and shape-shifting, redolent not so much of the deathly passionate (Nordic) lovers in Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde,* as the yearning Asiatic maiden in Alexander Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony* when she sings (in German translation) Rabindranath Tagore's lines "Speak to me, my love! / Tell me in words what you sang. / The night is dark. / The stars are lost in clouds." Chopin's chromatic chords and effortless harmonic shifts — slyly allowing single, unchanging notes in the melody to take on different meanings within different harmonies — help instill a sense of impassive longing. In his piano sets, Schumann tends to underline recaps of main themes — a structural marker he likes so much in his own piano character pieces that he stresses the literalness of return. In his

56 Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (Routledge, 1994), 215.

57 Ibid., 223.

"Aufschwung" op. 12, Schumann even abbreviates the material in order to emphasize the mechanism of recall, the hard slap of unvaried recognition: Here it is! here it is again! and again, and yet again! and again, now even sooner than before!

Chopin, on the other hand, tucks into the restatement of his languorous main theme in the D♭ major Nocturne with such consummate detachment and de-emphasis that the listener doesn't realize the return until they're halfway into it. (Cortot tells the pianist to play this thematic return lightly and nonchalantly, instructing that "the first twelve measures of this repetition should, rather like caresses in sound, evoke the grazing touch of quivering wings."[58]) When the theme is stated for the third time, it appears loudly and exultantly, only to come to rest emphatically on an unstable, dissonant note that sounds like a mistake until it's repeated (in a new harmonic context, and now quietly!) in the next bar. There follows another consolatory coda in a major key, marked *dolcissimo* (very sweetly). Here the sighing, downward-drifting chromatic descents in both hands imbue this restfulness with a hint of eroticism. (Rubinstein remembered capitalizing on their aphrodisiac properties during an intimate performance one evening in Paris in 1906: "'What will you play?' she asked, putting a vase with dark red roses on the side of the piano stand. 'Something of Chopin,' and I began to play the long D♭ Nocturne as though in a trance, inspired by her beauty. […] When I reached the coda with its pianissimo descending sighs, the Countess, suddenly, leaned forward close to me and, covered by the open stand and the flowers, kissed my mouth with a wild passion."[59])

It's not entirely clear what McClary means, musically speaking, when she mentions "identities [that] are easily shed, exchanged, fused, and reestablished" — except to say that Schubert's themes lack "ego" by appearing amenable, fluid, and quietly adventurous. By seeming oriented to quiet and changeable pleasures. By being free of rigidly gendered, patriarchal notions

58 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 49.

59 Arthur Rubinstein, *My Young Years* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 198.

of "how one should appear to be." Chopin's themes in his nocturnes can be more astonishingly changeable yet, to the point where the constant variation of material — often through the rich embroidery of melodic ornaments — seems restless and even promiscuous. In the Nocturne in B major, op. 9, no. 3, one of the most popular pieces of the set, Chopin repeats and adjusts the opening melody many times (measures 1, 9, 21, 29, 132, and 140) at a relatively quick Allegretto tempo. This is his own version of a musical *idée fixe,* created at the same time as Berlioz's, but so kaleidoscopic and changeable that variation becomes the all-suffusing lingua franca, the norm. In such a climate of shifting and drifting identity, a musical idea brought back without decorative change would have been shocking. And then there is the chromatic "slippage" in the melody, half steps all-pervasive right off in the first four measures — further establishing the listener's impression of a piece of music that is constantly pleasured and repleasured by its own pliancy, lubriciousness, and bliss. But it sounds like a private, eavesdropped-upon pleasure, not one created for the listener's benefit. Unlike the Berlioz, the repetitiveness in this nocturne has a psychological rather than a thematic "musical" effect. Chopin seems to emphasize the salient terms in the American Psychological Association's definition of *idée fixe*: firmly held, irrational, delusional, obsessive, and dissociated from conscious action.[60] Yet the theme is reticent and exquisite, host to score markings such as *scherzando* (playful), *leggierissimo* (very lightly), *espressivo* (expressively), and *dolcissimo* (very sweetly).

* * *

fascinatingly inevitable; singing and sighing and crying

A pervasive flexibility of musical time is the queerest, most unique aspect of Chopin's nocturnes, and the aspect that has

60 A*PA Dictionary of Psychology,* s.v. "idée fixe," https://dictionary.apa.org/idee-fixe.

queered me the most personally and indeed bodily. Musicians speak of *tempo rubato,* a practice of "stolen time" where one portion of the measure is slowed down, but with a mind to "giving back" the time thus "stolen" by then speeding up elsewhere. These are temporal stretchings back and forth for the purpose of expression, and they are for the most part not written in the score. They pianist uses them to point the listener to unexpected events and to manipulate their sense of musical satisfaction. A pianist who knows the Chopin idiom will flex the pulse according to a more or less constant ebb and flow. A musician's sense of *rubato* is the closest thing to a strand of their interpretive-musical DNA; it is an expressive temporal freedom that is indefinable, unteachable, personal, and indispensable. This flexibility of time is like the breath control exerted by a singer and, as with a vocalist, pianists can take the listeners' breath away in Chopin with points of unexpected hesitation, emphasis, and pushing ahead.

Rubato creates an alternate and highly personalized sense of time in both player and listener. It is the closest thing we musicians have to the sound of nonconformity, and I like to think a musician's rubato can tell me what they would be like in bed — it shows a person's spontaneity and responsiveness to the moment, their sensitivity to smaller, give-and-take details of sensation and pleasure. The temporal expressiveness of rubato contravenes "rules," both musical and of the body: the idea of a healthy, steady pulse and breath rate; the vaguely frightening notion of entrainment, where consistent rhythmic action pulls the listener in as co-participant in the musical experience; and the concept of the musical piece as a rational linear and cumulative process. Marches observe strict rhythm and meter, and are instruments of indoctrinated cooperation, to enforce conformity in the military, for example. (Note the common expression that a person who doesn't follow the crowd is said to "march to a different drummer," and not "dance to an alternate violinist" or "stroll to another guitarist.") Social cohesion demands regularity, while rubato is the style of singularity. In one of his journal entries, that arch-nonconformist Henry David Thoreau described his aversion to "the machinery of modern society" in

temporal terms, and offered the confession: "I am differently timed."[61] Rubato is, in a real physical sense, a rhythmic nonposture for the single musician; it simply isn't possible with ensembles and their necessary conformity of doubling lines of music and synchronizing everything together, yet through intense rehearsal the conductors Willem Mengelberg and Andre Kostelanetz managed a vague semblance of rubato with their own orchestras. In any case, rubato tends to vary from one interpreter to another. There are many ways to be flexible, but far fewer ways to be strict.

And then there's the matter of dynamics: Chopin rubato goes hand in hand with quiet volume levels, such that its mode of expression can sound more like a form of musical confession within a musical style that can suggest self-doubt. Those passages in the nocturnes that eschew rubato are typically those that get big and public and chordal (or maybe less "poisoned" or "effeminate"), like the wave of loud, octave-laden rhetoric that erupts in the middle of the C minor Nocturne, op. 48, no. 1. In such a passage, the private is made public. We know that Chopin envied Liszt's way of playing his own Études and also his ability as a pianist to project in larger public spaces, and in the middle section of this C minor Nocturne Chopin seems to be finding unaccustomed reservoirs of physical strength and trying on a Lisztian musical persona.

Flexible and personalized Chopinesque time, infused so early and so often in my own life, instilled a sense of temporal difference and a strong and lasting distaste for musical strictness and consistency. Growing up with Chopin's nocturnes from the records by Ingrid Haebler and by Tamás Vásáry, I came to dislike music that is monometric. Moreover, loud and rigid rhythmic insistence came to symbolize just about everything I hated in the world. It was dogma made audible. I was moved to think that such a rubato-apprised "lack" of rhythm can in fact be a

61 Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal II (1850–September 15, 1851),* ed. Bradford Torrey (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906), 316.

metonymy for an alternate way of life, a way of stepping aside from the big and loud world, and in itself a living alternative; a way of stepping back from all of humanity's noisy marching and chanting, and its mindless reproduction. (I think it was James Brown who rescued me from this misconception. Sometime in the 1990s his infectious grooves forced a rethink of my crude equivalences. His tracks, the closing pages of some Mahler symphonies, and Glenn Gould's performances of Bach taught me that "apparent" rigidity could be the more sanguine reality of joy penting up and pushing for release.)

At first I thought it absurd to say that a steady (or just unrelenting?) musical pulse could symbolize normativity, or heterosexuality more narrowly — even if only in identity-political terms. But then I came across a comment on Rubinstein's third nocturne recording where a critic praised the "fascinating inevitability" of the pianist's rubato — a pianist who didn't advocate Chopin as a "panderer to romanticism," remember, but who presented him as "a composer whose every measure was full of daring and powerful musical thrust."[62] An intriguing choice of words, from this particular critic, that with his rubato Rubinstein demonstrated expressive *inevitability*. Yes, marriage and children are inevitable. But whatever can "inevitability" mean in musically expressive terms? The term is vague, which means it must be political. Presumably it suggests the opposite of qualities this same critic disliked in other pianists: *self-indulgence, mannerism, arbitrariness, contrivance, inflexibility,* and *premeditation.* Hearing Claudio Arrau's recording of the Chopin Preludes, the same critic received that pianist with ambivalence: "His Preludes appear to spring from an inner conviction, even if the outer results will not be universally liked."[63] Inevitability has a meaning similar to immanence — the condition of being ordained, inherent, and presumed. And if queerness advances any one principle, it is a murderous opposition to

62 Ivan March, ed., *Penguin Stereo Record Guide,* 2nd ed. (Penguin Books, 1977), 279.

63 Ibid., 281.

immanence. Short-circuiting immanence is the main vocation of drag queens, ass-bandits, leather daddies, bondage masters, and visionary "cursed poets" alike.

An inevitable reading is a reading done according to agreed-upon rules — it is an interpretation that *springs directly from "the music,"* and one that strives to reach the idealistic plane of *sheer perfection.* I associate inevitability with immanence and conformity, in the religious and social senses that a higher presence resides unseen in everything ("God's presence is immanent"), and that people are social creatures ("society is an attempt to counter our lack of immanence as human beings"). Death is inevitable; love and sex are not. All this starts sounding like a vein of North Atlantic conservatism that came about in response to the 1960s political revolts. I imagine the music critic I'm quoting was the same generation as my father, who liked to put down civil rights and antiwar activists as "revolutionaries" and "radicals," as ungrateful people who just needed to get with the program like all the rest of us. By this traditionalist way of thinking, "radicals" were people who needed to wise up to "the way the world works" and just learn — for everyone's sake — some respect for the broader social fabric.

Rubinstein's "radical" opposite in matters of Chopin rubato was Ivan Moravec, a pianist who scoped out any excuse to slow down or speed up when he played the nocturnes, any harmonic niche deep enough to tarry and luxuriate in. If the roses were gifted with even the slightest sweetness, he stopped to smell them. Nothing was inevitable or taken for granted in Moravec's interpretations, and arbitrariness was a delightful and constant danger. One critic wrote the following after auditioning Moravec's 1965 recording of the nocturnes, connecting the pianist's liquid tone to his flexibility in phrasing, all under the banners of beauty and devotion:

> Moravec was incapable of playing a note, any note, that was anything less than beautiful — not just superficially beautiful but truly beautiful, bone deep, soul deep, "truth is beauty and beauty truth" beautiful. And when he strings each note, each

> lustrous pearl of a note, into phrases which sing and sigh and cry, each phrase becomes more beautiful even than each individual note. And when each phrase is joined in bliss with harmony, and then form, and then into a single luminous whole, then each work becomes an act of love.[64]

Looking back at the op. 62, no. 1 "tuberose" Nocturne itself, we find that it opens with a luxurious upward yawn of a rolled secondary dominant chord, resolving to a seventh chord on the dominant F#, and then finally a melody in the main key. This opening, a free or even arhythmic flourish that each pianist will render individually, represents an example of written-out rubato. (Similar ambiguity marks the beginning of the Nocturne in F# minor, op. 48, no. 2, but in that case the rhythm will depend more on the individual performer.) Rubinstein plays the opening upward roll of the "tuberose" as a gradual slow-down, and then doesn't draw out the half-note rest or draw much attention to the sensual possibilities implicit in the direction *dolce legato* (sweetly and smoothly connected) at the start of the actual melody in measure three. Moravec is less "inevitable," more obviously beautiful and loving, with Chopin's opening gambit: He *speeds up* across the opening chord, makes the next harmony sound more like a cadence by taking all the time in the world for the half rest (rests can be beautiful too, he reminds us, but Rubinstein seems intimidated by them), and then interpreting *dolce legato* to mean tender to the verge of inaudibility. The only points where Rubinstein really takes his time are at *da capo* returns of opening material; in those cases, his highly selective flexibility serves to make the forms of the pieces easier to hear.

Rubato in the Chopinesque sense should sound like a constant renegotiation of the music's proceeding, of its very ability to proceed. This idea of taking nothing for granted — What will this moment of acceleration bring? Maybe we're about to have a surprise, mediant-related key? Or will this measure even finish?

64 James Leonard, "Chopin: Nocturnes Review," *Allmusic.com,* https://www.allmusic.com/album/chopin-nocturnes-mw0001515960.

Should we just stop right here? — becomes a constant prolongation of desire, a refusal of satiation. The glory of queer desire is its unscriptedness, its lack of societal pragmatic utility. It acts out a fear of finishing and of emptying out its supplies of pleasure. It knows the adoring sadism of bringing a partner to the edge again and again, only then to step back. Flexibility in the act precludes the fear that resides in the old French poetic expression for orgasm — *la petite mort,* "the little death" — where the end of desire becomes the end of life.

* * *

a certain anguished, pleading intensity

I did eventually move from rumination to actual music-making, and tried to put these Chopinesque expressive obsessions into practice. The time had come for performance — in both the musical and sociosexual senses, for performing the written musical text and the unwritten text of who I was. To use Judith Butler's terms, there was an immanent need for me to test my belief in the fantasy of my own sociosexual performance: "In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*."[65] My playing Chopin in public for the first (and, in retrospect, probably last) time at the age of twenty, was a test of my own "compelling illusions." My college degree required at least a year of one-on-one instruction with a piano professor and now, after a semester of lessons, this was my obligatory appearance in front of the combined studio classes — about fifty fellow students. When the Nocturne in C♯ minor, op. 27, no. 1,

65 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre,* ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 271.

became a basis for my actions that afternoon, it was not only a moment of musical responsibility. It was also a test of — what to call it? — personal and social viability. It was the first time I'd performed anything — or undertaken anything, for that matter — in front of more than six people.

When I performed the nocturne that April day, I was a debutante at the ball — nervously anticipating my time on the dance floor, my formal moment of conjoined pleasure, expressiveness, and vulnerability. (All that was missing was a corsage and the standard-issue white gown.) Like a proper debutante, I was still a virgin. And so, this was the first time for me to steer my way through a paradigmatic but wordless progression hinging on desire, doubt, pleasure, and fulfillment. I was responsible — onstage and in real time — for forging a spiritually volatile succession of beginning, middle, and end into a linear experience that made sense for myself and for others. Not only were these extreme soul-states of *flowers* and *shit, idéal* and *spleen* possible problems in themselves, getting through a predicated sequence of them was a challenge beyond simpler questions of musicality. In a real way, being able to navigate this passage from yearning to tumult to satisfaction would be preparation for the genuine thing — for adult life.

As a gayboy, I felt an overwhelming need to display skill, strength, and wherewithal to people. But when I was preparing for this Chopin debut, the first thing I realized was the queerness that was my own lack of technique. The other students seemed perfectly capable of playing rapid and even scales, and getting through Mozart movements without pepperings of wrong notes. Chopin's music was changing before my eyes. I now saw it as music that often hides its alterities and alienations under a shiny, well-oiled, glittering — even counterbalancing? — façade of technical proficiency. Finger brilliance is its way of assimilation, as Baudelaire's brilliant syntax and versification are his: "Conceive me as a dream of stone: / my breast, where mortals come to grief, / is made to prompt all poets' love, / mute and

noble as matter itself."[66] The Chopin pianist who knows ease and adeptness is like the active lover, an unworried body that does as it's asked, leading to satisfaction in the self and in their place in the world. The person plays a lovely waltz, laughs with their admiring confreres, and then pecks their sexual partner on the cheek as a promise of things to come — it all fits into a smooth, happy show of ability. Jack Halberstam has written on "the queer art of failure": "Capitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption."[67]

One thing Chopin did — and he was surpassed in this only by Liszt — was to make clear the connections between musical virtuosity and sexual prowess. If sex is an act of human instrumentality — the body, used for purposes of pleasure and fulfillment, sometimes without thought, in a skill that is entirely subsumed within the act itself — then performing sex and performing music are difficult to tell apart. Maybe I was becoming disenchanted with my dear Chopin: How can subversive emotions and alterity survive selling out to high technique? Were queerness and ability mutually exclusive? Ah, but Chopin's Études op. 10 and op. 25 make such demands, vis-à-vis specific finger techniques, that they still give virtuoso pianists pause. These Études are more central to *Chopinisme* than Liszt's or Schumann's studies are to their worlds, but at the same time Chopin's are cruel-masochistic enough to send pianists out to the hand doctor and, during their drive, have them reciting their Baudelaire (via Sartre: "you can persecute my body") and their Genet (who should share Baudelaire's statement: "the supreme pleasure in love lies in the absolute knowledge of doing evil"[68]).

Charles Rosen, that queer and brutally truthful pianist-scholar, said of Chopin that he "always refuses to adapt his

66 Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal,* trans. Howard, 24.

67 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 91.

68 Cited by Marder, "Inhuman Beauty," 5.

musical thought to the convenience of the hand." Rosen went beyond the defiance that is compositional originality, and spoke of "Chopin's ruthlessness" in importuning the keyboardist's physicality. He says, in short, that Chopin performance often involves a kind of expressive cheating. The composer presses the performer's desperation into service as enhancements to musical expression, and instead of artistically and expressively rendering anguish, just has the pianist suffer real pain. Rosen finds the legato octaves in the B minor Étude of Chopin's op. 10 to be "even more punishing than anything in Liszt," and continues:

> *Chopin's sadism* is *usually* more subtle than that of his contemporaries, and in most of his work actual pain is associated with emotional violence. In the etudes of Chopin, the moment of greatest emotional tension is generally the one that stretches the hand most painfully, so that the muscular sensation becomes — even without the sound — a mimesis of passion.[69]

Chopin's stealth in his bodily demands makes those physical pressures all the more injurious. Paradoxically, his impositions are so strange yet astute that they ended up becoming a new (and sometimes self-injurious) kind of orthodoxy. American virtuoso Byron Janis, whose own career was cut short by arthritis, wrote: "Searching for ways to improve evenness and legato, [Chopin] often crossed his longer fingers over each other, slid the same finger from one note to the other, crossed his thumb under his fifth finger — all sending shock waves among pianists, particularly as it did the trick!"[70] Chopin's technique also acknowledged quirks of the flesh rather than working to minimize or standardize them. He went against the then-common wisdom — probably passed down by pedagogue Carl Czerny,

69 Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 364, 383 (italics mine).

70 Byron Janis, "More Than Mere Exercises: In Chopin's 27 Études, Technique and Music Become One," *Wall Street Journal,* November 15, 2008, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122670581542929769.

who taught Liszt — that the ten fingers must be equalized, that the irregular and inadequate ring finger must be strengthened — normalized to do the work of the all-powerful index finger. Chopin believed that the individual digits aren't equal and interchangeable, which had been the goal of keyboard playing until then, but rather that they have their own needs, quirks, strengths, and weaknesses. "Don't try to make all your fingers equal in strength," he said. "Each one has its own job to do."[71] Alfred Cortot in his nocturnes edition goes out of his way to tell performers, paradoxically, that they should not sound like pianists. Maybe this is a major difference with Liszt's earlier piano works. Cortot warns at one point in a nocturne that "there is no pretext for demonstrative virtuosity." At another passage, he disdains the flirtatiousness that comes about only as an exercise in skill, "for these two melodic embroideries, avoid the quality of charming coquetry with which they are too often endowed."[72]

As I soon found out for myself when preparing the C# minor Nocturne, an artist's technique — taken to mean that person's way of fitting into the world — becomes part of a social fabric, where normality means seamlessly connecting that technique with personal expression, communication with the world out there, and mastery of the body. In a testimony to the performative male ego, there can be no distinguishing musical from sexual assuredness. Glenn Gould was one of the queerest pianists in history, also possibly the greatest keyboard virtuoso to ever despise Chopin. And Gould gleefully satirized Arthur Rubinstein's own self-assured fabric when he — as part of a book review of his colleague's braggy and testosteronal memoirs — conjured up an imaginary first-person memoir of a Rubinstein recital at "the Maude Harbour Festival." Here the famed philanderer and foremost Chopin interpreter of his day is said to remember, in the midst of playing the festival concert:

71 Ibid.
72 Cortot, *Chopin Nocturnes,* 29, 23.

> I glanced toward the boxes. And there, seated on one marked "Live Bait-Do Not Refrigerate," was a vision of such loveliness that it instantly erased from my mind the memory of all four amorous adventures which had befallen me between lunch and five o'clock tea.… I resolved to address every note of my performance to her and her alone and to inquire into the county's statutory-rape provisions at intermission. As I began my Scarlatti group, our eyes locked in an optical embrace of such intensity that the cross-hand passages in Longo 465 were obliged to depart from the urtext.[73]

In puncturing the Rubinstein mythos here, Gould points to the notion of conjoined musical and sexual literacies — and the ridiculousness of such a convergence. My performance of the Chopin nocturne that afternoon revealed such a musical-social-sexual fabric to be, in my case, a mystery and failure. Or more shitty than flowery, if you will. Lumpy and threadbare, my particular textile had insufficient technique (even after much work, weeks and months of scales and arpeggios to a metronome), while my personal utterance was overbearing and overstated (as a clear expression of my frustrated or undirected sexual energy), and I never thought I would have control over my own very gay body (which seemed at the time just as unlikely to play fast scales someday as it would to impregnate a woman and bring about a family).

When I walked out onto the small stage at Lutkin Hall to play Chopin on a Steinway Model D that April afternoon, my first thought was that even a queer person's solitary walk to their instrument must by definition be contrary — meaning defective, compensated, aggrandized, or all three. A queer walk on a stage is based on no text — naked and exposed as an act of double-consciousness, the gait considered and reconsidered to the point of meaninglessness. Of course, I was also required to

73 Glenn Gould, "Memories of Maude Harbour, or Variations on a Theme of Arthur Rubinstein," in *The Glenn Gould Reader,* ed. Tim Page (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 291.

memorize the nocturne and go out on stage without a score. Musicians speak of muscle memory as the most basic and automatic, but also the laziest and most easily perishable way of remembering — when complex acts are memorized with the body, those memories tend to vanish under stress. And if nothing can be assumed with certainty of the queer body, putting one foot before another suddenly becomes an open question. My twenty-foot stage saunter to Chopin that afternoon was still my scrutinized gait — the walk that I'd rethought as an adolescent so as to be more normal and male, to blend in better. If the stronger worry that afternoon in Lutkin was losing my place in the memorized music, there was the more immediate (if also more remote) concern of forgetting how to walk. What would the music majors in attendance, even the closeted queer ones, have made of that?

For half a second, I considered actually running out to the piano.

There were two earlier points in my growing-up where I had tried to force my body into obedience — tried to "break" flesh if not bone, in the sense that an expert rider works to "break" a wild horse into submission. I labored to domesticate the animal. Both my physical coercions were meant to carry me to expressive, public means — abilities that would mean success. One of these was my months-long, Chopin-prep regimen of scales and arpeggios, undertaken to get a smooth or even effortless technique. (Hope bloomed eternal.) The other was collecting, somehow, a small stack of *Playboy* magazines and finding enough hand moisturizer to redirect — methodically! — my physical desires toward women. Each of these projects, banal enough on the surface, became a kind of "Steps to Parnassus," a methodical instruction, an exercise of will, a gradual breaking-through the boundaries of impossibility, and beyond them into a state of ability and credence. I took up these learning methods with due diligence, but they both failed.

Pianism and the piano were magical notions for me, and they proved — like all wizardry and conjuring, like all enchant-

ments — unreal and out of reach. My biggest ambition in life back then was to become a splendid interpreter of Chopin's First Ballade in G minor, op. 23. The big *ff*, powerfully symphonic, E major actualization about halfway through, when I could get it under my fingers and show it to the world, would lift me high and triumphant above all questionings. It would be my way of telling the world good things about myself, and my way of winning over hearts to my cause (whatever that might have been, maybe involving nubile counts and rose bouquets). But my piano teacher in high school had refused, without explanation, to let me play any Chopin. At the time I thought this was just a cruel and arbitrary punishment. (I later came to see it as a wise decision, since very little Chopin is easy to play, and most of it is in fact extremely hard to play well. Certainly no one should try to play Chopin before they've gotten at least some three- and four-part Bach polyphony well under their fingers.) At the same time as my teacher set things out of reach, she did anything she could to evoke music's magical, mysterious, mystical initiations. She tried to stoke her students' ambitions by evoking musicianship as this beautiful, almost mystical secret society with beflowered and forbidding portals. "And that man is *A Musician,*" she would gloat over some cellist who lived forty miles away and whom she'd bumped into twice. Madame would sit down and play passages from Chopin to impress and intimidate. "Well, if you don't get your way through that, then how can you ever expect to play this?" she once said before showily rattling off the six-against-eight opening of the *Fantasie-Impromptu* (a passage that small armies of eight-year-old pianists have no problem mastering, as I later found out).

But back to the C# minor Nocturne that afternoon in Lutkin Hall.… My performance started off well enough, with a nicely muted and cadaverous color to the left hand chords. By the middle of the first page, however, I started to run aground on the chromatic slithers in the right hand melody. My ears knew his chromaticism, but my hands didn't. I wasn't completely versed in this composer's way with half steps — his "grinning grimaces," his chromatic "groans" and "twists." And I was finding

that Chopin wasn't queer enough that wrong notes didn't sound extravagantly wrong. (A characteristic that is intertwined with this composer's chronic lack of musical humor: to everything its place.) Play a clinker in a piece by Beethoven or Liszt, and it can be heard as a token of sincerity, dedication, and strength of purpose. But insert an unexpected something in Chopin's perfectly wrought melodies, lines utterly suffused with craftsmanship that cross a Bach-like inevitability with the psychological expressiveness of Italian opera, and it's the proverbial hair in the soup. (That's one reason Chopin's enharmonically respelled melodic notes in the op. 27, no. 2 Nocturne are so poignant; they suggest wrongness as a strategy, but then are explained away as chord-tone puns. "Aha, fooled you, dear listener. I know how to use your own sense of correctness and know-it-all anticipation against you.")

My biggest problem that afternoon were the emotional, declarative passages in the nocturne. I made too much of them. My emotions weren't calibrated. My piano professor had noted this in lessons and warned me not to make too much of the dissonant climax and then the *con forza* recitative in octaves that leads back to the recap. "Too much!," he had written in my score. "Lift off the right hand!" But then in performing the piece on stage, I went right back to being overdemonstrative. I was intent on making the passage thunder, thunder, thunder, sending my listeners trembling back into their seats, and wordlessly imploring them to know my own secret and terrifying emotional depths. I could, and indeed would, have my power over them. Having such a deep substrate of shit in life, a resource that I didn't want to — and indeed couldn't — share with anyone, I was intent that day on impressing listeners with my splendid flowers. But again, the flowers that afternoon were so heavily, intendedly flowery that they in fact became grotesque. What was I compensating for? What was I not trusting?

My piano professor offered a short and simple reaction to my nocturne performance the next day: "Well, that was very much a mixed bag," he said in his chirpy yet rather bitchful Australian accent. He should have just called it shit. A failure. But then gay-

ness and success would have made strange bedfellows. Appropriating post-Freudian ideas of Jacques Lacan, queer theorist Jack Halberstam reaches the conclusion that "if, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)."[74] There is indeed an all-suffusing logic to the non-queer world, to straight people's birthright access to immanence, ease, attainment, and artlessness. And yes, to Rubinsteinian inevitability.

* * *

lurking, voluptuous

I was given a tape of my performance, and got over my injured pride long enough to listen again — or for the first time, I should say. And so I managed, over time, to value my Chopin nocturne performance, because its failures turned out to have heuristic teaching value. It helped me realize, for the first time really, that I would devote myself to the same kind of anti-project that Kaja Silverman (referring to the goals she shared with Leo Bersani) described as "writ[ing] constantly against the self — against mastery and power," and thereby exercising the imperative to "privilege the moment of undoing, and see it as something which must either be endlessly repeated, or prolonged to infinity."[75] My mistakes became useful in creating and fracturing experience rather than consolidating it. They led me to an extensive rethink of Chopin's piece — as an aural, corporeal, and even aromatic experience. My over-effusions and mistakes allowed me some healthy distance from the music's inevitability, immanence, and logic while I was still able to keep tabs on its artificial and

74 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 94.

75 "A Conversation with Leo Bersani with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman," in Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 172.

unhealthy containments. And my rethink now continues even after the music stops, because even when the music is closed and silent, the flower-like imponderables remain. (Which is to say, olfactory memories are intense and deeply imbedded, much more durable than the ear's recollections.)

But which particular flowers am I talking about? Those Baudelaire lilies — decaying, but with a sickly sweet smell — would be analogous to this music, but not synonymous with it. The "anal" chrysanthemum would at best be a distant metaphor for the nocturnes, unless it was Bersani or Genet playing them. No, I would nominate the rose as the most Chopinesque blossom — because of its satin-like petals and its rich poetic history. If we could forgive Rubinstein his thrusting heterosexuality, we'd be free to test-drive his carefree man-about-town romanticism (that old-world, self-made bonhomie! that rakish smile and narrow-brimmed fedora!). And then I could share in, I could delect Rubinstein's vase of ruby-red roses: the richly symbolic flowers that (as he said) graced a French countess's piano in 1906, accompanied his come-hither rendition of Chopin's nocturnal gem in D♭ major, and then shielded a hot-blooded kiss. Tell me you don't wish you were in those shoes.

And then there's the gardener's common knowledge that roses are "hungry" flowers, meaning they need a more regular diet of fertilizer than other blooms.

But on second thought no, Arthur Rubinstein's shoes and hat would be a bad fit. As my representative Chopin bloom, I would finally choose a white rose. Why? It's voluptuous, but less common than the red. It's aromatic, but not intoxicatingly so. It is more distinct to the eye after dark. It is as hungry and intimidating but also as exquisite as other roses, while its pale velvet sheen would make faint whispers of purity. (Most necessarily, a white rose wouldn't be coy. The flower bud bespeaks "a heart ignorant of love." When Gide said Chopin "almost never asserts," he wasn't saying the music was coquettish. Anything but.) And the white Chopin rose wouldn't be the rose of Chaucer, William Blake, and Gertrude Stein, it would be the more morbid rose of Emily Dickinson and the gay sadomasochistic

novelist Yukio Mishima. It would be the bloom empathized by the queer Dickinson ("… how easy / for such as thee to die!") and the flower that Mishima had jammed into his mouth in his nude photoshoot album *Barakei,* translated into English as *Killed by Roses.* Considered as poetry, the prettiness of the white rose would be a plain pretext for impermanence and for Mishima's homoerotic bushido. Neither a surfacey flourish nor an amorous declaration, the white rose offers the less compliant yet also lustier testimony that "I am worthy of your love."[76]

76 Dietz, *The Complete Language of Flowers,* 187, 188.

4

A Grained Voice in the Company of Men

(Nirvana, "Negative Creep")

If I could have fucked a sound in the musically hype-rabundant 1980s, I would have chosen Kurt Cobain's voice.

My sex term, high-up and up-front, allows a penetrating and intimate discussion of Kurt's vocal sonance, and of the manifold, ever-rippling implications of his own social frictions. (He once announced from a Newcastle stage: "I am a homosexual, I am a drug user, and I fuck pot-bellied pigs." The repertory of sociopathologies was wider yet for Nirvana's 1989 Vestibule tour T-shirt, which read: "Fudge Packin, Crack Smokin, Satan Worshipin Motherfuckers."[1])

Where, who, and in fact *what* was I as a Cobain listener? The verb "fuck" demands a direct object, and thereby introduces complicit plays of power, objectification, and domination — and there is indeed a hierarchy of listener roles to consider when we hear the songs that Kurt Cobain did with Nirvana. First we could

1 Charles R. Cross, *Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain* (Hachette Books, 2014), 219, 134. The contextualizing historian in me would assert that the late 1980s saw a national craze for pot-bellied pigs as pets in the United States. In short, the "pigs" takeaway from this Newcastle gig is that Cobain was giving voice not to bestial urges, but rather anti-commodity and maybe animal rights concerns.

consider his singing as a thing to behold, and ask if the listener is worthy of the song, if they are able to pay it proper enjoyment-homage. Regardless of whether we are in love with him or not, the searing aural validity of his voice has to be deferred to. A record of his vocals can still silence a room. The singing demeanor is unique and immediately recognizable. We know who this is. We know his story — the deathful singer-songwriter symbol of Generation X, fans genuflect before the voice, et cetera.

But then Cobain's voice was also a transactional matter, a sound-commodity separated from its physical source and offered for our use and our pleasure — a vibrational index of soundful joy, and an aural signifier of self-doubt and self-annihilation. It was committed to tape ostensibly to please us — to open our wallets, after which we could do with the singer's sonorities as we wished, so long as we didn't infringe on it as capital-accruing product. (It's almost shocking that this kid from Aberdeen, Washington, spoke of "the music" with the high-falutin' definite article, as if he were goddamn Mozart or McCartney or Morrissey: "First and foremost, we're all entertainers. The politically confrontational attitude may be fine for other bands, but it's not for us because it seems to overpower the music."[2])

Cobain's vocalism, when heard as such a bounty of sellable sounds, was a texture that positively invited penetration (of whichever kind). His glottal, rasping vibrations were luxuriously coarse, like burlap woven into velvet. For an appreciative gayboy listener, they solicited the sharpest gayboy nerve acuities, which are inside the ears and on the underside of the glans.

Charles Darwin discussed vocalizing as an important aspect of sexual selection. Theorist and philosopher Elizabeth Grosz elaborated on the idea: "It is the erotic, indeed perhaps vibratory, force in all organisms, even those without auditory systems, that seduces, entices, mesmerizes, that sexualizes the body." About thirty years ago, musicologist Suzanne Cusick brought this discussion to bear more pointedly on those very "auditory

2 Nick Soulsby, ed., *Cobain on Cobain: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago Review Press, 2016), 295.

systems." Cusick asked: "What if ears are sex organs? What if music-making is a form of sexuality in which (as in some other forms of sexuality) the sites of giving and receiving pleasure are separated?" More recently, Jodie Taylor specifically equated the ear with a vagina or anus: "The ear [is] a sexual orifice, a penetrable erogenous zone."[3]

So Cusick and Taylor made it clear that ears can be penetrated sensually, but can the tables be turned? Are sounds, though immaterial, also fuckable? Over the centuries, they've been culturally construed quite otherwise, as wafting, formless, evanescent, metaphysical. And can a listener really use their aural orifice as a phallus? Can they top the sound of someone's voice, consigning it to a bottom's role? Influential composer, writer, virtuoso accordionist, and outspoken lesbian Pauline Oliveros thought so. After reading a study of aurality, she exhorted her readers: "Did someone lose his body? Come now, Freudians, one can receive music but also actively penetrate it, not to mention all the other finer variations. Maybe we need banana-shaped ears."[4] And then we have Giacinto Scelsi pursuing a similar notion. This avant-garde composer, the mystic visionary who wrote pieces restricted only to unisons and octaves, evoked insertional sonic knowledge as a kind of deep musical deconstruction. "You have to enter into sound," Scelsi exhorted us. "Penetrate it in its triple essence: physical, psychic and creative. The same goes for colors: red, blue, yellow […] you

3 Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 32; Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* ed. Philip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (Routledge, 1994), 79; Jodie Taylor, "Sound Desires: Auralism, the Sexual Fetishization of Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness,* ed. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley (Oxford University Press, 2022)

4 Pauline Oliveros, "Rags and Patches," in *Software for People: Collected Writings, 1963–80* (Smith Publications, 1984), 113.

have to enter into them rather than looking at them from the outside."[5]

"Penetrate it in its essence." My book here is based on Roland Barthes–style understandings of text and reading, and assumes the poststructuralist notion of the text as so all-encompassing that there can be no distinction drawn between reading and sexual desire. (In Jacques Derrida's blunt statement, "there is nothing outside the text" — meaning a conscious, nonschizoid self is a unity that confers textuality on all that it perceives.[6]) In such a Barthesian manner of hearing-as-reading-as-inserting, the coherence of the message arrives with the sexual climax. These textual understandings are transparently but not unequivocally sexual: Author and reader are engaged in a relationship that has an outcome of either *plaisir* (pleasure) or *jouissance* (bliss or, more properly, orgasm). The relationship is described in terms of game-playing, erotics, ruses, and satisfaction. And most importantly, at least according to Barthes's thinking when he wrote *The Pleasure of the Text,* there is a distinction to be made between (1) normal ("frigid") reading practices that align with bourgeois notions of pleasure, and (2) desirous and "neurotic" readings that result in a *frisson* of meaning.

I use the *fuck* word for the sake of clarity in addressing Cobain's opacities of voice: to avoid Oliveros's coy euphemisms, but also because the term *fuck* speaks more directly to my own perspective. (And how could I ever aver something, sexually speaking, on another individual's behalf?) As a gay male who enjoys sex more than fresh fruit, I am focused more on cocks than bananas. Pauline Oliveros was probably chumming it up here with the Guerrilla Girls, a playful feminist-activist group known for holding public "banana counts" at art museums — a tally of the male nudity on exhibit, as relative to the female. (The group also sold foam-rubber fruit merch imprinted with

5 Quoted by Michele Fumagallo, "Le inquietudini di Giacinto," *Quodlibet,* February 12, 2011, https://www.quodlibet.it/recensione/956.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 55.

the exhortation to "think of the broads when you squeeze your banana.") But my own queerness, which has grown more and more impatient in recent years, encourages me to count cocks rather than euphemize them. Penetration also preoccupies me, a cis-gendered homosexual, more than the "caresses" and tactile sense that Cusick has pondered in considering her own "lesbian relationship with music." And Kurt's singing, given its frequent tensions and disaffections, seems to invite power plays rather than aesthetics; it doesn't present itself as an answer, but rather seems to pose a question. And for that reason, I feel I understand it innately.

Of course, references to fucking broach the difficult subject of male-incited violence and when (if) force can interface with pleasure. Whether violence is implied in my evocations of sex would depend on how you define sexual violence: according to radical, antiporn feminist Andrea Dworkin, or (say) according to sex-positive queer theorist Leo Bersani. (Dworkin called for resistance against "power without invention articulating the arrogance of those who do the fucking."[7] Writing as a gay theorist, Bersani stringently resisted Dworkin's resistance, saying she and colleague Catherine A. Mackinnon "have given us the reasons why pornography must be multiplied and not abandoned, and, more profoundly, the reasons for defending, for cherishing the very sex they find so hateful."[8]) In brief, divisions are malleable between forceful arrogance and pleasure over the internalized penis. Sexual violence could be present when one partner is prevented from saying no or prevented from disengaging, but this begs the difficult question (as Bersani might have asked it) of how male-on-male rape is to be understood differently — as it presumably is — from male sexual violence against women. To talk about fucking suggests a play of domi-

7 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (BasicBooks, 2007), 175. I take Dworkin's "power without invention" to mean something like "force without imagination."

8 Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 22.

nance in sex and a possible erotics of role-playing, and also by extension what Claire Cohen has called "gendered and sexualized specificities and hierarchies of harm."[9] Cohen undertakes her discussion of male rape in the context of arguing against points raised by Nicola Gavey in *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (2005). In trying to account for scenarios of abusive sexual power outside the dominant paradigm of men assaulting women, and without encroaching on basic feminist precepts, Gavey says that sexual violence toward men by women could be interpreted as a form of "consensual sadomasochism," while proposing that men can be understood as "true" victims only in the case of homosexual (meaning gay-on-gay?) rape.[10] This seems odd, particularly as sexual violence isn't typically perpetrated for the sake of sexual pleasure. Rather, it is a form of punishment and a way of exerting power, often symbolically, meaning the victim is made to represent an entire demographic and is then dehumanized as such a representation.

So, in sum: I am a dominant-fantasist male who would like to have his way with Kurt Cobain's sound. Here I emphasize the pleasurable (in the noncoerced, nonpolitical sense) aspect of cock penetration, and say that any violence I might suggest isn't aimed at any specific and unwilling persons. Rather, as behooves me as a Bersani follower, I take aim at the conjoined evils of pleasurelessness and disciplinarity. I mean disciplinarity in the sense of a curriculum, as when poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze famously spoke in 1973 of "conceiving of the history of philosophy as a kind of ass-fuck, or, what amounts to the same thing, an immaculate conception." Deleuze was equating sodomy here with violating a canonic writer's words and thoughts, with taking them in unconventional, profane, corrupting, and indeed intellectually "illegal" directions, for purposes of pleasure and without regard for academic genealogies and the usual proprieties. Here he was co-opting and sub/

9 Claire Cohen, *Male Rape Is a Feminist Issue: Feminism, Governmentality and Male Rape* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 160.

10 Ibid., 166.

perverting the usual phallic terms of masculinist historicism; for instance — in music — the notion that Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* "inseminated the whole modern movement."[11] (Robert Craft made this statement more than half a century after the music was written. So he wasn't wanting Stravinsky's radical 1913 piece to have "fucked the whole modern movement" so much as he wanted to see it executing certain subtexts of fucking; namely, *pinning down* contemporaneity and *staying forcefully intimate* with people and indeed *insisting on being irrefusable* after its time of currency.) And then what Deleuze believed he achieved with his "ass-fuck" was an offspring-result that was totally unanticipated, or even mutant, even if still genetically connected: "I imagined myself approaching an author from behind and giving him a child that would indeed be his but would nonetheless be monstrous."[12] Deleuze could have been referring to Kant's lingering authority here, in which case his sodomy reference sounds like historical payback: giving Immanuel Kant's culturally imbedded, hidebound, and culturally stifling ideas what the late twentieth century thought they had coming. Then saying to you the reader, implicitly, as if you'd just witnessed some dark-corner buggery: *Hey there, don't even try to hold me to reason, indeed you need to steer clear of me and my very queer ways.*

* * *

Roland Barthes presented his "grain of the voice" idea within a 1972 exploration of art song and singing — and a specific discussion of baritones Charles Panzéra and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Barthes's *la grain de la voix* has become one of critical theory's most durable catchphrases, but we owe its usefulness to how ill-defined and malleable it is — everyone who's used the term has tacitly shaped it to their own purposes. The phrase is still cur-

11 Robert Craft, "The Rite of Spring: Genesis of a Masterpiece," *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 20.

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix.

rent and discussed today, fifty years later. When music theorist Jonathan Dunsby recently took stock, he encouraged us to better understand the first of Barthes's two nouns (the grain). "It will be argued here," Dunsby writes, "that 'grain' has been something of a slogan, and perhaps it would have been better for it to have been explored as a specific idea. For the question of how Barthes writing about 'grain' made sense in the first place does not seem to have been asked in nearly half a century."[13] Of Barthes's "grain of the voice," one thing that can be said definitively (hah!) was that it centered on the nonmusical — that is, flesh-born — aspect of music-making ("the body in the voice as it sings, [like] the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs"[14]). Barthes himself said the "grain of the voice" is that part of the vocal transmission that is *distinct* from "everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values."[15] And this was his major departure from the usual musicians' discussions of personality, text, technique, musicality, training, breath control, and, indeed, words.

So, with his "grain of the voice" idea, Barthes presaged Deleuze by theorizing an opposition to orthodox musicality. His notion is a kind of cross-sensory oxymoron, taking a term from the sensory realms of sight and touch and applying it to an aural phenomenon. Now, musicians do often borrow such terms (e.g., such basic conservatory references as singing with "a round tone" or "a white tone"), but "grain" is different in being both sensorially specific and a noun. The only similar description that comes to mind is "vocal fry," more formally called "glottalization," which is what happens when a speaker tries to go too far below their range. It is "a low, staccato vibration during speech, produced by a slow fluttering of the vocal cords. […] A guttural vibration — once considered a speech disorder — [that]

13 Jonathan Dunsby, "Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzéra's Voice," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 134, no. 1 (2009): 113–14.

14 Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image Music Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 188.

15 Ibid., 182.

has become a language fad."[16] But even when the word "fry" is used to refer to a particular vocal register in speech rather than a tone-color in singing, it does suggest a fairly specific, easily recognized sound. Barthes's "grain," by comparison, is ambiguous and amounts to a heuristic.

And so Barthes, in using the anomalous word "grain" to perform this explanatory "ass-fuck" of his own, was trying to wrest vocalization away from the conservatories, from the music critics, and from the musicologists, which is why he disliked the slick and easy professionalism of labels, staying away even from the most basic term *baritone,* not to mention vocalist lingo such as *passagi, breath control,* and *break*. Indeed, it would seem one reason Barthes coined his "the grain of the voice" term was to steer away from the arrogant and nonsensual abstraction of "the voice" as a generalization — as something basically, conceptually different from "a voice" or "Dietrich's voice." (Barthes doesn't entirely avoid mentioning "the voice" in his essay, but he does refer more often to its constituent particulars of "the soul," "the song," "the throat," and "the body.") He exercises caution with the definite article because he wants to avoid the incompetent banality of descriptives and attributives:

> It can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. Music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is this, this execution is that. No doubt the moment we turn an art into a subject (for an article, for a conversation) there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form, that of the epithet.[17]

16 Marissa Fessenden, "'Vocal Fry' Creeping into U.S. Speech: Young Women End Sentences with a Gravelly Buzz in What Could Be a Catching Trend," *Science,* December 9, 2011, https://www.science.org/content/article/vocal-fry-creeping-us-speech.

17 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 179.

It's because of such oppositions between *culture* and *Culture* that Simon Frith (among others) understood "the grain of the voice" to be an important tool for popular music studies.[18]

Barthes tried to steer clear of the definite article because it smacks of establishment mores and conventions, but he did give more specificity to his idea of culture when he associated it with the possibility of an ethos, and therefore with the possibility of a less definite coherence that in itself could be termed artistic, magical, or religious: "The musical adjective becomes legal whenever an ethos of music is postulated, each time, that is, that music is attributed a regular — natural or magical — mode of signification. Thus with the ancient Greeks, for whom it was the musical language (and not the contingent work) in its denotative structure which was immediately adjectival, each mode being linked to a coded expression."[19]

Barthes was radical in proposing this notion of a musical sound as something distinct from (or perhaps beyond) culture, a sound as a phenomenological experience, as a materiality of the body that connects the viscera of musician with the viscera of listener. (He faulted Fischer-Dieskau for singing that "never exceeds culture: here it is the soul which accompanies the song, not the body.") For Barthes, singing becomes a matter of tissues. Those vocal tissues, not just sympathetic but indeed ecstatically connected, are the singer's (moist) throat and mouth and the listener's (moist) throat. Semiotics has customarily centered on pure communication, but the "grain" is the impure noise-aspect that stands outside institutions. It isn't a musicalizing agent, but rather is "the very friction between music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message)."[20] Most radically of all, in the midst of talking about tissues, Barthes dared to talk about pleasure as a term of meaningful human exchange. If "the grain" communicates, it does so

18 Simon Frith, introduction to Part 5: "Musicology and Semiotics," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word,* ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Routledge, 1990), 275–76.

19 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 180.

20 Ibid., 185.

in sensual terms. More than it signifies, the grain of the voice involves "a certain 'aesthetics' of musical pleasure" and is equivalent to "the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers." Dunsby clarifies and summarizes this: "[Barthes] ducks and weaves his way through philosophical conundrums to carry a simple message to his readers, a message about song having once been some kind of corporeal ecstasy. [… He] attempt[ed] to explain his engagement with Schumann as one not of contemplation but of desire."[21] And in this pleasure-transaction, where bodily tissue responds to the stimuli of other bodily tissue, where any smoothness of cultural exchange is beside the point, roughness of contact is the main matter.

So let the word go out: I take Barthes's "grain of the voice" as an aural equivalent to fellatio, so a practice that conservatories and musicology departments won't discuss, even as they say they're interested in the body and in sexual personhood. In the case of Barthes's construct and in oral pleasuring, the active agent *à grain* is a bodily hole — the gorge, the gullet, the maw — that both obliges others and communicates on its own behalf. Barthes focuses on the throat as sounding cavity, the space that creates the unique overtones (or "formants," as he put it) that give distinctive character to each voice. His emphasis on orality will put gay musicians in the mind of oral sex. Wayne Koestenbaum played with this allusion when he followed up on Barthes with his *The Queen's Throat* (1993). Consider Koestenbaum's title, which naughtily conjures up either a vocal mechanism amidst the eighteenth-century formalities of *opera seria,* or orally penetrating an affected and effeminate (and therefore resistant?) gay man. Koestenbaum describes the throat as both storied and inarticulate: "Everyone understands that genitals are mythologized, but no one mentions the doctrines clustered in our throats, in our methods of singing and speaking. We lack a vocabulary for what the throat knows and suffers — perhaps

21 Dunsby, "Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzéra's Voice," 130–31.

because the throat is loath to speak about itself."[22] (Characteristically, Koestenbaum uses "queen" and "body" as shifting signifiers throughout his book, such that the reader loses track of whether the author is addressing goings-on in an opera house, or performances in the bedroom, or score-settlings between vamps who face off with claws drawn. "The diva loves queens," Koestenbaum writes, "because pretending to be a queen is an occasion to divorce the body from the soul, to assume lofty and hieratic alienation; pretending to be a queen also helps the diva imitate figures in her past who might have ignored or abused her."[23])

If we particularize the field of vocal personages and possibilities, we can follow Dunsby's directive and aim for a better understanding of "the grain" as a human-anatomical idea, and get away from talking about "the voice" and its generalized abstractions and its banal specifics. The human voice is clearly the most erotic of all auditory experiences, for reasons that Darwin and Freud recognized. But that doesn't say much — and doesn't clarify the fact that by no means are *all* voices erotic. Barthes's issue here is not the generalizable feel of *all* sets of vocal folds, but rather the texture of *that one* voice. The feel of that particular voice that becomes an obsession, that nags and gnaws at you over years. That singular and certain verbal texture, that *granularity,* that sounds to your ears the way only very few things feel to the touch.

And so I'm compelled to shift semantics for a moment and talk about "the grained voice." This would subvert Barthes's wordage and misleadingly suggest that the voice is a passive thing (an object that something external can act upon to give it a texture). But such a term of "the grained voice" would suggest a distinctive texture made audible, and help us focus on the particular voice(s) of interest: voice A, which has particular grain X, voice B, which has the specific grain Y, and so on. (The

22 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon, 1993), 163.

23 Ibid., 108.

locution "the grained voice" also puts me in mind of "the ribbed condom." After one reads Barthes, "granulation" and other vocal terms do start to sound like ad copy for sex toys: "Catch feelings. Deep ribs provide increased stimulation. Ridges create additional friction where it counts and mean you're in for a bumpy, enjoyable ride."[24] I also wonder if the contemporary Taiwanese dentist, bio-artist, and speculative designer Kuang-Yi Ku had read Barthes before embarking on his "fellatio modification project." This is an implant for the upper palate that Ku designed "to create an embossed surface," a raised and bumpy area that "would enhance the physical pleasure" — a device intended, as Barthes might have termed it, to be a vocal-tract grain enhancer or an extension of the singer's vocal-erogenic "skin."[25])

With his "grain of the voice" idea, which he summarized as "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue," Barthes helps me perform some objectification; such structuralist terms are kind of kinky in that they introduce a pornographic anonymity.[26] But then the conscience asks, How can we separate a voice (and throat) from a face, that is, from an individual visual identity? Especially as the words that the voice sings tend to be suggestive of specific character(s). (If we're going to talk about voyeurism and auralism as counterparts, then we also have to entertain a powerful and sexually freighted duality of the gaze and the — what to call it? — auditory-gaze. And so Oliveros's guerrilla/gorilla notion of bananas/ears starts to make more sense.) And in my own discussion, how can I talk about fucking Kurt Cobain's voice while not talking about a sexual

24 "All Trojan Condoms," *Trojan,* https://www.trojanbrands.com/en/products/condoms.

25 Ku's countercultural goals here aren't dissimilar from Barthes's, and suggest Barthes was approaching the realm of bio-art. Ku says he aims to extend dentistry practices from curating the "three main functions of the oral cavity, aesthetics, pronunciation, and mastication" to the fourth function, sex, "which is left unspoken and undiscussed on the textbook of dentistry." Kuang-Yi Ku, "The Fellatio Modification Project — Male Masturbation Cup Mouth," https://www.kukuangyi.com/the-fellatio-modification-project---male-masturbation-cup-mouth.html.

26 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.

desire for Kurt Cobain himself? (There was such desire, and it was steadfast. For one thing, his blue eyes are still haunting, or even unforgettable. Here I can't shake David Samuels's synesthetic account of Kurt's gaze: "With the release of *Nevermind,* in 1991, Cobain had been widely acclaimed as the musical spokesman for the anger and longing of his generation — his crackling blue eyes were lit by the same alternating currents of gentleness and rage that lit up his songs."[27]) I would point here to my own dissociation of the senses — a fragmentation of sensibility dating back to my adolescence, as incurred by all-powerful desires and refusals of satisfaction. In my own case, the visual came to be divorced from the aural, and the ears took on unusual power. Separation and compartmentalization of visual and aural memories became a survival tactic, and I suppose destined me to become either a professional voyeur or a licensed "auralist." Looking is more fraught than listening. I wasn't "allowed" to make eye contact in the real world, I barred myself from staring at men (for the reason that desire might effect its violent interruption), and blocked myself from being looked at (which could mean either being discovered or hypnotically converted to out-and-out gayness). In the end, it was my ears rather than my eyes that became "the windows to the soul."

"The gaze" is an objectifying and unspoken male perspective that has been endemic to visual media: a privilege, a default voyeurism, a pro forma lingering over the female form. In response, Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, and Kaja Silverman presented the possibility of a female gaze. To my knowledge, no corresponding "gay gaze" theory has been developed, maybe because of sociopolitical realities such as the "gay panic defense," which means to gaze gay-desirously, objectifyingly, at a man you don't know (i.e., to make a "non-violent sexual advance," a term no one seems to have defined) is to invite confrontation, such that a legal defense can be made for murdering you. The Ameri-

27 David Samuels, "Kurt Cobain's Last Stand: The Crass, Exploitative Release of Nirvana's Final Song," *Slate,* November 15, 2002, https://slate.com/culture/2002/11/the-exploitative-release-of-kurt-cobain-s-last-song.html.

can Bar Association has itemized the details thus, its last point equating an expression of desire with penetrative sexual assault: "Typically, the defense has three variations: defense of insanity or diminished capacity, defense of provocation, and defense of self-defense. […] The provocation defense argues that the victim's proposition of a 'non-violent sexual advance' could be sufficiently provocative to induce the defendant to kill them. The final variation, of self-defense, claims that because of the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity, the victim must have been about to cause the defendant serious bodily harm."[28]

So gay-desirous-looking can be perceived by the look-ee as such a powerful signifier of impending sexual violence that such a gaze allows the look-er to be killed with impunity. And for many years I wouldn't allow myself *to look.* I even compiled for myself a set of not-looking rules, or maybe a set of ways to surreptitiously look without looking. Among them was "If you accidentally make eye contact, don't look away immediately, because that will make it obvious that you were indeed looking." Certainly we can't speak of the closeted gay man having a specific visuality, something that would imply a one-way transaction. Even feminist cinematic models of the gaze can't be used with "gay looking." Rather, we could compare it to that nonviolent, non-provocative process of communication, pleasure, and affirmation that Barthes outlined and called "reading." Barthes was ever the inveterate reader, of the textuality of voices and of faces. When I grew up searching here and there for traces of male beauty, my hidden desires turned me into a Barthesian "textualist." Even in Barthes's own case, I wonder if a connection can be made between repressed desire and a liking for textual play: Think of the libido, the desire of the reader, and just what the viewer hopes to get out of a text as they approach it. As Barthes describes it, the relationship between writer and reader is like cruising followed by casual, maybe anonymous, sex: "I

28 Alexandra Holden, "The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It," *American Bar Association,* 2019, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/.

[as writer] must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss [*jouissance*]."[29]

In the event, to be sexually aroused just by a face or by an isolated voice, to sequester the visual or the aural visage, starts to sound like visual or aural fetishism. In its most basic and sociopolitically unencumbered sexual definition, a fetish is an object or feature that incites sensual arousal or enhances such, but which in itself can't fulfill a sexual function. A fetish is a denial of community. A fetish is by definition a private turn-on, a turn-on that still isn't shared even if others also subscribe to it; it is the sexual counterpart to Wittgenstein's paradox of a "private language." So dirty words and blond tresses and Panzéra's singing Schumann can count as fetishes, but a penis cannot. (And the cock is unequivocal, knows all too well where it wants to go and what it wants to do.) Sexual psychologist Murray S. Davis described both "auralism" and "voyeurism" as nonmainstream (what he calls *non-Jehovanist*) practices because they are by definition distant relations, and thereby weaken the identity of the partner(s). In brief, there is a *moralism of sexual placement* insofar as where you are during sex predicates your intentions. Thus "liking to listen" and "liking to watch" are fetishist perversions. They show unwillingness to be close and engaged in sex, are too distant from missionary-for-the-sake-of-procreation to be healthy. And auralism counts as even lazier and more disengaged than voyeurism, in that the former isn't based on a verb, isn't based in an action while *voyeur* comes from the French verb *voir* (to see). "In the Jehovanist view, then, voyeurism, auralism, fellatio, cunnilingus, and sodomy are all 'gradational' perversions. Relative to normal sex, they connect sex partners to an abnormal degree — voyeurism and auralism separating

29 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1975), 4.

them too widely, fellatio/cunnilingus and sodomy fusing them too closely."[30]

Such fetishist separation is turbocharged by technology. In both photography and recording, technology became a vehicle for intimacy and privacy.[31] When it comes to being turned on by a voice, I'm not sure physical distance, as opposed to dissociation and division, is the real perversion-culprit. In his essay on Marquis de Sade, Barthes focuses on the marquis's torture device that he calls "the helmet," a kind of preelectric technology: a mask with a tube that isolates and magnifies the victim's screams by transmitting them for nonparticipants to enjoy aurally, in a separate room. Barthes goes so far as to suggest that detaching the sound from its visual basis purges it of its accessory-triviality within the sex act: "Yet this scream which distinguishes the victim is also, contradictorily, nothing but the attribute, the accessory, the amorous supplement, bombast. Whence the value of a machine to isolate the scream and deliver it to the libertine as a delightful part of the victim's body, i.e., as a sonorous fetish."[32]

Surely the issues here are technology and the actual process of hearing the voice — meaning Davis's line of reasoning fails to take into account the microphone, and the capacity such electronic transduction has for taking the listener close to the singer's body, or even inside of it. The rise of crooning styles in the 1930s (exemplified by Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and the young Frank Sinatra) was predicated on new miking technology, and gave rise to mainstream male vocalist sex appeal. Moderately quiet intimacy — or, more simply, closely eavesdropping on famous singers — was the new commodity here; in aural terms, the microphone now allowed singer and listener to be close together and indeed exclude all others from "their" much

30 Murray S. Davis, *Smut: Erotic Reality /Obscene Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 130.

31 Arved Ashby, "Photo/phono/porno," in *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (University of California Press, 2010), 194–220.

32 Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola,* trans. Richard Miller (University of California Press, 1971), 143.

smaller, secretive, and privately shared acoustic space. So the sound is no longer isolated and delivered as a "sonorous fetish," but is brought in ultra-close and shared. As Sinatra pursued this career-defining project of defining a new vocal style in the early 1940s, his pivotal publicist George Evans opened his eyes to the fine art of getting into bed with technology as a body-substitute: "Picking up on Sinatra's intimate relationship with the microphone, Evans told him: Imagine that mike on its stand is a beautiful broad, he told his client. Caress it. Make love to it. Hold on to it for dear life."[33] The aurally horny bobby-soxers "liked to listen," and couldn't help but pee the Paramount Theater seats a little when Frankie was on stage and making love to a microphone. Electric circuitry, in the broadest view, had become a handmaiden not to intimacy in the accepted sense, but rather to "intimacy" as well as INTIMACY.

* * *

I can certainly hear Kurt Cobain's flesh in and through his voice, and so my remembered (imagined) desire for his (possible, virtual) figure is still cued by records of his singing. But at the same time I can't have any genuine corporeal connections with a musician who shot himself decades ago. How can I know the body is in the voice, since I knew nothing of his body (apart from verbal accounts of how small of frame he was, and his own claim that he "had minor scoliosis in junior high")? All I've seen of Cobain were the fully clothed photos, which of course contrasts with female musicians of the time (think Deborah Harry and Gwen Stefani, but maybe not Kim Deal of the alternative groups the Pixies and the Breeders). What were his flesh and physique, with or without the truthing/lying/penetrative technologies of reproducibility? I've never even seen a shirtless photo of Kurt; the images he left behind aren't remotely as explicit as the recordings, the visual presence much more guarded and "public" than the aural. (There is that one photo of him, caught weeping help-

33 James Kaplan, *Frank: The Voice* (Anchor Books, 2011), 159.

lessly after a September 1990 concert in Seattle: a vision of psychic nudity.)

By all accounts, Cobain was ashamed of his body. But then he ingeniously distracted from the boney physique by pioneering the thrift-store-cardigan grunge look, often layered with the distracting geometric barrage of flannel shirts. This all fit his basic ethos as a passive-aggressive and unpredictable weakling who hated and feared alpha masculinity. His biographer Charles R. Cross relates the stories of Cobain being acutely embarrassed by his virginity, and then having his mother angrily barge in on his first sexual encounter, so he suffered the indignity of having to quickly dress in front of his first would-be sex partner, his still-stiff cock visible to all.[34] Kurt's adolescent fears of never being "man enough" focused obsessively, single-mindedly on the amount of hair growing — or failing to grow — on his testicles. And so he grew compensatingly long hair on his head, inspected his balls for hirsuteness every day, and warily evaded onlookers when he changed clothes in gym class. One strangely time-haunted journal entry on this inadequacy, as elliptical and poetic as one of Bashō's haikus, reads: "Not enough pubes yet. Lost years. Gained ideals. Not yet developed. Much past the time in which our pubes fail to grow."[35]

Any guy who cultivates a fear of failing to be man enough will obsess over his voice — fixate on its sonority, its "carry," its register, and finally its effect on those persons who hear him. He will experiment with casting his voice into different octaves. Kurt's male relatives and stepfather regularly accused him of being a fag, and this emotional abuse wrought subtly audible effects on his singing. On the Nirvana "Negative Creep" track (1989), his voice is suffused with rage, but it's not an anger fixated on testosterone levels, and it's not a rage that arises from the lyrics: "This is out of our reach / This is out of our reach / This is out of our reach / and it's grown / This is getting to be / This is getting to be / This is getting to be drone / I'm a negative creep /

34 Cross, *Heavier Than Heaven,* 55.
35 Ibid., 52.

I'm a negative creep / I'm a negative creep and I'm stoned." The vocal fury here is rooted more in the song's ethos and sound than in any narrative born of the words — the song has no story. What emanated from Kurt's throat was a concatenation of willpower, rage, and self-loathing, a bouquet of disaffections that he managed to bring together seamlessly and with surprising breath support.

Patriarchy and anger also channeled and daunted Cobain's developing musical tastes. Around the same time he had his sexual revelation, his big musical revelation arrived when he was sixteen and encountered a fellow Washingtonian group, the sludge metal/grunge band the Melvins. (But he always claimed the first concert he ever heard was by the equally nervy-sounding south California punk group Black Flag.) Lead guitarist and singer for the Melvins, Buzz Osborne, helped Kurt along in his musical coming-of-age by giving him some punk albums and passing along a book about the Sex Pistols. (Seven years later, Osborne would introduce Kurt and bassist Krist Novoselic to Dave Grohl, thus completing the definitive Nirvana lineup.) Kurt was influenced by the slightly older Osborne, not least by his eclectic underground musical tastes, and his dislike of crowds and aversion to stadium rock. He recalled how "[the Melvins] played faster than I ever imagined music could be played and with more energy than my Iron Maiden records could provide. *This was what I was looking for.* Ah, punk rock. The other stoners were bored and kept shouting, 'Play some Def Leppard.' God, I hated those fucks more than ever."[36]

The year Cobain discovered the Melvins also saw the huge heavy metal success of Quiet Riot's cover of the Slade song "Cum on Feel the Noize" (1983), which made the Billboard top ten. The chorus of this song was unabashed party-hearty and teen-exhortative, if more muted sexually than many metal singles of the time: "Come on, feel the noise / Girls, rock your boys / We'll get wild, wild, wild / Wild, wild, wild." The song had plenty of fuzzed-out, overdriven guitar work, stadium sing-along hooks,

36 Ibid., 46.

and even a fade-out at the end in 1970s style. Kurt had professed admiration for Slade at one point, but he and wife, Courtney Love, were keen to assail Axl Rose for misogynist incitements, such as the one in the 1987 Guns N' Roses song "It's So Easy": "Turn around, bitch, I got a use for you / Besides, you ain't got nothing better to do / And I'm bored." This masculinist–feminist contretemps spread from the musicians themselves to the fan bases of the two groups. Broader in its top-ten market reach was the casual sexist objectification heard in the hit track from Michael Jackson's 34×-platinum album *Thriller* (1982). This song, "The Girl Is Mine," is a duo with Paul McCartney that returns to the chorus: "The girl is mine / The doggone girl is mine / I know she's mine / Because the doggone girl is mine."

And so Cobain — neurotic but diffident, petrified by his own unmanliness, and unusually respectful of women for his time — had resolved at the height of his adolescence that metal and all its male pubescence were not for him. In terms of both its bands and fans, the heavy metal genre centered on self-serving mythologies of "men being men" and "men enjoying the company of men" — it presumed close-knit groups of hairy-balled males. Musicologist Robert Walser, focusing on metal in terms of its lyrics and its stage acts, pointed to "the heavy metal dialectic of absolute control and transcendent freedom in a performative context of male bonding." Walser explains this all-important bonding aspect, what Eve Sedgwick might have called the "homosociality of metal." Walser writes:

> Male bonding itself becomes crucial to the reception of metal that depends on masculine display, for it helps produce and sustain consensus about meaning. Exscripting texts do occasionally refer to sexuality, but typically as just another arena for enactments of male power. Mutual erotic pleasure rarely appears in the lyrics of heavy metal, just as it is seldom discussed by men in any other context. Metal shields men from the danger of pleasure — loss of control — but also enables

> display, sometimes evoking images of armored, metalized male bodies.[37]

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick tended a continuum between the "homosocial" and the "homosexual." Sedgwick might as well have been explaining heavy metal music cultures rather than English writing, since there are similarities between the men-among-men and men-against-men power plays that take place in Dickens (whom Sedgwick discusses) and in Def Leppard (whom she doesn't): "Clearly, however convenient it might be to group together all the bonds that link males to males, and by which males enhance the status of males — usefully symmetrical as it would be, that grouping meets with a prohibitive structural obstacle. From the vantage point of our own society, at any rate, it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic." Here she described homosociality as "applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." She continues: "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual — a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted."[38] I want to believe that Sedgwick was somehow responsible, say, through mind control or long-distance psychokinetic manipulation, for Cobain and his Nirvana bandmates French-kissing each other on live TV — at the curtain-call closer for *Saturday Night Live,* January 11, 1992. If only for a few blissful moments, homosocial and homosexual were reconciled in mainstream American media.[39]

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37 Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 160.

38 Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–2.

39 The moment was an important one for Cobain himself. In his *Incesticide* album (1992) liner note, when he lists "the few really important things that

(Of course there were — and are — additional breaks in this idealized "continuum" of society beyond those mentioned by Sedgwick. American culture became a thick rope of fearful power plays, not least race's intersections with sex and gender, and Sedgwick was teasing out just one thread of this in her discussion of homophobia. The truly valuable achievement at the close of the 1960s, a period of assassinations, race riots, and carpet-bombings in Indochina, was finding a way to bring "soft" and conciliatory-sounding topics such as desire and love back into discussions of race, sex, gender, and power. Author and civil rights activist James Baldwin, for one, was a furious malcontent who was still broaching the subject of love in a 1971 conversation with Margaret Mead, also in his own book *The Devil Finds Work* [1976]. He concluded that love can't help but become a vessel for sociopolitical domination: "When you have any terrific disparity in power, it produces terrible relationships."[40] This was only several years after the Summer of Love and John Lennon's typically idealistic and nebulous Beatles number one single "All You Need Is Love" [1967]: "There's nothing you can do that can't be done / Nothing you can sing that can't be sung / Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game / It's easy." But specifically what kind of love is both needed and easily gamed, John Lennon? And then there was comedian Rodney Dangerfield, who also "did a Sedgwick" in the 1970s with his joke about the disconnect between Judeo-Christian morals and suburban puritanism: "They say love thy neighbor as thy self. So what am I supposed to do, jerk him off too?")

Kurt wrote early on of his band's origins: "Nirvana's guitar/vocalist Kurdt Kobain [sic] and bass[ist] Chris Novoselic lived in Aberdeen 150 miles from Seattle. Aberdeen's population consists of highly bigoted redneck snoose-chewing deer-shooting faggot-killing logger types who 'ain't too partial to weirdo new

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I've been blessed with," he includes "kissing Chris and Dave on *Saturday Night Live* just to spite homophobes."

40 Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (Dell Publishing, 1971), 23.

wavers.'"[41] Cobain biographer Cross relates the frequent clashes where Kurt's older male relatives called him a faggot, and suggests he sustained a deep desire for physical intimacy with other dudes: "Growing up in a world where men were rarely touched except with the occasional slap on the back, he was starved for the feel of skin on skin."[42] Kurt apparently heard the "faggot" accusation often enough that he started believing it himself: "I'm definitely gay in spirit, and I probably could be bisexual." And at one point he found the label not just physically hazardous, but also psychically liberating: "People just thought I was weird at first, just some fucked-up kid. But once I got the gay tag, it gave me the freedom to be able to be a freak and let people know that they should just stay away from me."[43] In summary, Kurt Cobain owed much of his alienation and fear to — as Sedgwick described the cultural opposition — the sharp rift in modern Anglo-European cultures between "'men loving men' and 'men promoting the interests of men.'" (For the ancient Greeks, she notes wryly, "the continuum between 'men loving men' and 'men promoting the interests of men' appears to have been quite seamless."[44]) Herein lie the origins for at least some of the rage that often imbues Kurt Cobain's voice, and clues to the relevance of my own homosexual lust for — as opposed to aesthetic interest in — the sounds that came out of his throat.

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Kurt's voice was, to use the word in the broader sense, a punk instrument. It raised no boring questions of training or range, or of pitching the voice to an audience. At a Cobain memorial event, Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic eulogized him in terms of the alt-rock aesthetic — guitar-god-worship and studio-professional flair be damned: "Kurt had an ethic towards his fans that

41 Cross, *Heavier Than Heaven,* 115.
42 Ibid., 54.
43 Kurt Cobain, *Advocate* interview (1993), in *Cobain on Cobain,* ed. Soulsby, 386, 385.
44 Sedgwick, *Between Men,* 4.

was rooted in the punk rock way of thinking: No band is special; no player royalty. If you've got a guitar, and a lot of soul, just bang something out and mean it — you are the superstar. Plug in the tones and rhythms that are universally human. Music. Heck, use your guitar as a drum. Just catch a groove and let it flow out of your heart."[45] Kurt had what musicians like to call an untrained voice, and he sometimes struck his own vocal cords as if they were a drum. Critic Robert Loss writes, "Even when it's screaming, some part of Kurt Cobain's voice always contains that desire. […] Call it a permanent vulnerability. A defiant withdrawal from society. Call it childishness if you want."[46] The idea here is that the grain is indeed a grain, not a suave vocality, or even one that's consistently listenable, not the sonic equivalent to a pretty face. In a more everyday manner of speaking, such a voice might be considered grain*less.*

The trained/untrained vocal duality corresponds to another corporeal duality, that of the porn star actor versus the amateur — two franchises, each with its own aesthetics and fan base. In music recordings and in adult films, the untrained presence brings a special *frisson* that works outside any notions of style. It introduces the intense necessity of the moment, the eruption of a tumescent earnestness — not of expeditious technique or surface show, but of inalterable need and of message. In talking about the attractions of amateur porn, adult actor Meghan Madness positions professional and amateur genres on a dialectic between performance and pleasure: "What wasn't fun was watching two people pretend they enjoyed the interaction for the sake of money."[47]

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45 Cross, *Heavier Than Heaven,* 360.

46 Robert Loss, "I Was Young When I Left Home: How Kurt Cobain's Voice Resonates," *popmatters,* April 7, 2014, https://www.popmatters.com/180440-i-was-young-when-i-left-home-kurt-cobains-voice-2495671862.html.

47 Meghan Madness, "5 Things I Learned about Sex from Making Amateur Pornography," *Dirty Little Secrets,* January 5, 2022, https://medium.com/wtf-moments/5-things-i-learned-about-sex-from-making-amateur-pornography-bd8aaeac0532.

In Kurt Cobain's case, we can talk about an untrained voice, and also a voice that doesn't sound self-knowing. Even in comparison with other punk-related singers — Joe Strummer of The Clash, Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees, Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols — Kurt doesn't emanate a sound of insistence and "carry" and performed-ness. What does training do, whether it's in a voice conservatory or in sex work? Training aims to eliminate any sense of desperation, and that ignores the fact that desperation and fever can be exciting or even necessary. Surely the greatest thing would be training that works against itself by bringing desperation to the forefront rather than squelching it. But then doesn't all training eventually end up suppressing the very possibility of *frisson*? Barthes himself said that the market's insistence on clarity and consistency helped doom cultures of the amateur. Here he holds up Fischer-Dieskau as a paragon of vocal excellence and professional conventionality:

> His art — expressive, dramatic, sentimentally clear, borne by a voice lacking in any "grain," in signifying weight, fits well with the demands of an average culture. Such a culture, defined by the growth of the number of listeners and the disappearance of practitioners (no more amateurs), wants art, wants music, provided they be clear, that they "translate" an emotion and represent a signified (the "meaning" of a poem); an art that innoculates pleasure (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion) and reconciles the subject to what in music can be said: what is said about it, predicatively, by Institution, Criticism, Opinion.[48]

Innocence and rage make strange bedfellows, and various writers tried over the years to encapsulate Cobain's formidable contradictions of emotion and demeanor, eloquence and defect. After spending a relaxed weekend with the Nirvana members not long before Kurt's death, French journalist Youri Lenquette

48 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 185.

compared him to Saint-Exupéry's character the Little Prince. "O LITTLE PRINCE!" wrote Saint-Exupéry. "Gradually, this was how I came to understand your sad little life. For a long time your only entertainment was the pleasure of sunsets."[49] But dwarfing the resemblance that Lenquette saw with *Le petit prince* was one wretched, appalling, and paradoxical difference: "[Cobain] still looks, at twenty-seven years old, like a fragile, sensitive child. His face is partly hidden behind long hair separated by a center parting; he speaks in a soft voice, barely audible. A calm that must be there, but only when you catch in his glance a glimpse of the whirlwinds of energy that inhabit him. If one day someone makes a film where the Little Prince turns into a serial killer, Kurt could easily play the lead role."[50]

While we're dealing with contradictions, What did I mean by my contradictory term "luxuriously coarse" as I used it to describe Cobain's "Negative Creep" vocal? I meant something like critic Nabil Ayers's description when he heard Nirvana in Seattle in April 1991, before the group released their breakthrough album *Nevermind*. Ayers said of Cobain's singing on that occasion that "his guttural scream carried more scratching humanity and intensity than any singer I'd ever heard."[51] "Negative Creep" is track 7 on Nirvana's 1989 album *Bleach,* which predates their record deal with Geffen and the big-budget studio productions of *Nevermind* (1991) and *In Utero* (1993). So Kurt's raw vocal isn't remediated by technology, there's no moneyed modesty of disinterest — no "natural distance" or "reduction of distance" between our sweet banana-shaped ears and the rough fabric of this voice: "'The early songs were really angry,' [Cobain]

49 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince,* trans. Richard Howard (Thorndike Press, 2005), 41.

50 Soulsby, *Cobain on Cobain,* 460.

51 Nabil Ayers, "The Night Nirvana Changed Everything," *Rolling Stone,* April 15, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/nirvana-smells-like-teen-spirit-first-performance-1154128/.

said later. Indeed, here [on "Negative Creep"] his vocal is a howl, his sense of abjection and self-hate all-encompassing."[52]

Maybe I found Cobain's vocal rage specifically erotic on account of the shared anger — the fury being something that I sense, simply through the tone and colorations of his voice, that we had in common. Maybe the anger came from Kurt's notorious, debilitating stomach pains. Or maybe the rage is his rejection of metal-head-ery, even though the vocal itself might sound "metal." Or maybe the anger emanates from the self-loathing? "I Hate Myself and Want to Die" was a 1993 Nirvana track, and before that the line served as a working title for the *In Utero* album. (Geffen planned to issue the song as a single, but canceled the release upon Cobain's suicide.) I can understand the self-hatred, which makes Kurt and me comrades in arms and all that. The lyrics of that Cobain song continue: "Runny nose and runny yolk / Even if you have a cold still / You can cough on me again I still haven't had my full fill / In the someday / What's that sound? / In the someday / What's that sound?" Or, on second thought, maybe the anger is too well phrased to mark an existential crisis, and so the affect could be better described as petulance? (Few things are more engrossing than a beautiful man who is irascible in his work.)

Many listeners are surely moved *empathetically* by Kurt's voice, but I'm not one of them. My pleasure, since it's not born of empathy, could be a fetishistic getting-off on the sounds of another male's injury. So is this a gay aural SM thing? As in enjoying the pained sounds emitted by a man? In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Susan Sontag made the claim — possibly still shocking back in 2003 — that objectifications of pain have reached the levels of visceral delectation found in porno: "The appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. […] No moral

52 Douglas Wolk et al., "No Apologies: All 102 Nirvana Songs Ranked: RS Tackles the Complete Catalog of the Band That Defined the Nineties and Made the World a Lot Noisier," *Rolling Stone,* April 5, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/no-apologies-all-102-nirvana-songs-ranked-175683/blew-35524/.

charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching."[53] Sontag wasn't talking specifically about sexual violence, she was more generally addressing journalism, visuality, and shifting cultures of human cruelty. There could be sadism involved on my part, in that Kurt Cobain's vocal production is rageful enough that it seems to be actively damaging itself; the performance sounds like an act of self-destruction, and listening becomes as irrefusable as watching a car crash. So maybe the "Negative Creep" vocal was an aural promissory note of suicide? Mark Richardson has a traumatic response as a listener: "Cobain's voice through the second verse terrifies me. There is no concern for his physical well-being or even his future as a vocalist in a rock band. He sings as intensely as he can possibly sing. Sometimes, when I'm listening loud, I think my headphones might be breaking up from the volume only to realize that the membrane being excited to the point of distortion is actually Cobain's larynx."[54]

I think Richardson is being a bit of a drama queen here. Yes, Kurt screams in "Negative Creep," but he also somehow maintains pitch (or at least vocal stability) quite consistently, and varies the levels of growl/grit/grind that he adds to the voice. He seems to be marshaling his air supply, not forcing everything to vibrate and rattle as if there's no tomorrow. Modifying things in the vocal production is a way to safeguard the mechanism, and Kurt does shift registers. The repeated line is in a lower place, down closer to the lungs and those scrutinized testicles: "Daddy's little girl ain't a girl no more / Daddy's little girl ain't a girl no more / Daddy's little girl ain't a girl no more / Daddy's little

53 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 41.

54 Mark Richardson, "Happy Birthday, Kurt: A Mediation on the Late Rock Icon's Strange Journey from Being a Guy in a Band to an Idea that Keeps Cycling through Culture via Social Media and Our Own Minds," *Pitchfork,* February 20, 2013, https://pitchfork.com/features/resonant-frequency/9071-happy-birthday-kurt/.

girl ain't a girl no more." This possessive "daddy" isn't the serial killer that Youri Lenquette foresaw. Indeed, there's an audible hint of fetching vulnerability, and at this point I imagine Kurt could — screams or no screams — dash into an early Sinatra Italianate croon if he so desired. This daddy-sound is fetchingly manly; this could be the sound of one of those "snoose-chewing deer-shooting logger types," but at the same time this particular man's man wouldn't be hosting "highly bigoted redneck" tendencies.

This is a good point for me to declare a personal demurral. To my ears, Kurt Cobain's singing, though punk-derived and rageful and sometimes frightening, also managed to be well supported and consistently beautiful. And this vocal comeliness must relate to his eagerness to talk about "the music" while disavowing any song-based "message." He disavowed the wider cultural compulsion that Barthes referenced (with an audible shudder) as "the tyranny of meaning." Kurt happily neglected words — song lyrics, sung texts. He admitted that lyrics were often an afterthought, at best: "We wrote three new songs the week that we recorded the album [*Bleach*]. And I wrote lyrics to two of the songs ten minutes before I recorded singing."[55] And this was a near contradiction to the wordy power plays, self-conscious narratives, and world-buildings of so many heavy metal songs. "Iron Maiden draws upon a variety of religious and philosophical traditions," Walser writes, "in order to explore and interrogate moralities. […] More often, though, Iron Maiden's lyrics ponder the meaning and nature of existence, frequently by investigating the attractions of mysticism."[56] Cobain was more eager to distance himself from message acts, such as U2 and the folk-revivalist-cum-protest-singer Joan Baez: "My lyrics are often just bits of sentences put together without any particular meaning. I use ideas that come to my head, and I write them down as I go along in a notebook like this one. […] I have noth-

55 Soulsby, *Cobain on Cobain,* 21.
56 Walser, *Running with the Devil,* 152.

ing against lyrics with a message, like those of the Dead Kennedys, but it's just not at all the way I write."[57]

What role do words play in Kurt Cobain's erotic auralism? Probably none at all, but then when would they for any artist? I'm with Barthes in failing to find information sexy. For me, an individual male voice is a turn-on insofar as it is *not* a carrier of semantic or denotative meaning. (What pleasure could there be in fucking a guy who wants to *talk*?) To be honest, I never knew the lyrics to the chorus of Nirvana's bazillion-selling song "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and I think hearing informational words at that point would just make the singer's voice less arousing; they would get in the way. Again, there is correlation with Barthes's "grain" as that part of singing to be distinguished from "everything in the performance which is in the service of communication." But then what — if anything — is communicated by this mindless, Dadaesque chorus, which I have to confess I've looked up only now?

> With the lights out, it's less dangerous
> Here we are now, entertain us
> I feel stupid, and contagious
> Here we are now, entertain us
> A mulatto, an albino
> A mosquito, my libido, yeah.

I would say Barthes's "the grain of the voice" must correlate with the sound(s) that the Marquis de Sade believed came from sexual connection. Sade said the whole purpose of sex is to elicit an (involuntary, immanent) noise from the partner.[58] Yes, Sade's name has become synonymous with lustful cruelty and murder, and was immortalized in the everyday word sadism. But this particular notion of sex, as an act aimed at incurring sound,

57 Soulsby, *Cobain on Cobain,* 271.

58 "The objective in sexual congress, according to the Marquis de Sade, is to elicit involuntary noisemaking from your partner." Jim Holt, *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes* (W.W. Norton, 2008), 66.

is brilliant and radical. It would suggest a musicality of sensual partnership, and would seem to deny ugly tropes of masculine heterosexuality — for instance, that the male's purpose is to "defeat" the woman or to violate the partner. Doing something for the sake of a sound means listening, waiting for an answer of sorts, which in those terms makes sex very different from "Turn around, bitch, I got a use for you / Besides, you ain't got nothing better to do." And sex becomes, quite literally, about putting yourself in a "soulful" place and then "banging something out and meaning it." By this thinking, penetrating someone with your cock or pleasuring them with your mouth becomes similar to well-intentioned-ly drawing a bow across a priceless Guarneri violin or picking a string on a vintage Fender Stratocaster. So the sexual partner becomes an instrument. (Does this mean dehumanizing the pleasure-involved other? Well, I'm sure some guitarists respect their Les Pauls and some cellists have greater intimacy with their Stradivariuses than they do with their human partners, or maybe more.)

Barthes's notion reflects one of my own precious reasons for becoming so intimately involved with music in the first place: because it carries deep meaning at the same time that it really should force all concerned parties, at some point during the experience, to STFU (just *shut the fuck up*). (Barthes refuses to judge a musical performance on the basis of interpretive rules or style constraints: "I shall not wax lyrical concerning the 'rigor,' the 'brilliance,' the 'warmth,' the 'respect for what is written,' etc."[59]) Words pall, the sounds from you and from those around you count as only so much prattling, while a pleasured and pleasurable (and nonverbal) response to your actions becomes all-important. For myself, sex that doesn't incur an honest and sudden oral/aural response — which wouldn't include verbalizing, conversing, or reciting T.S. Eliot — is bad sex, or not sex at all. (And so I thank Sade for helping me understand that as a specifically sexual form of musicality, or maybe a musical expression of sexual desire.) The most intense gratification, even more

59 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 189.

satisfying than one's physical satisfaction itself, comes from hearing someone else's notes of pleasure resulting from some exertion of my own. At the same time, and here's the rub (the frottage, as it were): It becomes hard to try to define the phrase "aural indication of pleasure." Does that aural indication need to indicate a sensibility independent and indeed different from my own (a higher voice, a lower voice, an angry voice, a passive voice)? Aren't there human sounds that blur lines between pain and pleasure? Of course there are.

Barthes writes: "I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic — but in no way 'subjective.'"[60] "Blew" is the opening track on the *Bleach* album, and it starts the record with an arousing tour of the back of Kurt's upper throat, but at the same time casting a glance to the bottom of his windpipe (where he originates his bit of grunty, big-bad-wolf aspiration at the opening lines "Now if you wouldn't mind, I would like it blew / And if you wouldn't mind, I would like to lose"). There's good airflow here, and the singer's modicum of growl is all the more alluring when we know it's a matter of musical power and not (or not necessarily) a male sexual-domination dog-whistle thing. (Kurt said he was badly traumatized by the news that a pair of men had raped a woman while they sang "Polly" from the *Nevermind* album. But in that situation, one imagines it was the words — "Isn't me, have a seed / Let me clip your dirty wings" — and not the vocal quality that were heard as enacting power over women. So yet again a person was made to suffer under "the tyranny of verbal meaning," as opposed to the captivating equivocation that is vocal grain.[61])

60 Ibid., 188.

61 Cobain described this situation in his *Incesticide* album note. The song "Polly" was itself precipitated by a news story of a sadistic rapist. And then, the aftermath in Kurt's own account: "Last year, a girl was raped by two wastes of sperm and eggs while they sang the lyrics to our song 'Polly.' I have a hard time carrying on knowing there are plankton like that in our audience."

"Blew" is dark in register and timbre; years later, Krist Novoselic said the song was the first and last example of a neurosis-genre, and called it "the sole survivor of the Doom Pop experiment." Richard Bienstock of *Rolling Stone* gave some explanation and context for the musical murk: "When Kurt and Krist dropped their lowest strings during the recording of *Bleach,* they didn't realize their respective instruments were already tuned down a full step. The consequence was that they went 'one lower,' to a positively leaden 'drop-C.' Which, in the case of 'Blew,' essentially plunged Kurt's languid vocals and loping melodies into a tar pit."[62] I would agree with Bienstock's "languidness" description here only if it could have resulted from irreverent lovemaking. Consider all that low-register, winding vocalism closely doubled by the guitar — and confined within a narrow range. The song could have underscored the impromptu, narcoticized sex reunion that Kurt and Courtney Love had not long after they met, at least as biographer Cross recounted it: "Courtney was infatuated enough that by the end of November, after not seeing Kurt for two weeks, she uncharacteristically cancelled a Hole gig and flew to Amsterdam. There, they bought heroin and spent the day nodding out and having lazy sex." Her infatuation had not been averted by Kurt's own odd, obscurantist, all-over-the-map expressions of long-distance affection: "He sent her copies of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights,* and faxes that were equally romantic, though owing to his essential strangeness, much of what he wrote was also just plain weird. He frequently obsessed on his favorite off-color topics: human waste, 'butt-fucking,' birth, babies, and drugs."[63]

I'm vexed by one aspect of this song "Blew," and I think a better understanding of that aspect would help clarify my own sexuality. What I found most arousing in "Blew" is Kurt's vocal balancing act, but you mightn't think singerly mediations could inspire boners. What I'm talking about is his ability to growl

62 Wok et al., "No Apologies: All 102 Nirvana Songs Ranked."
63 Cross, *Heavier Than Heaven,* 218.

and grit and grind *while doing a fine job of singing* — in other words, to *make secondary throat noises while still maintaining pitch.* He's in command of not just his vocal cords but various parts of his lungs and his larynx and nose — not only the vocal cords and glottis and the false vocal folds that a vocalist employs to make noise. Kurt Cobain's anger is to be heard here, but at the same time there's also actual singing. This isn't the aural thumbprint of someone who's on the verge of losing it or someone who's vocally posing for the mikes. There's plenty of "grain" here, but also the pop sensibility of a musician destined to climb the charts. In a 1989 interview, Kurt was keen to "distanc[e] the band from the grunge stereotype. He claims Nirvana is trying 'to be less […] categorized than most bands' and pledges his allegiance to punk, the Beatles, even ABBA, while pointing to the softer qualities of the band's latest music."[64]

But this singerly aspect can't serve as an excuse for cynically reading aural aspects into Kurt's personality as a whole. I don't hear any culinary or à la mode aspects to his voice — and self-consciousness only as a vehicle for fear and inferiority. I can't hear him as some kind of gentleman-punk, as a nouveau riche kid expressing his predigested alterity with one of those diamond-encrusted Tiffany safety pins, but to be honest there might be aural traces of Kurt Cobain the nihilist who loved the Beatles in spite of himself.[65] And I've always been a sucker for suffering and sociopathic loners who have a lot going on in their heads. But I guess I would be allowed to hear this mediative vocalizing as symptomatic of an undoctrinaire personality, as indicative of a person who was able to listen to others and also

64 Soulsby, *Cobain on Cobain,* 39.

65 In one of the more famous debacles in later twentieth-century fashion history, Cobain and Courtney Love angrily set fire to items that designer Marc Jacobs had sent them from his now-notorious 1992 grunge collection for Perry Ellis. Love recalls: "We burned it. We were punkers — we didn't like that kind of thing." See Rachel Strugatz, "Courtney Love on Birkins and Sex: Courtney Love Talks Marc Jacobs, Kurt Cobain, Drugs and Couture," *Women's Wear Daily,* July 20, 2010, https://wwd.com/eye/people/feature/courtney-love-on-birkins-and-sex-3189035-1292541/.

shout loudly enough for himself. Certainly, Cobain's delivery isn't whiny and polemically message-driven à la Jello Biafra (Dead Kennedys, "Holiday in Cambodia") or Henry Rollins (of Black Flag), nor is it baiting the listener à la Johnny Rotten (of the Sex Pistols). When one hears Kurt's voice, the crooner legacy seems distant, but not disconnected. Like a latter-day Bertolt Brecht, Biafra used a vexing pitch-wobble to prevent the listener from tuning out the words and the singer's verdicts against United States warmongering and American bourgeois materialism. So, Cobain fell victim to no "tyrannies of meaning" in the song "Blew," and did nothing here that would have turned Barthes away.

I want to emphasize that the vocal "grain," although it makes an appeal to the listener's erogenics, isn't synonymous with seduction. (When the "non-grained" voice sings, protests Barthes, "nothing seduces, nothing sways us to *jouissance*."[66]) Or at least grain-ed-ness is distinct from musical seduction in the usual sense, as practiced by such great singers as Barry White, Sam Cooke, Engelbert Humperdinck, Tony Bennett, and Marvin Gaye. Seduction combines words and sex appeal, while the *jouissance* that preoccupies Barthes and me has skipped such steps and is already in later stages of penetration. Barry White is sexy, yes, but that sexiness is a cultured form of persuasive foreplay; it's a kind of salesmanship that relies on textual understanding. Sinatra recalled the ad hoc *bel canto* style that he devised as a pioneering crooner who started making love to the microphone: "Let him take care that the higher the notes, the more necessary it is to touch them with softness, to avoid screaming. Let him learn the manner to glide with the vowels, and to drag the voice gently from the high to the lower notes. Let him take care that the words are uttered in such a manner that they be distinctly understood, and no one syllable lost. In

66 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 183.

repeating the air, he that does not vary it for the better is no great master."[67]

* * *

With his "grain of the voice" idea, Barthes adopted a posthumanist perspective and said that it's not a *person* or a *culture* we hear when we audit "that particular voice" singing, it's a pile of tissues vocalizing through an individual and changeable combination of buzzes and resonances. When we talk about vocalizing, what we're talking about is a concatenation of sounds from throughout the body, all manner of bone and soft tissue, of spit and membrane, joining forces, "something is there, manifest and stubborn […] brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages."[68] Barthes was a semiotician, so he was ultimately concerned with meaning, and in that role he went on to conclude that it's often *not* the communicational and trained and culturally distilled aspects of that plurality of sounds that prove meaningful for the listener. Vocal instruction in European-diasporic art music traditions, and in many popular ones, has long aimed for a tone that is pure, open, relaxed, round, and warm. Here a good and steady air supply activates the "primary" vocal folds (cords) as the *fons et origo* of musical "information": sounding an A♭ (for instance) that is clear and unconstricted and in tune, with "false" vocal folds and other tissues contributing only enough distortion to color the sound, in a way that helps convey the lyrics. And of course different music venues — La Scala in Milan, a Broadway theater, a Southern Baptist church, a blues club — host different amounts and different kinds of visceral coloration-additions to that informational A♭. Cooperations of bodily resonances and tissues are different from one locale to another; one venue would have the sinuses

67 Sinatra in a 1965 *Life* magazine article, cited by Ken Ringle, "To Be Perfectly Frank," *The Washington Post,* December 9, 1995, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1995/12/10/to-be-perfectly-frank/69f9ff19-38f5-4c2c-afa8-5e837a5434a9/.

68 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 181.

more involved, and another would focus on the space at the back of the throat.

With his dominant interest in tissue as such, in the "single skin [that] lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings," Barthes was skeptical of vocal discussions that focused on air and breathing to the exclusion of vibrational matters. He saw such discussions of breathing as a kind of monopolistic mysticism in themselves. "The whole of musical pedagogy teaches not the culture of the 'grain' of the voice but the emotive modes of its delivery — the myth of respiration. How many singing teachers have we not heard prophesying that the art of vocal music rested entirely on the mastery, the correct discipline of breathing!" For Barthes, breathing as such (as abstracted from the body and its more sensate organs) is too inarticulate, too badly focused, too soft, too compliant, and therefore mired in shibboleths of clarity, expressivity, communication. In short, the pleura are too dissimilar from the cock. "The lung" amounts to "a stupid organ," Barthes says, an organ that "swells but gets no erection."[69]

I'm tempted to take "the grain of the voice" to a literalist's extreme and talk about other kinds of vocalization as noninformational bodily expressions. For instance, if we refer to a Cobain-musculature (Barthes was talking about a singing *it* not a singing *he*), what kind of sound did his particular tissue-miscellany make during fuck-sex when it sang, sang, sang rhythmically through the creaking bedframe, thunk-thunk-thunking cheap notched maple bedposts up against the wall? This would have been both a musical and erotic experience for this particular listener. (These lumbered erections, these woodies, must have had a most definable kind of grain all their own. So could we speak in this case of *la grain de la colonne de lit*?) This would have been a most impressive set of sounds speaking outside of culture, sounds presenting Kurt's bodily expression as cocksure and unmediated. Such an aural flipped-script would be incredibly sexy. It would be an absolute representation of what Barthes

69 Ibid., 183.

looks for in the sound of a musical performance; namely — as he puts it — "the certainty of the body, of thrill."[70]

Elisabeth Grosz's statement on sexual selection could certainly apply to singing: "This calling to attention, this making of one's own body into a spectacle, this highly elaborate display of attractors, involves intensification. Not only are organs on display engorged, intensified, puffed up, but the organs that perceive them — ears, eyes, nose — are also filled with intensity, resonating with colors, sounds, smells, shapes, rhythms."[71] Yes, the muscles and soft tissues of the listener respond sympathetically, instinctively, maybe imitatively to the tensions and relaxations in the organs and cavities of the speaker or singer. I have a pet notion that listeners tend to react sympathetically to the bodily intensities and resonances that they hear in singers. And this vocal interpersonal entrainment, which must happen in terms of pitch-finding and rhythmic imitation, happens most often unconsciously. When an opera lover hears Gaetano Donizetti's tenor aria "Una furtiva lagrima," as part of that listening experience he or she tightens their vocal folds to mimic what they hear, tries to create similar spaces and tensions in the nose and throat. So the listener's own body models — to some extent — the singer's bodily comportment. And the non-erotic formalities of opera are passed along, purely through sound, to the listener.

It's odd that Koestenbaum, in fathoming "the queen's throat" to its furthest reaches, didn't mention the oropharynx. This is the throat area behind the tongue and above the trachea, the mystical cavity where — in both singerly and oral-sexual terms — "the magic happens." It is the cradle for sonic, oral, and vocal seductions. For singers, the oropharynx is a vital space that needs to be kept open. For lusty men who don't wish to dawdle, it is the ultra-pleasurable "deep throat" place of true entrance that Linda Lovelace made famous in her 1972 porno of that name (and then Bob Woodward with his Watergate scandal reporting in *All The*

70 Ibid., 189.
71 Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art,* 66.

President's Men). Koestenbaum does talk about the "resonance rooms" of the head and upper chest, an architectural wing of the voice that has the mouth as its portal: "Many [vocal instruction] writers insist that the passageway to the human voice's resonance rooms be left open, as if singing were mostly a matter of sincerity and the willingness to confess."[72] Koestenbaum's "sincerity and the willingness to confess" suggest the singer is submissive and wants to please. Combined with a need to leave "the passageway open," the technique of proper singing parallels that of oral sex. Given the cruel stage traumas in opera, the power-submissive dynamic of going down seems even more relevant:

> Fellatio as a sex act has a power dynamic implied, whether you intend it to or not. Many people see the person giving head as submissive, and the person getting head as the powerful one, the one in control. This perception comes from a number of different sources. […] Some people feel downright uncomfortable about the surrender they feel is implicit in giving head, and they can have such powerful feelings about it that they might not want to do it at all. These feelings are especially sharp for abuse survivors.[73]

Singers talk about resonance in their sound, meaning what you are hearing is the spaces and holes in their bodies. Kurt himself said that he sang by consciously using the diaphragm to get air, as trained singers tend to do, and that this correct manner of vocal expression somehow — paradoxically — led to his incapacitating and chronic ailment (ulcers): "The way I sing, I use my stomach, and since I scream a lot, it ended up causing an irritation. The tour was really long; we played almost every night, so it couldn't heal. I ended up with a hole in my stomach."[74] Some Freudian complications might attend this notion that the

72 Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat,* 158.
73 Violet Blue, *The Ultimate Guide to Fellatio,* 2nd ed. (Cleis Press, 2010), 65.
74 Soulsby, *Cobain on Cobain,* 459.

most direct and well-supported form of expression could cause a bodily ailment that's associated with repression.

As it turns out, though, "proper" — meaning healthy, unbound, and sonorous — singing requires a different pharyngeal posture than preparedness for swallowing cock. (In other words, the classical, schooled singing wouldn't have impressed Darwin when he was theorizing on reproductive matters.) Or, if you will, opening the room in confessional fashion to allow music to exit makes for a different soft-tissues alignment than opening the space to allow large objects to enter: "If the [voice] student reaches the point where he or she really feels a hugely open space in the throat — the feeling that he or she is 'swallowing an egg' or some other piece of fruit, for example — it is actually likely that the tongue root is so out of the way of the mouth cavity that it is depressing the larynx. What is an effort to free up space for the voice to resonate better actually ends up placing tension on the throat, tightening it, and producing a hollow, throaty timbre."[75] This helps explain why the sounds of operatic singing couldn't figure in sexual selection — at least for myself; artistry of voice is no turn-on, because its musculature is uninviting. Likewise, a voice can arouse only if works at the front of the head rather than the depths of the lungs. "It is […] in the mask that signifiance explodes, bringing not the soul but jouissance," says Barthes. "With F[ischer-]D[ieskau], I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose."[76]

In both the verses and chorus to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Kurt Cobain's voice sonates in most of these directions. The track must owe its popularity to the really good hooks, and it somehow manages to be both melodically memorable and monotonous — that abjection again. The Cobain growl, that spicy purr,

75 "Singing with an 'Open Throat': Vocal Tract Shaping," *SingWise,* https://www.singwise.com/articles/singing-with-an-open-throat-vocal-tract-shaping.

76 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 183. Translator Stephen Heath explains signifiance as an idea, distinct from significance, that originated with Julia Kristeva. See Barthes, *Image Music Text,* 10.

is there in the verses. At the lines "Hello, hello, hello, how low / Hello, hello, hello, how low," he gets a bit more adenoidal — that petulance comes out to greet the listener once more — and then he drones away, in a kind of catatonic ecstasy, through his verbal repetitions. There's some quasi-yodeling between lower and upper head-voice registers. And then that nonsensical but hypnotic chorus, with its greater grind, its harsh vocal folds closure, and shortened and laterally spread out airway. The song remains powerful and self-contradictory in its combination of tunefulness with vocal clamor. The oropharynx beckons.

* * *

Is there anything queerer than falling in love with a dead man you've never met? Gayness amorizes over the things it can't have, or can't even see or grasp. A case in point, vis-à-vis sexual desire, is the persistent gay fetish for straight men — males who are in fact dead to the possibility of mutual eroticism. Lusting after straight men is surely not some kind of mirror image to the straight male fetish for femme "lesbian women," but more a matter of wanting something you can't have. Gay men also tend to be especially possessive and adoring of things past — a process of protracted and inverse grieving, maybe, made all the more acute by the 1980s–1990s AIDS annihilation. (In a famous bon mot, Freud tells us that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."[77]) Author D.A. Miller essayed an ode to the Broadway musical, in the form of a book-length "archaeology of the post-war gay male subject." Here Miller ironically invoked nostalgia as the protective bunker in the epic genre of gay survivalism: "Our only possible move, in fact, has been down: to sink ever more deeply into nostalgia, the dank nether world where the waning

77 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916),* ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1957), 246.

of a cult, of their belief that it will deliver them, commonly sends its diminished members."[78] Given such endemic nostalgia, gay men tend to hold their photos and recordings dear. They cherish the media that came into being as vehicles for nostalgia-before-the-fact — artifacts that are "snapped" to satisfy a melancholy visual or aural lack even before the thing represented is gone. (The closest brush with death I've ever had myself was when I had the impudence to question Maria Callas's vocal quality, and then saw an opera-queen chum mentally entertaining ways to bayonet me.)

Barthes himself was a virulent nostalgist, not least when he elevated Panzéra over Fischer-Dieskau as an esotericism, a sound that needed to be remembered even though — or especially because — it could no longer be experienced: "Panzéra does not belong to this culture (he could not have done, having sung before the coming of the microgroove record; moreover I doubt whether, were he singing today, his art would be recognized or even simply perceived); his reign, very great between the wars, was that of an exclusively bourgeois art (an art, that is, in no way petit-bourgeois) nearing the end of its inner development and, by a familiar distortion, separated from History."[79] And then when Panzéra died, Barthes described the singer — in the solitary manner of an aural fetishist — as a sound that probably had been loved faithfully only by him. Barthes went on in this eulogy, Dunsby tells us, to say that Panzéra had deployed a "naked" voice, an unexpected term "which we can take to be an image of transparency, although there is no doubting that an erotic charge was intended."[80]

The Jean Genet threads run deep in Barthes here. For Barthes, photos are incitations to memory, reading, and mourning. At the same time, there's something profane to his obsessive relationship with visual images, which he addresses as vehi-

78 D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 136.

79 Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 185.

80 Dunsby, "Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzéra's Voice," 121.

cles for beauty and as instruments of the rarified hermeneutic spark he calls the *punctum*. In his most Genet-ish moment, he finds an erotic charge in a prison photo of the manacled and hunky Lewis Powell, the member of John Wilkes Booth's conspiratorial entourage who was hanged in July 1865 for slashing and almost murdering William Henry Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state. Powell is serene and gently virile, even radiant, in this photo taken less than three months before his execution. He looks for all the world like he's modeling for Abercrombie & Fitch. (Barthes might well have breathlessly confessed "Je convoitre l'assassin maudit," or some such.) What can be queerer than wanting bliss at the hands of a doomed assassin? Shouldn't the passage of time and the darkness of violence disallow such a reaction? Genet dedicated *Our Lady of the Flowers* to the memory of a young man "whose death keeps poisoning my life" — Maurice Pilorge, the eye-catching murderer who was guillotined at the age of twenty-five. So Cobain becomes my Pilorge, his records are my scavenged photos, and being aroused by the sounds of this suicidal singer and songwriter counts as my own Genet moment. (Except that Kurt Cobain killed only himself, and after he had given joy to many. Following up on the profaned vestiges of Genet's own Catholicism, Sartre wrote *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr.* I should do my own homage and pen *Saint Cobain, Musician and Martyr*.)

In *Our Lady of the Flowers,* Genet recalled jerking off in prison over scavenged news photos of handsome murderers who'd gone to the gallows. (More parallels: The French penal system was still sending convicted killers such as Pilorge to the guillotine, while Cobain in essence beheaded himself with a shotgun. The beautiful visages were removed.) Half of Genet's fetish here was the elaborate process of secretly compiling the murderer pictures. He glued the images onto the back of a bulletin board in his cell, using pieces of moistened bread. And then, after lights out, finally and at last, Genet's ejaculations, grace-conferrals of a sort, performed the nightly miracle of raising these beautiful and disfigured men from the dead:

> At night I love them, and my love endows them with life. During the day I go about my petty concerns. I am the housekeeper, watchful lest a bread-crumb or a speck of ash fall on the floor. But at night! Fear of the inspector who may suddenly switch on the light and put his head through the grating forces me to take sordid precautions lest the rustling of the sheets draw attention to my pleasure; but though it lose in nobility, my gesture, by becoming secret, heightens my pleasure. I dawdle.[81]

Barthes becomes Genet whenever he rhapsodizes over images of his beloved deceaseds. And in this way, his record albums function like his photos. Specifically, Barthes's comments on the sensuality of vocal specifics seem conditioned by his obsessive clinging to elements in old pictures. Genet is in love with Maurice Pilorge and Barthes is enamored of Lewis Powell, both *because of* the would-be lover's doomed essence, not *in spite of* it. For Genet, that doomed aspect becomes erotic when it conjoins a visible abomination. He would post a man's photo in his cell only if "as I see it, he had the sacred sign of the monster at the corner of his mouth or the angle of the eyelids. The flaw on the face or in the set gesture indicates to me that they may very possibly love me, for they love me only if they are monsters."[82] (It's maybe that taste for actual abomination that prevents Genet from engaging in Barthesian nostalgia and outright mourning. Indeed, he's simultaneously surreptitious and confessional, like a suburban teen who's just discovered wanking.)

And what were Kurt Cobain's own "sacred signs of the monster"? There can be no better description of Kurt's monstruousness than his Sinatra-ized scream and his gorgeous faggishness. I dawdle.

I have to admit that mourning- and nostalgia-compulsions have only increased the neurotic-visceral intrigue that Kurt's

81 Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (Bantam, 1964), 55.

82 Ibid., 65.

voice has for me. (And me alone? Is this the loneliness of the fetish?) It's complicated to encounter and reencounter a voice that by itself has the non-"musical" effect of redirecting blood flow to your groin, a voice that was silenced many years ago — self-extinguished in a moment that left to a grieving wife a skull fragment with some blond hair still attached, a beautiful-man vestige that she retrieved and kept. Do the ethics of monogamy apply here? Maybe Kurt Cobain is for me something like Barthes's mother was for him, a presence that inspires rage against time and despair but also against the permanence of images. Except that I never met Kurt or heard him in the flesh, so who am I to talk? There's really nothing beyond fantasy and memory; those are the delights and the limits. (Genet and *Our Lady of Flowers* again: "It cannot be by chance that I cut those handsome, vacant-eyed heads out of magazines. I say vacant, for all the eyes are clear and must be sky-blue, like the razor's edge to which clings a star of transparent light, blue and vacant like the windows of buildings under construction, through which one sees the sky from the windows of the opposite wall."[83])

In line with Barthes's bittersweet photo-philic nostalgia in *Camera Lucida,* I hear Kurt's voice as the sound of a sweet and frail visionary who met a violent, sad end. If I hear the whole body in the sound, I also do hear in fact that he ended up destroying the integrity of his own body with a shotgun. Like Barthes's photographic mourning of his mother, there's a suffocating sense of *too late! too late! too late!* Lyricism of authorial voice seems misplaced. The time is certainly past time to rewrite anything. But I will read Kurt Cobain as I please, thank you very much. And that is my way of mourning him — as someone I was never able to know, never given the chance to hear as a sound integrated with a vision.

83 Ibid., 52–53.

5

My Queer Anthem

(Alban Berg, *II. Andante amoroso* from the *Lyric Suite*)

I knew I wasn't normal before I realized I was queer — and there is a difference between the two, even if you read "queer" in the most basic, nonsexual sense. This is to say, the two words aren't bound together as a dialectical, positive–negative duality. At least they're not for me. But then — something I realized only after leaving the closet — there are plenty of people in the world who are conspicuously nonnormal without being out-and-out oddities.

Even the word "normal" is a kind of onomatopoeic rendering of itself, lazy in its wide but vague scope and, simply in phonetic terms, sluggish and inert and soft and ordinary to the point of perversity. Heard simply as a set of sounds, the word falls badly on the ears. It's hard to imagine it ever being set well to music.

People do reclaim pejoratives, which is precisely how queer became a positive term in identity politics. But it's still an odd thing to fix such basic terms as *normal* or *queer* to yourself, honestly even more discomfiting than having others apply them to you. Such elementary words don't really register when they are put *by* you *to* you. At that point, it takes actual effort to recognize and grasp them.

A person's maturation can be seen as an escalation of descriptive words for that maturing self. After my realization of nonnormality, my thorniest 1980s self-negotiation was between

the twin clichés of the closeted faggot and the libidinous gayboy, while focusing on something — queer sex acts — that simply didn't exist at that time or were, I should say, invisible and unsaid. How can you define yourself according to something never seen? How is it possible for a person to desire and obsess over something that isn't there? Nature versus nurture, they say. At the same time, how can you evade something — for instance heterosexual attraction — that's everywhere? Well, what you do is rely on your imagination — on your own creative sense — to bring about the nonexistent thing "there" anyway. And to do that you start assembling your own world, with its own foundations and its own from-scratch rubrics, using little bits of physiological rubble and cultural discards that others have left behind.

And after you've figured that out and you're in the middle of such exalted and exhausting work, the queerest thing imaginable — queer now in the bad sense, in the sense of nonsensical and pointless — would be to give up and just wish you were normal. If you make this wish you defer to a psychic, conversion-therapy scheme that I call the "switchable binarism," a variation on the dialectical, positive–negative understanding.

These matters became clearer for me when I read Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* (2000). Warner barely veils his resentment of the sheer, self-admiring capaciousness of "the normal." (He might have found some solace in queer filmmaker Derek Jarman's observation, sometimes attributed to Dorothy Parker, that "heterosexuality isn't normal, it's just common."[1]) Warner discusses "the received wisdom" of "straight culture" and paints the status quo with a wide brush — probably too wide, but he does warn us with his title. This culture of convention is, in his description, a bundle of aligned bourgeois normalcies, and a means for the mainstream to administer stigma and shame to the less-normal — sorry, the less-common — in society.

1 Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament* (Overlook Press, 1993), 19.

Straights administer such judgments whether they really want to or not, Warner says. "Stigma is messy and often incoherent. The received wisdom, in straight culture, is that all of its different norms line up, that one is synonymous with the others." He says those norms manage your identifications, your genitalia, your desires, the degree of masculinity in your performance of yourself, whether you're attracted to butch or fem or in-between individuals, and of course what kind of sex you like and how often you like it. And finally, those norms will by definition require you to "trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence."[2]

In Warner's estimation, straight-ness becomes a metonymy for a wide-spanning, pervasive disregard for nonmainstream sexual practices, or just of difference more broadly: "Heterosexuality is often a name for this entire package, even though attachment to the other sex is only one element. If you deviate at any point from this program, you do so at your own cost."[3] It's with such a package or program that nonnormal *musical* attachments can enter the picture, and be traced with all their ramifications. (Addressing that gay music genre par excellence — the Broadway musical — D.A. Miller writes of the nonparticipating, non-esotericist, normative thinker that "he identifies himself with the plenitude of consumption refused only to those perverse enough to want what isn't provided, and who richly deserve all the contempt he is making sure they get."[4])

Warner's culture of "the normal" becomes so far-reaching that after reading him you start to believe that *every* manner of shame in American society must relate in some way to sex and gender. (These permissibilities have changed since Warner went to press twenty-five years ago, but clearly Puritan and Victorian mores are now roaring back with a vengeance. I find it hard

2 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 37–38.

3 Ibid.

4 D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 13.

to disagree with John W. McGinley, who concludes that "ultimately, all other meanings of shame are derivative from erotic shame" and additionally claims that misogyny, presumed to be a cultural constant, is inseparable from erotic shame.[5]) Such normalist generalizations come with the territory, since the unmarked nature of normality makes it harder to focus on than the marked character of difference. Writing elsewhere, Warner does use more concrete epistemological terms to refer to normal matters — or, more accurately, to *non-queer* affairs — as "the logic of the sexual order." His reference to The-Way-of-Things is helpful here. Just as logic is a difficult thing to grasp, most people find normality as hard to conceptualize as a fish would pondering the water it lives in. Warner refers along these lines to a logic that "is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world."[6]

Approaching societal normalcy from the other direction, queer theorist Jonathan Kemp finds that gayness involves stances that are both pervasive and subversive vis-à-vis Western intellectual ideals. He says that queer people have, by definition, subverted the ancient Platonic notion of desire as a binaristic meeting of two negative contrarieties: butch–fem, top–bottom, phallus–orifice, inseminating–conceiving, and so on. Being gay then means being a wrench in various works, even to the point of refusing to side with either option when society pushes a binaristic decision on you:

> Do opposites attract? Is desire lack? These assumptions have become so much a part of the ways in which we conceive desire that they are rarely questioned. Yet, what do they say about how homosexuality — a desire for the same — is viewed in our culture? [… This book] is offered as an inter-

5 John W. McGinley, *Shame! An Other Guide for the Perplexed* (University Press of America, 1993), 5.

6 Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* ed. Michael Warner (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiii.

> ruption within the hegemony of desire, a withdrawal of allegiance "from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna) which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality." As such, homosexual desire constitutes the biggest challenge to Western binaric thinking in that it dissolves the sacred distinctions between Same/Other, Desire/Identification, subject/object, male/female.[7]

So if normality is strangely slippery to conceive, queerness has an authoritative sharpness that would seem to obviate any need to be "liberated" from it. But then, to question Kemp's assertion, is desire strong enough as an epistemological and social solvent to "dissolve" such "sacred distinctions"? (Maggie Nelson might have demurred. In her view, offered at a more hopeful time than the present, "the time for blithely asserting that sleeping with whomever you want however you want is going to jam [the world's] machinery is long past."[8])

I quickly warmed to Warner's arguments because, unlike queer theorist David M. Halperin, who has held forth on "how to be gay" and "what gay men want," he rejects the "don't play into their hands" argument and lets himself broach sex. (Halperin takes Warner to task for potentially enabling "homophobic sensationalism."[9]) Warner goes on to talk about a queer honor code, where the deviant group implicitly and indeed silently assumes itself to be defined by the sexual practices of its members, while agreeing to not talk about those matters: "A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared

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7 Jonathan Kemp, *Homotopia? Gay Identity, Sameness & the Politics of Desire* (punctum books, 2015), 9–10.

8 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press, 2015), 27.

9 David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), and David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), 55.

condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity." This might sound like a cohesive counterpart to "straight culture," like an egalitarian victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. But Warner wants to emphasize the Faustian aspect of such a pact, and the pact itself starts to sound like a matter of honor, or at least routineness, among thieves: "If sex is a kind of indignity, then we're all in it together," says Warner. "And the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human. In order to be consistent, we would have to talk about dignity in shame."[10]

In short, Warner cautions queers to be wary of the thousandfold wiles of the morality police (he refers to "the moralists" throughout), and to watch out for any attempted morality overlays that the moralists might or might not phrase in clear sexual terms. One such enforcement we should avoid are covert (or, for that matter, up-front) campaigns of delimitation and imposed taste. In talking about different norms of desire, Warner brings up exclusivity, by which he means the socially expeditious practice of ruling out more prospects than you rule in. For the sake of health and function, we're all supposed to be discriminating in our tastes. Promiscuity conflicts with logical behavior, and a rational person isn't supposed to be loose and uncritical. Warner also develops ideas from Gayle Rubin on how behavior patterns within certain hierarchies of sex become an ongoing barometer of variance-acceptability in American society. Any public figure has a running scorecard total between sets of "good, normal, natural" tastes and "bad, abnormal, unnatural" ones, and enough pluses in the left column can offset one or two in the right. The process becomes a kind of sale of indulgences that sexual people are forced to negotiate in the public sphere.[11]

For instance, Warner's left and right columns oppose heterosexual versus homosexual, married versus unmarried, monoga-

10 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal,* 35–36.
11 Ibid., 24–27.

mous versus promiscuous, same generation versus cross-generational, no pornography versus pornography, vanilla versus BDSM, and so on. When Warner compiled this "normal versus abnormal" list, he missed a duality regarding sexual energy. Maybe division between a good "don't wake the kids" versus a bad "let's break the furniture"? Because people who broach the subject of sex, enjoy sex too much, or even enjoy it at all or allow themselves to say they enjoy it, are perverts. More to the point, Warner should also have included "same race versus cross-racial." The US Supreme Court ruled that state antimiscegenation laws were unconstitutional back in 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*). But Puritanism, in affiliation with forms of racism, still seems rampant in Eurocentric present-day gay male scenes, where "racial sexual desire" and "preference" matters seem even more fraught. Recent studies in the United States have made it clear: "White individuals do appear to have strong preference for only other White individuals."[12] New owners of the Grindr gay-hookup app aimed to squelch a discrimination culture in 2018 with a "Kindr Grindr" campaign. *Slate* reported on the ensuing gay-hookup culture controversy as largely a fight over terms of "preference," and suggested this: "'Preference' is not innate; beyond the basics of sex — gay, straight, bi — preference is conditioned by a society that is itself racist, fat-shaming, and discriminatory in all kinds of ways.… So-called preference, in other words, is at least partially learned, and it is worth reflecting on whether that education might have been a bad one."[13] Yes, hear! hear!, all well and good. But I wonder if Warner might agree that such divisions between nature and nurture are too strict and sure for comfort, and that *inclusivity* of preference

12 Raja Halwani, "Racial Sexual Desires," in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings,* ed. Raja Halwani et al., 8th ed. (Rowman Littlefield, 2023), 286.

13 Lance Richardson, "Making Grindr Kinder: In a 'No Fats, No Femmes' Culture, Could Encouraging Kindness on Hookup Apps Be Radical?," *Slate,* November 8, 2018, https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/11/kindr-grindr-hookup-apps-discrimination.html.

shouldn't be tarred with the same brush that critics use — rightfully — for *exclusivity* of preference.

Even the institution of orthodox fandom (whether it be with pop stars, designer bags, or anime characters) is puritanical in its fashion, and tends to follow basic cultural principles of monogamy and monotheism — not to mention philology and style-history affiliation. (Consider how the Beatles versus Stones dualism maps onto an Everly Brothers versus Muddy Waters polarity.) But having an unusually wide array of personal musical preferences makes your choices seem even more aesthetic (or kinky, which is much the same thing), as if you were ensconced in your oak-paneled study wearing a smoking jacket and cradling a brandy snifter. In directly comparable fashion, having sexual preferences that are perhaps too well defined and disparate for comfort — having a *type,* or, god forbid, *types* — risks turning living and breathing sex partners into aesthetic objects. (The two most shocking things about the Marquis de Sade were his rampant aestheticization, even of acts of torture, and the simple fact of his uncontrolled esotericism: "Sade liked to dream about the Emperor of Golconda who used to go riding on 'twelve women artfully arranged into an elephant.'"[14]) But then I can't help but wonder as a music lover: Which musical predilection could tip me over the precipice and into "bad, abnormal, unnatural" turpitude? What is the height of musical kink? Which Spotify track would make standers-by act as if they'd seen me doing *bukkake* with four lady-boys in clown outfits, steam-powered foot-long vibrators at the ready? For shame. Music involvements can incite states of indignity, but to such a degree of baseness and maybe *indulgent* anti-normativity?

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14 From a 1783 letter that Sade wrote to his wife from prison, as paraphrased by Michael Riffaterre in his review of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola,* by Roland Barthes, *Diacritics* 2 (1972): 4.

Just how esoteric is a sexual citizen allowed to get? Or a musical citizen, for that matter? One reason I latched onto Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* for string quartet (1925–1926) for dear life as an adolescent was that it spoke in a different kind of musical parlance. It was a voice of dissent from almost all the music that I'd heard before. It gave the middle finger to normality, to the everyday. Some music readings soon pointed out to me that this difference of musical manners is called "atonality," that Berg followed his teacher and mentor Arnold Schoenberg into adopting the "style," and that this atonality-difference was a major reason modernist music of the early twentieth century proved so unpopular with audiences. The French decadent poets of the time had a phrase that beautifully weaponized such aesthetic contrariness. They made it their motto to *épater les bourgeois,* "to scandalize the respectable middle classes." If Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud had opium, absinthe, sodomy, interracial sex, and an aversion to narrative and everyday syntax, Schoenberg and his students had so-called atonality. And sure enough, the debates over atonality and tonality often became heavily entwined in moral issues. When it comes to taste and aesthetics, *atonality* is one of the biggest mechanisms of musical partisanship, the biggest music-aesthetic kink on offer, the clearest indication of an almost absurd level of self-consciousness. Atonality is also more or less nonexistent in popular and vernacular musics, so it qualifies as a highly specialized über-artifice (in order to *épater les bourgeois,* indeed).

I follow Schoenberg and Berg themselves in insisting that atonality is an oxymoronic term for something that's impossible to define, at least in terms of musical style, which has made it all the more useful as a moralist tool, of course. But to play that game, we will ask, What is atonality? The dictionary gives a negative definition, a musical-compositional approach characterized by tonality's absence. So then what is *tonality*? Most essentially, it is yet another staple in what Kemp calls marauding "Western binaric thinking," in that it's coordinated in opposition to atonality as its contrary notion. This tried-and-trusted tonal/atonal duality became central in theorizing and judging

twentieth-century art music broadly speaking. If atonality is difficult to pin down because it's a defensive concept, tonality is hard to define because it's so many things at once: a cultural precept, a "law of nature," a (supposed) language that musical creators share with listeners (and listeners with fellow listeners), and more broadly to many folks a rampart against the apparent nihilism (or "agony," as music critic Henry Pleasants put it) of modern music. An understanding of tonality might seem as simple a matter as assigning a particular key to a particular piece, say, talking about one work being in D♭ major while another is in G minor. For many people who care about music, those predetermined series of half steps and whole steps — each hovering around its specific gravitational, world-building, yet intricate centrality of D♭ or G — have been microcosms of worlds, philosophies of living, and cultural bulwarks.

Two luminaries battled over the logic of such a tonal order in Berg's early-century Vienna, and the young Alban must have followed their arguments. Heinrich Schenker was a conservative music theorist, and Schoenberg was a progressive composer who became Berg's honored (if also difficult) teacher and mentor. Schoenberg started attracting wide attention and indeed notoriety with the premieres of his *Verklärte Nacht* (*Transfigured Night*) (1899) for strings and his Chamber Symphony No. 1 (1906). As a musical fundamentalist, Schenker maintained that music without some kind of key was in fact not music at all and that no musician worthy of that title would go beyond finessing the rules to actively breaking them. And so he was deeply unconvinced by Schoenberg's work and dismissed him as an antitonal nihilist. He described his composer colleague in scathing terms as "the godfather of new chords" and as a dangerous opportunist who advocated "for expansion and disintegration."[15] Even worse,

15 Descriptions of Schoenberg appeared in Schenker, "Resumption of Urlinie Considerations," which was translated by Sylvan Kalib, "Thirteen Essays from the Three Yearbooks 'Das Meisterwerk in der Musik'" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1973), cited by Arnold Whittall, "Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure in Britten," *Royal Musical Association Proceedings* 106 (1979): 28–29.

in privileging tonality and the primacy of consonance as "basic laws of Nature," Schenker suggested that Schoenberg and other atonality practitioners were deviants: specialists in unnaturalness.[16] In actuality, Schenker was the one making power plays out of what he thought were God-given dualities.

If Schenker was a fundamentalist and originalist, Schoenberg believed you could only realize the truth of a matter through direct experience with it — or with its results. He also believed every musician was their own individual. For his part, Schoenberg said that individual creativity must take precedence over rules and norms (but only after the creator has *learned* those rules and norms). Along these lines, Schoenberg believed that great modern musical creators could still make "tonality" work for them, thus manifesting (for instance) a viable and characteristic "Mahler tonality" or a distinctive "Strauss tonality." He also maintained that composers should never have anything dictated to them by theorists (who, since they are essentially failed composers, Schoenberg likened to "carpentry experts" who wouldn't know how hold a hammer). The year after Schenker made his "basic law of Nature" declarations in *Kontrapunkt,* Schoenberg put his cards on the table in his own *Harmonielehre* (1911): "I do not, as apparently all theorists before me have done, consider tonality an eternal law, a natural law of music." He goes on to say that even if tonality has some basis in acoustics (that is, in "laws" of musical physics, in other words the overtone series), that basis doesn't support such grandiose theoretical elaboration: "The laws by which tonality itself comes about are then still less necessary, far less; […] they do not teach the essence of the matter but merely aim at the orderly and mechanical elaboration of a device that makes it possible to lend musical thoughts the aura

16 "If only the composers of today could at last understand how utopian it is to believe that the nature of our senses could ever grant the dissonance an equal birthright alongside consonance! The two of them, consonance and dissonance, cannot have the same role; that is assured by the basic law of nature in general: never to form a thing twice in the same way!" Heinrich Schenker, *Counterpoint: A Translation of "Kontrapunkt,"* trans. John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, ed. John Rothgeb (Schirmer Books, 1987), 112.

of completeness." Elsewhere in the same study, Schoenberg suggests that theoretical tradition went beyond invoking tonality as a natural law to reconceiving it as a biblical commandment against sin: "There is so little grandeur in the sound of it, if the teacher tells the pupil: One of the most gratifying means for producing musical form is tonality. What a different impression it makes, though, if he speaks of the principle of tonality, as of a law—'Thou shalt…'" Schoenberg also talks about power and sovereignty in literal political terms, saying that tonality cannot be chromatically extended too far without its rule of authority being overturned by a mutiny of tones: "There again one has 'taken a prisoner who won't free the captor.' I should not wish to sit on that throne from which tonality's luster of sovereignty emanates."[17]

Fred Everett Maus and others have indicated, following up on ideas from Michel Foucault, that histories of sexuality have followed a process of defining normative practice when confronted by deviance, and this process was also true in music, where tonality was defined after the appearance of atonality, just as heterosexuality was defined after "the invention of the homosexual." "Schenker's creation of an elaborate tonal theory in response to posttonal music resembles, to some extent, sexologists' back-formation of the concept of heterosexuality as a complement to their new concept of homosexuality," says Maus. "In both cases, a conceptualization of the normative or unmarked category follows awareness of an alternative. Schenker's attack on some music as unnatural recalls, of course, similar attacks on homosexuality."[18] The suggestion is not that tonal music is "straight" and atonal music is "gay," whatever that might mean, nor the reverse. Rather, the upshot should be that ideologies of order, power, and control have been mapped onto this musical duality, and listeners should question tonality's status

17 Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (University of California Press, 1978), 27, 127–28, 9, 394.

18 Fred Maus, "Sexual and Musical Categories," in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology,* ed. Arved Ashby (University of Rochester Press, 2004), 162.

as a musical normality. (In a similar understanding, Theodor Adorno claimed that patterns of commodity capitalism latched onto the tonal music tradition: "The idiom of tonality, […] which circumscribes the traditional stock of music consumed today, is identical with the worldwide musical consumers' language. People may fail to grasp what was said in that language, the specific content of the musical works, but they are familiar with the works' superficial connections insofar as the traditional idiom links them automatically."[19])

In short, the only definite thing we can say about tonality is that it is Eurocentric music's most widespread paradigm of normality and acceptability. (And it's in this sense that tonal music is complicit in what music theorist Joseph Straus has called "the tyranny of the normal."[20] Straus's statement bucks the persistent historical trope of "modernist tyranny," an idea that still lives on in academic circles like a contagious skin condition while, at least in my own small actuality, modernist sounds were an escape from the marauding, ultratonal straight-boy tyranny of heavy metal music. If there was a regime of modernist tyranny in 1980s American rural exurbia, a modernism posing as stifling normality, I didn't get that memo. I certainly found it harder to get ahold of Berg records than albums of Tchaikovsky or Rod Stewart. And again, when I went off to college and studied composition, there were few if any modernists or serialists within earshot.) And so, turning to the question of individual musical creation, we can say that "tonality represents a point where the individual composer negotiates her own identity within the socialized world of pitch relations, and as such it took on more and more of a performative aspect across the previous century."[21]

19 Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music,* trans. E.B. Ashton (Continuum, 1989), 39–40.

20 Joseph Straus, "Music Theory's Therapeutic Imperative and the Tyranny of the Normal," *Music Theory Spectrum* 43, no. 2 (2021): 339–48.

21 Arved Ashby, "Tonality as Law, Contravention, Performativity," *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música* 13 (2009), https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/article/46/tonality-as-law-contravention-performativity.

Another way of saying this: If tonality is, as Schenker believed, a legacy-paradigm of musical universality (and maybe musical morality), it follows that such abstraction ends up becoming a foil for the specific composer — the standard-issue template that ultimately goads the creative musician into expressing their own individuality. So tonality (like the Ten Commandments delivered by Moses?) is discussed as an archetype but ends up being a nuanced practice, which helps explain how a Mozart symphony in D major turns out so very different from a Mahler D major symphony. I might even say that tonality is a performative matter, in the sense that theorist Judith Butler described gender. According to this notion, there's no difference between the *what* and the *how* of individual identity. I stated in 2009:

> Every composer's tonality (or, more broadly, modality) is necessarily performative, especially in the first half of the twentieth century: for what was tonality at the time if not a systematic musical externalization of personally determined choice? But for Berg the idea of a "performative tonality" becomes all the more attractive because such elements are so changeable in his work, often giving the impression (as they do in Mahler, though in a different way) of being less the expression of an unchanging compositional identity and incentive than the outcome of a negotiation with some external imposition.[22]

Berg himself gave the lecture "What Is Atonal?," highlighting funny confusions from the start by treating the adjective in his title as a noun — just as Warner does with "The Trouble with Normal"! Here Berg foresaw precisely these pseudo-moralist, chauvinist Schenker objections to "atonal music" (that the music was, in essence, anti-musical) and replied to them. "It is certain that this term 'atonal' was used with a pejorative intention, just as terms like 'arrhythmic,' 'amelodic,' 'asymmetric' were also used at this time," Berg says.

22 Ibid.

> But while these borrowed terms were sometimes suitable as designations for specific phenomena, the word "atonal," unfortunately I must say, served as a collective term for music that was assumed not only to lack relevance to a harmonic center, but also to have none of the other prerequisites of music, such as melody, rhythmic, formal divisibility into large and small. So the term "atonal" today really means as much as something that is not music, nonmusic, in fact something that is quite the opposite of what has always been understood as music.[23]

I sense here the same sort of liberal corrective, the same sort of renegotiation of suffocating power-moral dualities that Berg used when he defended his lesbian sister, Smaragda, in a 1910 letter to his future father-in-law: "Had I the time, I would make this long letter twice or three times as long, and deal in detail with homosexuality: those afflicted by it and those who, because they are not so afflicted, treat these sick people as criminals."[24]

Berg effected dovetailings of tonal and atonal in just about all his mature compositions — smooth integrations of old and new, traditional and cutting-edge. There are conflicting interpretations of Berg's overall project here. Theorist Dave Headlam claimed that Berg's music really has nothing to do with tonality (as opposed to interval cycles, which he says can end up giving local *impressions* of tonality), but George B. Stauffer described Berg's work as a "lyrical combination of tonal and atonal tech-

23 Alban Berg, "What Is Atonal? A Dialogue," in *Pro Mundo — Pro Domo: The Writings of Alban Berg,* ed. Bryan R. Simms (Oxford University Press, 2014), 220.

24 Alban Berg, *Alban Berg: Letters to His Wife,* trans. Bernard Grun (St. Martin's Press, 1971), 110. In terms of 1910 Catholic Viennese morals, Berg is writing here as a progressive and an advocate. When he opts in this letter to talk about homosexuality in terms of sickness rather than criminality, he chooses not only to exclude the law from this discussion but also to turn around possible questions of victimhood: A person doesn't choose to be ill, rather illness is foisted upon them. But heartless people who wield the law to serve their own personal animosities have indeed made the choice to be cruel.

niques, […] closer to late Romanticism than to the strict modernism of his contemporaries Schoenberg and Webern," and as part of this says that "Berg experimented with using highly dissonant chords in a tonal way."[25] Of course, any finessing of tonal versus atonal elements in Berg takes on political overtones. Music theorist Anthony Pople observed how "even today to suggest Berg may have created atonal music by adjusting tonal models seems more of an accusation than an analysis."[26] All this reminds me of Butler's observation that the performative act can have its own internal frictions, making it "a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself."[27] As regards purity and duality, the Berg analyses mentioned above are clumsier than Butler's performativity descriptions, which involve "a turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure."[28] And it is perhaps in that tenuous, "dissonant and denaturalized performance," as Butler describes it, that "difficult labor," that any hearing of Berg as a basically nontonal composer could arise.

* * *

25 Dave Headlam, *The Music of Alban Berg* (Yale University Press, 1996), 61, and George B. Stauffer, "Alban Berg's Dissonances," *The New York Review of Books,* June 23, 2022, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/06/23/alban-bergs-dissonances-simms-erwin/. Headlam doesn't talk about tonal/atonal divisions in Berg's music, but instead speaks more realistically (and less ideologically) of tonal "invocations" and "implications."

26 Anthony Pople, "The Musical Language of *Wozzeck,*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg,* ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

27 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 186.

28 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993), 241.

Alban Berg's music "refuses nothing," said his close colleague and erstwhile student Theodor Adorno. I've mentioned Berg's wide musical embrace. Waltz passages affirm the composer's Viennese heritage in various pieces, and he went out of his way to acknowledge these in his published scores with the performatively quite inscrutable marking *Wienerisch* (Viennese). Sledgehammer-brutal, near-tone-clusters function as cinematic stingers in the two operas, most violently when Lulu is stabbed to death by Jack the Ripper at the end of that opera. Elsewhere, you can hear traces of the sweet Italianate euphony of Puccini. The angry young archmodernist Pierre Boulez was scandalized when he heard a Bach chorale in B♭ major quoted in the final movement of Berg's Violin Concerto. If we broadly consider such variety of styles, Berg's work shows how profligacy is itself threatening, maybe the biggest sin of all. But he chooses to be profligate anyway. Adorno's broader context for his description of Berg "refusing nothing":

> It was precisely because [Berg's] natural bent, the death instinct, drew him into diffuse, vast dimensions, that he was obsessed with craftsman-like integrity. A felicitous pedantry stands guard over his radical oeuvre as it did only once before over the works of the conservative [novelist Adalbert] Stifter. It was as if technical organization sought to restore in the work what life had withheld: Berg's music, in that regard quite defenseless, defends itself on all sides, refuses nothing, searches for the common denominator between expression and construction, combines the shock of chaos with the euphoria of ringing sound, autobiographical secrets with carefully planned architecture.[29]

I instinctively understand such inclusivity — or promiscuity, or openness to self-contradiction, evocative of an inner life that might be more exciting and fulfilling than the one actually

29 Theodor Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link,* trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25.

lived. Freedom is yearned for, even if there's no understanding what that might mean. For Berg himself, an asthma sufferer and indiscriminate worshipper of Mahler, freedom was imagined at the transfigurative end of the first movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, a place where Berg envisioned himself breathing as Mahler when entering the clean air in the hills south of Vienna: "He wants to make a home for himself, far from all adversity, in the free, thin air of Semmering, to draw in this air, this most pure of earthly air, with ever deeper breaths."[30]

So how does Berg's "tonally atonal" music actually unfold? Fluidly and organically. It has less in common with Beethoven's muscular thematic trajectories than with Franz Schubert's habits of "deflection and exploration," his "casual, always pleasurable pivots" — to use musicologist Susan McClary's description, in the context of that composer's sexual alienation in the repressive police state that was Prince Metternich's Vienna.[31] And then Eric Salzman beautifully summarized the *Lyric Suite* as an aural experience by getting away from academic fixations on themes and motives:

> By turning his imaginative enterprise to a series of shorter, characteristic movements, Berg was able to create expressive structures that grow naturally out of the ideas themselves. These ideas are not only themes in the traditional sense but also colors and expressive shapes, an aspect which Berg emphasizes by qualifying the tempo indications with strong, associative "color" words: Allegretto gioviale, Largo desolato, Presto delirando, Trio estatico, and so forth.[32]

30 Alban Berg, ["On Mahler's Ninth Symphony"], in *Pro Mundo — Pro Domo: The Writings of Alban Berg,* 378.

31 Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006), 215.

32 Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction,* 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 2002), 118.

I mentioned that Berg's music sounds like the work of a non-abstinent. Adorno gives rare biographical detail on his teacher's love life: "He said that he had never in his life known the full happiness of sexuality, such as he imagined it to be."[33] Not the usual kind of discussions heard between a composition teacher and a student. Such a lament over sexual deprivation could allow us to hear the *Lyric Suite* as a soundtrack for desirousness, or even some measure of insatiability. Then Adorno provides the broader context, encompassing passion as a compositional incentive: "Berg had numerous affairs, which never went well, however; the unhappy end was part of the composition, so to speak, and one had the feeling that these liaisons were a part of his productive apparatus from the start, that they were — entirely in keeping with Austrian humor — desperate, but not serious."[34] Adorno says that Berg had multiple dalliances, not because he was a lusty Casanova, but so he could give himself a steady supply of juicy secrets, which in turn served to pull more music out of him. The prime example is the *Lyric Suite,* which Berg wrote as a secret ode to his mistress Hanna Fuchs-Robettin. So we have the "productive apparatus" of this great composition, while there's doubt as to whether Alban and Hanna, the first resident in Vienna and the second in Prague, ever consummated their relationship. The affair was probably just a *belle-lettrist,* private-correspondence sort of heuristic amenity: the poet selfishly using the lady as a muse, like Guillaume de Machaut and his Péronne, or Francis Petrarch and his possibly fictitious "donna Laura" — or Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck. In an odd letter that Adorno wrote to Helene Berg four months after Alban's death, he called the affair an instance of life imitating art rather than the other way around:

33 Theodor Adorno, "Im Gedächtnis an Alban Berg," in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 18 (Suhrkamp, 1984), 490–91, cited and translated in Bryan R. Simms and Charlotte Erwin, *Berg* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 324.

34 Theodor W. Adorno and Alban Berg, *Correspondence 1925–1935,* ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Wieland Hoban (Polity, 2005), 235.

> One thing was clear to me: that the H.F.. business was not paramount for him; that she was not in a position to challenge his relationship with you; and that it was far more a case of his loving H.F. in order to write the *Lyric Suite* than of his writing the *Lyric Suite* out of love. This admittedly touches on a secret that is perhaps harder to bear than any "infidelity," namely that the artist in Alban's sense (and I know I am his kindred spirit in this) simply cannot live an immediate life.[35]

Yes, secretiveness bordering on onanistic esotericism comes through in one of the covert letters that Berg wrote to Hanna (and probably had Adorno hand-deliver), penned about the time (July 11 and 23, 1925) that he was pondering the new composition that would become the *Lyric Suite*. "The incurable wound, which I fear I will carry around with me for the rest of my life, bleeds so incessantly that as yet I cannot touch one key or write down a single line of notes," wrote Berg. "I would most like to write songs. But how could I? The words of the texts would betray me. So it will have to be some songs without words, which only someone who knows — only you — would be able to read! Perhaps it will become a string quartet!"[36] In addition to furtiveness (the potential betrayal of words), his note indulges in Wagnerian imagery (Amfortas's unhealable wound in *Parsifal*, inflicted when this King of the Grail Knights was seduced by an irrefusable maiden) but also gives a clue on the "lyric" (that is, song-based) basis of the quartet. When the *Lyric Suite* was finished and published in a pocket study score, Berg sent a copy to Hanna with detailed handwritten annotations, using different colored pencils. So here was Exhibit A, the secret hermeneutic reading, or "secret program" the scholars have dubbed it, that the composer had "encoded" into his composition. Or, as Berg and Adorno might have insisted, the *real* score of this work in

35 Ibid., 233–34.

36 Constantin Floros, ed, *Alban Berg and Hanna Fuchs: The Story of a Love in Letters,* trans. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch (Indiana University Press, 2008), 83.

its genuine manifestation. At the top of the second movement that I'm discussing, the *Andante amoroso,* Berg's own interpretation is pleasantly, G-rated domestic: "To you and your children I have dedicated this 'rondo': a musical form in which the themes (notably yours) — closing the charming circle — continually renew."[37]

"The words of the texts would betray me": I still want to read this "betray" more broadly as a comment on the necessity of instrumental expression over vocal, even though more literally the statement demonstrates how Berg's *Lyric Suite* is, in essence, the quasi-declarative work of a closeted heterosexual. So the whole piece is exploding with implicit (and sometimes explicit) meaning, but the part of the *Lyric Suite* that is most astonishing, the one most strikingly full of what Salzman called "colors and expressive shapes," is the *Allegro misterioso* third movement. The *Allegro misterioso* secretly commemorates the lovers' first meeting, when mutual affections were tacitly discovered under the scrutiny of others. The movement is a soundtrack to an unknown visual and emotional aspect, the sounds composed of furtive murmurs, manic rustlings, and seemingly random *col legno* knockings (tapped with the wood of the bow) that demonstrate the life-disrupting terror of instantaneous but forbidden erotic attraction. (Adorno refers here to "a desperately passionate scene in suppressed whispers."[38] Appropriately, the outer sections are played with mutes, and the string timbres denatured further by bowing over the fingerboards and on the bridges of the instruments.) Yet to get an overview of the movement as a whole, this rush of emotions is contained by a strict ternary (ABA) form, the repeat of "A" written as a mirror image of the first "A," meaning it is recapped in reverse. Adorno refers to such typical Bergian palindromes as "this mythic compulsion toward the closed security of formal immanence and the enigmatic compulsion for security of compulsion […] as if in fear that

37 Cited by Mosco Carner, *Alban Berg: The Man and His Work,* 2nd rev. ed. (Holmes and Meier, 1983), 127.

38 Adorno, *Alban Berg,* 110.

some centrifugal force could explode even the most meticulous structure, he sought to hold construction mesmerized with a multiplicity of simultaneous forms, which themselves sometimes take on the appearance of chaos, like some powerful hallucinatory universe."[39]

From early in Berg's career as a composer, which Schoenberg said he began in limited capacity as a writer of songs and only songs, he had tried to compete with the modernist or even avant-garde techniques of his colleagues Schoenberg and Anton Webern. His teacher had taken him to task for such apparently unsuccessful avant-gardist experiments in the *Altenberg Lieder,* op. 4, and Four Pieces for Clarinet, op. 5 — pieces where Schoenberg complained bitterly of "a too obvious desire to use new means." But the Allegro misterioso of the *Lyric Suite* is the place where Berg finally succeeded in matching "new means" of expression with a quality and intensity of feelings calling out to be thus expressed. It can't be a coincidence that this is the movement where Berg connected himself with his Hanna most concretely and obsessively, starting things off with rustling fragments of those four 12-tone row forms that contain the pitches FABH — in English, F-A-B♭-B — thus internesting *Fuchs Hanna* with *Alban Berg.* This four-note emphasis in the third movement is, along with the *Tristan* chord quotation in the finale, the closest Berg came to outing his own amorous secret; the initials almost seem to convolute themselves in innovative sexual positions. When I looked through Berg's *Lyric Suite* manuscripts in Vienna, I saw for myself just how much time, thought, sweat, and music paper went into configuring these obsessive pitch operations of the third movement. Even so, I can't imagine he knew what these pages would actually sound like until he started rehearsals and heard them with his own ears. But then that makes the movement's ethos even more misterioso, and the aural experience of *Allegro misterioso* could be secondary to the amatory symbols as they're written on the printed page.

39 Ibid., 107.

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Pleasures possessive but noninsistent, intimate yet histrionic, and loving yet secretive. Berg everywhere eulogizes beauty in his *Lyric Suite*. As with a number of his works, the piece quietly betrays confidences — it exposes its own author as an aesthete to the marrow, counts out its own measures in lovesick-arcane exercises of commemorative-fetishist numerology, and sings hymns to comeliness. And in this sense, my polemical chapter title here makes sense: The *Lyric Suite* would indeed be queer if considered an anthem in any usual sense, except maybe if understood as an obsessive ode to beauty. Beethoven had a great humanist cause at heart when he set Schiller's famous "Ode to Joy" text in his Ninth Symphony ("be embraced ye millions; this kiss is for the entire world!"), and a century later Berg composed implicit "odes to loveliness" (as they might be called, covert settings of a silent text that could have read "be embraced ye one exquisite person!"). As part of this project, his *Lyric Suite* ends with a heartsick address to Hanna — not through a high Enlightenment poet such as Schiller, but through the catatonic decadence of a Baudelaire sonnet (which Berg incorporated in his finale in Stefan George's German translation, but secretly — with the actual words, beginning "to you, sole dear one," also squelched).

Adorno wrote that Berg's music, though it might indeed "refuse nothing," also paradoxically "absolutely never affirms itself. Any kind of insistence is foreign to it."[40] So if Adorno is right, then Berg's work undercuts itself to such a degree that it subverts social and musical expectations. The resistance to affirmation means a Berg piece could never serve anyone as an anthem — a musical assertion of geographical or psychic nationhood, a statement of belonging to a specific community. The *Andante amoroso* movement of the *Lyric Suite* begins as if eavesdropping on its own self-questioning, so private and intimate is its sound, initiating a psychic mise en abîme. Adorno called the *Lyric Suite* "a latent opera," and homed in on the

40 Adorno, *Alban Berg*, 5.

music's selective eavesdropping aspect: "The Suite has the character of an accompaniment, as it were, to a course of events absent from it. But this course of events does not demand the symphonic presence of sonata form as represented in the linear logic of four autonomous voices."[41] Berg's opening intervals are awkward; for instance, the first violin's opening half step followed by drops of two larger intervals before going back up — a counterpoint teacher could take a red pencil to such waggeries. Berg still manages to incorporate such ungainliness into a beautiful phrase structure — a lovely expressive shape — and sensitively placed in terms of register.

The eavesdropping of the *Andante amoroso* starts with delicious ambiguity, and indeed a sense of free harmonic levitation that might put some listeners in mind of "atonality." Still, each voice has lovely remnants of traditional voice-leading, threatening almost constantly to nudge matters into the clear pleasure-orbit of this or that chord. (When McClary talked about "deflection and exploration" in Schubert, consciously invoking possibilities for sexual pleasure that come and go, she could just as well have been describing Berg's *Andante amoroso*. Like Schubert in the second movement of his *Unfinished Symphony,* Berg avoids "consolidation of ego boundaries," choosing instead to "drift through time by means of casual, always pleasurable pivots."[42]) The larger leaps in the cello clarify things somewhat in measures 3 and 4, maybe suggesting possibilities of D major, but at the same time hitting on a C# to fill out a four-note whole-tone note group that seems to argue against any real tonal arrival after all. We could talk about tonality remnants, maybe the nice bric-a-brac left after the collapse of a modernity-traumatized sonata by Mozart or Brahms — the contours of the individual lines, the phrasing, the rhythmic stresses work together to suggest the possibility of some pleasurably vague tonal orientation, but also jostling against each other too much to affirm any hierarchy.

41 Ibid., 105.
42 McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," 215.

Or we could say that Berg internalized aspects of early Romantic rhetoric and semantics, and freed himself to make fleeting hints of that past at his pleasurably cushioned cadence points. Cadences are those points where he — momentarily slighting his own skills of ductility, constant motion, and versatility — allows the music to drop anchor, brings it to a safe and stable position of rest. To places of selfless, non-insistent, loving escape from moralism. More than once, we're pointed vaguely toward a soft and alluring resting place on C major before the music starts moving again. He effects his "smallest links" with and through different materials that surface in this *Andante amoroso* movement. There comes a dance-like melody (measure 16, at around 4:20), which is in triple time and more simultaneous in ensemble, sounding clumsy, almost like a march for people with three feet, and later (starting measure 56, about 5:45) an aching, throbbing, hesitant kind of idea that rises upward without going anywhere. When these different components of the form come back, they're always changed, boiled down severely to just one or two cursory measures, or sprawling out further to full melodic richness. At one point (measure 101, about 7:30), the waltz-march pops up for just two bars before it gets shoved out of the way. And then I can't do justice to Berg's points of rest when I use a dry word such as "cadence." Descending into repose can be the listener's ultimate pleasure — one the "atonalist" composers supposedly deprive the listener of — and here Berg has found ingenious ways to titillate and then satisfy us with such arrivals.

For example, at the movement's end (starting measure 147, about 9:00), a lushly textured fall upward in both plucked and bowed sounds is answered right away by a soft and methodical ticking downward of eighteen notes, the cello closing things off with two quiet C's at the bottom. Given this long-stretching descent, just where does the cadence land and the movement end? The listener blissfully loses track of the meter and the location of the tonic pitch, and such unexpectedness proves strangely comforting. These last two C's are Berg's encoding the nickname of Hanna's little daughter, Dorothea — affectionately

called "Dodo," which is the Italian solfege for the pitches C-C. These final last notes are already distant by the time we hear them; we hear the girl being called when it's too late, as she's already run off to some new adventure. (Incidentally, it was Dorothea who ended up safeguarding Berg's annotated score of the *Lyric Suite,* and the one who finally showed it to the Berg scholar George Perle, thus fully divulging this music's amorous secrets and making news headlines about forty years after the composer's death.)

Berg's *Lyric Suite* was influenced (most obviously in its title) by the Czech composer Alexander Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony* and Zemlinsky's settings therein of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. In his fourth movement, *Adagio appassionato,* shortly before quoting the lovesick *Tristan* chord from Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde,* Berg actually quotes Zemlinsky's rendering of Tagore's lines "You are my own, my own" (in German: "Du bist mein Eigen, mein Eigen"). The poem reads, in English translation:

> You are my own, my own,
> Dweller in my lonesome dreams!
> With the shadow of my passion
> Have I darkened your eyes,
> Haunter of the depth of my gaze
> I have caught you and wrapt you, my love,
> In the net of my music.
> You are my own, my own,
> Dweller in my deathless dreams![43]

Such mystical and passionate wordage, taken from Tagore's collection of love poems *The Gardener.* (The poet's careful supervision of his translations leaves my conscience free for discussing his work in such detail as published in English.) This lover clearly tends his words as lovingly as he tends his passions, care-

43 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener,* trans. Rabindranath Tagore (Macmillan, 1913), 58–59.

taking them as units of meaning and sound-vocables of pleasure. Note the first two lines of each stanza returning as a refrain at the end, in the manner of the old French *rondeau* love poems.

Berg homed in on Tagore's notion of the lover being a musician, and the unique net metaphor — the lover's music not catching the beloved, but instead cloaking and swathing them in a warm if inescapable embrace. (This net can't be made of rough jute or nylon, fibers that would abrade the beloved's soft skin, but must be fashioned from soft cotton or maybe silk.) Berg's and Zemlinsky's excursions into such sensuous exotica were cued and indirectly influenced by Mahler's song-symphony *Das Lied von der Erde,* which contained settings of freely translated Tang dynasty poems by Li Bai and others. Mahler had latched onto these texts in an effort to distance himself from the wordy, palpable expressiveness of Germanic poetry, and to get closer to sentiment itself by distilling emotion into something both purer and more rarified. And to escape the suffocating and tired dualities of his own life experience. This volume of translated Chinese poetry "gave Mahler an alternative to Western notions of salvation and heaven, and thematicized diverse spiritual yearnings within a particular geographical and spiritual landscape. […] The overall plan for *Das Lied von der Erde* shows how Mahler, working after his daughter's death, had traded redemption for journeying."[44]

Berg's wordless, sort-of quotation of Tagore (via Zemlinsky and Mahler) is just one example of his music "refusing nothing." He can't even refuse the quotation after doing it once in the *Adagio appassionato* of his *Lyric Suite,* but ends up giving it again. (Repeating something wicked, working to make the esoteric common, must count as the ultimate perversion. After all, Sade dreamed not once but habitually about the emperor of Golconda and his elephant-of-twelve-women.) Berg's first quotation appears at the storm-and-stress climax of the movement (starting in measure 32), where the Zemlinsky/Tagore fragment

44 Arved Ashby, *Experiencing Mahler: A Listener's Companion* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 181.

appears in octaves in the viola and marked *molto espressivo*. The *appassionato* waves of the movement then return and then gradually subside into a *molto tranquillo* section, and there the "you are my own, my own" quote appears in the muted second violin (starting measure 46), now marked *pp* and "entirely free, recitative-like." Supporting this mute declaration of love is a transparent, even radiant sort-of D major, as (mostly) held down by the D-A fifth at the bottom of the texture. But then the "you are my own, my own" melody in the second violin is in a kind of E♭ major, creating a bi-tonal tension that Berg deftly softens through use of register and different kinds of motion in the individual instruments. Any restlessness here is more redolent of daydreaming than tonal friction. Is this atonality or tonality? The answer is yes.

This movement from the *Lyric Suite* demonstrates Berg's penchant for "refusing nothing," but it also validates another one of Adorno's Berg aperçus — that Alban was at pains to weave "systems of secrets" into his compositions. Adorno's fuller explanation:

> The affair [with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin] was hopeless from the start; on the one hand, it was burdened with an incredible pathos, while on the other hand, Berg was no more willing to leave his wife than Hanna was to leave her husband and two children. He conducted the affair with infinite secrecy: officially to prevent his wife from finding out, but in truth probably because he loved secrets in their own right; he gave me all manner of functions within this system of secrets; from the very first day he had told me the whole story.[45]

The "system of secrets" makes for a tasty paradox, similar to Tagore's amorous and enwrapping, but entirely porous, meshwork. (Nets are after all systems, graceful and lovely in their simplicity.) Tagore elaborates on the net's inclusiveness in another poem from *The Gardener,* one that begins, "In the morning I

45 Adorno and Berg, *Correspondence 1925–1935,* 236.

cast my net into the sea. / I dragged up from the dark abyss things of strange aspect / and strange beauty — some shone like a smile, / some glistened like tears, and some were flushed / like the cheeks of a bride." (As with the poet's net, Berg's secrets prove more cosseting than abrading; these beautiful confidences are happily, maybe blissfully retained. After all, Berg makes no secret of the quotation in his published score, but brackets it off with quotation marks as "citation from Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony*." But Tagore's beloved is puzzled and maybe afraid of these gifts from the sea, and in any event rather angered by them, just as Berg's critics were annoyed by his own exotic and esoteric musical nonsensicalities: "She glanced at them and said, 'What strange things are these? / I know not of what use they are!' / I bowed my head in shame and thought, 'I have not fought / for these, I did not buy them in the market; / they are not fit gifts for her.'"[46])

* * *

I was a *Lyric Suite* fan, but not just as a listener — maybe even as the work's proxy composer. Though I knew nothing of Berg's musical details and "secret programs" when I first fell in love with hearing the *Lyric Suite,* I like to believe now that I detected and latched on to a composition that addresses the difficult question, Just what is a musician to do with overwhelming desires? It became apparent to me early on that Berg's piece was some kind of sketch for how I wanted my own life to be lived, despite the piece's pessimism on the possibility of emotional-sexual fulfillment (the last movement marked *Largo desolato*). And in reading the descriptions that friends and colleagues, such as Adorno, had for Berg, I often had the uncanny feeling I was hearing things said about myself. His handwriting was illegible; he was always late but hated being rushed, and would still miss trains even when he showed up early; he found it hard to confront people; his sense of irony became a basic tool for dealing with the world; and, for similar reasons, he practiced an

46 Tagore, *The Gardener,* 7–8.

uncritical and secular hero worship of certain figures, Gustav Mahler and Karl Kraus among them. But most of all, I think I resemble Berg as a person in that I'm constantly in love and hard-wired to "refuse nothing." Another way to put this is to say that I have problems with what Michael Warner calls "exclusivity" or maybe "inclusivity" when it comes to matters of musical (and maybe sexual) preference. And I can only wonder how I arrived at those likings, and how they might be affiliated with each other.

Health (or, rather, "health") keeps coming up here, and it's a loaded term. The health construct pertains not only to soundness of the body but also to soundness of mind and soundness of … well, I suppose the soul. Adorno says that Berg did not take part in everyday musical manifestations of "health, the will to live, the affirmative," but American musicologist Richard Taruskin discusses Berg's opera *Wozzeck* in terms of "the abnormal" and the "luridly subjective." These opposing verdicts have been cued largely by this composer's "atonal" tendencies and the attendant politics of reception, and by the subjects of his two operas. (Just about everything said in this regard could also be said of Berg's *Lyric Suite,* which was his first extended piece after the premiere of his first opera, *Wozzeck*.) It's not difficult to read this would-be debate over the "health" of atonality as a continuation of Schenker-style worries over its apparent immorality (close as it is to human relations to "nature"). I hear these health questions as biased probings into the moral condition of this music — as examples of the moralism that Michael Warner, among others, found endemic to mainstream straight cultures. After all, who in their right (meaning healthy) mind would choose something lurid over something nonlurid? Who would choose an example of music that runs counter to sense?

Here we have a specific instance of Warner's idea of "different norms" coming together and "lining up" in straight culture to enforce a "logic of the sexual order." Halperin ventures further into this issue and points to what he calls "unexamined normative notions about psychological health" being used against gay men. This is in the context of his 2007 discussion of a rise

in barebacking — the colloquial term for fucking without condoms — and the attendant moral panics. Halperin concludes: "Most efforts to understand gay men's sexual risk-taking complicate their task by setting themselves the impossible goal of explaining behavior that has already been defined as deeply irrational or incomprehensible." Such engagements with illogical actions, as illogic might be manifest in risky sex, then lead to questions of basic reasoning: "That speculation has led in turn to a revival of medical thinking about homosexuality: a style of reasoning that distinguishes 'healthy' from 'unhealthy' behavior, and thereby tends to smuggle into an ostensibly scientific analysis many stealth assumptions about good and bad sex, functional and dysfunctional subjectivity, proper and improper human subjects."[47]

Even beyond any questions of atonality, Berg set himself up when he decided to use two of Frank Wedekind's scandalous and oft-censored plays for his *Lulu* libretto. When in 1935 the esteemed American critic Olin Downes heard the suite of excerpts from *Lulu,* which of course were still unstaged and mostly untexted, he called the music "trash." Downes then went on to say the following, presumably going beyond the score and encroaching on the not-yet-publicized libretto: "Raping, suicide, murder, the prevailing flavor of a highly diseased eroticism are, perhaps, just so much promising material for a musical Freud or Krafft-Ebing to work upon."[48] Contrast this with Adorno's reaction to this same music, which he finds deeply sensual but untouched by pathology. More accurately, Adorno says Berg's music offers deliverance for carnality and a cure for damaged sexual pride. Especially restorative is the lush, lovely, desirous, yearning style that Berg used for the Alwa character, whom Wedekind created as a journalist while Berg made him a com-

47 Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?,* 11.

48 Cited by Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time,* 2nd ed. (University of Washington Press, 1965), 56.

poser (and thus a Berg avatar) in the opera. Adorno describes Berg's rendering of Alwa as:

> Truly a corporeal-incorporeal suitor: united in Alwa's rondo themes is the exuberance of Schumannesque youth and Baudelairian fascination with fatal beauty. What became known as the first movement of the *Lulu Suite,* the enraptured praise of the loved one, glows in an ecstasy words cannot equal; as if the music wanted to become one of those fairy-tale gowns Wedekind envisaged for Lulu. *This music, as a radiant, multi-hued jewel for the beloved body, seeks to restore human dignity to a banished, heretical yearning.* Every bar of music intends salvation for the banished, for the symbol of sexual being, for a soul that in the hereafter rubs the sleep from its eyes, to quote from the most irresistible bars of the opera.[49]

So Berg's music is anti-moralist, as you'd expect of a composer who was in thrall to ultraliberals, such as Wedekind and Karl Kraus. But although Adorno said the music is redemptive, he also claimed that Berg's art was contrary to basic beliefs in well-being — a judgment that must result in large part from this composer's loosening of the tonal stays heard in common-practice works. Adorno seemed to predict such queer theorists as Bersani and Halperin in interrogating commonsense notions of "health." He associated health with the hidden power plays of mainstream commercial culture, with conformity and tradition — in short, with unthinking orthodoxy and civic compliance, which he would say smacks of Nazism. (Nazi officials were indeed oddly preoccupied with matters of health in their domestic public programs, presumably to further establish health's dialectical counterparts of ethnosocial disease and "degeneracy.") "Berg assumes a position in extreme antithesis to that which musical tradition calls healthy, to the will to live, to the affirmative, to the repeated glorification of that which is,"

49 Adorno, *Alban Berg,* 7 (my italics).

writes Adorno. "This concept of health, inherently as ineradicable a part of prevailing musical criteria as it is of Philistinism, is in league with conformism; health is allied with what in life is stronger, with the victors. Berg abstained from such assent."[50] This might sound as if Adorno is evoking morality and social cohesiveness, but I think he's talking about the self-virtuousness of the public (which of course administers hypocrisies).

Taruskin made a claim of the musical language in Berg's *Wozzeck* that might sound similar to Adorno's, but is actually diametrically opposed to it. "The reason why audiences respond to *Wozzeck* 'despite' its atonal language turns out to be the same as the reason why atonal music has become popular in film soundtracks as a representational device," wrote Taruskin. "Audiences understand it in both contexts as a metaphor for physical or psychological abnormality; it symbolizes stress, aberration, horror. […] In his very success with the atonal idiom, still unequaled and probably never to be surpassed, Berg exposed its limitations."[51] Taruskin, commenting as late as the early twenty-first century, still feels a kind of moral panic in the exploitative draw exerted by 1920s and '30s atonality. (Moreover, I have no idea how such an authority could have spoken of "the atonal idiom," a term that is not only meaningless as a negative term with the singular definite article, but also a conceptual mess that wouldn't pass in a freshman term paper.)

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50 Ibid., 5.

51 Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 521–22. Without citing his source here, Taruskin repeats almost verbatim the description of "the new musical resources" that Adorno and Hanns Eisler published in their *Composing for the Films* (Oxford University Press, 1947). But Taruskin cherry-picks self-servingly from this text. Adorno and Eisler write, "The fear expressed in the dissonances of Schönberg's most radical period far surpasses the measure of fear conceivable to the average middle-class individual; it is a historical fear, a sense of impending doom." But Taruskin ignored Adorno and Eisler's next paragraph, where the other new-musical-resource shoe drops, and those authors assert, "Naturally the extension of their expressive potentialities is applicable not only to the realm of fear and horror; in the opposite direction, too, that of extreme tenderness, ironic detachment, empty waiting, and unfettered power" (36–37).

In the same history textbook, Taruskin declares Berg's *Wozzeck* outrageous insofar as it was tainted by expressionist excess. He says Berg's opera, like that movement broadly invoked, is "luridly subjective."[52] It's worth looking up the term "lurid" here, and finding it defined as "shocking because involving violence, sex, or immoral activity." "Lurid" isn't far from interpret-as-you-wish words that some states wrote into law to allow policing of morality — to give law enforcement enough leeway of probable cause to harass anyone who engaged in sex outside of marriage; for instance, in 1950 the Virginia legislature made it a crime for citizens "to lewdly and lasciviously associate and cohabit together."[53] And so Taruskin's most basic accusation emerges, sideways as it were, that Berg's atonal music (however that might be defined, construed, or even differentiated from tonal composition) is immoral, or could have a deleterious effect on the listener's morality. (I was fortunate to read and internalize a quite different take on Berg in one of my very first music books, where the eminent British musician Lionel Salter emphasized this composer's links with the nineteenth century rather than the burn-the-house-down incentives of the early twentieth: "A strong vein of romanticism is conspicuous almost throughout [Berg's] music, and it is this humanity which makes it more accessible to the ordinary listener."[54])

But damned if you do, damned if you don't, Herr Berg. Not only does Taruskin (among others) find the word atonality musically and historically viable (even though the word doesn't really make sense, and Schoenberg and Berg resisted it), and not only does he sharply differentiate between that and tonality. He goes further to suggest that Berg's atonal music is not only immoral but his tonal passages are in fact disingenuous. Taruskin hears the tonal and atonal invalidating each other in Berg's mature music. Or at least the listener, in an inversion of Schen-

52 Ibid., 508.

53 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal,* 13.

54 Lionel Salter, *The Gramophone Guide to Classical Composers and Recordings* (Salamander, 1978), 29.

ker's "tonal law" idea, is unable to "believe" the tonal passages of *Wozzeck* after hearing the atonal ones:

> The act III interlude is (by several orders of magnitude) the biggest of those "tonal" moments that impinge on the atonal world of this opera at strategic intervals like comments from beyond, or without, thus setting up the biggest, most "global" irony of all: what is normal elsewhere is abnormal here and vice versa. The "normal" language of tonality can only be spoken in *Wozzeck* as a foreign tongue. […] But as soon as we respond as "normal" listeners to the stimulus of the interlude's tonal catharsis, black and white are radically reversed. All the rest of the opera is now placed "in quotes." The distance of its special world from the "normal" world of music becomes a part of the characterization, a metaphor for Wozzeck's crazed condition.[55]

One reason I love the *Lyric Suite* is, as I say in absolute contradiction to Taruskin, its lack of audible tonal–atonal confrontations. No, that's a bad understatement of musical passages that embrace rather than exclude, that amount to outright conciliations. Berg actually finessed his multiplicities and juxtapositions and wove them so narrowly together that there are really no normal and abnormal pages, or pathological passages to contrast with healthy ones. It all makes for a peaceable kingdom, except when the dramaturgy requires otherwise. To my ears, this music sounds polyamorous, and antithetical to righteous preaching and shallow, casual moralities. Adorno titled his book *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link,* meaning Berg's greatest ability was transitioning almost instantly from one kind of idea to another. (And to appreciate the significance of that, you'd have to go back and look at the many, many "guides to harmony," "modulation manuals," and so on where sage musical minds after Richard Wagner explain their hard-won compositional-theoretical wisdoms on moving seamlessly from point

55 Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century,* 520.

A to point B.) As a "master of the smallest link," Berg crafted music that is infinitely ductile — always in motion, never doctrinaire, resisting long-term assertions and allegiances. And this is what finally qualifies his work as anti-anthemic. "Berg's music renounces itself and the person speaking through it, in recognition of its inherent vanity, and perhaps also in the unacknowledged hope that only that which does not keep a grip on itself will not be lost," wrote Adorno.[56]

Taruskin wasn't the first to bring up normalcy vis-à-vis Berg. He often seems to do bad-faith paraphrases of Jeremy Tambling, the comparative literature scholar who discussed Berg's *Wozzeck* as an iconic modernist opera that people have habitually projected onto unitary models of the world and human thinking, when the work is in fact rooted in notions of modern, psychological, and operatic doubleness. Looking back at earlier critics of *Wozzeck,* Tambling finds George Perle fixated on "the coherence and stability of the work itself" and Joseph Kerman on the idea that "art as so often in opera criticism, redeems life." Like my own take on Taruskin, Tambling sees those two writers forcing Berg's opera onto their own severe models of normalcy. The act 3 interlude is the biggest and most "impinging" tonal moment as Taruskin hears it. According to Tambling, "this interlude flatters the audience that they are normal, i.e. 'humanity itself,' and that they are able to be confessed to. Kerman, it seems, cannot wait to get back to normal."[57]

Whenever change threatens, the world starts looking like a zero-sum game, and difference starts looking like a contagion and contaminant. Warner recalled a tetchy and stewardly Republican member of the SUNY board of trustees who went public with her disapproval of a 1997 conference at one of the campuses on "The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom." "For so many people the demand for more shame simply feels like morality," writes Warner. "Candace de Russy has a way of

56 Adorno, *Alban Berg,* 5.

57 Jeremy Tambling, "Listening to Schizophrenia: The Wozzeck Case," in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music,* ed. Ashby, 176–94.

intoning the word 'lesbianism' on camera with so much high-minded scorn that many people simply forget that the word might actually bring a lot of pleasure to others, or that others' pleasure costs them nothing, even if they do not share in it." I love this simple sentence from Warner so much that I've posted it, all-caps, on my fridge: the realization, so easy yet so ever-elusive, that "others' pleasure costs them nothing."[58]

Searching for a specific term for such begrudgment in the face of civic fears, I came across Rick Santorum's discussion of "moral ecology." Santorum is the conservative Republican former US senator (1995–2007) from Pennsylvania and member of the ultra-right Freedom Coalition. He pontificated about "moral ecology" as a situation of contaminants threatening our shared ethical ecosphere, of bad actors spoiling our moral groundwater and thus threatening the community's spiritual health. Santorum refers here to "the burden of stewardship we face in our time" — such hard work it is! — and concerns himself with "what we owe to our children" — hard enough to justify emotional blackmail![59] What is the phenomenon that causes Santorum to speak here of moral ecology? Why, homosexuality, of course or, more specifically, the prospect of same-sex marriage. Conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently brought up the moral ecology idea again, this time describing it in clearer "ecological" terms as "the moral and intellectual moment, which constitutes *the shared water in which we swim.* In this definition, every member of society has a role in shaping the culture. We all create a moral ecology around ourselves, one that either elevates the people we touch or degrades them."[60]

Thus the ecological dangers. In a 1998 article devoted entirely to the conservative moral ecology idea, University of Oklahoma philosopher Allen D. Hertzke gives more detail on what

58 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal,* 15.

59 Rick Santorum, *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good* (Regnery, 2005).

60 David Brooks, "Time to Say Goodbye," *The New York Times,* January 30, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/opinion/david-brooks-leaving-columnist.html (my italics).

the "moral" aspect entails. Predictably, the contemporary present is found to be a hotbed of depravity in comparison with the past. Hertzke focuses specifically on modern contaminants corrupting youth: he laments "the state of modern culture — its violence, drugs, sexual promiscuity, anomie, family decline, and lagging achievement among the young." Technology of course makes the slippery slope ever more slippery, aiding and abetting "individual selfishness, lust, envy, and aggression to chip away at the fabric of community life. To many people, the moral environment today just seems cruder, more violent, and less healthy than in the past, especially for the young."[61]

I believe the conservative moral ecology concept maps well onto Taruskin's warnings about musical examples that confront us with "danger," to reference the title of his book *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (2009). Certainly, to bring back Warner's description, Taruskin was like the paranoid and resentful Schenker and Henry Pleasants in being unable to accept, let alone make room for, certain "pleasures of others," certain liberties of expression that would "cost him nothing." And again the aggrandized sins of modernity loom large. European artists of the first three decades of the twentieth century have been condemned for the same kinds of toxic arrogance that aided the rise of fascism and the systematic institution of genocide. Associating with the modernist Schoenberg was in itself a moral failing. "I was called a 'seducer of young people,'" Schoenberg recalled in 1937. "And when a critic once compared me with Socrates I was not sure whether he intended to honour me or to suggest I should be condemned like Socrates and given the cup of poison."[62]

Taruskin didn't fault Berg for aesthetic failure, musical incompetence, or historical misjudgments, as go the critic's usual diatribe-depositions against composers. Rather, Taruskin

61 Allen D. Hertzke, "The Theory of Moral Ecology," *The Review of Politics* 60, no. 4 (1998): 629–30.

62 Arnold Schoenberg, "How One Becomes Lonely," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (University of California Press, 1985), 41–42.

said Berg was a danger because as a musician he suffered and possibly disseminated *faults of character.* Taruskin wasn't caring for our musical sensibilities here, he was concerned for our moral fiber as listening citizens. He was afraid we'd be seduced. Richard Filler Taruskin was out to save our souls. And so in *The Danger of Music* it's no surprise to see him declare his wish "to throw open a window on the miseducation of musicians in America" and to see him write an objectively titled *Oxford History of Western Music* textbook that is less consistently a history than it is a set of Gospels according to Richard.[63]

* * *

Musically and otherwise, I too can refuse nothing. So then by what quirk of fate and genetics is it possible for me to love the music of Pierre Boulez and Sergei Rachmaninoff with the same slack-jawed wonder? Likewise the late medieval English composer John Dunstaple alongside Japanese *gagaku* music and the Naugahyde-seamless songs of Burt Bacharach? And the ambient electronica of Ryuichi Sakamoto? Dr. Samuel J. Hoffman's 1940s theremin records for Capitol?

I was once accused of tribalism, an odd description for someone who is as embarrassed as I am by my own whorish musical polyamorousness. This was in an academic review of a book that I had edited in defense of modernist music — a widely disliked but ill-defined musical corpus, one that would include Berg and his *Lyric Suite*. That reviewer, originally a Taruskin student, referred to my book as a forum where "Ashby […] pleads for reconsideration of his misunderstood tribe."[64] Of course that reviewer wasn't referring to my gayness when he chose to invoke

63 Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (University of California Press, 2009), 86. See also Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century (*Oxford University Press, 2006), and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

64 Peter J. Schmelz, review of *Twelve-Tone Music in America,* by Joseph Straus, *Notes,* 2nd ser., 67, no. 2 (2010): 321. Though reviewing the Straus,

my marginalized tribe. (And to be fair, my own dissertation adviser had minimized my reasoning elsewhere as an "argument for special interests.") But the reviewer's mention of tribalism made it clear that culture-divisionary lines had been drawn more strictly and quadratically than I had realized. He called me a tribalist because I wrote about a kind of music that he apparently considered cliquish and indefensible, or, more simply, he concluded that I was so positive about that body of music that I couldn't possibly (or normally?) also like certain others. Zero-sum binaries again.

Taruskin himself levied a similar idea at this modernism book of mine, the same one the tribe-minded reviewer was discussing: "Ashby's volume is the usual assortment of special pleading, double standards, and invective, leavened by a novel strain of duplicity. That strain was the sudden claim that academic serial music had never differed in its aims or claims from any other kind of music, and was, all of it, conventionally beautiful."[65] Such accusations cause soul-searching even if the accusations seem off the mark. So let me try to play along. If common culture and "just the way things go" are really going to hold sway, then my tribal treacheries might line up against norms as follows:

> Sketch of an Arved Ashby normality, with a nod to Michael Warner; each aspect being false:
> — his should-be object desire: different sex, same tribe (*I should be romantically and sexually involved with white women.*)
> — his should-be musical object desire: same tribe, limited number of styles (*my musical tastes should be more exclusive than inclusive.*)
> — his should-be social group: same tribe (*I should congregate with other white Americans.*)

Schmelz aligns my book *The Pleasure of Modernist Music* with Straus's and discusses my book in some detail.

65 Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays,* 89.

— his should-be professional context: transparent and efficient functionality of language with the tribe, intellectual goals shared with same
— his desires and obeisances to beauty: rationalized and controllable (*as a licensed intellectual, I shouldn't become as incoherent as butter on a hot day when I read Roland Barthes seamlessly transmuting reason with poetry, see and hear a beautiful man at peace with the world, or hear a luscious Rachmaninoff string chord, and in any event I shouldn't be conflating such different things in public, for shame.*)

My own sexuality is an alignment of erotics that, as an attempt at summarizing, really has to constitute "an experiment of one." By nature I find myself bewildered by the sorts of this-or-that conceptual dualisms I mention above, and this disorientation must relate to my individual constellation of amorous affinities and sexual desires. I've tried to grasp the conflicts in Berg's music that other listeners and analysts have talked about in detail, but I just can't hear them. God knows I've tried. What is it about the language "normality" of Berg's act 3 orchestral interlude from *Wozzeck* that is supposed to reorient me as listener to preceding "abnormalities," to the point where *black and white are radically reversed*? I've tried to inhabit such an exclusivist hearing-mindset, but it's beyond me — just as I've failed to find Scriabin more interesting than Tchaikovsky (I love them both) or hear the suffocating mindlessness that others discern in Steve Reich and Philip Glass. And it is actually such suspicions of being wired differently that have convinced me I'm the least likely of academics, or at least the least critical and discerning among them.

And then being lambasted by Taruskin for having the audacity to find certain things beautiful that he (and, by implication, a legion of confreres) doesn't — this is a familiar kind of belittlement, one I've gotten to know all too well over a lifetime. The normalist, lecturing assertion sounds like "how can you possibly find men beautiful?," just cloaked in musical terms. And so I think I'm forgiven for hashing this out a bit more through imag-

ined conversations. First of all, I can't understand what it means for something to be "conventionally beautiful" — a description Taruskin suggests that I'm yearning to poach for things that are in actuality "abnormally beautiful," "not really beautiful," "not consensually beautiful," or maybe just scare-quotes "beautiful." Or, to go back to Adorno's phrase, "heretically beautiful." (I guess this is the point where I do my "special pleading," as apparently compelled by my special interests and my desire for something that conservatives derisively call special rights.) Since when are there different beauty hierarchies, divided between desirable and undesirable? Why are there zero-sum beauty tabulations? Taruskin seems to keep "abnormally beautiful" (or whatever you call such a special-interest grouping) as a possible category for Berg and other modernist music, but implying thereby that such abnormal beauties aren't for general consumption.

The ramifications of ecological exclusivism just keep going. Atonal music of the Schoenberg circle threatened additional ecologies beyond the moral; namely, racial and linguistic ones. Speaking as a historian of modern music reception, I suddenly think that Taruskin's "abnormal" musical "language" might in fact be Chinese. By way of explanation, let me cite Nicolas Slonimsky, the music historian, conductor, raconteur, and new-music advocate. Slonimsky writes in the preface to his ageless *Lexicon of Musical Invective*: "To listeners steeped in traditional music, modern works are meaningless, as alien languages are to a poor linguist. No wonder that music critics often borrow linguistic similes to express their recoiling horror of the modernists. The Chinese language, as the ultimate of incomprehensibility, serves the critics particularly well for such comparisons." And sure enough, one now-infamous press reaction to the British premiere of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces compared this music to "a poem in Tibetan; not one single soul could possibly have understood it." Thirteen years later, a Berlin music critic recounted the premiere of Berg's *Wozzeck* as involving "defiant squads, the shock troops of atonalists, the dervishes of

Arnold Schoenberg. *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg was the battle slogan. The work of a Chinaman from Vienna."[66]

This excursion to East Asia — or, more accurately, this incursion of a musical "Yellow peril," this infiltration from a foreign race with its frightful babbling — helps explain my own loves and confusions. Though I don't know what the Tibetan language sounds like, I think I'd enjoy hearing a poem in it; it would promise an experience fresh enough to revivify old acquaintances. As a language closely related to Chinese, spoken Tibetan would, I imagine, be just as melodious and regal as contemporary Mandarin. Even so, my pleasure in Tibetan poetry — or, for that matter, in hearing a Chinese Austrian composer who might write operas in nontraditional style — wouldn't just be some kind of escape hatch from communicational ennui. From an early age, as I discovered in going off to college, I realized the comforts of sitting within a group of people who not only look different than I, but who are speaking a language I don't understand. There's comfort to be had in escaping the burdens of so-called comprehension, and I had trouble explaining how it was *not* rude to leave me out of the conversation when in fact I wanted to be left out. I've underlined here the idea of music as something that can operate above or below conscious understanding, and there's no other way to explain my consolatory sense of dining with six folks from Seoul and Daegu who've chosen to avoid English, than to say it seems related somehow to musical experience. Maybe hearing spoken Korean when you barely understand it makes it a kind of music, but of course one that's only "modern" in the sense that I myself have come so late to it.

So there are scenarios where phonetics can become both unintelligible and beautiful, indefensible as some linguists and anthropologists might find that. I discover a sense of pure and harmonious humanity, of the basic things shared by people even when they happen to be geographically different and might want to avoid verbal exchange in their second language. In such a tableau, I am spun within a web-company of people, while

66 Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, 4, 151, 54.

being in a sense invisible myself. And there I am free to enjoy the flickering distillations of different emotions crossing their beautiful faces without needing to know their banal reasons. Or their important ones, either.

* * *

Clearly, I've arrived at a point in life where the idea of "normal" has become a cipher, a ramshackle semantic placeholder for … something. Maybe it now serves as a heuristic, an opposite pole to the possibility of something better. The first reviewer of my *Pleasure of Modernist Music* found fault with another thing, and in this case I'm grateful for the diagnosis. What that writer faulted me for was being "interested in a sort of hypothetical or counterfactual historiography, the history of what might have been, or as it should have been."[67] Yes, exactly. But then if I'm going to be publicly berated for finding beauty where I shouldn't, can you blame me for envisioning myself in some other version of the world? Being queer often demands utopianism. And there are plenty more revisionist reimaginings of the world — world-correctives, hopeful sketches of *better* worlds — where those came from. The horrors of Nazism and Stalinism had made Taruskin a fervent anti-utopianist, and I now wonder if his cynicism would have allowed him to concede any disenfranchised people their hopeful visions? (I think the answer would have to be no, since he equated identity politics with "victimology."[68] But to state one obvious point in contra-

67 Schmelz, review of *Twelve-Tone Music in America,* 321. This might be the place also to thank John Fallas for his own sharp rundown of *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*: "The essays gathered together here aim to capture specific aspects of what is humanly valuable in a broad spectrum of music, rather than worrying about what is permissible or forbidden, 'right' or 'wrong.'" Fallas, review of *The Pleasure of Modernist Music,* edited by Arved Ashby, *The Musical Times* 146, no. 1890 (2005): 107.

68 "That strain [of duplicity] was the sudden claim that academic serial music had never differed in its aims or claims from any other kind of music, and was, all of it, conventionally beautiful, and that anyone's refusal or inability to recognize it as such was a form of persecution. This form of

diction, the rich manifestations of Afrofuturism are the very opposite of any conceivable victimology.)

Berg didn't write music for a binaristic, zero-sum, with-me-or-against-me planet — as Adorno suggested when he attributed to his former teacher the lavish intention to "restore human dignity to a banished, heretical yearning." Though the piece ends in catatonic depression, the *Lyric Suite* has a utopian aspect in José Esteban Muñoz's sense of that word — in the sense of dreaming up a better and more pleasurable and more fulfilling place. Muñoz isn't about any queer victimology, far from it. Remember Berg's words to Adorno: "He said that he had never in his life known the full happiness of sexuality, such as he imagined it to be." I wouldn't call this an *ideology* matter or a matter of *modeling*, but a matter of music envisioning (imagining) a spectral palette of pleasures and almost infinitely variegated shades of yearning. "Queerness," Muñoz writes, "is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." The lacuna here is a matter of desire as well as promise. Muñoz goes further to link queerness with futurity, saying, "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."[69] So what would a futuristic Arcadia for queer desires look like?

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defense — of which Fred Everett Maus, a leader in male-feminist and gay/lesbian criticism, has been the pioneer — turns modernist studies into a variety of identity politics, or 'victimology' as it is informally known." Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays,* 89.

69 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1.

6

Misappropriated Pretty

(Tom Petty, "Don't Do Me Like That")

This must be the first ode you've had written to you, Tom.

It's hard to know even where to start my panegyric. Where to start? But at least I know I *can* start, which wasn't true of my queer crushes on you — aural and visual — back in the 1980s.

The word panegyric won't do, sorry — sounds too old and Greek.

Okay, I'll just have to begin with your hair; there's no way around that. The hair even before the music, how perverse — almost like the straight adolescent I wanted to be, the one who grew up reciting "blonds have more fun" without knowing what he was saying. The "like spun gold" thing, another cliché. Rapunzel, and so on, but with a difference.

(And now here's where I, an Ivy-League-trained academic who spent decades in the closet, am supposed to start honing away the sharp, or even burred, edges of my desires by bringing in historical context.)

(Because context is great for cleaning up messes, for tidying up after your ideas and your cravings. For making them sound right. For scrubbing away the dirt and the trivialities. For lubricating the discussion. Facts and background info make for good psyche-bleach, just because they remove us from the here and now, which is where desire starts and proliferates.)

Yes, I've started. It's okay for me to start with the hair, because you were proud of your long locks and thought they defined you. (As indeed they did.) You said it was after seeing Beatles photos that you grew out your tresses: "[My parents] didn't like the length of my hair. They were really shocked by that. That me and my buddies were letting our hair grow long. They were really shocked by that. Because it was unusual in '64. We wanted to look like the Beatles. We thought it would be hip for our band."[1] So this was in 1964, maybe right after the Liverpool boys had their first Ed Sullivan spot (which you probably saw on your folks' black-and-white TV in the living room), or maybe on the *Beatles for Sale* album cover (which you would have grabbed as a fan, but then you had no money and said the singles were easier to come by).

The Fab Four didn't become actual longhairs until *Rubber Soul* in 1965, the album cover that — with its stretched or maybe lopsided image of the band members — also declared their first sort-of-foray into psychedelia. Whichever way you looked at it, the world was shifting and the Beatles were leading the way. Whenever and wherever it was exactly, from that point forward Tom Petty, aspiring fourteen-year-old rocker from north central Florida, never deigned to show his ears again. You started an anti-ears crusade. And maybe yours was the first?

You even liked and kind of imitated the collarless jackets that the very gay Brian Epstein had picked for his Liverpool boys, maybe to show their lengthening hair as it fell, unimpeded. But none of the Beatles were blond, and none had pretty or cascading hair. And your own jackets were actually rouge, as if to make a point (which point was that again?): "And we had the peg trousers, the real tight pants. And Dennis Lee's mom made us our first set of uniforms, and they were collarless jackets, like The Beatles wore. But they were pink, with black trousers. We looked pretty sharp."[2]

1 Paul Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* exp. ed. (Omnibus Press, 2020), 41.

2 Ibid., 47.

Long hair on a guy didn't say "drugs," at least not yet in 1964. The time of your own adolescence was a precarious non-*Zeitgeist*, wedged between postwar civic conformism — "the military-industrial complex," pocket-protectors and horn rims, "fellas" meeting up politely with "gals," "the future is plastics" — and the incipient volcanic revolution that was the later 1960s. The year 1964 must have been early enough, well before Woodstock and the Summer of Love, and shortly before the Vietnam protests and the criminalization of LSD, that the hippies didn't play into your look. So the blond locks on your head might have been morally and psychically pure and showed no stakes in Timothy Leary's "turn on, tune in, drop out" counter-aesthetic. You wouldn't have known Leary's just-published book *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964) and its proud annunciations, including this one: "A psychedelic experience is a journey to new realms of consciousness. The scope and content of the experience is limitless, but its characteristic features are the transcendence of verbal concepts, of spacetime dimensions, and of the ego or identity."[3]

It was such consciousness-journey-mumbos-jumbos that disgusted your dear friend-to-be George Harrison when he journeyed in person to Haight-Ashbury in August 1967, the ground zero of flower power, to see what all the fuss was about, and found himself revolted and then a little scared. "I went there expecting it to be a brilliant place," George remembered. "I thought it was going to be all these groovy kinda gypsy kinda people, with little shops making works of art, and paintings and carvings, but instead it turned out to be just a lotta bums. And many of them were just very young kids who'd come from all over America and dropped acid and gone to this mecca of LSD."[4] This was the good-for-nothing, pseudo-artisanal stereotype of

3 Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (University Books, 1965), 11.

4 ZobbaZobbaZobbaZoo, "George Harrison on Haight Asbury" [sic], *YouTube,* June 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_I-ThafU1e4; from *The Beatles Anthology,* part 6.

West Coast hippies, with chemicals wagging the tail of an empty wannabe culture. Even its music was suspect.

So your own long hair arrived and then stayed as a clarion call of industry and stubbornness and dedication to the cause — and no way of bum-ness. But why resort to such categories? Because you were confronting the 1960s establishment terminologies that British sociologist Dick Hebdige talked about, which made cultural deviancy "a dynamic process whereby those in power define the limits of acceptable and unacceptable behavior through labelling (e.g., marijhuana smoker = lazy, long-haired, potentially violent malcontent, etc.)."[5] "Hipness" is actually the word you chose for your own long-haired self: the tresses as a symbol of inclusion, recognition, willing social exclusion, and even kin-group protection: "[I met Mudcrutch vocalist Jim Lenahan since] he had long hair, and he was one of the five or six guys in town with long hair, so you would kind of group together so that you wouldn't get your ass kicked. Because there was the real danger of rednecks beating the shit out of you."[6]

Sometime toward the end of the decade, fellow longhair musician Neil Young did stray from the longhair pack and get the shit beaten out of him in such a way, somewhere in Georgia, and then out of anger he lectured the good folks down in Dixie with his song "Southern Man" (1970): "Southern man, better keep your head / Don't forget what your good book said / Southern change gonna come at last / Now your crosses are burning fast." Young later retracted the condescension in his song, if not the song itself. But by this measure, you — Tom Petty, from Gainesville, Florida — were not a "Southern man." (Young's term is simple but odd, a phrase that maybe only a Canadian could have come up with, but then it scans and rhymes better than "redneck," and so makes a better lyric. By the way, I've always wanted an excuse to pen the phrase "down in Dixie," so thanks for that.)

Long hair this early in the 1960s could indicate being a girl or a pansy. Short hair, for its part, had long been a sign of submis-

5 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979), 179.
6 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 53.

sion to social or government control, as witness prisons and the military. And more autocratic nations tend to squelch any such expressions of individuality. Consider in tandem the common saying about Japan, that it's a place where "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down," and the scarcity of longhairs among that country's salarymen. So the Southern men who beat up Neil Young might have been angered by such a simple matter as his seeming refusal to join the social fabric, his visual rebuff of conformity. Why didn't this Canadian longhair just get with the program? And it's in such an antiestablishment context that we can best enjoy George Harrison's genius, gentle, break-the-ice tease of producer-to-be George Martin, ever the good-natured industry wingman: "I don't like your tie."[7]

If you, Tom Petty, managed to steer clear of the Southern man thing and its casual — or just homicidal — racism, rock and roll also helped you sidestep the "good old boy" clan mentality. The Beatles also helped you evade the helluvafella tradition, with its hard work in the fields and big whiskey draws and bar brawls. The theme here of being a Southern male in the 1950s was rebellion, especially when these guys had no idea what they were rebelling against: "If, as [Charlie] Daniels urged, Southern Rock musicians took pride in being rebels, what was it they were rebelling against? Finally, why was the movement so exclusively and self-consciously male? An important part of that effort to find or construct a heritage — if only, in some cases, to find a heritage against which to rebel — showed in the nearly constant references to the South or particular southern states and cities."[8]

Gravedigging was one of your many jobs as a Florida kid, Tom, when you were trying to fit money-making ventures betwixt and between your band practice sessions and gigs, and

7 Mark Hertsgaard, *A Day in the Life: The Music and Artistry of the Beatles* (Delacorte Press, 1995), 39.

8 Ted Ownby, "Freedom, Manhood, and White Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts,* ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (University Press of Virginia, 1997), 370.

looking for a place to put down musical roots. And it was your hair-pride that led you to graveyard work, the first necessitating the second. As you recalled it, dead-people work was one of the few things longhairs like you could do to make money at the time: "Yeah, it came back to hair again. You couldn't get a job with long hair. Digging graves, you could. It was a city job. They were governed by rules where they couldn't tell you to cut your hair."[9] So your employment options had to make do around your haircut choices, not the other way around. How fashion-backward. Lionizing John, Paul, George, and Ringo led you to coffins, tombstones, and earthen pits with worms split into oozey halves by your rusting shovel. Instead of getting a buzz cut and a decent goddamn job, maybe jerking sodas, you let yourself work in the domain of the deceased. And between your gravedigging employ and playing high school dances rather than attending them, your love life must have been a bit dismal.

So you were early to the longhair scene — you covered up your ears before that became a political statement. Of course you weren't the only Southern man who used hair length to carve a place out for himself between the buzz-cut generation and the hippies. You must know that Lynyrd Skynyrd, progenitor long-tressed band in Southern rock music, adapted their name from Leonard Skinner, a six-foot-two teacher and coach who patrolled the hallways of Lee High School as a dress- and grooming-code Nazi in the later 1960s: "For boys, socks and tucked-in shirts were required, sideburns had to be above the earlobe, and hair couldn't touch your shirt collar or fall within two fingers of your eyebrows. 'The philosophy behind that was, if students were dressed better and looked neater, they'd behave better and study better. It didn't work,' Skinner said after the code was scrapped in 1970."[10] So here we have Lynyrd Skynyrd as the ultimate Southern rock band, the one that replied to Neil Young with their own top-ten hit song "Sweet Home Alabama"

9 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 53.

10 Gene Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd: Remembering the Free Birds of Southern Rock* (Broadway Books, 2002), 49.

(1974), but who could just as easily have gotten the shit beaten out of them by those same hair-paranoid rednecks.

I'm within my rights talking about your blond hair, Tom, because straight dudes of the time were free to talk about women's coifs, and gay turnabout is fair play. Free even to touch the girls' hair without warning or permission, as a right implicitly ceded to mediocre men by beautiful women. (Blondes have more fun, and all that.) Jayne Mansfield was a Texas belle, and before her there was Marilyn bringing the term "platinum" to male admirer's lips. And then there were girls such as Sandra Dee, Tuesday Weld, Brigitte Bardot (who single-handedly sparked John Lennon's blonde fetish), and Grace Kelly (who continued Alfred Hitchcock's). Also "creamy blonde" Joanna Moore in the Elvis flick *Follow That Dream,* which you'd actually watched being filmed in Ocala in 1961. But of course it was Elvis you remembered actually meeting on that occasion; you remembered the brunet king as "radiant" in appearance.[11]

It must be a fated coincidence that I was born the same year you grew your hair out — way out, so that it cushioned your neck and collarbones and went beyond "touching your shirt collar" to actually making it disappear. And somewhere, down inside, my own blood flows more strongly down below knowing I could have acted as an inversion of those suburban Cold War family men who — feelin' good after cocktails, after dinner prepared by the wife, like maybe a sloe gin fizz or a pink squirrel or two, and maybe the planning of junior's basketball schedule — would dream of touching the fabled gold tresses of Marilyn, Jayne, and Grace. Surely it was considered innocent-manly enough to be casual dinnertime conversation, in front of the wife and kids. (*Did you see Marilyn had her hair done different when she sang for the President's birthday? Such a fox, such glamour on that honey-dolly.* I admit I'm so completely bad at this…)

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11 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 9.

Your own blond hair, Tom, was deeply different from the girl bombshells, so nearly ruler-straight that it perplexed the eye — no wave, no curls, no kink, no turn-under. Such simple coif-linearity in an era of lacquered bouffants, beehives, and bobs! Your own long blond locks looked shiny, cared-for, tended-to, ultra-conditioned, but maybe it was just good genes; you were too straight and blue-collar to be involved with "product." Your locks also looked thin enough to be fragile and wispy to the touch. So you had at least the *look* of a would-be, misled pretty boy who failed in whatever mission it is that pretty boys undertake, who was somehow lied to before you became a star. You just *are,* in spite of yourself.

I think the first time I ever saw you was Glen Christensen's *Damn the Torpedoes* (1979) album front and the concurrent February 1980 *Rolling Stone* magazine cover, back in that magazine's covertly gay Jann Wenner days when men were often quietly objectified on the front, including the infamous, nearly naked John Travolta shot from 1983. (Wenner's covers sometimes looked like stroke magazines.) In that *Damn the Torpedoes* image, Christensen has you posed awkwardly in front of a deep lipstick-red backdrop and wearing an almost as strong lipstick-red T-shirt. The throbbing red hue, plain but visceral in its effect, nearly New-Wave-y, looking less like blood than a very sweet and glossy cherry, gives you an almost doll-like appearance, pulling Tom Petty decisively away from the sepia tones of the folk revival and the paisley and tie-dyed colorations of 1960s psychedelia. I wonder if Christensen (and Wenner's cover) were trying to vivify your paleness of complexion: "Red is the color of passion and fierceness, and it can accentuate the golden strands of women [and men?] with blonde hair," writes Maria Dolores Garcia in *Fashion* magazine. "In fact, a bright red dress will light up your hair and make you look stunning on a date night. Aside from that, you can also pick various shades of red, such as cardinal, alizarin, pomegranate, and scarlet red."[12]

12 Maria Dolores Garcia, "Which Colors Look Best on Blondes?," *Fashion,* February 24, 2021, https://vivaglammagazine.com/which-colors-look-best-

Your hair was so straight, Tom, that it parted of its own accord halfway across your forehead, like a curtain drawn by God. And then the parted curtain halves fell down on each side, uninterrupted, cascading past your cheekbones and straight down past your unimpeding, narrow jaw. If Tom Petty was a show, the hair-curtain declared your face as the main attraction, maybe not entirely fairly. And herein was an anomaly — namely, your grandmom's Cherokee heritage intermingling with your northwest European mother's genes: "So then the story unfolded. My father's mother was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian."[13] You remembered your grandmother and how her family didn't want to broadcast anything "other." They really wanted to be considered white Americans, you recalled: "They were country people. Had a corn crop, probably an acre. And chickens. [She] was in complete denial about being Indian. Didn't want that out too much. Didn't want to talk about that. Now I can see why. It was sad, really. The Indian thing was not a popular subject. They wanted to be white. Meaning my grandmother and her other two sons." And then your blond, French English mother passed her hair color on to you, making you "the only blond, blue-eyed guy in the family." It's maybe not often recalled that hair color and texture is a stronger indicator of ethnic heritage than skin hue.[14] "And we all ended up with this really straight hair, Indian hair, and Indian noses," you yourself recalled.[15]

Your straight, beautiful, long hair embodies various cultural dissonances. Cultural historian Marina Warner tells us that Christian biblical mindsets cast a long shadow when it came to pre-Enlightenment Europeans' notions of body hair. "Hairiness indicates animal nature," Warner writes. "It is the distinctive sign of the wilderness and its inhabitants, and bears the freight of Judaeo-Christian ambivalence about the place of instinct and nature, fertility and sexuality. […] The Elizabethans had a prov-

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on-blondes/.

13 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 31.

14 Sarah Cheang, "Roots: Hair and Race," in *Hair: Styling, Culture, and Fashion,* ed. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang (Berg, 2008), 27–42.

15 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 4.

erb, 'Bush natural, more hair than wit,' which associated abundant locks with the primitive and the inferior, hence the sexual, the beastly."[16] Warner summarizes the importance of golden tresses for Europeans, in the later twentieth century still carrying its ancient hint of virginity but now possibly tinged with the offsetting taint of eugenics and Aryanism: "Blondeness is less a descriptive term about hair pigmentation than a blazon in code, a piece of a value system."[17] Marina Warner harks back to Max Lüthi, the twentieth-century Swiss folklore scholar, who discussed "blonde hair as a vital aspect of beauty's function in fairy tales: its capacity to awaken the senses also helps illuminate the truth."[18] The fairy tales of blond tresses are many, starting with Charles Perrault (of "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Sleeping Beauty" fame), and ending with Jayne Mansfield's arrival in Hollywood. This mythology concerned young women, for whom the term "fair" showed a convergence between beauty and light, between natural loveliness and golden locks.

These Judeo-Christian notions, which are locked into a constant opposition between virtue and sin, contrast with the less guilt-ridden Cherokee lore of magical figures who are marked by long hair: seers, helper sprites, little people charmed and supernatural. James Mooney, in his classic *Myths of The Cherokee,* tells of one such oracle: "In a variant related by Hagar (MS *Stellar Legends of the Cherokee*) a star with fiery tail falls from heaven and becomes a man with long hair, who warns the people of the coming deluge." These myths often speak of these long-haired magical male samaritans also being good-looking and muscular, such as the spirits called the Yûñwĭ Tsunsdi': "They are little fellows, hardly reaching up to a man's knee, but well shaped and handsome, with long hair falling almost to the ground. They are great wonder workers and are very fond of music, spending half their time drumming and dancing. They

16 Marina Warner, "The Language of Hair," in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 358–60.
17 Ibid., 364.
18 Ibid., 367.

are helpful and kind-hearted, and often when people have been lost in the mountains, especially children who have strayed away from their parents, the Yûñwĭ Tsunsdi' have found them and taken care of them and brought them back to their homes."[19] So there's a good home for longhairs in Cherokee legend; they can live by good deeds and don't have to support themselves with gravedigging, and they have no track coaches running after them with clippers. By comparison, mainstream Western aesthetics are so very uncool. There's no question which of the two realms I'd want to live in if given the choice.

So what was the visceral sexual appeal of long-haired male rockers? The Beatles were a wan baroque concoction, and so imitating them wasn't anything sexy. Uncut tresses could invoke magic, in line with the old tales and legends from various continents. They hint at unseen rituals, and so could be sexy in the way some people somewhere (somehow?) might find, say, Freemasons sexy. Maybe the primary longhair sexual tension comes from the vague, slightly dark implication of a subculture. The long-haired subtexts of rebellion — giving the finger to social mores, meaning the "violent malcontent" thing — might portend pent-up angers and high energy between the sheets. And feasibly, possibly, lower sex inhibitions — that animal nature again, as desired/feared by those involved in overdrastic white-European thought. (The sex manuals said to be wary of partners who feel compelled to wash right after screwing; they might be unconsciously trying to cleanse themselves of you.) More concretely, long hair on a guy shows commitment to self-embellishment or self-decoration, which would conflate hirsuteness with tattoos.

I haven't seen any instances where a political conservative has connected long hair on a man to his being a sissy or a fag, but I'm sure someone, somewhere has lumped drug abuse, laziness, and homosexuality together in a Gordian knot of immorality — one that seemed tailor-made for the simple remedy of

19 James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee; And, Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees,* repr. ed. (Charles and Randy Elder-Booksellers, 1982), 445.

soap and scissors. (There was that oft-recalled exchange between countercultural rocker Frank Zappa and the abrasive TV interviewer Joe Pyne, who happened to have a prosthetic leg. "So I guess your long hair makes you a woman," said Pyne. To which Zappa replied without missing a beat, "So I guess your wooden leg makes you a table."[20]) But the cultural implications of unbarbered locks changed in the later 1970s, when long hair could signal being a metalhead. Robert Walser quotes critic Robert Duncan on heavy metal musicians as "slack-jawed, alpaca-haired, bulbous-inseamed imbeciles in jackboots and leather and chrome."[21] How is one to tell hair that's been grown out of rebellion (alpacas are too stupid to rebel) from hair that's been grown to be attractive? When is it a fuck-you and when a come-hither, and are there times when its purpose — as something indicative of attitude — is to do both simultaneously, maybe as a kind of statement, "I'll fuck you thither"?

Warner reminds us that hair has a "mythic power" and a "multiplicity of meanings" that center on the basic duality between being "the sign of the animal in the human" and all that means in terms of bestiality or purity, and the shining and incorruptible aspect of the body, "the least fleshly production of the flesh."[22] She says we humans have developed our follicles as a "rich resource" for writing and communicating "the language of the self." We put our hair length and visibility constantly in play across a spectrum between, on the one hand, the animalistic, and on the other, the human. "Hairstyles continually perform a drama about the beastly and the human selves present within each individual," Warner writes, "and mark off degrees of identification and repudiation in a form of animal mimicry."[23] So maybe those heavy metal alpacas aren't as distant from human

20 Ed McMahon with David Fisher, *When Television Was Young: The Inside Story with Memories by Legends of the Small Screen* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), 154.

21 Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 20.

22 Warner, "The Language of Hair," 372–73.

23 Ibid., 371–72.

music-making as we might have thought. We have met the hairy enemy, and he is us.

Warner also mentions hair's "centrality to body language," something that makes it especially important in music-making. Long hair intrigues the viewer by utterly changing a guy's appearance between when he's lying supine and when he's prone. It can become a shining, ever-shifting, and ever-tousling face-mask. It both frames and cradles the face. Most important, long hair becomes an invitation to see a man *in thrall to something.* Think of Bob Marley singing, as he so often did, with his eyes closed. Here the hair becomes both hat and halo: unnecessary and illogical, a forced pause in necessary discourse. (And this is why male long hair is so hard to talk about: To cite it as an example of something meaningful and "cultural" is to deny it both culture and meaning; Jacques Rancière said vis-à-vis Barthes, "To give examples of punctum is, in a certain fashion, to give myself up."[24]) Long hair is all a stage of preparation for the eyes to close and the head to tilt back when the jamming becomes immersive or the sex becomes all-pleasurable — when reason loses relevance. Long hair on a man indicates his readiness for such a state, for a state of surrender to other forces — whether it be music or bodily gratification.

Or spiritual absorptions, for that matter: the sacred over the profane. The Ḵāksār and other Sufi dervishes of Persia grow their hair long as part of their initiation, and their locks become part of ritual observances. Moreover, the Ḵāksār have maintained their tradition as an oral practice, not one centering on scripture and study: "One of the last poles of the order, Moṭahhar-ʿAlišāh (mid-19th century) remarked that 'the poverty (*faqr*; i.e., Sufi practice) of the Ḵāksār is an untouched and pure subject; no one has yet published anything about our states and precepts. We live as dervishes in practice, not with forms and books.'"[25]

24 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator,* trans. G. Elliott (Verso, 2009), 43.

25 Zahra Taheri, "Ḵāksār," in *Encyclopedia Iranica,* December 15, 2010, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kaksar.

There can't be any causal connections with the headbanging practices of 1980s heavy metal communities — surely a profane community if there ever was one — but the traditions do share involvement in oral transmission, hair-symbolism, and ecstatic trance-making.

Tom, you were from north Florida; Lynyrd Skynyrd was from Texas. So your immediate competition was really the Southern longhairs in Georgia, specifically the Allman Brothers. And as you recalled, it was that competition that made you exile yourself from the South to Los Angeles, where you started the Heartbreakers and found your real identity: "The Allman Brothers had gotten big, and every group had become an imitation of that. Literally everybody but us was an imitation of the Allman Brothers. And they were playing really long songs, and jamming. And we hated it." This sense of disaffection prevented you from doing business with the nearest big record label, which was 250 miles north in Macon, Georgia. "We were told [by Capricorn Records] we were 'too English' for them. They were into this Southern sound."[26] In other words, you were too Beatles and not enough Robert Johnson or Muscle Shoals for their tastes. Part of the opposition here wasn't just stylistic, but also a matter of jamming length. The Allmans went on for long stretches. Their "Mountain Jam," recorded live at the Fillmore East and released on the *Eat a Peach* album (1972), ran more than thirty-three minutes, while you prided yourself on the Beatlesesque concision of three-minute tracks. (Just like your hair never reached your boobs, as Gregg Allman's did. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing, after all.) It was the Allmans' basis in the blues that allowed them to do their thing at length, but Tom Petty didn't really touch the blues and didn't have Mississippi Delta in his musical DNA.

And so, being a tangle of contradictions (your "blond Cherokee" looks not least among them), you were distinctive without being imposing or fashion-forward. *I was just this pale, little, skinny kid with long hair.* You were an urchin, a puck. Maybe

26 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 58–59.

also a small, almost pretty punk. If I had to describe your physical bearing and your voice in one word, I'd say petulant. And pouty. Also boyish. Maybe the last kind of look you'd expect in a rock star. And your move to Los Angeles prompted closer affiliation with folk music and even great musical distance from the blues: "We loved the Byrds and we loved the Beach Boys, and Buffalo Springfield and the Burrito Brothers. And we kind of felt we belonged here [in LA]. And we always have, though we're still never referred to as an 'LA band.'"[27]

* * *

Contrary to your star status, one of your major fascinations is your sheer, magnificent, ultra-glorious unlikelihood. (As a blond Cherokee rock front man, for Christ's sake, you were maybe some kind of incongruity-counterpart to Dylan as a Jewish, fiftieth-parallel-north protest-music troubadour. The only real dustbowl-aspect to Dylan was his sound.) At times you looked more girlish than boyish, which wouldn't be an issue except that you happened to write anthemic songs about young rock maleness. Your man-aspect would have been at home only in Perrault or old mythology, and that connection is what gives your appearance as the Mad Hatter such credence in the surreal, Lewis Carroll–themed "Don't Come Around Here No More" video (1985). The Mad Hatter appearance also worked because you could appear grotesque to the naked eye, and didn't seem to care. On such occasions, your drooping look, heavy eyelids, sunken cheeks, hanging-open mouth, and sulky lips gave you the demeanor of Shelly Duvall transmuted with Margaret Hamilton, two actresses famous for their psychological horror roles, the first of the two at the receiving end of evil (from Jack Nicholson) and the second delivering it with rock and roll glee (to Judy Garland). Your dentition is too big for your face. And then there are your narrow little shoulders, which you liked to puff out and square off with a suit jacket.

27 Ibid., 58.

I did know something of your early personal history, and identified with your abuse at the hands of your father (resonating with one idea of gay sex: as a bonding between sidelined fellow-somethings), and your ostensible lack of vocal-sexual charisma queered my vocal fetish all the more. On that *Damn the Torpedoes* album cover, they are unmistakable, those lacerated but blank eyes, all afraid to look. Or rather, those eyes that look but without permission to see. I know very well that inability to see; it is a fear of locking eyes — a fear of drawing abuse. The rock-lore is thick with tales of you moving heaven and earth to get *Damn the Torpedoes* made, making it the highest boulder up till that point that you as ambitious Gainesville-musician-Sisyphus had managed to roll uphill. Still, I think your eyes are empty and fearful in this photo — maybe I'm seeing the naked drive that you talked about, before your mellowing in middle age.

How was it possible for such an ac hoc figure to become "one of the quintessential American rock stars of the late twentieth century," *The New York Times* said in your obit? There was certainly persistence, hard work, quality control, and plenty of reinvention across decades. You didn't look the role at all, really, but come to think of it, rock stars who qualify as eye candy are surprisingly rare. (We'd have to wait until after glam, after genderfuck, after punk, after all those shadowbox-disguisings and desire-obfuscations, after the air was cleared, to get a genuinely handsome guy in front of a microphone. But then our patience was rewarded with the likes of Chris Cornell and Kurt Cobain.) I appreciated the fact that you and your entourage didn't plunk money down for photographers to make you look sleek and sexy — as Billy Squier, Eddie Money, Ringo Starr, and even Bob Dylan had done.

In saying you looked unlikely, Tom, I didn't mean you looked ordinary. Quite the opposite. You looked wonderful but not unprecedented. Let's say I found it an extraordinary but rather familiar look: I saw more than a few kids in junior high and high school who had long blond hair veiling such a look of fearful abusedness. Of absence, almost cadaverousness. By then, the

end of the 1970s, it was late enough in the political game that the short-hair Nazis had given up the fight. You said in your interviews that you and the Heartbreakers were sometimes mistaken for a punk act, so you might have agreed with Dick Hebdige when he said, "The scruffiness and earthiness of punk ran directly counter to the arrogance, elegance and verbosity of the glam rock superstars."[28] I can see an ingenuous punk core, one that could make the Ramones look and sound tame by comparison. Yes, the Ramones brandished their tees, their tight and frayed jeans, and their leather jackets and sunglasses. They stood afront brick walls, hands in pockets. But so what? Tom and the Heartbreakers stood and pouted; Tom angled his head downward, stuck out his lower lip, and looked directly ahead so as to challenge the camera. Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, and Tommy had nothing on you. Plus, you were blond while their hair looked like crude oil seeping from their heads.

But in that look of yours I saw something familiar and personal, a sense of shared suffering, maybe. I saw something of myself. It does seem a typical adolescent look, shared at a time when long hair could be both a form of protest and something to hide behind. And a high school time of life when desire takes strange forms under duress, as it must when you're in prison. Comrades in abjection, using each other in ways no one else could really understand. Two cocks, deployed as dual weapons of pleasuring disaffection. Taking your miseries out on the naked guy who happens to be in your bed. I think of fellow prisoners (or regimented students) deflecting the stress and tension on each other by fucking, intuiting that you could drive your fears deeper and deeper out of sight if you just fucked harder. Of being forced to translate suppression into the most naked form of sexual utterance, but of doing so over on the side somewhere, out of sight, with half a wish for scandalous discovery. In the vacant after-hours chemistry lab, maybe? (All those sturdy, hip-level lab tables.) Or, even better, the tighter confines of a dark

28 Hebdige, *Subculture,* 63.

janitor's supply closet that had been left unlocked? One of very few times it would be a thrill to be closeted.

I don't know how this school-depressive Tom-lookalike and I would have found each other, and I can't imagine such an encounter without sounding like a bad porno. There could have been some accidental collision or other, or a quick and unconsidered kiss (no affection, more about gnawing or biting). Or a locker-room sharing of glances that led to a slate of inevitabilities. (Just as straight guys took the heavy metal power chord as a call to action, for American gayboys of a certain age, the metallic slamming of lockers transmits an aural spark that is viscerally sexual.) After these two repressed gayboys connected, there would follow mutual predation, and the mutual shock of not realizing until then just how strong "these feelings" actually were. But also a shared, forceful objectification that's not possible when two people are attracted to each other in a top-ten, you're-so-beautiful way. (There can be a very fine line between revulsion and fascination. Maybe Paul McCartney put this best when he said, speaking not about gayboy sex but the John Cage–influenced music of Cornelius Cardew and the AMM group, that "you don't have to like something to be influenced by it."[29])

There's nothing original about these scenarios, which is sad — and their only perversion. Likewise your songs, which inherited nothing of the Beatles' artisanal gift for surprise; think of their vacillating between major and minor in "She Loves You," the gently delightful, ear-smacking flat-submediant chord in the chorus of "Hello, Goodbye," or the white-noise tsunami in "I Want You (She's So Heavy)." When I listened to Tom Petty tracks, I had no more expectation of surprise and novelty than when I listened to godawful 1970s pop-rock crap like Foreigner or went to bed with other men. And then I think of novelist Yukio Mishima's account (crystal-clear, unsurpassed) of just what happens in a gay sexual encounter, where any competitive dislike can just become a way to clear the air for an understanding of all that is shared. Where, as Eve Sedgwick might say,

29 Barry Miles, *In the Sixties* (Jonathan Cape, 2002), 103.

the homosexual act clears the air for the homosocial bond. This becomes the opposite of gay desire as a remediation of emptiness — in short, of sexual inversion as Freud and Havelock Ellis would have it. Whenever I return to a Tom Petty song, it's not out of a musical love for the track in itself. Instead, I think of what Mishima wrote in *Forbidden Colors,* his breakout gay novel:

> It will be nothing new; I know that the demands of originality will be no more satisfied than before. Why is the love of men so irresolute as this? And yet is not the very stuff of homosexuality that simple state of pure friendship that comes after the act? That lonely state of returning, lust appeased, mutually to the state of being simply members of the same sex — had not their lust been granted for the very purpose of building to such a state? Those of this ilk love each other because they are men, they like to think, but is it not the cruel truth that by loving they recognize for the first time that they are men? […] Rank, occupation, age, beauty notwithstanding, they are a fellowship welded by the same emotion — by their private parts, let us say. What a bond! These men do not have to sleep together. From the day we were born we have slept together. In hatred, in jealousy, in scorn, coming together for a short moment of love just to keep warm.[30]

So there was this contradiction, Tom Petty: between the good-times message of your paeans-to-straight-youth music and your ostracized-composite, even traumatized-reject look. Related is the problem of naming you — the problem, or nonproblem(?), of categorization. You and the Heartbreakers weren't folk, weren't pop, weren't heavy metal, certainly really didn't have anything to do with the blues (there go the Stones comparisons). You recalled with nervous hilarity playing early on for rednecks in country bars in Florida, where you wore "Wyatt Earp ties" (you called them) to compensate for your long hair. This was

30 Yukio Mishima, *Forbidden Colors* (Knopf, 1968), 56.

before Willie Nelson earned long hair some Southern street cred when he started sporting braided pigtails in about 1972. So what were you, then?

It was mainly your songwriting importance that got your name into your band's title (Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers), but even your name didn't suffice as a descriptor. As a boy growing up in Gainesville, you must have suffered on account of your surname. I'm willing to bet the other boys tried to make you cry by calling you "Tom Pretty." Maybe they even got limp-wristed and took up a falsetto whine when they said it. The name must come from the Old French *petit,* which also gave us the words "pet" ("an animal kept as a favorite") and "petting" ("fondling indulgence") — a creature, kept and abused, that a person wants to give comfort to. And there was some fit there. After all, you had that blank face; that smile, all forced and wounded. That homely visage that seems unable to express anything, unless it's through song.

Maybe there was a hint of revenge to my Tom Petty likings. I resented your musical popularity among my classmates. "Mr. Petty's music provided the soundtrack to countless parties and long highway drives."[31] The infectious power of your choruses, as if made for group singing. The whole stadium rock, good-times ethos was a school thing that I loathed even before I knew why I stood apart from it. My classmates, whom I both hated and wanted to see naked and in my bed, whom I wished to see angry and erect and needfully demanding, they swayed in time to "Here Comes My Girl," "Breakdown," "Listen to Her Heart," and "Learning to Fly." And I desired those boys, and I wanted to hear you — wanted to use you — differently.

Words are food for the onanist imagination, and proper names — aural icons, snapshot representations of their subjects — are almost as erotically palatable as visual images. By owning the name, I own the thing. If I can't possess you as a

31 Simon Vozick-Levinson, "Tom Petty Songs: Listen to 14 Essential Tracks," *The New York Times,* October 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/arts/music/tom-petty-best-songs.html.

warm body in the sheets, I'll have your name and do with it what I will. Having the name of the desired perform in your mouth is oral sex, with the added thrill of denotation.

And this phonetic deconstruction can be retribution for the power of ordinary pejoratives. One revenge for being called a fag was to fellate the aggressor's name at night, forcing it into the role of oral pleasure. I gave such payback to my classmates Steve and Chris and Larry, among others, and so their names in themselves became a kind of petulant music. And then Tom as the first name, all plain and single syllabled: Uncle Tom, doubting Thomas, Tom as the generic male — as in the tomcat, the tomboy, the tomfool. (Not all names can be musicalized in such a way. I fear that when I pass away, my epitaph will broadcast the fact that I lost my virginity to a guy named Ralph.)

Fellating a person's name only becomes a musical act when it becomes a perversion: Humbert Humbert musicalizes Lolita's name, ridiculing the normalcy of its iconic function. He does verbal cunnilingus on Lolita — "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps" — and holding "the fire of his loins" at his beck and call, not at his loins per se, but pinned down beneath his hard palate.[32] At a time when Prince, Judas Priest, and Frank Zappa were being harassed by the Washington wives' Parents Music Resource Center, Tom Petty's audiences would probably have agreed with Vladimir Nabokov's wickedly, satirically stupid introduction to *Lolita,* attributed in print to one John Ray, Jr., PhD: "'Lolita' should make all of us — parents, socialworkers, educators — apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world."[33]

* * *

And then there's your voice. I say Tom Petty's look was unlikely, by which I mean you didn't disappear into the late 1970s wood-

32 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Knopf, 1992), 9.
33 Ibid., 5.

work, into a backdrop of physical-bodily normalcy. No spandex or poodle-cuts, no chest hair, no cowboy hats for you. Cotton, not polyester. You did do some leather pants, dark vests, the occasional cravat, and dandyish pinstripes. This unlikelihood was also true of your vocals, which were keen but not in any comfortable way: "Mr. Petty wrote pithy, hardheaded songs that gave a contemporary clarity to 1960s roots. His voice was grainy and unpretty, with a Florida drawl that he proudly displayed."[34] So what was vocally unpretty about pretty boy Petty? There was too much sinus for comfort, too much whine. Writing in *The New York Times,* Simon Vozick-Levinson drummed up some intriguing adjectives when he called your "Don't Do Me Like That" singing "one of his most devilishly effective lead vocal performances; he made a needling sense of resentment sound like the most liberating thing in the world."[35] (I looked it up: *needling* can mean "sarcastic, acerbic, cutting, hostile.")

It's true you didn't sing under false pretenses, and even considered yourself just a vocal placeholder for the band at first: "I always thought we should have a proper singer. My voice is such a specialized, stylized thing. Though I'm actually a much better singer now than I was then, in terms of tone and things like that. But I always felt we needed a real singer. It took years to kind of realize that I was the singer."[36] The phrase "singing voice" won't serve, exactly. I've heard it said that Frank Sinatra's rosewood-whisky-heartbreak-remembrance croon was a tacit and pervasive presence for male rock singers — and you can hear it in artists as different as Jim Morrison and Van Morrison, for instance — but that can't be said of you: "Petty was a plainspoken workingman's rocker whose approachable but unmistakable croak helped keep the band's songs grounded."[37] Croak, as in

34 Jon Pareles, "Tom Petty, a Mainstay of Rock with the Heartbreakers, Dies at 66," *The New York Times,* October 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/arts/music/tom-petty-dead.html.

35 Vozick-Levinson, "Tom Petty Songs: Listen to 14 Essential Tracks."

36 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 54.

37 Stephen Thompson, "Tom Petty Was Rock's Everyman," *NPR,* October 3, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/10/03/555163541/tom-

what frogs do? Now there are musicians who sing but who hate their own voices (John Lennon among them), but who still manage to make their throats function in the studio, just as there are those who learn to own their vocal weaknesses and leverage and even patent them (among them George Harrison, and of course Bob Dylan). I don't think you did either, Tom; when faced with a vocal challenge, you just sang all the more intensively albeit not more robustly, come hell or high water.

In being hard to listen to, you could be compared with Richard Manuel, the so very sad-soulful lead singer on The Band's great and timeless album *Music from Big Pink*. (Manuel really tears one's heart asunder in Dylan's magnificent song "I Shall Be Released," a track that's hard to hear without thinking of the singer's suicide nineteen years later.) But then Manuel was a true soul vocalist, and could hold pitch and sing more from his upper lungs than from his nose. I'll admit, Tom, that you yourself sometimes went down surprisingly low, to catch some manly tones. There's the verse of "Here Comes My Girl," where you really step out of your usual near-falsetto and take on a Sinatra-esque, sage-like tone of depressive rumination. These recitativo lines seem annunciatory, quite unlike your usual song-self, the rhymes not quite believable:

> You know sometimes, I don't know why
> But this old town just seems so hopeless
> I ain't really sure, but it seems I remember the good times
> Were just a little bit more in focus.

To my ears, your word choices said kink and your delivery suggested sexual tension and abused petulance. Especially after the weathered wisdom that opens the first verse, the last two lines of the "Here Comes My Girl" chorus are downright creepy with their pitch-slides and wheedling: "Yeah, and she looks so right / She is all I need tonight." A robust Sam Cooke or a smiling, bouncy Peter Frampton could carry these lines. But as delivered

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petty-was-rocks-everyman.

with your *unmistakable croak,* they're only so much vocalized lecherousness. Even if I change the gender of the pronoun in your lyric, you still sound reptilian.

Even more generally speaking, your singing seemed more a matter of declamation than sending emotions melodically aloft, and so it reminded some listeners of Springsteen. The inimitable critic Lester Bangs was so reminded, and the comparison apparently caused you some concern. (You replied to Lester that you'd never really listened to the Boss, so you went out and did so, and came back unimpressed.) It's true, both you and Springsteen give the impression — maybe as singer-songwriters who came of age post-Dylan — of singing less than you spoke in-and-around-the-notes. *Sprechstimme* was Arnold Schoenberg's word for this. Much of your roots-music, blue-collar street-cred lies here, I believe. Critic Stephen Thompson writes: "His songs could sound tortured, weary, angry, knowing, defiant. But Petty also possessed a great capacity for hard-won warmth — for having sounded so tortured, weary, angry, knowing and defiant that his moments of grace, when they came around, rang all the more true."[38]

I don't hear the "hard-won warmth" thing. When are you ever warm? More often, what you do in songs is warn people. What I heard was a vocal petulance that matched your visual self as *this pale, little, skinny kid with long hair.* In being sexually aroused by "Don't Do Me Like That," I was able to see and hear things others didn't, and my misappropriations started smelling — as I realized after the fact — like cultural revenge. I didn't hear ordinariness in your voice. When I first encountered this song, I failed to hear the straight-male aspect of the lyrics and musical style and instead found erotic appeal in your small voice and glottal and growling sounds. The country-style hiccups are supposed to express frustrated desire, but does the thin-voiced and thin-boned Tom Petty — *just this pale, little, skinny kid with long hair* — stand as a plausible hetero desirer? Or in this song

38 Ibid.

are you the classmate with me in the janitor's closet, pleading to go faster?

> Then he said "you'd better watch your step"
> Or you're gonna get hurt yourself
> Someone's gonna tell you lies
> Cut you down to size
>
> Don't do me like that,
> Don't do me like that
> What if I love you baby,
> Don't do me like that

Those hiccups — those quick, percussive, coquettish little breath intakes at "get hurt yourself" — make me think of Buddy Holly, and maybe country yodeling before him. And doing an acceptable hiccup was a country-singer credential. Or at least that's the philologically minded, style-history context that scholars would want us to believe when hearing "Don't Do Me Like That." For an example, such scholars might point to the first verse of Holly's "That'll Be the Day," when the singer and his love get really close with all their clucking and smooching: "Well, you gave me all your loving / And your turtle doving / All your hugs and kisses / And your money too." But I'd like to make a point here. From a later twentieth-century queer perspective, that is back when I first heard Petty's "Don't Do Me Like That" — more than twenty years after Buddy Holly's death and almost fifty after the demise of country yodeler Jimmie Rodgers — the question arises of why I should care about the real-historical, the intended, country and western origins of the hiccup. In *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (2013), Edward P. Comentale steps back and considers Holly's hiccup from a more individual, epistemological perspective, the perspectives of language and breakdowns in language.

> At first, Holly's hiccup seems to erupt from within the melodic line like some unruly somatic force, an irrepressible

> presence in a more or less canned pop performance. We may take pleasure in its quirky immediacy, as a physical disruption of linguistic and melodic structure — sheer expression. [… But] he seems to be toying with the very structure of speech as a system of differentiation, emptying out his own voice again and again, so that he can assert it more forcefully. Presence thus becomes the effect of multiple arbitrary differences — the hiccup appears as no primary expression, but as part of a larger structure of emptiness. And, yet, in this alone, it still bears — like the DJ's own scratching — traces of something else, something irrepressibly human.[39]

And so, Tom, when you hiccup in "Don't Do Me Like That," Comentale's description becomes even more apropos. This is "no primary expression," as he puts it, but something to be heard "as part of a larger structure of emptiness." It's a DJ's vinylizing of the voice. To my ears, you do indeed sound like you're leaving communication behind, and becoming more intensely involved in "something else, something irrepressibly human" — something relating to your physical body. What that something sounds like to me is panting; you're overheating and needing more oxygen. And why would you be panting here, exactly, while exclaiming over human relationships? Well, I like to imagine your song written and sung by our Proustian bard of gay America, Edmund White. Here "Don't Do Me Like That" would be the needle-drop for a "ridiculous" encounter that White remembers thus, centering both on his BDSM tastes and his self-described kilt fetish: "Now he was in the apartment and I was feeling a cornered animal's excitement. I could hear the muffled clank of the kilt's metal buckles tap the wood chair. At last he opened my door. He was bare-chested and barefoot, just the kilt around him, the front of it severely tented by his erection. He looked as triumphant as a warrior. […] My instinct was to whimper and

39 Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 229–30.

accept whatever he dealt out, but I learned I could provoke him to new heights of fury if I pretended to resist."[40]

It was your unlikelihood, visual and vocal, that enabled me to hear "Don't Do Me Like That" as aural kink. But my sexy-gay hearings of the song are predicated most basically on the lyrics as I (mis)hear them: as some form of sex play. As I still understand it, the phrase "do me" can have only one meaning, especially given its grunting, monosyllabic, almost onomatopoeic phonetics. I can't unlearn this. And then when the song is fast and the vocalist seems to be whimpering, well.… With its glints of sadism, the vocal growl at "Someone's gonna tell you lies / Cut you down to size" just make the song all the more carnal. Your own *intended* meaning of the "Don't Do Me Like That" lyrics dawned on me only slowly. As I say, there were also musical misunderstandings. Not knowing early on about your cogency, your dislike of '70s album-rock elephantism, I took the energy and quick tempo of the song as sexual. (From your own perspective, this was no doubt part of the lingering influence of the earlier Beatles singles, which were often shorter than two minutes.) Critic Simon Vozick-Levinson heard this song as pure pop solicitation:

> Mr. Petty and the Heartbreakers' first Top 10 hit is a masterpiece of efficiency — at two minutes and 44 seconds, it's all hook. While histories of this era often emphasize the ways that punk firebrands reined in rock's self-serious bloat, "Don't Do Me Like That" is a reminder that Mr. Petty was doing much the same thing from well within the mainstream.[41]

It's a critical cliché to say that you were an infectious-chorus-type of songwriter. In his obit, Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* called you "as much a pop hitmaker as a rock 'n' roll craftsman, he'll be remembered for his instantly unforgettable choruses,

40 Edmund White, *My Lives: An Autobiography* (HarperCollins, 2006), 229.
41 Vozick-Levinson, "Tom Petty Songs."

and for how good it feels to sing along to them."[42] So, in my defense, how can a failing relationship — for that's where your "don't do me" is being done — be brought into an up-tempo, infectious chorus?

* * *

If you were an unlikely rock star, I was an unlikely listener. Whenever I lent an ear to Tom Petty, I was an outsider looking (listening) in. Queerness is, to cite cultural theorist Nikki Sullivan, "a deconstructive strategy," it eludes definitions, reassigns meanings, counteracts social normality, and profanes intuitive and wider understandings of "the way things are."[43] The most basic form of queerness in this sense involves desiring something that is — that is known to be — categorically undesirable or outside desiring. And by this reasoning, stylistic kitsch appears to be a form of queerness. Queer musicologist Mitchell Morris, in *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (2013), presents glossy commercial 1970s pop as a cultural predicament where music of "improper" appeal was freed from the otherwise normalizing force of critical verdicts.[44] What Morris is describing is in itself a form of fetishism and misappropriation: extracting songs (by Barry Manilow, the Carpenters, and Cher, for example) from their original music-marketplace contexts and subjecting them to new, in-depth, critical-aesthetic modes of appreciation. This certainly fulfills Freud's psychoanalytic definition of fetishism as the practice of turning objects to purposes (in Freud's thinking, sexual purposes) that they weren't intended or designed for. I can only add that Morris's "persistence of sentiment" process differs from my own Tom Petty misappropriation in that mine is a kind of guerilla action, a perverse reinterpretation of meaning,

42 Pareles, "Tom Petty, a Mainstay of Rock with the Heartbreakers."

43 Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York University Press, 2003), 59.

44 Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (University of California Press, 2013).

a construal that is not simply distinct from its creator's original intentions, but sabotaging of those intentions.

"Misappropriation" is my word here for my own queer deconstructive strategy, maybe the biggest-baddest of all, that is misplaced desire: using the right things for the wrong reasons, or maybe the wrong things for the right ones. Here growing up in the closet becomes a school for misappropriation. Think of watching the Super Bowl along with seventy million other viewers, but doing so only to see light playing off the players' tight pants. If one synonym for "misappropriation" is "stealing," then this amounts to a sweet cultural thievery. And there was much more in a late-1970s, small-town Midwestern upbringing. Images of men that were printed and broadcast under the radar of censorship and obscenity laws in "great places to raise your kids," indeed as invitations to shop or "learn about the world" at a time of Cold War American exceptionalism. These pushed this queer individual to become ever queerer, forced him into a *queerness of misappropriation* that starts to look like fetishism. I'm talking American Heritage images of loinclothed Native Americans, *National Geographic* photos of migrant Mexican workers in impromptu showers, and Saskatchewan he-men pumping iron. (Not to mention art books. I remember being hugely aroused by Caravaggio's painting *Amor Vincit Omnia*: a buck-naked, street-urchin angel postured to demonstrate — in ways both allegorical and pelvic-sex-positional — how "love triumphs over everything." So much for culture in the United States, but then Caravaggio would probably have approved. He apparently lived for a time with the boy who modeled for this proud Cupid.)

But these all became dear things to me, and at that time I knew no difference between loves and fetishes. It was difficult to take the absence of sex as less than very serious. In terms of the music I've loved and the men I've had sex with, I've even wanted to sample the luxury — an indulgence that defines normality? — of involving myself with impunity in something I knew even then that I'd come to disown or even regret. In short, to know the indulgence of involving myself where the pleasure

was just as high as the commitment-stakes were low. Of getting involved with someone or something I knew right away I was going to lose, but didn't care. An easy lay.

"The message of many things in America is, 'Like this or die.'" This assertion on our consensual notions of value comes from cultural theorist George W.S. Trow. "It is a strain. Suddenly, the modes of death begin to be attractive."[45] I would add that the most normal thing in America, in commodity-drunk America, is to want what others want, but the queerest thing is to want it *for the wrong reasons.* This is angry bricolage, expressing through offense. It's the ultimate queerness in a rabidly capitalist society: the queerness of misappropriation. Yes, the first dictionary definition of "misappropriation" is stealing; it's not coincidental that I acted out a near-shoplifting when I got Prince's *Dirty Mind* out of the music store — after paying for the record, but *how to exit with that album cover.* One experience that mimics the unspoken queerness of the sexually other is the momentary fear that grips you when you go past shoplifting alarms in a store. The ability to glide past these without even the slightest hesitation could only come from a life of steady solvency, of privilege — a life where you can take for granted having the means to satisfy your needs, at least legally. Now try to imagine exit alarms designed to detect desirous misappropriations. W.E.B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" in action.

Such misappropriation is contrary to the social dynamics of liberation and acceptance, but is implicated in culture and in — damn the word's snotty overtones — artistry. Misappropriation is using what you have remaindered to you, and using it to the utmost. It also runs counter to the hegemonic form of being gay that David M. Halperin calls, by way of John Clum, "a shared alternative reading of mainstream culture."[46] (Misappropriation is indeed alternative, but it's not shared.) It is cer-

45 George W.S. Trow, "Within the Context of No-Context: The Decline of Adulthood," *The New Yorker,* November 9, 1980, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1980/11/17/within-the-context-of-no-context.

46 David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 12.

tainly reading against "the grain," but might or might not be a kind of reading against authorial intention. Of course, misappropriation leads to a multitude of other mis-es: misreading, misinterpreting, misusing. But then I believe the literary critic Harold Bloom, who said that great things — maybe the only great things — transpire from such mis-es. Bloom's key phrase is "the anxiety of influence," but he's keen to demythologize the influence notion:

> "Influence" is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships — imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological — all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and it is the central point of this book) is that the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call "poetic misprision." What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be idiosyncratic, and it is almost certain to be ambivalent, though the ambivalence may be veiled.[47]

Misreading is an alternative manner of loving. Misreading becomes a way of life, even a duty. Being different necessitates a multipronged way of living, of trying to survive a world that can seem populated by multitudes. It's here that Tom Petty's stadium-rock mode becomes off-putting, along with all the quasi-religious talk about his authenticity, purity, goodness — of *not* misreading. The most basic myth is that Tom Petty was a knight in shining armor fighting a profit-directed music industry. In his published conversations with this "last rock-n-roll hero," Paul Zollo works up this interpretation:

47 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1997), xxiii.

> That season of discontent with the industry came to an end, but it was never gone. After the release of *The Last DJ,* which resounds as a biting indictment of both radio and record companies for cheapening their most valuable resource, critics called him bitter. "I'm not bitter," he said. "I'm just sad." To him, there was no excuse for what he saw as a corporate vulgarization of what to him was sacred. "It's cheaper for the record companies to manufacture artists who aren't going to make any waves than to deal with somebody with a point of view and some integrity," he said. "But integrity in music and art should be respected." There's that purity again. Even in the Eighties when America's new president was a former movie star named Reagan and the culture was in flux, he stayed true. In those days, who else even included the words "integrity," "music," and "art" in the same sentence? Integrity always mattered to him, at a time when the concept was becoming extinct, and the pathway to pop stardom became more akin to winning a game show than developing artistry. "Marketing has become more important than product," he said. Pop stars no longer were self-created, but pre-packaged for full marketing potential, a complete betrayal of that purity at the heart of his life. He endured it, but with open disdain. "They're presented as pop stars," he said. "That's fine. But I wish they weren't presented as musicians. They're not. And I think the public is short-changed by that."[48]

There's more than a fair cow pen's measure of bullshit here, but it's some eclectic bullshit: being against commercialism, yet talking about fans, writing songs around infectious choruses, and thinking of music as a stadium-filling gig; extolling purity, yet doing nothing really original; talking about musicianship and integrity, but never getting around to finding a real singer (unless collaborating with Stevie Nicks counts; I don't think joining the Traveling Wilburys does). And who wouldn't stake a

48 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 25.

claim to integrity? The only thing worth declaring is what specific cause you're pledging your integrity to.

I've come to realize that many of the nuances to my Petty-kink were really a queer reaction to the crowd-draw thing, to the celebrations of suburban banality, to the great wide American church of unsullied and unquestioned belief. Because a trust that's never been tested isn't worth holding onto:

> "He had a lot of fight in him," Dana Petty agrees. Over the 20 years that Dana went on the road with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, "I Won't Back Down" was a fixture. "They played that every night," she says. "Tommy never got tired of that one, because of the audience response." There were times, she remembers, when the tens of thousands of fans singing along were so loud they would drown out the band. "It's a song that touches everyone in their own way," she says. "You could see that they were all singing about their lives every night. And it's a pretty amazing thing to witness." The song's universal appeal stems from its simplicity, says Tom Petty's daughter Adria Petty. "It's like a mantra. It keeps building you up, stronger, stronger, stronger. Every word of the song is culminating in more tenacity."[49]

A pretty amazing thing to witness? Of course I can't begrudge anyone their will to survive and overcome, especially if they're battered or besieged. But this "singing along so loud" thing is a recurring nightmare of mine, the sound of thousands of people saying, chanting, or singing the same thing in synchronization. Where is the boundary between group appreciation and mob mentality? I've heard such "audience response" sonorities in football stadiums, and they make the blood run cold. (And this has progressed. Nowadays, I've become suspicious of the sound

49 Melissa Block, "'A Song for Any Struggle': Tom Petty's 'I Won't Back Down' Is an Anthem of Resolve," *NPR,* May 8, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/05/08/721228788/tom-petty-i-wont-back-down-american-anthem-resolve.

of just ten people applauding together.) The Nazi Nuremberg rallies must have sounded like such a "building you up, stronger, stronger, strong," culminating in tens of thousands of Brownshirts heading out in lockstep formation to go forth and abuse Jews. If you've resolved to persevere (to "not back down"), that's great, but keep it to yourself (or within your group-therapy session). The same goes for praying, politicking, listening, sporting, and other such forms of group involvement. (And then what are you not backing down from, exactly? These are the semantics of lynch mobs and down-home fascism. Is there any cause besides bodily survival that's worth such white-knuckle commitment? Can't you entertain a role for discussion or compromise?)

Somewhere in my own misappropriative act, Tom, your stadium-size draw played a role. I felt my kinky violation of the standard male-as-desirer role became all the more quietly delightful the closer it got to subverting classic rock clichés and machismo. Expectation is a wonderful thing to overturn. How many of your megastadium ticket-buyers would have continued their rockist enjoyment if a gayboy got on stage and fondled your pretty blond hair and touched you in more desirous ways? Performing obvious misappropriation — "doing" you "like that" — in front of 100,000 fans, hoping to draw out your "approachable but unmistakable croak," this would be queerness honed down to the razor-sharp edge of an existential experience. Come to think of it, maybe I have a lot of fight in me too, but the absurdity of my fetishistic fantasy shows I don't go out and evangelize for my cause.

* * *

The prose around rock and roll music does take on biblical overtones. Emphasized in the discourse are roots, lineages, purities, "keeping the faith" — even allusions to the Babylonian captivity and the promised land: "[Tom Petty's] mission from the start was to keep it real. He was drinking from the well of the original rock and roll, and maintaining that authenticity was one of many hard promises he made to himself and his fans, and which

he never broke."[50] Such fundamentalist-musical thought about "drinking from the well of the original" has been called "rockism." Like all such –isms, "rockism" represents the politicization of an uncritical belief in something, and in this case the trajectory of that something is tied to the wishes and needs and stories of the baby boomer generation. In his brilliant "The Rap against Rockism" (2004), critic Kelefa Sanneh went so far as to link it with white privilege:

> Rockism isn't unrelated to older, more familiar prejudices — that's part of why it's so powerful, and so worth arguing about. The pop star, the disco diva, the lip-syncher, the "awesomely bad" hit maker: could it really be a coincidence that rockist complaints often pit straight white men against the rest of the world? Like the anti-disco backlash of 25 years ago, the current rockist consensus seems to reflect not just an idea of how music should be made but also an idea about who should be making it.[51]

It's a fair point, but surely the broader cultural priority beyond the question of who is the question of authenticity. And authenticity is a dangerously nebulous notion, something that's claimed by just about everyone, just about everywhere. Much of the problem is that someone claiming to be authentic is saying tacitly that others are, by contrast, *in*authentic. In that way, it's not too distant from claiming to be blessed and enlightened, which suggests there are other people out there somewhere who are, by contrast, damned or ignorant.

These ideas of a uniform community centering on belief-uniformity, they get especially fishy when it comes to history — especially when ideas of directness and immaculacy (and, by suggestion, holiness) become involved. Searching for

50 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 19.

51 Kelefa Saneh, "The Rap against Rockism," *The New York Times,* October 31, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/the-rap-against-rockism.html.

authenticity is the stuff of organized religion, and when musicians and music-lovers start searching for authenticity, they get mired in the unholy muck of godliness:

> "When I hear Muddy Waters sing," [Tom Petty] said, "or Slim Harpo, it's very pure. It's incredibly honest. It doesn't need a lot of instruments to make it so pure. There's a thing about music: If you believe the singer, then the song is going to work. It's all about believability. If you can believe the singer, it will work. So I think our quest was for purity." […] "Music," he said, "is probably the only real magic I have encountered in my life. There's not some trick involved with it. It's pure and it's real. It moves, it heals, it communicates." His faith in the redemptive power of real-time rock and roll never faded, and to the end he remained a true believer.[52]

I honestly don't know what such purity is, or, more to the point, what it might sound like. I don't hear Slim Harpo — or Beethoven, or Ryuichi Sakamoto, or the B-52s, or Tom's own friend and colleague Bob Dylan — as pure, and I can't imagine that being a basis for their importance. But then I don't know why I would want to spend time trying to hear such a purity, which would have to be a laborious process of attempting to listen for things that *aren't* there. Listening would have to become a kind of aural centrifuging. No thanks, I'd much rather spend an hour strongly misreading and sullifying — in other words, depurifying — a Tom Petty song. Morality follows purity, and they both become involved in arguments against "everyday uses" of music. By this thinking, musical examples can embody truths that struggle, persist, and edify.

In the final estimation, I can only feel that queerness is utterly incompatible with rock music as Tom Petty and his fans invoked it: as a musical claim to honesty, purity, and authenticity. (Saneh's accusatory "rap against rockism" still has currency, two decades after his essay. And alternative music must be the

52 Zollo, *Conversations with Tom Petty,* 19.

periphery-exception that proves this rule.) You have on the one hand the pride that rock artists and fans take in authenticity and rootedness, most basically in believability, and on the other you have queer belief — the phrase is an oxymoron — in subverting and questioning. (Mitchell Morris talks about popular music tracks as "generational objects": songs as they come to embody "elaborate, sometimes elusive issues of politics, aesthetics, and most importantly, morality" for listeners inhabiting a particular time period.[53]) This duality might boil down to a confrontation between understanding songs as scriptural elements — like the Psalms, which were meant to be sung — and songs as sentimental icons, glittering fetishes, false idols. The song as evidence of belief involves affirmation, while the song as fetish involves disavowal (for instance, of one's own sexual difference or social marginalization), evasion (for example, of uncontrollable sexual desire), or warding-off (of transgression, of the devil's work).

And so, Tom Petty, your blond tresses and your unlikely vocal croak were — at least for the rock faithful — symbols of your authenticity, while at the same time they qualified as my own items of gay misuse, misappropriation, and reinterpretation. In her essay on fetish fashion (think leather chaps in the East Village or studded dog collars worn by high school students), Candace Martin speaks of fetishes as "vehicles in which to put disavowed desires." Martin goes on to describe a process where "whatever is forbidden is eroticized; this is the appeal of the sexual outlaw, the exemplar of radically transgressive sexuality."[54] So I suppose my own squelched longing is for Southern good-old-boy rockers, my desire consigned and limited to the symbolism that is long hair on men. My queer misappropriations might also bring to mind cultural historian Valerie Steele's description of fetish-fashion as manifesting a "charisma of deviance and decadence,"

53 Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment,* 9.

54 Candace Martin, "Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power," in *Longing: Psychoanalytic Musings on Desire,* ed. Jean Petrucelli (Karnac, 2006), 114.

where a fetish is something extracted relatively safely from a culture otherwise deemed perverse and dangerous.[55]

And there, Tom Petty, stand we in our unbridgeable divide: you in your purity and centeredness, and me in my peripheral place. You're straight down the middle, definitive. But I'm a pervert with paraphilias (including a hair fetish), and thus categorized by prefixes that mean (*para-*)*beside, between, around, opposite to, above,* or *false,* and (*per-*)*straying*. I suppose our oppositions might reflect the conflicting interpretations of the very term "rock," which can suggest either stability and permanence (a heavy geological object that's solid and stationary) or motion and change (something moving back and forth, such as a cradle or a bed that's supporting some passionate lovemaking). So, to cloak this opposition in disparate musical examples: We could have the Christian hymn "Rock of Ages" pitted against the Rolling Stones' "If You Can't Rock Me," one of many songs that plays up the double connotations of (1) sex; and (2) a blues-derived musical style that charged and defined baby boomer youth. And I'll resist the urge to play with that divide by closing here with any queer subversions of, or gay puns on, the word "rock." Maybe I'll just let the Stones do the honors by cueing up "Rocks Off," their opening track from *Exile on Main Street*. Would you call this masterpiece of rawness a pure, authentic, or redemptive song, dear Tom? I didn't think so. At the same time, I can't shake the feeling that you must have loved it anyway.

55 Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 193.

7

Symphonic Fictions and Penetrations

(Beethoven, *I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso* from Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, op. 125; Bruckner, *III. Adagio: Langsam, feierlich* from Symphony No. 9 in D Minor)

Through high school and college, my life support was the Romantic Austro-German symphonic tradition. I must have already seen the pompousness in that music-historical phrase, but there was nothing academic in the music as I heard it. Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, some Richard Strauss — the usual suspects enthralled me, but not, I think, in the usual ways. What they offered were aural provocations and confidences, very muscular in tone but intimately served up — *portably! al fresco! marvel of marvels!* — by my beloved, in fact coddled, first-generation Sony Walkman. And I engaged in these al fresco sonic-psychic collaborations *loud* — the two little silver volume slider knobs all the way up, and the foam earphones fitted on tight, to best approximate the feel of the sounds hitting me bodily, not just aurally.

What to call this constant stream of tones, ringing in the outer ears and then reheard again and again in the inner? On the surface of it, the specific symphonies I was involved with became personal mementos, tokens, commodities. Someone in cultural studies in the 1990s coined the phrase "soundtracks for our lives" to reference our personal musical repertoires — the individual playlists that we curate, and play again and again

to keep everyday drudgery from driving us mad. Bruckner's Eighth offered (still offers) an alternative to world-weariness, and that's probably why the soundtracks description never really worked for me. My scenario was more the reverse, in large part because I felt a different kind of corporeality. For me these symphonies were the life and the meat of the matter, and the world that played out in front of my eyes — visual but not tactile, since physical contact and intimacy were nonexistent — was the accompaniment thereto, the condiment. Life became the soundtrack to the symphonic visual track, as it were.

These symphonies were both micro- and macrocosms: carefully tended and manicured plots of time, but dead set on thoughts and feelings so grand as to lie beyond the reach of words. I thought of them as heavenly bodies around which life revolved and found focus. They also became wordless heuristics for the mind: sound abstractions, jungle gyms for the psyche, rhythm tracks for finding emotional structure. Catharses, maybe. Self-flagellations, possibly. Articles of an obsessiveness that smacked of autism. The material peripheria to the sounds were also important parts of the process. I was fascinated by the spidery, hand-engraved Mahler scores published by Universal Edition — by how the printed pages parsed, immobilized, and framed these overwhelming barrages of sound. I also loved to watch the little plastic cassette sprockets rotate as I listened on my Walkman, sometimes in sync with the music, sometimes not. Armageddon would never come, so long as the Bruckner Adagio was still in process (usually a long process) and the capstans still turned. And I liked to tap the boxes with the nail of my right index finger, as if to verify they weren't illusory in all their shiny magic. As if to prove their physical containment. A confirmation of glossy, commodified materiality. Tap, tap, click, click, turn, turn.

I soon realized that my amassed tapes, long listening-immersions, and printed scores weren't the core of the matter, but only the most immediately legible traces of what were, in deepest essence, mythologies. The symphonic lore consisted of parables, legends, tall tales, fallacies, anecdotes, fears, superstitions, all

of them so imposing that "the music itself" often came second to the cultural mythologies. More to the point, I soon discovered that this symphony lore was an elaborate distraction from things unspoken and unsaid. It was a decoy away from the maelstroms — the great unsaids that could brutalize us or consume us whole. Sublimations, maybe. Evasions, definitely.

These fables surrounding Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler — I actually call them myths because they aren't needless deceits so much as truthful and necessary fabrications. They are fictitious nonfictions, as solidified in history. (Music scholars and sociologists of music are keen to point out that abstract music, or *absolute music* as exemplified by symphonic traditions, cannot be a thing. Well, by contrast no one in cultural studies insists that Diana of the Moon, warrior Achilles, or Paul Bunyan never really existed, or that they are "just" a sociocultural mechanism that exists in order to perpetuate a clique.) The symphonic lores are also myth-like in that they are passed down through generations, and often take on lives of their own. They also prove compulsive, meaning it's *expected* that dreams, fancies, fantasies, and cautionary tales will be woven around these works.

And why symphonies, specifically, as aural traces of mythologies? Why no superstitions around sonatas or power ballads or — if you take the orchestra's sound to be important in these matters — ballets or concertos? The answer has to do with the symphony's profound high-culture cachet through the centuries, and also — after Beethoven, at least — its status as the compositional proving ground in Eurocentric music. Consider also the ostensible abstraction (meaning no texts, storylines, or other obvious "content") and the usual process of symphonic thinking, which was often described in formidable terms of a musical argument. (Critic Richard Bratby defines the symphony as "a multi-part work that, through a purely musical argument, builds widely different ideas and emotions into

something greater than the sum of their parts."[1]) And if the symphony embodies an argument, it is by definition an argument that aims to have the final word — in authorial and in structural terms. Giya Kancheli, the Georgian composer who wrote seven momentous symphonies between 1967 and 1986, declared it a genre where "there always should be an attempt to express oneself completely and entirely, according to the time in which this symphony is being composed."[2] Argumentation is based on disagreement, and symphonic argumentation entails a dispute to end all disputes. An argument can be a very serious business, indeed a basis for rage and violence. So much for the idea of music as a thing of pleasure…

* * *

Such musical brawling led musicologist Susan McClary to focus on one specific Beethoven passage. Catching her attention was the return of the first theme in the Ninth Symphony's first movement. "The point of recapitulation," McClary wrote, "is one of the most horrifying moments in music, as the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damming up energy — which finally explodes in the throttling, murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release." In other words, Ludwig van took what is supposed to be a fulfilling point of rearrival and overlaid it with intense dissonance and extreme repetition. McClary calls this (in a revised version of her essay) "one of the most horrifyingly violent episodes in the history of music," as instigated by a "juxtaposition of desire and unspeakable violence," an "unparalleled fusion of murderous rage and yet a kind of pleasure in its fulfillment of formal demands."[3] The cadence does finally happen, but it then repeats over and over again maniacally as if it had been

1 Richard Bratby, "What Is a Symphony?," *Gramophone,* February 1, 2023, https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/what-is-a-symphony.

2 Arved Ashby, Margarita Mazo, and Giya Kancheli, "Composer in Interview: Giya Kancheli," *Tempo* 211 (2000): 11.

3 Susan McClary, "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 128.

suddenly emptied of meaning, and the possibility of actual satisfaction is buried under an avalanche of dissonance and animus. The world shifted its axis when I came across McClary's Beethoven reading, first because she corroborated my thinking that such hefty orchestral music was tantamount to sex in its visceral and mental effect. And that the sexual hearings could be quite specific, even on a bar-by-bar basis. And that listening to this music could be a matter not only of psychic transportation and love (or "love," rather), but also violence. And that listening to a certain kind of music becomes a matter of penetration, and so broaches big issues of *individual sovereignty* and sexual politics, along with questions of *pain and pleasure.*

Not just penetration, but also power plays that are redolent of sex. It's an obvious point: power plays are also deeply manifested in a musical work's harmonic, rhythmic, and structural unfolding. Susan's account of Beethovenian muscle became notorious as soon it appeared in 1987 in a limited-circulation forum, and then through musicologist hearsay. I remember my fellow music graduate students misquoting her in 1988 and then tittering in disbelief, but all these formalists were showing was their own incomprehension of music's visceral powers. McClary deleted the rape reference when she reprinted the essay in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (1991). I don't know how literally she wanted us to take her "murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release" remark, but the lack of simile reference made me think, quite literally. Specificity aside, I would elect Susan's statement as an example of latter-day symphony-centric myth-making. Her claim is useful and deeply relevant, but at the same time not something to fact-check. McClary was contributing to the ongoing Beethoven-symphony mythos, and her interpretation will remain in play as long as people ask what Beethoven's music means. (Also belonging to that convoluted mythology are the death threats and rape threats she received after making her "Beethoven statement." As if her claim of patriarchal violence in the symphonic tradition needed any verification.)

McClary was just addressing the elephant in the Beethoven room; namely, this composer's musical forcedness and strong-arming, and the broader cultural ramifications of these characteristics. *Beethoven doesn't stop with his argumentative confrontations* or maybe *Beethoven doesn't take no for an answer* would be good paraphrases of her basic assertion, even when music-formal-compositional or personal-listener sensibilities tell him to stop. This is a testosteronal issue. Ludwig van has been gendered masculine in historiographic terms, even taken as a muscular musical alpha male for the long nineteenth century. British music historian George Grove wrote in 1883 that "another equally true saying of [Robert] Schumann's is that, compared with Beethoven, Schubert is as a woman to a man." Grove elaborated by saying that Beethoven will habitually "compel his hearers with an irresistible power." He also pointed out a "strong, fierce, merciless coercion, with which Beethoven forces you along, and bows and bends you to his will."[4] In McClary's more specific explanation, Beethovenian symphonic narratives are fierce and merciless in the ways they strategize their high-points and tonal resolutions — a single and decisive, all-subsuming climax! — while brooking no thematic and harmonic obstacles. Brutality erupts when pleasure threatens to defuse and distract the drive to tonal cadence. Orgasms threaten not to arrive. Vulnerability leads to anger against those who would deliver our pleasures. The point of cadence becomes vitally necessary, McClary said, like the prospect of ejaculation itself. But it (or they) can also prove disappointing when compared with all the "storm and stress" that preceded. Her revelations were far-reaching. The symphony composers in question "quite regularly push mechanisms of frustration to the limit," she wrote, "such that desire in their narratives frequently culminates (as though necessarily) in explosive violence."[5]

4 Sir George Grove, "Schubert, Franz," in *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A.D. 1450–1883) by Eminent Writers, English and Foreign with Illustrations and Woodcuts in Four Volumes,* vol. 3, ed. Sir George Grove (Macmillan and Company, 1883), 364.

5 McClary, "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk," 127.

The eminent pianist and musicologist Charles Rosen was something of a Beethoven expert, yet neither pedantic nor academic in his expertise. (In addition to his books involving this subject, he effected in his recordings of the late piano sonatas and Diabelli Variations a rare balance between the musical forest and the trees, both the larger picture and the details.) In responding to McClary in print, Rosen agreed that a specifically sexual interpretation is useful when "something [so] extraordinary is taking place" in music, but in the event he took her "murderous rage of a rapist" statement as a metaphor. So Rosen agreed with McClary on the penetration aspect, but then disagreed with her assertion that the passage fails to climax — he couldn't concur with her hearing of impotence, of rage born from vulnerability. And Beethoven gives Rosen no grounds for fear: "I hear the passage as if Beethoven had found a way of making an orgasm last for sixteen bars."[6] So here we had two sharp and knowing musical minds, focusing on the same exact point in the Ninth, one hearing it in terms of overwhelming pain, and the other in terms of protracted pleasure. (If I wanted to get needlessly empirical, I could say that Rosen should have seen a doctor if he experienced orgasms that noisy, harsh, and jarring.)

This becomes, at least in part, a body question. To hear a loud and emphatic dissonance in Beethoven as sexual penetration implies a parallelism (if not equivalence) of orifices: perpetrations of the ear being comparable to those of the vagina or anus. Equivalent penetrations or no, the mythologies and practices surrounding the different orifices are very different. They've also shifted over time. We see the word "ravish" was used specifically to describe musical sound at a time when ears were considered organs of pleasure, orifices made for fleshful penetration by others. According to literary scholar Simon Smith, proceeding from work by Penelope Gouk, sound in mid-eighteenth-century England was not yet understood in terms of waves. Acoustic science, apparently still in thrall to Aristotelian theory, was

6 Charles Rosen, "The New Musicology," in *Critical Entertainments* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 266.

about theorizing another body that entered the listener's own, sovereign body: "This provides a metaphor of hearing as male–female penetration recurrent across descriptions of compulsive musical experience, concurrent with and complementary to the seizing and leading away of musical ravishment."[7] It was also common for the early modern imagination to think of music as a pleasure-giving phallus, one that could even bypass the ear. On the basis of a line from Baldassarre Castiglioni's manual of manners *Il Cortegiano* (1528), Smith talks about the "sexual sense of ravishment as a metaphor in part for the difficulty of resisting music." He elaborates: "The analogy between hearing and ravishment was a central means through which seventeenth-century listeners comprehended musical sound. Indeed, the penetrability and, often, defenselessness of the ear seems to have appealed greatly to the early modern imagination even away from music."[8]

With this aural ravishment some centuries before heterosexuality and homosexuality were "invented," and before the advent of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Smith makes the important point that the duality of male–female and penetrator–penetrated was a question of roles and not a matter of physical makeup. Here the early modern concept of hearing music can seem strangely familiar for our own time in the twenty-first century, insofar as it involved free shifting of gender personas: "Ravishment genders performer and compelled auditor not by anatomy but by role: whether man, woman, boy or girl, all that matters is whether one has a penetrated (female) ear or rather generates a penetrating (male) species."[9] So, in summary, the "compulsive irresistibility" and "defenselessness of the ear" of music meant at that time that pleasure was freely experienced. And it was a situation where men, women, and children, in short humanity as a whole, were happy to be penetrated. The

7 Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse, 1603–1625* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 30.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 36.

Elizabethan-era clergyman and author John Northbrooke put this succinctly when he referred to music's ability to "rapte and ravishe men in a maner wholy."

As always, music scholars lag behind in such discussions, and old-school (but post-Beethoven) formalists closed themselves off to them entirely. The questions *What if music is sex? What if ears are sex organs?* were first posed by lesbian musicologist Suzanne Cusick, asked coyly since she already knew the answers.[10] Pursuant to Cusick's thinking, Jodie Taylor referenced the ear as "a sexual orifice, a penetrable erogenous zone. When we are penetrated by sounds so rapturous that we find ourselves erotically stimulated, even orgasmic, is this aural sex?"[11] Fred Everett Maus presents music as a penetrative phenomenon, one that I would say resembles rape in the way it takes control over the listener while precluding language — and thus, presumably, the possibility of consent: "Music has an invasive aspect, a way of dissolving a listener's control, that distinguishes it from language."[12] But there's little wonder that there would be men who resist these ideas, and who indignantly rebut any detection of violence and analogies to rape in Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony. Such a response might seem inevitable, given this symphony's canonic and high-humanist cachet.

This is not just a question of threats to sovereignty of the body and integrity of the ears (as something penetrated by extreme sound), but also a question of breaches perpetrated on the psyche (as things penetrated by phalluses). Integral sovereignty of the body and psychic penetration are clearly very personal matters. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis uses the terms *symbolic pen-*

10 Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology,* ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (Routledge, 1994), 67–83.

11 Jodie Taylor, "Sound Desires: Auralism, the Sexual Fetishization of Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness,* ed. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley (Oxford University Press, 2022), n.p.

12 Fred Everett Maus, "The Disciplined Subject of Music Analysis," in *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing,* ed. Andrew Dell'Antonio (University of California Press, 2004), 31.

etration and *psychic penetration* to refer to the *psychobiological* fear of a breached self, including (or especially) the scenario of opening up to the analyst and to transference, or even to male friendship more generally. Contemporary Lacanian psychoanalyst Dianne Elise talks about an intertwined "fear of homosexuality" and "masculine sense of self in many heterosexual males." She describes the male defense mechanism where "phallicism as a fortress of emotional self-sufficiency" — a male apparatus she calls the "citadel complex" — "becomes the matrix of a subjective sense of masculinity."[13] Literary scholar and musicologist Lawrence Kramer described much the same complex after a hearing of Beethoven's Violin Sonata, op. 47, the "Kreutzer." Kramer characterized this composer's musical mannishness as "relentless," but "not quite unambiguous" in its defensiveness and fear of "a dangerous weakness." He summarized this as follows: "Masculinity on terms like these is a virtual impossibility passed off as an actual necessity. No wonder, then, that it lashes out at all comers — though nothing in its frustrating predicament can excuse its conduct. This masculinity is a rattletrap contraption that can't be fixed; it needs to be replaced. Can't someone figure out how to fire the superego?"[14] I imagine most straight men would find little or negative pleasure in feeling themselves brutalized in Beethovenian fashion, specifically if it meant being — as George Grove specified the musical domination — *forced, coerced, bent*. Particularly if such a musical experience entailed — as McClary described it — being *penetrated*.

Two matters come up with the citadel complex, matters as significant and unresolved in the 2020s as they were in the 1990s. First, this passage in Beethoven's Ninth seems to function — at least in part — as a demonstration of just how arguable and ill-defined pleasure and pain are, particularly when it comes to sex. (I mentioned the high-minded and visceral evasiveness

13 Dianne Elise, "Unlawful Entry: Male Fears of Psychic Penetration," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 11, no. 4 (2001): 499.

14 Lawrence Kramer, *After the Love Death: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (University of California Press, 1997), 257–58.

of symphonic thinking, but the matters evaded can be existential, not just matters of pain and pleasure.) The crux of the matter is penetration, which is all but mandatory for the pleasure of the top the same way a single and all-subsuming climax is necessary in a sonata form. But penetration is also a hugely variable matter for the bottom. The central issue is pride as it becomes endangered by vulnerability, thereby leading to the possibility of "throttling, murderous rage." When a climax is underway, what is the exit strategy if it's not ejaculation (or a climactic cadence)? And is the climax exited in a way that preserves or enhances the top's dignity? Penetration without climax is a humiliation for the top. For a separatist feminist such as Andrea Dworkin, the kind of pleasureless penetration heard at the Beethoven's Ninth Symphony recap shows pure patriarchy, irredeemably at work.

Cusick was the first scholar to write about music in state-sponsored torture, but she professes to no involvement with such musical phalluses in her own experience. In discussing McClary's Beethoven statement in print, she made no reference to the rape statement. Cusick — whose fairly autotheoretical essay "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music" stands as a classic in the field — speaks of pleasure and not pain. In her account, music becomes most powerful, psychologically and physically, when it engages our body in its physical, sensuous aspect at the same time its transportative "musical" aspect causes us to forget our bodies. At such a point, it enables "the notion that listening to music can dissolve subjectivity, releasing a person into a paradoxical condition that is both highly embodied and almost disembodied in the intensity with which one forgets important elements of one's identity, and loses track of time's passing."[15] Its strength comes from suffusing the ear and the body at a particular point — namely, when the listener is most vulnerable. And again Cusick's account of musical entrancement isn't phallic; she says she was "touched" but makes no mention of penetration.

15 Suzanne G. Cusick, "Music as Torture/Music as Weapon," *TRANS: Transcultural Music Review* 10 (2006), https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon.

Ravishment seems a better description, at least as far as it means the kind of ecstasy found in religious experience.

* * *

Cusick gave an idea of how these questions of musical power plays are especially variable and complex for queer listeners, because those individuals have different (and often changeable) affinities with submission and domination, pain and pleasure. When I read McClary's Beethoven statement, I suddenly had to wonder if I identified with penetrative sexual aggression and murderous intent. As someone then starting my scholarly career with the Arnold Schoenberg circle of Viennese modernists, I found my own questions intensifying when I came across her follow-up statement: "And once [Beethoven's] successors in the nineteenth century tasted that combination of desire and destruction, they could not get enough of it."[16]

Many gay men, obviously not all or maybe not even a majority of them, engage in anal sex, whether giving or receiving. (Heterosexuals do too, but that's another story.[17]) If you're male, being penetrated down there by a cock has become the definitive signifier of queerness. Stated another way: Penile penetration is equated with submissive femaleness in males. There was the widespread assumption in twentieth-century American culture, gay and straight, that a guy wasn't homosexual — a fairy, a faggot — until he'd had a cock in him. Gay America chronicler Edmund White remembered nights of deferential masculinity under the Hudson River piers in the 1970s when "the 'straight'

16 McClary, "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk," 130.

17 A 2005 survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that 38.2 percent of men between twenty and thirty-nine and 32.6 percent of women eighteen to forty-four engaged in heterosexual anal sex. For what it's worth, then: Considering the minority status of LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals, this means by far the largest number of anal sex acts are performed by heterosexuals, not queer people. See Em and Lo, "The Bottom Line," *New York Magazine,* December 21, 2006, https://nymag.com/nightlife/mating/25988/.

teens from Jersey stood in the narrow space between two trucks and got sucked off."[18] Writing at the height of the AIDS epidemic, queer theorist Simon Watney teased out the various subtypes of disgust that mainstream society had for the prospect of a man submitting to being fucked by another man. Much of that revulsion, he said, is displaced misogyny: the idea of a man being submissive, in short being womanly in a situation where his masculinity should be positive and definitive.[19] (This is not to imply that passive straight men don't exist, but talk about a nearly invisible and almost inaudible demographic!) More to the point, this anal significance also applies to queer discourse. Back in 1987, when a court case followed a ban on the book *The Joy of Gay Sex* by Canadian customs, the judge in the case reversed the prohibition and said as part of his statement, "To write about homosexual practices, without dealing with anal intercourse, would be equivalent to writing a history of music and omitting Mozart."[20] (We can wonder why Judge Hawkins didn't invoke Beethoven there, but then Wolfgang could be gendered more feminine — and thus more penetrable — than Ludwig since the Italianate galant style was less brawny than the Austro-German *Sturm und Drang*.)

And then of course AIDS changed both the sex and the discourse starting in the 1980s. Watney lamented the fact that the lethal virus had — in society's eyes — set gay men in an ethical collision course with their own psychosexual definition and with their bodies and their specific pleasures: "AIDS offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave."[21] But abstinence wasn't the answer, as pioneering queer theorist Leo Bersani made clear when he went further with some of Watney's terms and differentiated biologi-

18 Edmund White, *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and 70s* (Bloomsbury, 2009), 77.

19 Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 47.

20 Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano, *The Joy of Gay Sex,* 3rd ed. (Harper Collins, 2004), xvii.

21 Watney, *Policing Desire,* 125.

cal death from a perhaps even more lamentable death of identity (meaning repression). At the same time, Bersani questioned Western society's reification of certain destructive notions of self, which he called "the sacrosanct value of selfhood." Returning to the superego, there's more than a little Freud in his statement that "the self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence." (He was saying, in essence, if you want to talk about spreading AIDS as a form of murder, then let me introduce you to a more insidious and long-term form of aggression — namely, civilization's cult of the individual ego.[22]) Bersani concluded by suggesting that society should celebrate "gay men's 'obsession' with sex" because it demonstrates a form of principle and belief, because "it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice." He continued: "Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis."[23]

I recite all this to give some idea of how fraught the pain–pleasure nexus can be for gay men. It became a psychic, physical, cultural, and maybe even existential encumbrance for gays after the sexual revolution and after Stonewall, in an era when — Foucault said — liberated and defined homosexuals suddenly felt the need to redefine themselves from the ground up. The pain–pleasure nexus becomes an opportunity for "developing and transforming" the specifically gay self, and doing so in a way that diverges from straight culture. The archetypal gay bottom — translatable into musical terms as the Beethoven lis-

22 Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 29–30, and Simon Watney, *Policing Desire,* 126.

23 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 30 (italics in original). Bersani takes the term "ascesis" from Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. [The New Press, 1997], 281–302 to mean "[not] a morality of renunciation but […] an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being."

tener — then appears as the iconic, even mystical instance of what Bersani calls "the internalized phallic male." Musicologist Robert Fink saw McClary's Beethoven rape reference as a watershed moment in the field, and a point of inspiration for his own career as a scholar of music. Following up on her allusion to sexual penetration, Fink wrote in 2004: "It now seems to me that McClary had, in the course of formulating a feminist critique of Western tonality of which at the time I was totally unaware, hit upon a singularly vivid image that concretized the pleasure and pain that await when one moves beyond modernist structural hearing."[24]

One reason for the fraughtness of the pain–pleasure nexus among gay men is their question of roles. In ways that don't apply broadly to the straight world, gayboys negotiate the respective roles of dominant and submissive as one of their first steps in having sex. This also applies with gay couples who alternate between receptive and penetrative positions. And then in an ongoing relationship, such basic matters are often renegotiated as the years go by. The gay blogger Zachary Lane has listed "15 Things Only Bottoms Understand," and included among them "that pain to pleasure transition. It's such a quick transition, the pain to pleasure switch."[25] The subjectivities and countersubjectivities, the strategizing of dominant–submissive roles, are almost never-ending with anal sex as a taste to be acquired. There are so-called power bottoms who initiate and stay in control, bottoms who don't want to submit to a hypersensitive top, receivers who contrarily don't want an overeager dom, and so on. As G.W.F. Hegel might have parsed the relation through his master–slave dialectic, an eternal loop forms from each partner's mutual positing of the other's self-consciousness, upon which his understanding of his own role depends: "On approaching the other it has lost its own self, since it finds itself

24 Robert Fink, "Beethoven Antihero: Sex, Violence, and the Aesthetics of Failure, or Listening to the Ninth Symphony as Postmodern Sublime," in *Beyond Structural Listening?,* ed. Dell'Antonio, 110–11.

25 Zachary Zane, "15 Things Only Bottoms Understand," *Pride,* December 14, 2022, https://www.pride.com/gay-sex/gay-bottom.

as another being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for this primitive consciousness does not regard the other as essentially real but sees its own self in the other."[26]

But that's barely the beginning of the myriad shades of role-playing politics in gay sex, the roles playing off one another, much as Hegel described. For particulars we could turn to blogger Michael Alvear, who details some of the role-playing intricacies of the topping side of the equation, and explores words such as *dom top, power driller, somebody you want to submit to, somebody who cares about whether it hurts.* These terms are surely useful, as they are and not as metaphors, in differentiating the different kinds of power dynamics and role-playing that occur between composer and listener in orchestral music. Alvear writes:

> Porn shows us that there's only one way to top: Act like you flexed and the sleeves came off, take hostages and give them a back alley pounding. Your wishes mean nothing to him. Oooh, does it hurt, Princess? Shut up, it's supposed to hurt! WHACK!
>
> Now there's a lot to be said for the junkyard dog school of anal sex, but for newbies hoping for a future without wheelchairs? Not so much.
>
> On the other side of the coin, you might end up with a teacup poodle — a tender top who's so sensitive to your feelings he doesn't exactly fit the portrait of somebody you want to submit to. Unlike the porn stereotype, he really does care about whether it hurts, but he doesn't know how to assert his masculinity in a sexually appealing way.
>
> The best partner for a newbie is a romanticized version of a dom top. He's the ideal mix of a good power driller and the dreamy husband who knows how to make love. However, this kind of lover is exceedingly hard to come by.

26 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V. Miller (Clarendon, 1977); para. 179, 111.

> From a probability standpoint, the odds are that you're going to end up with a junkyard dog, rather than an idealized lover or a teacup poodle. This means you're going to have to take control early and often or the pain is going to turn you into a man-hating homosexual.[27]

According to the lore, gayboys are drawn to celebration and role-playing in their most colorful forms, thus the fabled loves of disco, brunch, drag, parade floats, and bright chiffons. (David M. Halperin refers to a venerable queer aesthetic of "unseriousness," which seems largely synonymous with camp and opposed to what he calls a "sentimentality" culture. Marissa Brostoff summarizes Halperin's equation of camp with gay culture as he presents it in *How To Be Gay*: "In Halperin's account, such productions [of Ru Paul and Lady Gaga] testify to the survival of gay culture, however disavowed, after several generations of denial that it still exists or still matters."[28])

But I am convinced that a disproportionate number of gay men — of course not all of us, and of course not gay men exclusively — are drawn to a culture of pain in their sexual and musical transactions, maybe sometimes mystically or mythologically. (Or maybe everyone is so drawn who has been touched by neurosis, with queer people disproportionately touched in this way? Or maybe we gay men have learned to lie to ourselves about our pain–pleasure nexuses, or just leave these big questions to our poppers and smooth muscle relaxants.) This is really just a sharp, diametric conjoining of the adoration and the penance in Bersani's "internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice."[29] This queer colossus notion is inseparable from a love of bigness, naturally. The sense could be that pain is part of the identity, that it gives them (us) a taste of power and beauty (as Hegel theorized), and maybe most especially because pain is

27 Michael Alvear, "How to Bottom Like a Porn Star," *Like a Porn Star,* https://likeapornstar.net/how-to-bottom/.

28 Marissa Brostoff, "Notes on Caitlyn, or Genre Trouble: On the Continued Usefulness of Camp as Queer Method," *Differences* 28, no. 3 (2017): 5.

29 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 30.

the most authentic, the most real thing we can know. (Edmund Burke realized long ago that "the torments […] are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy."[30])

For me, musically and sexually, size can prove fulfilling either as a manner of aesthetic (perhaps abstract) splendor or as a physical imposition — or, better yet, as both in tandem. But being a size queen requires work, a considered understanding of pleasure and a nuanced conception of pain. In an interview with *Playboy* magazine, the sex educator, blogger, and professed size queen Bex Caputo turned the expected terms around, and said that for him the conceptual came before the corporeal: "For Bex, his preference is about feeling accomplished. Being able to take something so large takes effort and feels like he's conquered a difficult challenge. 'I also physically like the feeling of fullness,' he adds." This is not to imply that the term hasn't been borrowed by women. The same *Playboy* writer also consulted adult actress Sofia Rose, who said a man's cock size is for her the immediate (and only) indicator that she will be playing the submissive on that occasion. In short, for her it's the dimensions of the cock even more than the man's personality or bodily actions that determines the hierarchy of roles: "Knowing a man is truly able to handle me, gives me a heightened sense of pleasure during all aspects of sex."[31]

Genius and greatness are often described as some manifestation or other of bigness. Masterpieces, whether they be paintings, symphonies, movies, or funk albums, tend to be statements of both length and breadth. This could sound like a description of genius as manifest in sex, with phrases ("a man [who] is truly able to handle me") that might just as well measure the gifted-

30 Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke,* vol. 1: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (John C. Nimmo, 1787), 111.

31 Quoted by Charles Deluvio, "In Defense of the Size Queen," *Playboy,* July 30, 2018, https://www.playboy.com/read/in-defense-of-the-size-queen-1.

ness of a painter, songwriter, or actor. There is an affinity for what philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant called "the sublime," a "standing back and beholding" quality to a love of big things. At the same time, there is the specter of mortal danger. Whether we're talking about a queer man who thrills to see the naked approach of his endowed and engorged partner or a fan of orchestral music who watches as a hundred orchestral players start filing onto the stage, the largeness aesthetic is in part anticipatory — an eager state of not-knowing, of looking forward with some nervousness to the body feeling filled and the mind emptied. And a state of questioning: Will there be pain? Will there be blood? When will the long-awaited pleasure arrive?

In any event, it's surprising there's no burgeoning literature on queer pain, not pain in the real yet familiar senses of disaffection, persecution, and loneliness, but in the "pain to pleasure switch" that is queer enough to leave your queer worldview fundamentally queerer. (Searching through the third edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex,* we find one or two small references to the possibility of pain in fucking, and how easy a matter this is to solve: "Proper lubrication and relaxation will prevent pain or damage."[32] So simple! But when it comes to pain in emotional and psychological rather than physical terms, the book has dozens of references with verbose solutions.) Going through life being told your sense of pleasure is false, or misplaced, or imaginary, leaves you with the paradoxical need to taste it even more acutely — to sharpen it, to make sure it's real. My own understanding, not backed up by any research and no doubt simplistic, is that most nonqueer people engage in normal vanilla sex for the sake of pleasure and to joyfully remind themselves of the integrity of the self — of their unpenetrated wholeness as a "most sound and exquisitely sensible body," to return to Burke's phrase. But pleasure in its own turn can become a political issue in both sex and music, and can be spun in odd political direc-

32 Silverstein and Picano, *The Joy of Gay Sex,* 1.

tions, which makes a sad comment on our lives over the last century, as we've moved from humanism to posthumanism.

So those who submit to anal penetration do so in order to jack up sexual pleasure, to make it sharper, more immediate, more genuine, and more subversive. Reaching the prostate during sex can have an opioid-like effect. Here *The Joy of Gay Sex* advises us: "The more direct the pressure against [the bottom's] prostate gland, the more pressure (and thus pleasure) he feels."[33] Or, to return to Foucault's firsthand thinking on this matter, BDSM practices can function to "multiply or redistribute [the body's] loci of pleasure,"[34] or to "alleviate a male bottom's 'problem' in feeling 'that the passive role is in some way demeaning.'"[35] Queer sex, even when narrowed to the domain of the pleasure center in the brain, the *nucleus accumbens,* can get hormonal-chemical enhancement just from sociopathic feelings of doing something naughty: risking forbidden pleasures, defying authority, doing gonad stuff that could get you in the papers, that your relatives couldn't stomach talking about, and so on. But then, of course, those countersocial feelings are (we hope) shared by the two partners, and so ultimately the countersocial becomes social.

The gay pain–pleasure nexus has become an anachronism. It's at odds with twenty-first-century attitudes (painfully so, I'm tempted to add), and not only those pertaining to the ears. Halperin continues to plug his culture of gay unseriousness, in large part to evade any possibility of a gay culture centering on sex. Cusick described, back in 1991, her "passionate crusade" as academic and scholar "to teach everyone I encounter to reconstruct their relationship to pleasure itself, which I think to be generally perverse in mainstream American culture. I am driven, always and everywhere, to get people to associate pleasure with joy instead of with danger and guilt."[36] Such theories of pain as a sensation separate from and opposed to the feeling of pleasure,

33 Ibid., 82–84
34 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 22
35 Foucault cited in ibid., 19.
36 Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," 74–75.

or such hopes to liberate pleasure from guilt, have been fostered by theories in behaviorist psychology. At some point after the Enlightenment, avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure became assumed as a basic, dualistic condition of human survival. Jeremy Bentham famously declared in 1789 that "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne."[37] And then, even before the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner, we can refer back to "the pleasure principle" that Freud theorized in opposition to "the reality principle." (Even though he spent years nuancing and complicating his own duality, such as in the 1924 essay "An Economic Problem in Masochism.")

But the pain–pleasure connection — the inextricability of the two — leaves a long trail through Eurocentric thinking, indeed covering millennia. We can find theories on the inextricability of pain and pleasure at least as far back as Plato, thus well before the duality mapped onto Christian notions of salvation and damnation, virtue and guilt (and before utilitarianism attempted to redress such ethical notions). In his *Phaedo,* Plato reports Socrates as saying:

> How strange a thing is what men call pleasure! How wonderful is its relation to pain, which seems to be the opposite of it! They will not come to a man together; but if he pursues the one and gains it, he is almost forced to take the other also, as if they were two distinct things united at one end.[38]

So Socrates — the thinker who was sentenced to death for corrupting Athenian youth — thought pleasure and pain necessarily sequential, if not necessarily coincidental. Plato himself

37 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Athlone Press, 1970), 11.

38 Plato, *Phaedo,* trans. F.J. Church (Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), 4.

presented pleasure in his dialogues as the restoration of balance and harmony of spirit after the pain of discordance — thereby portraying pleasure as something very different from its representation in Christian ethics, but similar to Cusick's understanding of it as a natural state that stands in opposition to "danger and guilt."[39]

To return to Beethoven: What to make of his symphonic penetration, first pointed out by McClary, when it's experienced from a gay male perspective? It's worth asking the question, especially since — as far as I know — there's no gay fandom attending this composer. At stake here are sensuality (pleasure) and basic integrity of the self (sanity). If you were male in the nineteenth century, penetration of your body was tantamount to penetration of your reason. Courts could rule that alleged queer fornicators were either practicing sodomites or nonsodomites who had involved themselves in anal incursion by reason of insanity. At the same time, executing vaginal penetration was an essential precept of masculinity. Dianne Elise refers to a basic dialectical tension where the male subject will close himself off to pleasure so long as he practices *being* invasive while disallowing invasiveness *upon himself.* She speaks of an actual boundary that prevents pleasure and emotional engagement, or even precludes romantic love itself. This powerful barrier dictates the neurosis where "an impermeable bodily and psychic boundary — the ability to penetrate without the ability to be penetrated — collapses a necessary dialectical tension that may affect men's experience of sex and of love and that may shape and limit their desire."[40] Such penetration, including psychic penetration from the analyst, has been "equated with homosexuality" but is more recently considered in terms of "loss of masculinity" and is therefore generally understood in gender terms. Or, to use

39 Mehmet M. Erginel, "Plato on Pleasures Mixed with Pains: An Asymmetrical Account," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy,* vol. 56, ed. Victor Caston (Oxford University Press, 2019), 73–122.

40 Elise, "Unlawful Entry," 499.

more everyday terminology, showing sensitivity opens the subject to the possibility of forced entry.

You can neither assent to nor dissent from the domination, pain, and argumentative rhetoric surrounding the Austro-German symphony. (Neither lubrication nor relaxation will smooth your way as listener.) The first writer to take up the challenge was the unclassifiable E.T.A. Hoffmann, a composer of music and writer of fiction who also published what's now taken to be the first in-depth exegesis of Beethoven's instrumental music. Hoffmann declared already in 1810 that Beethoven's symphonic writing "inflames in our breasts an inner, rapturous life, a more intense expression than is possible through words," making it music that "stirs the mists of fear, of horror, of terror, of grief, and awakens that endless longing which is the very essence of romanticism."[41] He was writing here in terms of the late classical notion of *the sublime,* an enjoyably painful (or painfully enjoyable) aesthetic. Similar ideas of the sublime had been theorized by Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Burke wrote the following on "the sublime and beautiful" in 1759, well before Beethoven's time: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."[42] Burke accentuated pain because its idea proves "much more powerful" than pleasure. The unspoken specter is, of course, fear-unto-death. Kant also felt pain in the sublime, but for him this friction stemmed from conflict between the subject's imagination and their rational sense. "The feeling of the sublime," Kant wrote, "is at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of

41 Arthur Ware Locke and E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music: Translated from E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'Kreisleriana' with an Introductory Note," *Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1917): 132, 128.

42 Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* 110.

imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason, and a simultaneous awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense of being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law."[43]

The Austro-German symphony is as the Austro-German symphony does. Its unspoken precepts are many, yet these are largely ignored by music academics. These mythical aspects make the genre more amenable to fictional exploration than scholarly discussion, so to follow up I will now go through the latter-day symphonic mythos that's played out in some literature. I plumb fictional writings here to recover some of the real Beethoven history. We won't learn about symphonic mythologies from reading most musicology, because music scholars have pushed aside such cultural presumptions, and left them as cultural scraps for novelists, poets, comedians, and filmmakers to scavenge and discuss. Musicologists are in the market for objective facts, for conclusions that can be replicated in the lab.

* * *

Pain, pleasure, and Beethoven were tightly interwoven in Anthony Burgess's novella *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). With this book, Burgess rejected the psychological behaviorist thinking that had resulted in hurt being theorized ever-more distantly from gratification. The violent protagonist Alex is an upper-class thug who rapes women, robs and beats people to death, and wreaks other senseless violence while listening to records of his favorite "Lovely Ludwig van." As a textbook sociopath, Alex transgresses neither for money nor for passion, but apparently out of an attachment to cruelty that has turned into an actual aesthetic. His love of Beethoven and love of violence are closely intertwined. The character cries out while being deprogrammed of his taste for administering violent pain: "It's not fair I should

43 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,* trans. James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford University Press, 2007), 88.

feel ill when I'm slooshying [listening to] lovely Ludwig van and G.F. Handel and others."[44] (Like most tyrants, Alex is good at playing the victim when he's not brutalizing others. But he's given a run for his money in this by the Ministry of the Interior that faces off with him.) Beethoven's music is for him a matter of joy, but an incitation to evil rather than good. Burgess himself wrote: "There were still musicologists around who alleged that Beethoven opened up a vision of divinity. Alex gets something very much opposed to that."[45] Beethoven is necessary for his living, but women are tools for his use:

> Then I pulled the lovely Ninth out of its sleeve, so that Ludwig van was now nagoy [naked] too, and I set the needle hissing on to the last movement, which was all bliss. There it was then, the bass strings like govoreeting [enunciating] away from under my bed at the rest of the orchestra, and then the male human goloss [voice] coming in and telling them all to be joyful, and then the lovely blissful tune all about Joy being a glorious spark like of heaven, and then I felt the old tigers leap in me and then I leapt on these two young ptitsas [women].[46]

Burgess took the title *A Clockwork Orange* from Cockney slang for an extravagant strangeness. He said the term connoted "a queerness or madness so extreme as to subvert nature."[47] His genre here is absurdist and dystopian black comedy. "I saw that the book might be dangerous," Burgess said several decades later, "because it presented good, or at least harmlessness, as remote and abstract, something for the adult future of my hero, while depicting violence in joyful dithyrambs. But violence had

44 Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (W.W. Norton, 1963), 114.
45 Anthony Burgess, *You've Had Your Time: Being the Second Part of the Confessions of Anthony Burgess* (Penguin Books, 1990), 246.
46 Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange,* 45.
47 Anthony Burgess, "The Clockwork Condition: The Author Comments on His Most Famous Book, in 1973," *The New Yorker,* May 28, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/the-clockwork-condition.

to be shown."[48] Alex wants Ludwig van to be naked alongside him (presumably joining in as his "brother") when he takes "the lovely blissful tune" of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as an incitement to group fucking, and he goes on bludgeoning and murdering to music ostensibly written to celebrate humanist communality and rapture. In the text that Beethoven set, Friedrich Schiller calls out to his brethren, "Go on, brothers, your way, / Joyful, like a hero to victory," and this must be where Alex picked up his habitual term of direct address. ("Music always sort of sharpened me up, O my brothers, and made me feel like old Bog [God] himself, ready to make with the old donner and blitzen and have vecks [guys] and ptitsas [women] creeching [screaming] away in my ha ha power."[49]) Later, while Alex is being deprogrammed by the Ministry of the Interior, his negative conditioning is shown to be a success when he hears the Ninth Symphony by chance and vomits. (The government's experimental method is called the "Ludovico Technique" — "Ludovico," of course, being the Italian version of "Ludwig.") This interchange of Alex's pain with his pleasure, and then back again when he is *de*-deprogrammed, leaves his senses of gratification and agony in disarray. He hears Beethoven's setting of Schiller in a dream, its text now twisted by illness to align with his own language and aesthetic:

> Boy, thou uproarious shark of heaven,
> Slaughter of Elysium,
> Hearts on fire, aroused, enraptured,
> We will tolchock [hit] you on the rot [mouth] and kick
> Your grahzny vonny [dirty smelly] bum.[50]

Burgess's violent and lustful protagonist perpetrates penetration and pronouncement, translating reality into his own terms and giving edicts on all matters of things, maybe like a strung-out, sex-compelled, and punked-up revision of Friedrich Nietzsche's

48 Burgess, *You've Had Your Time,* 61.
49 Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange,* 4.
50 Ibid., 71.

Zarathustra. It's this nineteenth-century heritage, along with the hermeticist standoffishness of counterculture, that causes Alex's language and imagery to be purposefully archaic ("O my brothers…"). This makes him sound all the more like some kind of caricature-amalgamation of British imperialism (Alex's parents are upper-class) and narcissistic postwar youth culture. His narcissistic individualism is abetted by his cultural collisions.

Alex is the ultimate Beethoven fan, and his studly understanding of sex begins and ends with vaginal penetration — with "the old in-out." (He remembers one encounter: "She came up towards me with the light like it was the like light of heavenly grace and all that cal [crap] coming with her, and the first thing that flashed into my gulliver [head] was that I would like to have her right down there on the floor with the old in-out real savage."[51]) He delights in penetrating women against their will, but the possibility of being penetrated himself (at least by anything or anyone not associated with Beethoven) escalates his homicidal urges. He's a fictional textbook case of Elise's "citadel complex." The only time Alex kills someone out of actual rage, rather than killing as a kind of hobby, is when he and his cohorts pommel another inmate who had appeared in Alex's bed and put the moves on him: "He was govoreeting [talking] dirty like love-slovos [words] and stroke stroke stroking away."[52] Clearly gay desire inflames Alex's "dangerous weakness," his inflated but fragile masculinity. The main issue here isn't sexual violence as such, but rather threats to sovereignty of the body and the psyche (as things penetrated by phalluses) and dangers posed to integrity of the ears (as something penetrated by extreme sound). Integral sovereignty of the body and psychic penetration are clearly very personal matters, and can suggest pain to one person just as they might intimate pleasure for another. And it's only Ludwig van's music that penetrates Alex in such a way that "the old tigers leap" and he's inspired to go out with his "old

51 Ibid., 125.
52 Ibid., 85.

tigers" and forcefully penetrate women. One form of penetration begets another.

Like E.T.A. Hoffmann, Burgess was a composer of symphonies, a Beethoven adherent, and a writer of fantastical tales. He made it clear that music was central to the story of *A Clockwork Orange,* "not just an emotional stimulant but a character in its own right."[53] (Burgess said the book took on such a life of its own after Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation that he thought of disowning it. Then a conversation with Kubrick led him to write his *Napoleon Symphony: A Novel in Four Movements,* which he structured in imitation of Beethoven's *Eroica*.) One reason I refer to the earlier incarnation of McClary's essay is because her mention of sexual assault connects uncannily to Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*—and specifically to Alex, the rape-happy and Beethoven-adoring gang leader in the book. In short, *A Clockwork Orange* is a darkly comic extrapolation of patriarchal culture to its absurdist extreme. Kramer invoked Beethoven's music in terms of a "relentless masculinity […] a rattletrap contraption that can't be fixed." Alex is in this view the ideal Beethoven listener, a rattletrap listening virility to match the compositional subject. And the government's attempt to "fix" the contraption ends in disaster, so Kramer is correct also on the irreparable aspect. When it comes to pain and violence, there is a problem with agency. Specifically, when music becomes loud and noisy and dissonant, is that the sound of violence being wrought on the listener or the sound of the music being aggressed? Is the music doing the aggressing or demonstrating its effects? Clearly we should look more closely at moments of musical pain.

Violence begets more violence. They say domestic and sexual violence are handed down through successive generations of people, so it stands to reason that the same would happen in music. This means McClary was right with respect to the post-Beethoven symphonic tradition, where musical aggression was passed down through generations of composers, much as abuse becomes "genetic" with families. (All the more reason to

53 Burgess, *You've Had Your Time,* 246.

get away from talking about compositional style histories; such historicism encourages copycat brutalities.) There is a particular discord that begins in McClary's "murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release" passage in Beethoven's Ninth, and then makes its way — or evolves, I should say — to the harsh disharmony that launches the Ninth's finale, and from there to a terrifying moment in Anton Bruckner's Ninth Symphony and then an equally shocking one in Gustav Mahler's Tenth. Bruckner and Mahler of course knew Beethoven's symphonies intimately, Mahler himself conducting the Ninth on ten separate occasions. But this lineage holds true even if you say the four chords (from Beethoven's first movement, Beethoven's finale, Bruckner's third movement, and Mahler's first movement) are different sonorities. Each case shows a composer pushing harmonic legality to its limits, as harmony was understood at that particular time, so the heuristic shock value of the sonority is more important than its exact harmonic makeup. In the finale of Beethoven's Ninth, I hear that composer referring back to the dissonant "murderous rage of a rapist" chord from the first movement. He begins the finale of his Ninth with a sharply dissonant chord and then restates it six minutes later, right before the voices enter. Richard Wagner called this the "terror fanfare" (*Schreckensfanfare*), a nickname that has stuck to the chord. (Scholar Chris Walton translates Wagner's term as "terror fanfare" rather than the more literal "fright fanfare" because, he says, "'Schrecken' had long been the standard German term for the 'Terror' in Revolutionary France." In other words, the fear that Wagner imputed to this chord is a mortal fear, a fear that reaches the level of horror, blood, decapitation, and death.) Wagner described the passage more broadly as "a chaotic outburst of wild despair [that] pours out in screams and bluster."[54]

And then there are the expansions of the orchestra between Beethoven and Bruckner. French composer Hector Berlioz was one of the first French musicians to evangelize for Beethoven.

54 Chris Walton, *Richard Wagner's Essays on Conducting: A New Translation with Critical Commentary* (University of Rochester Press, 2021), 121.

Berlioz took his composition professor Jean-François Lesueur to hear Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in Paris. When Lesueur emerged from the concert, he sounded as if he wished there'd been a safe word in place. "That sort of music should not be written," was Lesueur's fearful reaction.[55] Now just imagine the sound of such a "shouldn't" composer if it were composed later in the century for an orchestra of a hundred players with quintuple winds. Critic and scholar Paul Bekker traced symphonic developments through "the dynamic orchestra of Beethoven," "the orchestra of Romantic illusion" (Weber, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann), "the virtuoso orchestra" (Berlioz, Meyerbeer, and Liszt), "the cosmic orchestra of Wagner," and then "the decadent orchestra" (Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler). This is a history of European intelligentsia striving for more complex textures and ever-greater power and sensuousness of sound. That history can be subsumed broadly under reception and influence of the "Richard Wagner orchestra," a cultural phenomenon unto itself and a huge sound palette that — coincident with decadent arts movements — served as a launching-off point for the later Viennese symphonists Bruckner and Mahler. Actual aural injury became possible after Wagner expanded the brass section (at least four horns, at times six or eight) and quintupled the winds, which of course necessitated bigger string sections, followed by Mahler's and Strauss's incorporation of more percussion and theatrical "effects." As caricatured in the press, Mahler's and Strauss's commanding orchestral styles involved elephants, anvils, lightning, electric chairs, livestock, artillery, and sawmills.

Burgess's Alex is a *junkyard dog* in sex terms, or maybe (at what might possibly be deemed rare sentimental moments) a deromanticized *dom top.* His violence is deeply enabled by — maybe even modeled on — the strengths of Beethoven's orchestration, by its sound as much as its message, as he perceives it. And when Alex tries to titillate some young and ill-

55 Hector Berlioz, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz,* trans. and ed. David Cairns (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 82.

fated female music-lovers over to his place, he describes the different instruments in terms of their affiliation with heaven or hell. He invites these girls over for a "proper" hearing of music, with an appropriately big home audio setup and sound:

> Then an idea hit me and made me near fall over with the anguish and ecstasy of it, O my brothers, so I could not breathe for near ten seconds. I recovered and made with my new-clean zoobies [teeth] and said: "What you got back home, little sisters, to play your fuzzy warbles on?" Because I could viddy [see] the discs they were buying were these teeny pop veshches [things]. "I bet you got little save tiny portable like picnic spinners." And they sort of pushed their lower lips out at that. "Come with uncle," I said, "and hear all proper. Hear angel trumpets and devil trombones. You are invited." And I like bowed.[56]

Wagner took Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the launching-off point for his whole music-theatrical project, with the voices in his "symphonic" music dramas treated more as *obbligato* instrumental parts than as aria-singing personalities. So he placed new emphasis on the orchestra's role in the opera house. As part of this, he desired an orchestra that by itself — as separate from words, staging, and plotlines — could sustain dramatic impetus through the most visionary, opera-house-filling spectacles. (Bekker, born the year before Wagner died, spoke of that composer wanting an almost visualistic orchestra that could "mirror" his "scenic visions," while fashioning a quid pro quo where "these scenic visions were called up by the orchestra."[57]) To do that, Wagner ended up selecting instruments and mixing their colors in ways that overwhelmed, ravished, besieged, provoked, and subjugated — or which have done so at least in orchestral performance practices of the second half of the twentieth cen-

56 Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange,* 43.

57 Paul Bekker, "The Cosmic Orchestra of Wagner," in *The Story of the Orchestra* (W.W. Norton, 1936), 193.

tury. (He went well beyond Beethoven's "angel trumpets and devil trombones.") The "Wagner orchestra" and its retoolings at the hands of later composers is history's loudest, most variegated musical entity — at least among acoustic, nonamplified ensembles. It is a penetrating sonority, the most aggressive of European musical entities. At the same time — at least after Wagner expanded his instrumentation for his *Ring* cycle of operas — his mature orchestra is also a mechanism for seduction ("Come with uncle, you are invited"), an all-embracing, wide-ranging, cossetting sound ambience.

Wagner's mature orchestration wasn't just a matter of heft and loudness, it was also a set of sonorities of widely varying textures and colors. Bekker got it right when he called Wagner's orchestral sonority a "cosmic sound organism." As Bekker would have it, Wagner's egotism (for instance in mandating invention of some new instruments to suit his purposes), theatrical-dramatic demands, and lack of any instrumental virtuosity of his own meant that he "acquired from the first an objective sense of orchestral sonorities, not particularly biased by the peculiarities of any one instrument."[58] Bekker read this composer's strange theories on drama and language, and on that basis said that Wagner's orchestra leaves the audience needing the semantic specificity of words. His orchestral sonorities — like Bruckner's and Mahler's after him — were powerful enough to brutalize his listeners, articulate enough to communicate with them, and invasive enough to demean them. Two caricatures following the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* demonstrate this, both of them drawn by French artists. In his drawing *A Munich. Après une heure de Wagner par ordre* (1868), Honore Daumier showed concertgoers absurdly in thrall to Wagner's orchestra, sacrificing their dignity for the sake of this sonic experience. One male listener sits forward and is seen collapsing with his mouth wide open, like a hungry baby bird or begging dog. (There can be no better visual equivalent to Leo Bersani's words for the horrifying appeal of undergoing anal penetration, "the terrifying appeal of

58 Ibid., 175.

a loss of the ego, of a self-debasement."[59]) The other illustration, drawn by artist André Gill the following year, shows Wagner drawing blood from an oversize ear by hammering a musical note into the eardrum.

Bruckner worshipped Wagner and his music to the point of absurdity, but scholars have questioned whether he actually understood it — the highly chromatic language, not to mention the often sensual aspects of his librettos. Bruckner echoes Beethoven's "terror fanfare" at the cacophonous *tutti* passage that occurs about twenty-five minutes into the third movement of his own Ninth Symphony. I refer to this ear-splitting cluster of seven pitch-classes, essentially an entire scale played as a simultaneity, as "the penetrative scream." (A scream would be a plausible reaction to a "terror fanfare," I suppose. Also, if we were to survey loud and grating orchestral dissonances in Austro-German music history, I'd note that Bruckner's "scream" seems a pre-echo of Alban Berg's *Todesschrei,* the intensely dissonant orchestral "death scream" that marks the heroine's murder at the end of his opera *Lulu*.)

The man who conducted the premiere of Bruckner's Ninth after the composer's death, Ferdinand Löwe, found himself so unable to wrap his head (and ears) around Bruckner's hellish "penetrative scream" that he took it upon himself to pare it down from a 13th chord to a 9th chord — deleting three pitch-classes and substituting simple harmonic banality, even penny-dreadful cliché, for the very pious Bruckner's aural vision of hell and damnation. And here I come back to the McClary-inspired question of whether this wound is wrought on the listener or on "the music" as a virtual agency. To my ears, the discord is a self-directed wound rather than (as in Beethoven's Ninth) a blow outwardly aimed. It is painstakingly planned out and prepared for, unlike Beethoven's in all its arbitrariness, and its infliction changes the course of the whole symphony. There are multiple contrasts with Beethoven's example. In Bruckner's case it is the music itself, rather than the listener, that is injured and violated.

59 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 27.

Just as significantly, there are different aural interpretations of just where the chord delivers the listener afterward. These are all matters of the greatest significance, as Bruckner showed when he decided to dedicate his Ninth Symphony "to almighty God." But then is God the music's honoree or the intended witness to its violation?

* * *

The phallic penetrations in the Austro-German symphony repertory aren't just a matter of dissonance, heavy orchestration, and high volume. They're also a matter of imposing self-important musical information on the listener. (The idea dawned on me when I played the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for my graduate seminar on "Music and Queer Desire," and several in the class blurted out their impression that the opening pages are "rapey.") In Ralph Ellison's Kafkaesque novel *Invisible Man* (1952), the nameless protagonist is violated, even tortured by the opening motif from Beethoven's Fifth. The anonymity of Ellison's protagonist, his namelessness, serves to demonstrate his neglect — and indeed, his obscurity. We are availed of the (often piquant) names of everyone else, some of them with honorifics (there's a Dr. Bledsoe) and some with middle initials (the peak of nominal ineffectuality). The nameless central character literally lives in a hole — okay, a kind of basement. Whereas Burgess's Alex is confronted by an authority that's bent on curing him of his sociopathology, and thereby integrating him into society, Ellison's "invisible man" is continually confronted by a society intent on erasing his presence and his very identity. Ellison's book, at least the Beethoven negative-conditioning episode, must have inspired Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. Burgess called *Invisible Man* a masterpiece, and in his memoir brought up Ellison's themes of racial disregard and disrespect after describing his own real-life brushes with British thugs: "Walking through Harlem, I had no need of self-protection. The worst punishment the blacks could wreak on the formerly tyrannical

whites was to make them invisible. It was Ralph Ellison's novel, which few of them had read, in reverse."[60]

Ellison relates the humiliations visited upon a nameless African American protagonist, who recounts his absurdist torments in the first person. The Beethoven episode follows a disaster at the protagonist's workplace, the Liberty Paints plant, where he submits to the company's practice of hiring college-educated Black scabs when the usual white employees strike. I'm convinced, on the basis of their similar tone and content, that *Invisible Man* was a major inspiration for Boots Riley's absurdist "postracial" film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). Maybe more importantly, Ellison's novel influenced Barack Obama's memoir *Dreams from My Father* and Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (about which more anon). Cole himself has summarized *Invisible Man* as follows:

> Ellison's sharp, loquacious narrator lives in an overlit basement apartment, and stalks the streets of New York. He is subject to disregard and petty humiliation, not because he is insubstantial but because he is black. A great deal has changed in the city since this book was awarded the National Book Award in 1953, but young African-American men still go about disregarded. This book held an unflattering mirror up to American society; American society applauded, and looked away.[61]

The invisible man is humiliated by whites, but just as often degraded by other African Americans who have been manipulated by whites to clash with other Black people. The first of several literal fights happens when the man is forced to enter a boxing ring and fight other Black men — a kind of cockfight — as a

60 Burgess, *You've Had Your Time,* 276.

61 Teju Cole, "Teju Cole's Top 10 Novels of Solitude: The Author Picks Out the Best of Literature's Lonely Odysseys, from Colm Tóibín's *The Master* to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*," *The Guardian,* August 24, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/24/teju-cole-top-10-novels-solitude.

"battle royal" participant vying for a prize. Toward the close of his chronicle, Ellison's protagonist asks himself why he's written the thing down. But all he can do is profess the profoundest ambivalence: "I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love."[62] (To fully grasp the protagonist's voicelessness and sense of futility, we should remember that Ellison's book predated the *Brown v. Board of Education* [1954] decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott [1955–1956] and the start of the civil rights movement in the United States. And the character's anonymity parallels the name-change of Malcolm Little, the man who became Malcolm X and converted to the Nation of Islam the same year Ellison published *Invisible Man.*)

The protagonist's job is with manufacturing the Liberty Paints company's signature color, which is called "Optic White." (The obviousness of the company's name and best-selling product sharpen the novel's darkly farcical aspect.) He gets into a fight with his supervisor, resulting in explosion of the paint preparation tanks — and, presumably, the skin of both combatants being coated with the primer, which must then make them eligible for higher salaries because now their skin is white. When the man regains consciousness after the accident, he finds himself not being attended by medical staff, but strapped to a cot and subjected to experimentation with electroshock equipment that's designed to perform knifeless lobotomies. He's been declared a violent threat to society, and has to be converted back to social usefulness. He is addressed as "boy" throughout the electroshock. Apparently, his workplace unconsciousness was too good an opportunity for the faceless tyranny to pass up:

> Somewhere a machine began to hum and I distrusted the man and woman above me.
>
> They were holding me firm and it was fiery and above it all I kept hearing the opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth — three

62 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Penguin, 2014), 579.

> short and one long buzz, repeated again and again in varying volume, and I was struggling and breaking through, rising up, to find myself lying on my back with two pink-faced men laughing down.
>
> "Be quiet now," one of them said firmly. "You'll be all right." I raised my eyes, seeing two indefinite young women in white, looking down at me. A third, a desert of heat waves away, sat at a panel arrayed with coils and dials. Where was I? From far below me a barber-chair thumping began and I felt myself rise on the tip of the sound from the floor. A face was now level with mine, looking closely and saying something without meaning. A whirring began that snapped and cracked with static, and suddenly I seemed to be crushed between the floor and ceiling. Two forces tore savagely at my stomach and back.[63]

Ellison might have modeled this scene after the Tuskegee atrocity perpetrated by the US Public Health Service, but he inoculates his Black protagonist with Beethoven rather than syphilis. But are the four buzzes heard by the protagonist really a quote of Beethoven's Fifth or some kind of Beethoven's Fifth paranoia on his part ("I kept hearing…"; "I wanted to call him, but the *Fifth Symphony* rhythm racked me…")? Or is this torture a matter of cultural imposition and humiliation rather than a musical matter as such? Surely this is an instance of *assault with musical information*—a bare, emphatic, and distillated musical motive. The short-short-short-long noise is being made, appropriately enough, by a machine, maybe by *the* machine; that is, the machine of machines that is society. And we should remember that the man has spent most of this disastrous day laboring over the manufacture of Optic White. Problems with that manufacture led to his epic fistfight with his supervisor Lucius Brockway, a Black man who accuses him of being a mole for the union. Through the protagonist's negligence, the means of production for Optic White is destroyed (while he's wrestling

63 Ibid., 232.

in primal fashion with Brockway), and when he regains consciousness he's being subjected to the most famous rhythm in Eurocentric (read: white) music history. This goes well beyond the aversion therapy, the Ludovico technique, in Burgess.

But *A Clockwork Orange* must have been modeled in part on *Invisible Man,* as we see when we read in Ellison that the technicians' desire is to effect "as complete a change of personality as you'll find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows."[64] By this estimation, Ellison's and Burgess's music-loving protagonists are essentially the same beings, just with all their sociopolitical, economic, and cultural tables turned 180 degrees. Ellison's protagonist is not only invisible, he's inaudible. But Alex the thug suffers no such soundlessness and invisibility in *A Clockwork Orange,* and Burgess's novel is in fact a noisy and twisted morality tale. But there are telling admonishments from the Liberty Paints staff while they're penetrating the invisible man with Beethoven buzzments: "Be quiet now," followed by the more emphatic "shut up!" It's as if he's failing to conform with concert hall etiquette, and his cries are bothering other patrons.

The protagonist certainly had no choice in being subjected to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Toward the start of Ellison's novel, the invisible man tells the reader about his favorite music, which of course isn't Beethoven, but rather Louis Armstrong. He tells us he likes Armstrong because "Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music."[65] The narrator goes on to say that his own invisibility, an aspect that sounds more and more synonymous with his blackness as the book goes on, has given him a rhythmic sensibility that is far from machine-like. This sensibility sounds redolent of swing, an

64 Ibid., 236.
65 Ibid., 8.

unregimented rhythmic orientation that's historically resisted the strictness of notation:

> Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.[66]

We might deduce that Beethoven, in contrast with Armstrong, is frightening by virtue of his nonlyrical and "visibly" in-your-face extremism. The symphony's "on the beat" relentlessness is one reason it's oppressive, even torturous.

* * *

Cole's *Open City* (2011) presents us with another young protagonist whose character is defined through interaction with Austro-German symphonic mythologies. He is a "model immigrant" now living an ostensibly settled and promising life in New York City a few years after 9/11. He is very well-read, maybe overly read, and finishing his psychiatry internship — an utter contrast with Burgess's Alex, who is public enemy number one and thrives on chaos and cruelty. Alex is if anything an overreliable narrator, holding nothing back, while Julius's increasingly feverish erudition prevents him from revealing much about himself. And his never-ending commentary on everything from Dante to Freud to Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is detailed and devotional enough to sound like cant. He is particularly taken with two of Mahler's final works, the song-symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony. Two hearings of Mahler give form to Julius's first-person narrative. In the first chapter, he listens to *Das Lied von der Erde* in a record store, and in the last he hears

66 Ibid.

Simon Rattle conduct the Berlin Philharmonic in the Ninth in Carnegie Hall. (Much of what he says of Mahler's music could also apply to Bruckner's, and in any event Mahler modeled his Ninth in some specific ways on Bruckner's Ninth. The reason Cole chose Mahler for his novel is probably the same reason Burgess had picked Beethoven for his own — this composer was the headliner, the symphonist *du jour.*)

When Ellison turned the Beethoven Fifth motive into an electrical noise, he was boiling the music down to the most basic information — making history's most famous piece of classical music either *more* of a cultural artifact or *less* of one. Timbre, articulation, phrasing, bowing, and the like were all scrubbed away. This was a distinctly positivist, midcentury kind of reductiveness — a kind of musical-logical calculus. It recalls a school of motivic musical analysis that was pervasive after World War II. These analysts parsed the long and complex scores of Bruckner, Mahler, and early Schoenberg into combinatorial bits of information, as if they were in Fortran or some other computer language. Rhythm was sometimes mentioned in these analyses, but the presumption was that pitch was the central element of the music. So Ellison's deranged and cruel lab techs inoculate the nameless protagonist with the most concentrated tincture of Beethoven, or maybe some kind of Beethoven informational DNA. The experiment is so agonizing and demeaning, physically and psychically, that the protagonist emerges brutalized, as if he'd been gang-raped. He collapses on the street, and has to be rescued. Cole's Julius, by contrast, is involved with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and Ninth Symphony within a music-historical embrace that's wide enough to be pretentious. He tells us at one point that his music teacher back in military school in Lagos had taught the subject only in terms of its factual details: birth dates, death dates, performance venues, and so on — all trees and no forest.

Alongside the two hearings of Mahler, Cole also structures his novel around two incidents of rape — the first perpetrated on the protagonist Julius *by* the music teacher already mentioned, and the second by Julius on his adolescent friend Moji.

Both those sexual violations occurred before the book begins, but the two recollections — of Julius as penetrated and as penetrator — serve to bookend his narrative. (Trauma and violence are handed down, dissonance begetting more dissonance, whether we're talking about Julius passing along sexual trauma or Bruckner bequeathing harmonic injury to the next generation of Viennese symphonists. It was surely inevitable that at some point Mahler, the foremost Viennese symphonist of the early century, would consult Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. In essence, it was the genre that made its way onto the therapist's couch.) But the important point is that the two recollections of sexual assault are so swallowed up by the narrative that they almost pass by the reader unnoticed, in neither case drawing much of any reaction at all from Julius, while he expounds on his two Mahler hearings at length and in showy and bookish detail. Clearly the musical experiences serve to diffuse and distract from the sexual ones. The symphony's mythological, instinctual evasions — as I've described them earlier — serve Julius's own narrative obfuscations well.

In *Open City,* Mahler's two symphonies become mainstays in the narrator's texture of equivocation and elusiveness. Living and working in such a hugely populous and diverse metropolis, Julius is unmoored; he finds himself cut adrift between races (he's estranged from his parents but longs for his German grandmother) and cultures (he has no connection with African music or art and finds jazz trivial, but is eager to show how conversant he is with classical music). He is also caught between sexualities. The reader is left to deduce that he's closeted, since he describes his friendships with several men in intense detail, and his one time of submitting to a woman's sexual advance leads to a strangely dispassionate convenience: "Afterward, she told me her name — Marta? Esther? I forgot it immediately."[67] Julius only feels comfortable cruising the New York streets, restless and evasive rather than curious and leisurely as would be the *flaneur,* and he envies the city birds their freedom to go

67 Teju Cole, *Open City* (Faber, 2011), 110.

wherever they wish. His closest friend in the city he refers to only as "my friend," while his supposed girlfriend gets a name but lives (conveniently?) elsewhere. Julius's only attachment as a child was to Moji's brother. We realize Julius has unspoken psychological undertows only toward the end, when Moji tearfully holds him to account for raping her eighteen years earlier. Moji blames her brother for not intervening in the assault. I suspect she was an erotic substitute for her brother, and that she knows it. Julius has no reaction whatsoever to Moji's rape accusation even though she begs him to respond: "I don't think you've changed at all, Julius. Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them. […] But will you say something now? Will you say something?"[68] For the first time, the loquacious young man has no words.

The sexual assault that Julius suffers as a young student in Nigeria is apparently reimagined through his own defense mechanisms as a school disciplinary action. The music teacher at his military school, as remembered, keeps berating him and then punishes him severely for a small, inconsequential offense. This episode of violence, which has a sexual aspect even at its surface, becomes a murky but defining life experience:

> Musibau motioned to me to undo the metal side fastener on my shorts. I bared my buttocks and bent over, using the blackboard for support. He caned me. It took effort, and he sweated from the exertion, methodically bringing the cane down on me.[69]

Change one word in this, and it becomes a graphic account of forced anal penetration — male-on-male rape. Otherwise how would Julius even be inclined to watch his perpetrator's sweaty, effortful exertion and his "methodical" actions? There's something very nearly pleasurable — more than a soupçon of kink — in his observations. (Remember Hegel's description of

68 Ibid., 245.
69 Ibid., 84.

the master–slave dialectic: "This primitive consciousness does not regard the other as essentially real but sees its own self in the other.")

Julius was barely effected by the ostensible rape back in school, at least not emotionally: "Sitting was difficult; my entire body burned. The technical drawing teacher continued his lecture without comment."[70] But he responds years later to Mahler's Ninth Symphony rather like Lesueur exiting Beethoven's Fifth in Paris. Trying to leave Carnegie Hall, Julius takes a wrong turn and somehow ends up stranded out in the rain on a slick fire escape. He suffers vertigo and almost falls to the concrete from several stories up. Heard at the end of the book, the Mahler symphony clearly unlocks some traumatic memory or suicidal impulse. Julius's hearing of the piece and ensuing existential crisis are — somehow — the shoe that finally drops after his sexual violations from years before. Maybe Mahler's "impossible elation" brings his own trauma, as first received then inflicted, to the surface. His interest in the death-hauntedness of Mahler's late music amounts to a well-worn platitude, but his invocation of light is unexpected and makes his attachment to the music sound more genuine: "All are vast, strongly illuminated, and lively works, surrounded by the tragedy that was unfolding in the life. The overwhelming impression they give is of light: the light of a passionate hunger for life, the light of a sorrowful mind contemplating death's implacable approach."[71]

So Ellison's invisible man is forcibly consigned to invisibility and inaudibility, while Julius selectively silences himself in *Open City*. He spouts names and facts in polished prose, but is almost wordless when it comes to his own personal issues, the very issues that Alex and the invisible man relate to the reader with healthy clarity. Julius prefers Mahler symphonies to popular music, which is to be expected since he's into rote learning and obscurantist mythologies. He's well versed (or assimilated) in Eurocentric scenarios, and would be a hit at cocktail parties

70 Ibid., 84.
71 Ibid., 249–50.

on the Upper East Side. He knows Eugène Ysaÿe's music as well as he knows *Beowulf,* Francis Fukuyama, and Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History,* but he confesses an abiding disinterest in jazz: "[I] would even occasionally worry about why I seemed not to have a strong emotional connection with this most American of musical styles."[72]

* * *

These three novels alerted me to different yet sometimes convergent varieties of silence and invisibility that attend the symphony as a genre. The particular neglect that comes with social oppression is what afflicts Ellison's Black protagonist as well as it does Julius, who is at best intermittently communicative as a Black man, but entirely silent when it comes to his own (apparent if unspoken) gayness. High art is surrounded by different forms of hushed silence and invisibility — namely, the shroud of silence that Eurocentric aesthetics casts over concert halls and art museums. We pause in muted and anonymous — and indeed belittled — wonder in front of Eugène Delacroix's paintings at the Louvre, and focus on pitch motives in Beethoven instead of broaching the feeling his music creates when it hits our chests as sound waves. Are these different varieties of the same socially mandated silence or are they unrelated squelchings? Or maybe they are all outgrowths from a common lineage of power and mutedness? Julius has the misfortune of seeing the different varieties converge. He meets the gay man Kenneth at an art gallery (a double layering of silence), and when Julius reencounters him in an all-male bar in a furtive and out-of-the-way location, he says almost nothing to him and excuses himself after noticing that "[Kenneth's] eyes were asking a question. A sexual question."[73] Julius finally gets to hear Mahler's Ninth in person, at the end of which he remarks on "perfect silence in the hall." This perfect, postsymphonic stillness is so pervasive it almost

72 Ibid., 24.
73 Ibid., 54.

becomes visible: "I looked around the hall, at the illuminated faces, all flooded with that silence. The seconds stretched on."[74]

I recognize aspects of my own musicality and musical experience in each of these three remarkable novels, and find some surprises too. I definitely can't understand Alex using Beethoven as a pretext for his own cruelty and physical aggression, even as I get McClary's analysis of the Ninth Symphony in terms of sexual assault. When I listen to symphonies, I feel the same sorts of tigers leaping that Alex does, but I might prefer to think of them as lunging. I recognize the electricity that runs through some Beethoven, through the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, for instance, but then Ellison helps me realize that such tension and shock don't count as a pleasant experience for everyone, indeed the opposite. In short, the sublime becomes a culturally contingent feeling that doesn't translate well, if at all, beyond the boundaries of Western Europe in the nineteenth century.

I did immediately see Ellison's Beethovenian lobotomizing "machine" as a prototype of my beloved Walkman from the early 1980s. One of the scene's experimental technicians refers proudly to "my little gadget," and its connections to the test subject include a headpiece that resembles earphones. The purpose of my own mini-stereo was also, in part, to calm and even anesthetize myself. Yet my gadget was a shiny, prized commodity of upper-middle-class leisure culture, advertised with smiles and white folks in postures of happy enthrallment. One person's capital punishment becomes another person's cultured leisure. And I know each of these forms of imposed silence very well. Of course the Walkman blocked out most everything else while I listened to Beethoven symphonies on it, but this silence it induced was the prized silence of high culture — healthy and educational, behooving of me as a close descendant of north European immigrants. If anyone had ever said to me while listening to Beethoven what one technician said to Ellison's protagonist in the experiment, that "you'll be all right," it would have sounded sincere and truthful rather than devious and

74 Ibid., 254.

threatening. The exhortation could almost be ad copy for home electronics. There'd be no reason to suspect a lie.

Neither the "little sisters" that Alex invited over for "angel trumpets and devil trombones" nor Ellison's invisible man knew what the hell they were getting into when they started hearing Beethoven. There's a namelessness at work here, even an oblivion — as is also characteristic of anonymous sex, oceanic musical experiences, and sociopolitical oppression. All three of those scenarios would converge in the experience of a gay rave or the backroom of a bathhouse. When you enter the back part of a gay bathhouse, the darkness is at first frightening and then titillating. You experience an awesome combination of obscurity and possibility, a rare combination of noise and quiet. There is a bathhouse epistemology where you encounter pain and pleasure at hands both anonymous and familiar, like feeling your way through darkness toward a warm singularity, an agreed-upon embrace, a mutual gratification. Hoffmann described his psychic reactions to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony by using the first-person plural, invoking shadows and physical space, and only very occasionally referring to Beethoven by name. Hoffmann also cloaks the affair in anonymity: "Glowing beams pierce the deep night of this realm and we are conscious of gigantic shadows which, alternately increasing and decreasing, close in on us nearer and nearer, destroying us but not destroying the pain of endless longing in which is engulfed and lost every passion aroused by the exulting sounds."[75] Hoffmann would have been in his element at a recent Brooklyn bathhouse rave, as described by a visiting journalist: "It's 1 a.m., and everyone is incredibly hot and nearly naked. The bathhouse has a faded majestic feel: tiled walls painted with an Edenic landscape, an assortment of erotic chiseled sculptures, an opal jacuzzi and an emerald plunge pool. Glinting wet bodies are everywhere. Getting off on the red-light

75 Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," 128.

dance floor. Getting it on in the water. Leaving steam rooms immersed in clouds of pearly vapor."[76]

I'm partial to this phrase "warm singularity" as a stand-in for "composer" — at least as a contrast to the buzzing machine that enshrines Ellison's ultracold singularity. Alex Ross, another queer writer on music, speaks of needing to discern a "singular creative personality" amidst sounds. "Having grown up with the notion of musical genius," Ross writes, "I am reluctant to let it go entirely. What I value most as a listener is the sense of a singular creative personality coalescing from anonymous sounds."[77] This is a textbook bathhouse epistemology. The sound-coalescing that Ross talks about is specifically yet anonymously the composer's personality — a persona that could turn out to be Bruckner, Charles Mingus, I suppose Brian Eno, or the less penetrative and therefore less painful Florence Price. (A symphony composer who does in fact manage "to fire the superego.") Fred Everett Maus made the point, as shown by much musical discourse, that understanding a piece of music becomes more a matter of getting to know it as one knows a person (a relation that Germans indicate with the verb *kennen*), and not knowing it as one would know a set of facts (which in German would be a matter of *wissen*). In Maus's description, understanding a piece or a musician's work "is a different kind of understanding, more like understanding a friend than understanding a linguistic statement."[78] (Or, indeed, more like understanding a sex partner.) While listening to Bruckner. I felt as if physically brushing up against his stylistic knowns, his sense for epochal and lumi-

76 Arielle Domb, "Debauchery (and a Little Detox) at an Underground Brooklyn Bathhouse Rave: At the New Rave Series Steamroom, Revelers Sweat It Out, Literally, as They Get Down and Get It On," *Brooklyn Magazine,* November 15, 2023, https://www.bkmag.com/2023/11/15/steamroom/.

77 Alex Ross, "The Rediscovery of Florence Price," *The New Yorker,* February 5, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/the-rediscovery-of-florence-price.

78 Fred Maus, "Classical Concert Music and Queer Listening," *Transposition* 3 (2013): 3, https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/148.

nous orchestration, his manias and weaknesses, his tougher and more truculent climaxes.

Even more significant matters concern weight and the body. The Ellison and Burgess novels prove most subversive when they show the effects music can have on the human corpus, and on the relations between bodies. Any lingering questions of whether Ellison's electro-lobotomy is truly a race-based experiment are answered when the protagonist has a seizure, and one of the technicians laughs and says, "They really do have rhythm, don't they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!"[79] Besides the slur, the tech shows an utter lack of humanity when he sees "the invisible man's" convulsion as a Beethoven dance. The tech might also be rebuking Louis Armstrong's sense of swing, if heard (as the protagonist hears him) as a form of rhythmic subtlety — as a metric provision where the player has the liberty and the desire to, as the protagonist put it, "slip into the breaks and look around." For the thug Alex in *A Clockwork Orange,* Beethoven's Ninth is an aural exhortation to unleash his loins: "I felt the old tigers leap in me and then I leapt on these two young ptitsas [women]."[80] By contrast with those two protagonists, Julius has no bodily reaction to his live hearing of Mahler's Ninth Symphony in Carnegie Hall. His response is purely intellectual, involving the frontal lobes and a virtuoso recall of Mahler-facts. He sounds like a concert hall docent.

Where my own aural violence differed most from the nefarious sound-torture in Ellison was in the matter of sonic weight. Surely the torture aspect in Ellison's electric lab comes from the lack of orchestral body and weight in Beethoven's opening measures. Suddenly the Wagnerian idea of the orchestra as a "sound organism" takes on importance. For a bottom, the pain–pleasure nexus can hinge on the top's weight. Most of my early albums of Austro-German symphonies were recorded in the 1970s and '80s by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Herbert von Karajan, who has recently been summarized by

79 Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 237.
80 Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange,* 45.

the more recent Austrian conductor Franz Welser-Möst as "a magician of sound."[81] Those sounds Karajan elicited in Berlin were uniquely weighty, trenchant, and powerful. Tonal weight means a consistently supported tone: the tonal stamina needed for the most sustained and trenchant ensemble sonority. The terms Karajan himself used in some 1980s interviews with Richard Osborne — "unbelievable power and precision," "full tone, full length," "huge impact," "immense force and weight" — show specific, working aspects of this kind of tone production.[82] Even the highest violin lines have a distinctive weight to them, in a manner that's difficult to describe. Karajan recalled a disheartening early tour performance with the Berliners that led to a basic rethink in rehearsal. "In Vancouver we began with a Beethoven overture, and the first chord — it was like picking up a sponge, there was no body in the tone. I would have liked to creep to the edge of the podium and disappear. So I said, we must do some basic things." He then worked almost sadistically on the group's tonal stamina, instructing them on "how to play a fermata with full tone. They thought I meant for five seconds but I made them practice holding their tone for twenty or thirty seconds."[83]

If "weight" is the noun here, "thrust" is the verb that carries the noun. The Karajan-Berlin tonal weight, developed over decades, was the ballast behind their aural-musical "thrust" — a trademark way of administering sound. Wilfried Strehle, a violist under Karajan in Berlin, said upon listening decades later to one of their records, "you still hear this incredible passion, this thrust, this force."[84] In music, thrust is a matter of timing, in

81 Franz Welser-Möst, with Axel Brüggemann, *From Silence: Finding Calm in a Dissonant World,* trans. Christine Shuttleworth (Clearview Books, 2021), 143.

82 Richard Osborne, *Conversations with Karajan* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 48, 88, 82, 108.

83 Ibid., 82.

84 "Karajan's Unique Porsche," *Porsche Newsroom,* 2017, https://newsroom.porsche.com/en/christophorus/issue-382/porsche-911-turbo-rs-maestro-herbert-von-karajan-salzburg-13945.html.

coordination with a strategic pushing of the sound — pushing it ever further while always supporting it, pushing the sound to the verge of losing control, but without doing so. Also important to their sonic "thrust" was a sense of line and a skill in manipulating expectation, involving, for instance, fairly strict time, certainly without rushing, and leading into loud culminations with just a hairbreadth's hesitation before the big payoff.

So musical thrust is like phallic penetration in that both open a person to the possibility of chaos and loss of self. Objectification is going on here: treating humans, cooperative partners, as means to an end where sovereign individuality is sacrificed. Karajan himself once wondered out loud in an interview: "When does that moment come when an orchestra goes from being a mass of over a hundred people to becoming one person with a marked character?" It's ostensibly a matter of sound, but on consideration becomes a less palatable question of human control and compliance. (In his more characteristic conducting technique, Karajan relied on the larger muscles of the shoulders, upper arms, and torso — the core muscles that would be used in sparring and wrestling, and I suppose in physical abuse. He rarely reached above neck height, effecting a sturdy center of gravity and balance that mirrored the well-anchored orchestral sounds he elicited. The final payoff of a crescendo was often cued with an upturned fist, punched forward at about gut level — a universal gesture of aggression, and one that could probably get a conductor furloughed these days.) Though Karajan dealt with a degenerative spinal condition over his later decades, the overriding visual impression he created on the podium was physical power — but a controlled and focused and low forcefulness, as was analogous with his orchestra's sonority.

Pleasure — at least in any nonsublime, non-BDSM sense — will be dispelled when the sense of individual self is dispelled. McClary talked about Beethoven and rape. The discourse surrounding orchestral thrust and its history is much less positivist and prescriptive than it is a matter of overwhelming the individual, subjective, receiving self. Think again here of Karajan's own words u*nbelievable power, huge impact, immense force and*

weight, all suggesting music being made under duress. (Impressions of such displeasure were had by Leonard Bernstein, a musical outsider who guest conducted the Berlin Philharmonic for the first time in 1979, in Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Biographer Humphrey Burton recounts their work together: "It took a while for the Berlin players to respond to [Bernstein's] extrovert style at rehearsal. Their trouble, he told them, was that they'd forgotten music-making was supposed to be fun."[85]) Burke said of the sublime that "the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature […] is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other."[86] Over recent decades, psychologists have reached a consensus that rape is not actually about arousal — and thereby isn't a matter of seeking pleasure — but is instead about power, control, and domination. A classic 1979 study by clinical psychologist A. Nicholas Groth presents the case that sexual desire plays at best a limited role in sexual violence: "Rape, then, is a pseudosexual act, a pattern of sexual behavior that is concerned much more with status, hostility, control, and dominance than with sensual pleasure or sexual satisfaction. It is sexual behavior in the primary service of non-sexual needs."[87]

* * *

I have a fourth, novelesque tale of my own to tell. This also centers on a young protagonist who is symphony-involved. One of my very few high school memories of any kind involves biking on impulse one morning from school to the public library, two miles away, just to hear the Berlin-Karajan record of the piercing dissonant "scream" in the third movement of Bruckner's Ninth

85 Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (Doubleday, 1994), 454.

86 Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* 130.

87 A. Nicholas Groth with H. Jean Birnbaum, *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* (Basic Books, 1979), 13.

Symphony. (I'd left my Walkman at home that day, apparently.) I seem to remember just picking up and leaving in the middle of a class, but that couldn't be right, and I don't quite recollect why the pilgrimage was so urgent. As Bernstein might have said, this was no fun-seeking campaign. Instead, what I felt was a sudden, unignorable need to be aurally intimidated and penetrated, to remind myself what terror sounded like. I needed an injection of the sublime. (I suspected some hornier students were running off during lunch hour to have sex somewhere, and here was my attempt at a musical counterpart. But that's not to say I found Bruckner's "scream," or his use of the orchestra, erotic.) Robert Simpson — that informative yet critical Bruckner authority from Britain — tried to plumb this music's "strange and compelling tonal conflicts." Simpson said the Ninth Symphony differs from its predecessors in that it can give us "the feeling that the composer is himself terrified by his own fantasies."[88] The third movement "is the most tortuous music Bruckner ever wrote. It is a search for a way out of the terrors and horrors of the first two movements and it as at the same time a search for a tonality, beginning with an agonized minor ninth that twists back on itself to an equally distressed major seventh."[89]

I arrived at the public library, found the Karajan record of Bruckner's Ninth, and dropped the needle in the run-in groove on the second side. What I was anticipating was the Armageddon that starts to rumble forth about twenty-five minutes into this Adagio third movement. As the crisis begins, there are anxious figuration in the violins as the upper strings reach ever-higher, and out-of-breath sextuplets in the woodwinds. The disaster balefully foretold, it strikes savagely — all the more arbitrary and unjust in that it doesn't involve a cadence. The music just sidesteps into a loud and barely recognizable dominant chord on the full orchestra, encrusted with nonchord tones to make a nightmarish cluster of seven pitches. Bruckner's chord certainly penetrates the ears, but it penetrates even more deeply

88 Robert Simpson, *The Essence of Bruckner* (David & Charles, 1967), 179.
89 Ibid., 191.

as an idea (or maybe as an unthinking action). This composer was in the habit of scrutinizing and rescrutinizing the voice-leading in his music. Had any "hidden fifths" snuck their way into the music? Had he resolved all chordal dissonances down by step? And yet here, in this chord in what he knew would be his last composition (and in the event, what became the final completed movement of that final composition), he threw the rules overboard.

The dissonances don't even serve a harmonic purpose — the ultimate agonized *fff* shriek is just a flick toward terror. For this and other reasons, it's possible to hear Bruckner's hellish discord as a sign of weakness rather than strength, an indicator that the flesh was winning out over the spirit. He was still trying to finish the Ninth Symphony while racing against illness and senile dementia, which helps explain the quotation from the Austrian anatomist Josef Hyrtl. Bruckner copied Hyrtl in his own journal, "Is that which Faith calls the immortal soul of man only an organic reaction of the brain?"[90]

In the 1975 record by Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, Bruckner's "scream chord" is implacable and smoldering from within. For us listeners, our aural-sex partner here proves very weighty and "top-py" indeed. There is that typically seamless Berlin corporate tone, heavy rather than actively aggressive, as I say, and effortlessly blended from the very bottom of the range (the tubas) to the very top (the trumpets and high violins). The Berlin violas, for instance, could shape-shift and modify their sound to be indistinguishable from the horns or clarinets. Nothing protrudes, no individual players stick out, not even the principals. All this results in instrumental sections that sound as fluid as they do powerful. Their corporate tone in Bruckner's "scream chord" is as weighty and implacable as a hundred-year-old oak tree, with roots a mile deep that stand in constant support of even the highest twigs.

90 Derek B. Scott, "*Lux in Tenebris*: Bruckner and the Dialectic of Darkness and Light," in *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 127.

This Berlin-Karajan orchestral sonority is so obdurate that your ears and body can only yield to it. Open most any book on nineteenth-century orchestration, and you'll find discussions of acoustics (science), treatises (philology), instrument construction (mechanics and history), playing methods (where the phrase "extended techniques" hints at unreason), and generally measurable things and things obeisant to the cults of positivist learning and cultural production. Of course orchestration is also talked about in composers' style histories. But you'd find nothing on the more difficult, and, yes, subjective, questions of how orchestral sounds can shake the listener all the way down through their chest, groin, bowels, legs, and feet. (Mark Evan Bonds said the Wagner caricature that he includes in his book on absolute music, the French image of the master of Bayreuth physically assailing the ear, "reflects the perception of Wagner as a revolutionary, his music a violent affront to established standards." But all the image shows is the brute force that this composer inflicts on the ear — his injurious sound, his auditory bloodlust.[91]) Those writing about orchestral developments pay obeisance to objectivity, temperance, standardization, and cogency. But their omissions, specifically regarding listener sensations and bodily reactions, really manifest what Foucault called the "sort of living, voluble, and anxious madness that the mechanisms of power and psychiatry were supposed to have come to repress and reduce to silence."[92]

So what are these contradictory interpretations of sense (sense as pain or as pleasure), silence (as oppressive erasure or aesthetic appreciation), and symphonic sound (as glowing light or imposing weightedness)? These people, diametrically opposed in their responses to the terms in these dualisms, are they just differently enculturated and differently privileged? Have I just bought into views of power that contrast with Elli-

91 Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 174.

92 Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984* (Penguin Books, 2019), 120.

son's? There can be no easy answers to these questions, or maybe any answers at all. We can't even leave off here with Mark Twain's jokey saying: "It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horse-races." We can't sign off with this quote because animal protectionists in our post-humanist era warn us that "horse racing is animal suffering for human entertainment."[93] Because when it comes to actual suffering, differences of opinion must end — for everyone's sake. (And we've reached a point where even well-worn verbal maxims are breaking down.) But which is madder, my own desire for aural weight and imposition, for an orchestral style that obviates the individual, or the culture of a person and group that go about producing it?

* * *

I emerged from my 1980s symphonic involvements with a taste for musical power, for force and grandeur, for aural and physical wrangling, for *earning* my gratifications — for being made to work for my pleasures. But pain is considered antithetical to today's universal rights to ease, dignity, health, and wellness. You aren't — indeed, you *can't* — be allowed to own your pain. And people nowadays tend to confuse painlessness with virtue. Pain is a form of dehumanization that comes from an imposition of hostile, external forces. And by these same sociopolitical dynamics — these paradigm shifts in music and sex simply must be connected through bigger sociopolitical dynamics — orchestras have now lost the weighted, thrusting sonorities of the twentieth century.

Only a few such ensembles existed, even fifty years ago. In addition to the Berlin, there was the Philadelphia Orchestra — another group curated for four decades by an old-world European male who wasn't particularly interested in liberalism

93 "Five Reasons Why Horse Racing Is Cruel," *World Animal Protection,* https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.nz/news/five-reasons-why-horse-racing-cruel/.

or democracy. By the time I had the chance to see Karajan in person with the Vienna Philharmonic in February 1989 in New York, a weak and ailing man in his last year, he took an eternity to get from the stage door to the podium. Once there, he leaned-sat against a cushion-rail thingy, his podium gestures were minimal, and not coincidentally the orchestra had an indecisive (though still glowing) sonority. His death shortly after marked the beginning of the end of a sound paradigm, as did the 1985 death of Eugene Ormandy, the maestro who had just out and declared, "the Philadelphia Sound is me."[94] By no coincidence, orchestral tone became lighter and lighter across the board as these authoritative male conductors died off and the twenty-first century approached. Recent decades have seen some music critics protest the "brutal," "opaque," and "oversaturated" orchestral sonorities from Ormandy's and Karajan's and Riccardo Muti's heydays. Young and ascendant conductors such as Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla are now doing intriguing things with the music, and don't concern themselves with the sublime or with erecting impenetrable, floor-to-ceiling sonic splendors. (Instead of recording Beethoven or Bruckner or Mahler, Gražinytė-Tyla has been essaying the operas and elusive symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich's colleague Mieczysław Weinberg.)

Historical coincidences mean something. And so it must indicate some turnover of *Zeitgeist* or sexual-political paradigm that these autocrats of orchestral "thrust" were passing right around when McClary made her powerful statement on Beethoven's Ninth, AIDS was instigating queer theorists (Simon Watney and Leo Bersani, at least) to hold forth on policing the male anus, and Andrea Dworkin published her most extreme polemic of radical feminism, *Intercourse* (Free Press, 1987). (And Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* followed shortly after.) McClary made her Beethoven statement and then softened it around the edges a bit when she officially took it to press, but has nevertheless been made to wear it around her neck as a mill-

94 Phyllis W. Rodríguez-Peralta, *Philadelphia Maestros: Ormandy, Muti, Sawallisch* (Temple University Press, 2006), 16.

stone ever since. (Beethoven wasn't even the main subject of her essay.) Much the same happened with Dworkin and her polemic in *Intercourse* that,

> hatred of women is a source of sexual pleasure for men in its own right. Intercourse appears to be the expression of that contempt in pure form, the form of a sexed hierarchy; it requires no passion or heart because it is power without invention articulating the arrogance of those who do the fucking. Intercourse is the pure, sterile, formal expression of men's contempt for women; but that contempt can turn gothic and express itself in many sexual and sadistic practices that eschew intercourse per se.[95]

Dworkin was falsely and eternally quoted after this as saying that all penis-to-vagina intercourse amounts to rape, by definition.

I'm not saying these five North Atlantic intellectuals were saying the same thing or were agreeing on any specifics. But if we were to separate their various important polemics from the more volatile aspects of their argued contexts, we could see them all protesting subjugation and asking for a reinvention of pleasures. And doing so with knowledge of Shere Hite's shocking research conclusion, published in 1976, that only a minority of women achieved orgasm through penetrative vaginal sex — through pelvic thrust-fucking, through "the old in-out" that Alex practiced and preached in *A Clockwork Orange*. In short, sexual pleasure became a gendered issue — implicated in sexual inequality. Hite's work followed on the pamphlet "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1970), where New York feminist Anne Koedt denied long-standing Freudian belief that a woman who couldn't be brought to climax through vaginal stimulation was frigid and needed psychotherapy.[96] The idea arrived in the

95 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Basic Books, 1987), 175.

96 "Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men," Anne Koedt wrote, "our own biology has not been properly analyzed.

1970s that the cock might be dispensable, after all. So these five writers were all responding to some of the same gendered and sexualized exertions of power they were seeing in the neoconservative early 1980s. And none of them were arguing against pleasure — to the contrary, they were arguing against limiting pleasure to its male-centered definitions. It's not often recognized that McClary and Dworkin were both keen to suggest alternative, nonviolent sensualities. McClary went into detail on (for example) symphonic music by Franz Schubert and songs by Earth Wind & Fire. Whereas Burgess's Alex the thug had taken self-gratifying male interest in "the old in-out" to absurdist extremes, Dworkin invoked a range of sensual pleasures — with fucking still in the repertory, but "intercourse becoming [only] one sex act among many entered into by (hypothetical) equals as part of other, deeper, longer, perhaps more sensual lovemaking."[97]

After the paradigm of weighty orchestras passed, some critics recognized it in hindsight as a sounding manifestation of the entitled male ego. The British critic and author Michael Oliver, hearing a digital remastering of the Berlin Philharmonic in their renowned 1974 record of Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht,* found the string sonority so imposingly unified yet so lacking in human individuality as to be almost repellant: "The sound is huge but curiously ill-defined: are there 40 violins or 400 in Karajan's orchestra, or just one vast super-violin? […] With such massively opaque sound the effect is as much repulsive as impressive."[98] And at about the same time that orchestral performance in the North Atlantic was achieving unprecedented tonal *power, impact, force,* and *weight,* there were parallel developments in sexual politics. The 1970s and '80s saw what jour-

Instead, we are fed the myth of the liberated woman and her vaginal orgasm — an orgasm which in fact does not exist." Anne Koedt, *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* (New England Free Press, 1970), 1.

97 Dworkin, *Intercourse,* 175.

98 Michael Oliver, "Schoenberg Orchestral Works: Arnold Schoenberg," *Gramophone,* March 1986, https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/schoenberg-orchestral-works-3.

nalist Ginia Bellafante has called "various efforts to expose and address the dark and dangerous habits of American intimacy."[99] Dworkin and her fellow feminist theorist Catherine MacKinnon were seeking a prelapsarian aesthetic — calling out violence as a gender issue, theorizing forms of sex without power and hierarchy, and looking forward to genital interplay absolved of "fucking" and "thrusting" aggressions. In short, there was a move to dissolve the centuries-old link between sexual pleasure and power as something to be either exerted or forfeited. In the *Hite Report* (1976), Shere Hite was specific in proposing a sex method that would do without violation and thrusting, even without penetration per se. Her egalitarian idea centered on a female–male "mutual lying together in pleasure," a scenario without "top" and "bottom," without "giver" and "receiver." Here the vagina enshrouds the cock just as much as the cock enters the vagina, the man remains still, and the woman's vaginal and pelvic muscles help bring both partners to mutual orgasm.[100] Hite was envisioning a time when women would be in-control tops rather than subjugated bottoms. Dworkin simply took up Hite's call for sexual pleasures that don't force women into submissive, victimizing, and mechanistic roles.

I do see that these changes in orchestra tone and makeup were inevitable, just as I recognize the importance of cooperative, respectful, and mutually pleasurable sex. At the same time, I can't feel sympathetic to these two priorities because I feel distant from them — in large part because of my gayness, which distances so very many things. I wonder if a Bruckner symphony played with light and transparent orchestral tone would still be Bruckner, just as I ask if gay sex absolved of aggressive penetration would still count as gay sex. Bersani recognized Dworkin's and Hite's dreams of a utopian sexuality devoid of power plays. But speaking as a queer man, Bersani said reimagining sex in

99 Ginia Bellafante, "Before #MeToo, There Was Catharine A. MacKinnon and Her Book 'Sexual Harassment of Working Women,'" *The New York Times,* March 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/books/review/metoo-workplace-sexual-harassment-catharine-mackinnon.html.

100 Shere Hite, *The Hite Report* (Macmillan, 1976), 141.

such ways would necessitate a reconsideration of our bodies, which are structured and related in such a way that we "associate mastery and subordination with the experience of our most intense pleasures."[101] And then there is the intense ebb and flow of the ego in sex, and the powers that allow for the *jouissant* loss of self: "The self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power. It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self. But sex as self-hyperbole is perhaps a repression of sex as self-abolition."[102] Lastly, of course the duality of dominant and submissive, the basic power play itself as so often malleable, is part of the queer recreational arsenal. Bersani encouraged us to remember the pleasurable powers of submission, talking about how sad it would be to completely lose the "strong appeal of powerlessness, of the loss of control. Phallocentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women."[103]

There are no signs yet of any such renascence of either mutualistic, egalitarian sex without postures of violence, or of a deeply considered culture of joyous submission. But in the meantime — that is, since the 1970s and '80s when these idealistic sexual rewrites were being proposed — orchestras and orchestral composers have gone on to their own post-Beethovenian, non-Wagnerian utopias. Technical standards in Western European orchestral playing improved exponentially after World War II, and the increasing use of (for instance) wider-bore brass instruments and steel strings with greater tension meant a more brilliant, unanimous, and imposing sonority. As sleekly and powerfully recorded by photogenic maestri, such music had the capacity to rouse some bored and depressed queer boys who were trying to grow up in small and repressive US towns. But

101 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 22–23.
102 Ibid., 25.
103 Ibid., 24.

with the late twentieth century and advent of stronger musicians' unions (in the United States) and increasingly democratic patterns of administration (just about everywhere), not to mention diminishment of the conductor's administrative (hire and fire) powers, "thrust" is pretty much gone from orchestral performance. Welser-Möst remembers a contentious 1984 rehearsal of Karajan with the Berliners, at a tense time when the orchestra's democratic governance structure was strengthening and their frustration with thirty years of the maestro's control could boil over at any moment:

> This was at the time when the tensions between the great old man and the Berlin Philharmonic were already becoming noticeable. At one of these rehearsals he wanted the violins to quickly perform a *fortepiano* with a stroke of the whole bow. This was followed by tumult — it was the classic spark that caused the powder keg to explode. What a scene! Orchestra members sprang from their seats and screamed at Karajan, while he sat there, stony-faced. I tried to make myself as small as possible in my seat. When the noise had died down, Karajan said, in a voice of admirable calm: "Does this mean that in future we will have to take a vote on whether to play *piano* or not?"[104]

Cultures of sonic drive and unanimity died thus, for better or worse, and Karajan's ebbing musical authority ended utterly when he passed away five years later. At the same time, any musical citizens echoing Burgess's Alex have been subjected to #MeToo scrutiny, prosecuted, or put on Thorazine, and thank God for that. Since concerted musical "thrust" was a product of the second half of the twentieth century, the influx of "historically informed" performance practices has come to fill the ideological void (even with ensembles using modern instruments or, should I say, especially with those). Forests have been replaced by trees, as regards both sound and ideology. Pleas-

104 Welser-Möst, *From Silence,* 138–39.

ure and pain alike have been usurped by positivist ideologies. Ensembles have gotten smaller whenever historical research suggests reduced players are a possibility. The French orchestra Les Siècles is one extreme example of a recent large ensemble sound that's as unweighted and non-Karajan-esque as could be imagined. I find their sonority light, flinty, shallow, and monochromatic. Les Siècles will force no listener anywhere into aural submission, indeed their corporate sound wouldn't intimidate a soul, but then that's probably their time-relevant rationale. And this orchestra will leave no listeners drooling or mesmerized. Speaking as a Bersanian by situation and conviction, I feel something important has been lost.

Bruckner's work — contrary to its reputation — opts out of the sexual violence found in many other works from the European symphonic tradition. Bernstein, for one, believed this music doesn't know how to ejaculate. More specifically, it doesn't know how to reach a state where ejaculation is a possibility. If Beethoven has trouble coming, Bruckner can't envision coming. "There are no real orgasms in Bruckner's music," Bernstein said to music producer R. Peter Munves, who'd asked Lenny why he conducted these symphonies so very rarely. "He doesn't reach a climax. He's always gonna be, but it never happens."[105] Bruckner's music does tend to avoid the suggestions of power and vanquishment that we hear in Beethoven and other symphonists. Its splendors aren't jealous, they don't come about at others' expense. Its grandeur comes from elsewhere, and is arrived at by other means. Certainly Dworkin's search for something "other, deeper, longer, perhaps more sensual" puts me in mind

105 R. Peter Munves in conversation with Bernstein, quoted by Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 406–7. Old-school formalists insisting on a biographical grounding for such a sexual interpretation of Bruckner's music might consider one specific, documented recollection from 1891. Max von Oberleithner was a friend of Bruckner, and recalled the devout composer once confessing to regular wet dreams, which suggests he was still highly sexed and unsatisfied even in his later sixties yet didn't allow himself to masturbate. Oberleithner quoted by Julian Horton, "Recent Developments in Bruckner Scholarship," *Music & Letters* 85, no. 1 (2004): 91.

of Bruckner slow movements. (Derek B. Scott says the culminations of Bruckner's symphonies "are not really reached by tonal striving"; rather, he suggests "there is more in the way of tonal *balancing* in Bruckner. I am referring here to balanced tonal masses rather than a balance of power."[106] Scott also contrasts his transfigurational conclusions with Beethoven's forceful resolution of symphonic dualities and teleological arrivals.)

Bruckner's symphonies make me think of another statement by Dianne Elise: "If, as I have been arguing, males have an early bodily and psychic experience of receptive excitement and an enlivened sense of interiority, what then are the forces that close down this self-representation and lead instead to a masculine focus on externality?"[107] Though he proved himself in the compositional proving ground of the symphony, and indeed focused on this genre to the exclusion of most everything else, Bruckner apparently never lost the receptivity and interiority that Elise said is quashed by the arrival of manhood. This creator of hour-long "cathedrals in sound" or "symphonic boa constrictors," pick your historically validated metaphor — he remained a naïve and childlike figure, and probably died a virgin.[108]

* * *

106 Derek B. Scott, "Bruckner's Symphonies — A Reinterpretation: The Dialectic of Darkness and Light," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner,* ed. John Williamson (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 188.

107 Elise, "Unlawful Entry," 503.

108 James Garratt refers to "the long-established tendency to treat Bruckner's symphonies as 'masses without texts' and 'cathedrals in sound.'" See Garratt, "A Kingdom Not of This World: Music, Religion, Art-Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Music and Romanticism,* ed. Benedict Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 146–62. Brahms's comment on Bruckner writing symphonic "boa constrictors" quoted by Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music,* trans. J. Bradford Robinson (University of California Press, 1989), 271. And Constantin Floros writes, "No less a person than Gustav Mahler coined the aperçu: 'Bruckner, a simpleton — half genius, half imbecile.'" See Constantin Floros, *Anton Bruckner: The Man and the Work,* trans. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch, 2nd rev. ed. (Peter Lang Verlag, 2015), 5.

Prefiguring the millennium in *The Illusion of the End* (1994), philosopher and theorist Jean Baudrillard said we are experiencing a "curving back of history" where "the future no longer exists."[109] In such a posthistorical picture, the 2020s are looking like a wholesale retreat from the 1980s. Somewhere in those four decades, I lost interest in bottoming and in Beethoven. (Or I should say most of him, but not the slapstick Beethoven, such as the Piano Sonata in E-Flat Major, Op. 31, No. 3; or the beautifully esoteric music, such as his Op. 126 Bagatelles.) The same questions recur: Was the pain worth it? What did the submittances teach us? Have the musical and gay-anal meritocracies given us what we need to be happy?) Now I feel free to question lovely Ludwig van and his pugnaciousness. "Beethoven was a titan, wrestling with the gods," said Wagner.[110] But why in the world was Beethoven wrestling, I ask? Because of his deafness. Because his stomach hurt. Because of the aristocracy. Because of lead poisoning. Because he was surrounded by philistines. Because he wanted a tussle, and difficult things are of greater moment than pleasurable ones. Because history has it so. Or maybe just because that's what we were told in school.

Time flies. The schooling ended. My Walkman broke or was misplaced, I forget which. A student blurted out one day: "The sublime is bullshit." A prominent critic suddenly objected to Karajan's interpretive "grandiloquence." I lost interest in Beethoven's gut-wrenching musical arguments. In their stead, I now found myself appreciating the music of Ludwig van less than the *idea* of Beethoven or his simple historical and aesthetic *possibility*. (The question there was, What set of circumstances could produce a Beethoven?)

Elise offers a coy aside in her "citadel complex" essay, one that goes to the very heart of who I am as a music-involved person: "My clinical experience does not allow me to adequately

109 Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End,* trans. Chris Turner (Polity Press, 1994), 10–11.

110 Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, eds., *Wagner on Music and Drama: A Compendium of Richard Wagner's Prose Works,* trans. H. Ashton Ellis (Da Capo Press, 1964), 162.

theorize the salience of this dynamic [of psychic penetration] for gay men, which I envision may involve certain complexities that should be given careful consideration."[111] She opts not to enumerate those complexities, sadly. But until she gets around to them, my own book here offers some possibilities.

One such complexity could be the fact that I've been cohabitating more and more with that archetypal anti-Beethovenian, Claude Debussy, but, I should add, not the archetypal Debussy either; I'm not one for musical mise en abîmes, for trading one stylistic cliché for another. (Similarly pain-free are Debussy-indebted musicians, such as Henri Dutilleux, Tōru Takemitsu, Brian Eno, and Ryuichi Sakamoto.) I've come to treasure Debussy's impossibility or, should I say, his musical *unlikelihood*. (The query here is, By what accident were you and I able to cross paths with a Debussy?) Indispensable these days is the gentle, radiant, and rather recherché prelude to *L'enfant prodigue* (*The Prodigal Son*). Paradoxically enough, I've become needful of this little piece's fascinating resistance to my fascination. There's no getting my fill of the peaceable flutter between D# Phrygian and B major at its start and end. What to call movement between these two harmonies, which share the same scale and are in that sense the same harmony? If it's a cadence, it's the least cadential, least testosteronal one imaginable. Beethoven would be humbled and befuddled.

What I'm saying is that Debussy's music is able to broadcast — secretively, by negative example, below and between the notes — the Beethoven resentments and symphony dislikes of its creator. Though the *L'enfant prodigue* prelude does rise to an emotional zenith, the piece ultimately says nothing, argues nothing, inflicts nothing. Any revolution it declares is a clandestine one, vaguely insinuated. It comes from a different civilization — a different world, by the sound of it. (Which is the very rationale behind another Debussy musical withdrawal, his *Épigraphes antiques.* Could there be a less Beethovenesque title

111 Elise, "Unlawful Entry," 500.

or set of sounds? By contrast, we could say Beethoven is known for serving up *Discours moderne*.)

According to the American pianist George Copeland, who knew the sybaritic and genetically unhappy French composer and in fact studied with him, Debussy "believed that Beethoven had terrifically profound things to say, but that he did not know how to say them, because he was imprisoned in a web of incessant restatement and of German aggressiveness."[112] Just so. One day a former teacher of Debussy's found him sitting at the piano, unaggressively and emancipatedly streaming parallel dominant seventh chords up and down the keys — stringing along a series of gentle harmonic questions, but with no interpolated answers. When the teacher challenged him to give the necessities or rules he was following to create such a nonsensical sequence, Debussy replied, "*Mon plaisir.*"[113] I believe there's truth in his simple answer — a credo for life, in fact. And why shouldn't we live?

112 Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Amadeus Press, 1992), 166.

113 Charles Koechlin, "La leçon de Claude Debussy," *La Revue Musicale* 142 (1934): 2.

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