Literary Modernism and the Aging of the New Music: Ballets Russes to Bebop

by

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Abstract

This study examines the contribution made by literary modernism to the institutional legacy of the avant-garde music of the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, it considers the vice versa – the role played by the institutionalization of avant-garde music in shaping literary modernism’s sense of its own aesthetic mission and institutional destiny. The musical developments in question include the European “New Music” theorized by Theodor W. Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus, typified by works such as Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du printemps and the tonal experiments of the so-called Second Viennese School, as well as the African-American jazz avant-garde of the 1940s and ‘50s. Subject at first to fierce controversy, the New Music had, by the middle of the century, amassed a sizable audience and considerable bourgeois prestige, and its repertory had achieved a secure place in the academy. The institutional entrenchment of the New Music in the American academy would have a decisive influence on the emerging technical grammar and artistic self-conception of modern jazz, which itself was to undergo a similar, if smaller-scale, process of institutionalization in the decades to follow. The authors discussed – among them Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Siegfried
Sassoon, Djuna Barnes, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Adorno himself – at once bear witness to the New Music’s growing cultural privilege, and help give shape to the institutional discourses by which that privilege is constituted. Certain of these authors identify with or admire the music more than others, but all of them recognize that the reception of the experimental modern art exemplified by the New Music is a process on which their own institutional legacy depends. This recognition manifests itself in the texts both discursively and formally. For the literary artists of modernism, criticism of the New Music is almost inescapably an act of, necessarily provisional, self-criticism, an assessment of their own artistic and cultural ambitions or, retrospectively, their achievements. And since literature, whose materials are discursive, is most readily positioned among the arts to directly shape institutional discourses about art, and in this case discursive constructions of the modern, the reverberations of these literary judgments continue to be felt in the present-day academy.
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Introduction

“To speak of the aging of the New Music,” wrote Theodor W. Adorno in the 1955 essay from which I have taken the title of this study, “seems paradoxical.” By “the New Music” (“die neuen Musik”), Adorno meant, specifically, the experimental European art music of the first decades of the century, whose audaciously sustained dissonance strained against the limits of the common practice tonal system that had been in place for at least two centuries, and even deliberately worked towards its dissolution. Such music, by the Paris-based Russian composer Igor Stravinsky and the “Second Viennese School” of Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg, among others, had helped to usher in the sensational period of European modernism: audience riots had greeted the debuts of Berg’s Altenberg Lieder (1912) and, most notoriously, Stravinsky’s collaboration with the choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes, Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring, 1913). And yet by 1955 this music, which had once seemed an all-out assault on established aesthetic standards and familiar structures of musical sense, which, according to Adorno, had had as its essence “the refusal to go along with things as they are,” had begun, Adorno now reckoned, “to show symptoms of false satisfaction.”¹ The composers’ varied earlier efforts to resist the strictures of tonality had stabilized into the systematic, rationalized musical language of serialism. At the same time, the music’s bourgeois audience, and prestige, were growing; and the techniques, theories, and repertory of the New Music had achieved a secure berth in the academy.

This, then, is the semantic paradox to which Adorno refers: can any art, “aged” in this way over time into a cultural institution, still be called, or thought of as, “New”? What is the meaning of “newness” in the context of a continuous European art music tradition – or, for that matter, in Western music culture generally? The German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus wrote of the “paradoxical permanence” of the “quality of incipient beginning, of ‘for the first time’” inherent in the early atonal works, which to Dahlhaus constituted an “immediate aesthetic quality” that even “half a century later . . . can be felt in almost undiminished form.”² No doubt one of the reasons for this response, this enduring subjective sense of the New Music’s novelty, is that the systems of pitch organization devised by Schoenberg and his contemporaries never did manage to wholly supplant the existing ones, not even in the conservatory; in an era offering
unprecedented access to music production and reproduction, atonal and serial music remains an eccentric and, to a large extent, isolated cultural phenomenon.³

But if the New Music’s dominance was short-lived and circumscribed, its foothold in the academy has turned out to be permanent and expansive. For more than half a century, in countless studies and courses on the culture of modernity, works such as Stravinsky’s Sacre and Berg’s Wozzeck (1922), and discourses such as the theory and practice of atonality, have served as signifiers of that which sets modern culture apart from the art and way of life of an increasingly distant and unrecoverable past. This provides another explanation for what Dahlhaus speaks of as the “paradoxical permanence” of the New Music’s seeming quality of newness, one which, as Dahlhaus himself suggests, “can be perceived only by bringing into play one’s historical awareness.”¼ The New Music – or what is more usually, if more ambiguously, called modern music – is not now, nor has it been for nearly a century, “new” or “modern” by virtue of being current, or recent. The New Music is new, rather, and “modern” music is modern, because, by institutional repetition, it has come to stand for the radical, the disorienting, the unprecedented, the revolutionary – in short, for the concept of the modern itself. It is the music of the new, the enduring music of the perennial new. And it is with this institutional status, and how it came about, that this study is concerned.

This study examines the dialogic role played by literary modernism in the institutional legacy of the New Music: it is concerned, that is, both with what the literature of modernism contributed to, and what it derived from, evolving critical and academic constructions of the musical avant-gardisms of the first half of the twentieth century. The music in question includes not just the Europe-centered New Music theorized by Adorno and Dahlhaus, but also the African-American jazz avant-garde of the 1940s and ’50s, as well as its philosophical precursors and successors. The authors I consider – among them Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Siegfried Sassoon, Djuna Barnes, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Adorno himself – at once bear witness to the growing cultural privilege of the various manifestations of musical modernism, and help give shape to the institutional discourses by which that privilege is constituted. Certain of these authors identify with or admire the music more than others; but all of them appear to recognize that the reception of the experimental modern art exemplified by the New Music is a process in which their own cultural status is bound up. This recognition manifests itself in the texts on both a discursive and
formal level. For literary artists of modernism, criticism of the New Music is almost inevitably an act of (necessarily provisional) self-criticism, an assessment of their own artistic and cultural ambitions or, retrospectively, their achievements. And since literature, whose materials are discursive, is most readily positioned among the arts to influence institutional discourses about art, and in this case discursive constructions of the modern, the reverberations of these judgments continue to be felt in the present-day academy. The texts surveyed here, with their diverse representations of music both “new” and otherwise, make up the primary sources of musical modernism’s historical record.

The three parts of this study collectively trace two distinct, but contingent and ultimately converging, threads of modern art’s reception history. The first of these is the textual reception, literary and otherwise, of the New Music, in incarnations ranging from Stravinsky’s Sacre to the bebop recordings of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, the “free jazz” of Ornette Coleman, and the serialism-inflected jazz “New Thing” of Eric Dolphy. These chapters probe the cultural meaning ascribed to the music’s level of dissonance, its resistance towards traditional tonal and formal structures, and its expansion of the boundaries of intelligible musical sound. The second thread is, in essence, the reception of that reception, the historiographic uses to which the responses of literary writers to the music have been put by scholars of both music and literature, as well as in the academy generally.

Numerous studies of the culture of modernism as a whole have touched on intersections between the musical and the literary imagination of the period, and on those occasions – such as the 29 May 1913 premiere of the Sacre – where the former set off the latter. Modris Eksteins’s classic history of the political and artistic avant-gardes of the first half of the century, Rites of Spring, is probably the best known example, taking that 1913 performance as a touchstone of its analysis of modernism as a “culture of the sensational event” in which “art and life . . . are fused as one.” In reaching that conclusion, Eksteins synthesizes the mythopoetic, conflict-ridden textual record by which that foundational event has come down to us, citing it as an instantiation of how, in the modernity heralded by the premiere of the Sacre, history “has surrendered much of its former authority to fiction.” In a similar way, Thomas J. Harrison’s 1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance applies Schoenberg’s tonal concepts to a sweeping theory of “Mitteleuropean”
visual, literary, and musical (as well as philosophical, psychoanalytic, sociological, and political) expressionism; but Harrison’s study is more interested in constructing a cohesive transnational cultural movement than in probing the cultural meanings with which literature invested specifically musical developments, or the ramifications of that investment of meaning in still-prevailing institutional assumptions about Schoenberg’s project.\(^6\) By contrast, Brad Bucknell’s more narrowly focussed *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics* is thoroughly concerned with representations of musical sound, musical sensibility, musical structure, and musical subjectivity by literary artists (among them Pound, Joyce, and Stein), situating these representations in a post-Wagnerian context.\(^7\) Although Bucknell’s book includes some consideration of the musical avant-garde, especially with reference to Pound’s compositions and treatises, because it concentrates on aesthetics, it deals mainly with music as conceived by authors in the abstract, rather than with historically specific developments.

With its discussion of Pound’s relationship with George Antheil, and Stein’s with Virgil Thomson (which produced the briefly popular opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, first performed in 1934), Bucknell’s work contributes to a recent swell of scholarly interest in cross-disciplinary collaborations between the literary and musical exponents of modernism. In this respect, it takes its place alongside historical studies by Steven Watson and Margaret Fisher, respectively, of the role played by the Stein-Thomson collaboration, and Pound’s musical activities for public broadcast of the early 1930s, in modernism’s “mainstreaming.”\(^8\) Along the same lines, Matthew Riley’s edited volume, *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960*, includes an essay by Tim Barringer on Edith Sitwell’s collaboration with the young composer William Walton, *Façade*, first performed in 1923; other essays in the book shed light on the musical climate and attitudes towards avant-garde developments on the continent to which English authors of the time would have been responding.\(^9\) Although these books share a common historiographic bent, for the most part they stop short of developing Eksteins’s nuanced critical approach to the primary materials of history. One of the things that make Eksteins’s work exemplary is its attention to the particular problems for contemporary historiography involved in citing literary art as a source.

Historicizing modernist literary relations with, and attitudes towards, the New Music requires more than just an interrogation of the ways in which musical history imprints itself on literary discourse and literary form – or literary history on musical form, for that matter. It requires, first of all, prising apart the authors’ assumptions about the cultural meaning of musical structures
from our own, which involves being aware of the discourses informing our assumptions about music as well as the ones informing theirs. But it also requires taking into account the motives of, or stakes for, literary writers in contributing to a growing and rapidly stabilizing bourgeois critical consensus. Especially in the case of later texts, it requires us to consider the ways in which literature registers, discursively and formally, its awareness of contributing to the New Music’s historical record, of forming a part of the basis for its institutional status. Above all, it requires us to consider how literature as such brings into being that institutional status, how literary form and literary discourse are reflected in the form and discourse of institutional thinking about the New Music, and what the consequences of those relations might be for our present understanding of both the literature and the music. As Björn Heile has observed, recent studies on the music side of modernism’s institutional legacy have tended to gloss over questions of how and especially why that institutionalization has come about, and the social and ideological functions the music has been called upon to serve in the process. Literature, I argue, with its capacity to reproduce, ironize, and even dictate institutional discourses, can help address these questions, and illuminate the processes by which music acquires ideological and social meaning.

Such considerations are particularly crucial in charting the cultural course of jazz, whose institutional status is less secure and of shorter standing. Despite steadily broadening definitions of what constitutes musical “modernism,” and for a complex of historical, ideological, and economic reasons, not least of which is its more than residual association with the commercial music industry, rarely outside of specialist contexts is jazz modernism considered as part of, or even closely connected to, the constellation of avant-gardes of the first half of the century. The expansive treatment of the subject in the third part of this study is aimed at addressing this imbalance. For undoubtedly “modern jazz” represents a later phase of musical modernism than those of the Sacre, or Schoenberg’s unfinished opera Moses und Aron (1930-2); and undoubtedly, it bears the stamp of those earlier phases. But the fact that it – as I will demonstrate – derived musical techniques, rhetoric, and part of its artistic self-conception from the example of a newly institutionalized European modernism, rather than developing these wholly independently, no more disqualifies its claims to an identification with the larger Western modern art movement than, for example, the acknowledged and decisive influence of Joyce, Stein, and Pound on the respective literary projects of Barnes, Hemingway, and Eliot disqualifies theirs. Of course, the motivations for African-American jazz artists in seeking to identify their
work with European modernism were themselves complex – politically, socially, institutionally, and artistically – and thoroughly tied in with modernism’s institutional status.

In this study, I am concerned mainly with the legacy of the New Music in the academy of the English-speaking world – especially, but not exclusively, that of the United States. As a consequence, with the exception of Adorno, whose influence on conceptions of modern music in the American academy of the present day is inescapable, I have concentrated on English-language texts. This has precluded dealing with, for instance, perhaps the definitive literary document of the Schoenbergian (and Adornian) project, Thomas Mann’s great novel of his American exile, *Doktor Faustus* (1947). This is regrettable, but the novel’s philological, formal, historical, and cultural references are so specifically German as to muffle, if not altogether silence, its reverberations in Anglo-American institutional construals of the music. But its significance for modernist music historiography as a whole is considerable, and even within the ambit of this project, there are some immediately apparent resonances between Mann’s novel and, for instance, the closing section of the discussion of Woolf in the second chapter. A different study than this one, no less necessary, on the literary record and institutional legacy of the New Music in continental Europe, could ill afford to overlook this text, as well as others even less accessible to an English-speaking readership.

The method of this study is historical and historicist, but its structure is not strictly chronological. In line with its emphasis on reception and canon formation, it begins by assessing the music’s current institutional situation, before turning to the early textual materials informing that situation, and which contributed to its consolidation. (How this textual reception influenced the evolving grammar of the music itself is a secondary concern, emerging especially in the third chapter.) It then examines how contemporaneous and retrospective literary documents, including the testimony of neglected and otherwise marginal texts, can complicate current critical perspectives, and even help resolve tensions inherent in scholarly constructions of the social and artistic meaning of the modernist musical project, in its own time and in ours. Less familiar and available texts can also serve, as with those by Djuna Barnes in the first chapter, as a lens through which to uncover critical operations in texts that have played a more direct role in
shaping institutional discourses. This general outline for the study as a whole is also roughly adhered to within each of the three individual chapters, as they consider, in turn, the respective literary records and institutional afterlives of *Le Sacre du printemps*, the tonal experiments of the Second Viennese School, and the jazz avant-gardes. The first chapter thus deals with some of the earliest music and some of the latest texts, as the project begins with the composition that did the most to establish the New Music in the public consciousness, and with texts whose gestures towards historiographic detachment adumbrate the position from which we, as twenty-first century listeners and scholars, must approach the century-old monuments of “modern music.”

Notes


4 Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music*, 13. The first essay in this volume, “‘New Music’ as Historical Category” (1-13), offers a thought-provoking cultural history of the concept from the fourteenth century to the twentieth.


– although it comes in a section on “Folk Culture, Commodification, and National Identity in Literature and Music.”

12 For a concise introduction to the musical and historical dimensions of Mann’s novel, see Hans Rudolf Vaget, “‘German’ Music and German Catastrophe: A Re-Reading of Doktor Faustus,” in A Companion to the Works of Thomas Mann, ed. Thomas Lehnert and Eva Wessel (New York: Camden House, 2004), 221-44.
1 The Moment of Modern Music

With the centenary of the sensational 1913 Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* approaching, scholars of the culture of modernity will increasingly have to confront the historical remoteness of this defining event of “modern” music. Recent debate in the U.S. Supreme Court, with congressional debate sure to follow, over whether Stravinsky’s ballet scores and other European works of similar vintage can be made subject to copyright protection encapsulates the *Sacre*’s uneasy position, straddling the private and the public domain, the avant-garde and the antique.¹ Chronologically speaking, we are now very nearly as far removed from the debut of the *Sacre* as the *Sacre*’s first audience was from the debut of Beethoven’s Fifth; and Stravinsky’s music, vaunted in its day as a radical break from the European classical tradition, has become so securely institutionalized that to today’s students, it amounts to little more than another piece in the classical repertoire – as, indeed, it has for many years now. Textbooks may still try to convince students of the *Sacre*’s distinction as an “unprecedented departure from established musical traditions”;² its unresolved dissonances may still thrill, or annoy, the classically-trained ear; but a century of musical developments have made the outraged reactions of some of its first hearers and critics seem quaint, even a little absurd. We can still appreciate the ballet’s innovative aspects, and its importance for modern music and art, but for most of us this appreciation has to be sought from a position of historiographic retrospect, returning to the surviving original documentation of the ballet’s debut to assess the material truth of this indelible vignette of the time before the World Wars. The latter is the impulse behind scholarly efforts, which began in earnest in the 1980s, to situate the events of the premiere in the political and economic conditions of prewar Paris, or to sort through the press reviews of the *Sacre*’s early runs and concert performances, or to “reconstruct” and reappraise Vaslav Nijinsky’s lost original choreography, to cite just a few examples.³ It is here, amid such historicist endeavours, that the twenty-first century scholar must begin, if she hopes to grasp the significance of this quintessentially twentieth century artefact.

If this is now generally conceded, it’s less well known that a similar condition of retrospective detachment has been a feature of the reception of *Le Sacre du printemps* almost from the start, even before the ballet was ten years old. Responses to the ballet by Stravinsky’s literary contemporaries reveal as much. Partly, the historiographic slant of these early responses is a
reflection of some qualities particular to the *Sacre*, namely its unusual susceptibility to remaking and recontextualization, by its composer and by others, especially early in its history. This susceptibility is inextricably tied to sudden reversals in the *Sacre*'s popular and critical fortunes during the first decade or so of its performing life, which in turn contributed to its rapid attainment of classic status. Meanwhile, the institutionalization of the *Sacre*, which was well underway by the early 1920s, provided a platform from which literary modernists could reflect on the institutionalization that their own works were then in the process of undergoing – or not undergoing, as the case may be. Implicit in this is a double perspective: the writers in question had to think of themselves both as practitioners of modern art, dependent upon its reception and commercial potential for their livelihood, and also as part of its general audience, shoulder to shoulder with the “bullet-headed many” who in Pound’s famous formulation “will never learn to trust their great artists.” It was a contradiction not all writers, it seems, felt themselves able to resolve.

In this chapter, I’ll examine a number of literary responses to the *Sacre* by authors who were active in Europe during the period of the ballet’s critical and popular reassessment. All of these texts, despite their considerable differences in treatment and wide chronological and geographic dispersion, have in common an attitude of retrospective, quasi-historiographic detachment towards *Le Sacre du printemps*; but their retrospection is complicated by a persistent deferral, or provisionalness, of judgment, which manifests itself in the texts both discursively and formally, and stems from, among other things, the artistic stakes of such a judgment, and the elusiveness of the *Sacre* as a historical object. I’ll concentrate at greatest length on two works by Djuna Barnes, especially her poem “Rite of Spring,” which was published just before her death in 1982 and presented as “a poem waiting, to be continued,” and thus instantiates extremes of both retrospective distance and formal and discursive irresolution. But even in much earlier texts by Gertrude Stein and Siegfried Sassoon, we find authors grappling with the problem of a watershed moment in the art of their time whose original significance is always receding from view and from memory in a changed climate of opinion, even to those who were “there” in 1913.

In this way, their responses to Stravinsky’s ballet adumbrate the complicated historicism of today’s scholars and listeners, who may still perceive the novelty, discordancy, or difference from convention of this century-old composition. At the same time, texts such as these, on the
margins of the canon, can aid the current historicist project, by helping to restore to its original, but multiple, contexts what notoriety and acclaim have enshrined and set apart.

1.1 “Quite the concert of the year!”

The seminal importance of Stravinsky’s ballet, both for modernism’s sense of itself as a movement, and for critical conceptions of the concerns and aesthetic qualities of modern art, has become part of the received wisdom of the humanities. The “riot” in the audience that took place at the premiere, at Paris’s Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 29 May 1913 – sparked by, among other factors, Stravinsky’s exceedingly dissonant score, and Nijinsky’s aggressively unballetic choreography⁶ – quickly entered the high-culture folklore of its era; and it continues to serve, in lectures, textbooks, and other concise introductions to the subject, as an emblem of modern art’s discontinuity with the aesthetic expectations and values of the past. The same can be said of the reviews, ranging from the merely uncomprehending to the hostile, that greeted the ballet in the Paris papers upon its initial run. For almost a century now, the early reception of Le Sacre du printemps has played a role in shaping the assumption that truly “modern” art must be abrasive, inaccessible, and divisive.

No doubt the commotion of its first night, and the moral fervour of the negative notices it received, helped turn the premiere run of the Sacre, at least in retrospect, into “le moment de la musique moderne,” as Serge Diaghilev pronounced it⁷; but it was the music’s subsequent transplantation, by Stravinsky and others, to new and more austere contexts that allowed Diaghilev’s slogan to hold. Though neither Stravinsky nor Diaghilev would ever stop trading on the sensation created by that initial scandal, the enduring pre-eminence of the music of the Sacre in the modernist canon has little to do with what actually sparked the events of 29 May 1913.

The score’s thoroughgoing dissonance, though it struck a number of early listeners as unprecedented, cannot solely or even primarily be responsible for either the work’s controversy or its cachet.⁸ For the very concept of dissonance relies on some reference to tonal resolution; in fact, the Sacre’s musical vocabulary is much more rooted in the conventions of the European tonal system than, for example, some of the compositions by Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, which were playing on other European stages at around the same time, such as Schoenberg’s Pierrot Lunaire and Alban Berg’s Altenberg Lieder (both 1912). Some of these
works dispensed with tonal resolution altogether; a few of them – notably Berg’s – had suffered difficult receptions, but none on the scale, or with the ferocity, of the premiere of the Sacre. Nor could the audience at the premiere of the Sacre have been caught wholly by surprise, given the Ballets Russes’ already established history of provocation, and Stravinsky's own nascent avant-garde reputation. Musical qualities alone, in other words, can entirely explain neither the riot, nor the Sacre’s subsequent iconic centrality to 20th century European music. The riot itself, not the music, is why, to historians such as Modris Eksteins, Le Sacre du printemps can seem to embody the whole era of modernism, maybe even the whole tumultuous century; for nothing captures the absurd irony of violence on an unprecedented scale in a time of unprecedented technological, cultural, and economic development quite like a riot at a ballet. Today, with more and more of the musical workings and early history of the Sacre having been exposed to light by scholars such as Pieter C. van den Toorn and Richard Taruskin, the story of the riot continues to serve an almost allegorical function, as a justification of the work’s virtually unrivalled place at the head of the modernist avant-garde. This “myth of the twentieth century,” to borrow an expression from Taruskin, is – as the expression implies – nothing new, and it is not going away: admiration of the Sacre’s artistic qualities, which has been general since at least the 1920s, has always tread on the heels of a conviction of its “importance.”

Probably the best-known account in English of the premiere run of the Sacre is the zany and, it turns out, utterly confabulated one offered by Gertrude Stein in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933). In that version, Stein and Toklas hear of the “terrible uproar” at the first performance, and are prevailed upon to attend the second show, four nights later:

No sooner did the music begin and the dancing than they began to hiss. . . . We could hear nothing, as a matter of fact I never did hear any of the music of the Sacre du Printemps because it was the only time I ever saw it and one literally could not, throughout the whole performance, hear the sound of music . . . our attention was constantly distracted by a man in the box next to us flourishing his cane, and finally in a violent altercation with an enthusiast in the box next to him, his cane came down and smashed the opera hat the other had just put on in defiance. It was all incredibly fierce.

Of course, no other witness reports anything of the sort happening on the night of 2 June 1913. But that may be beside the point. Stein’s compulsion to fabricate the episode – or at least fantastically embellish it – is more revealing than any of the details in it. Drawn in by the centripetal force of Stein’s effort to sum up Paris modernism and place herself at the centre of it,
the premiere of the *Sacre* presents itself as a sensation of its time and place – “All Paris was excited about it” – as well as an avant-garde artistic provocation: “Toklas’s” account concludes with Stein returning home to compose “a portrait of the unknown,” a poem in her most up-to-date style. It may well be, as Eksteins speculates, that Stein and Toklas never actually attended a first-run performance of *Le Sacre du printemps*, in which case “Toklas’s” claim that the music was inaudible to her would in fact be, as she puts it later in the *Autobiography*, “literally true, like all of Gertrude Stein’s literature.” On the other hand, the extended treatment of the ballet in the *Autobiography* makes the failure to address its most enduring and contentious feature an especially conspicuous gap. This deferral of judgment about the music of the *Sacre* fundamentally complicates the memoir’s prevailing attitude of retrospective demystification and naturalization towards modern art.

The confusing circumstances of the ballet’s genesis and first decade shed some light on how it could have seemed, to Stein in 1933 and others at the time, to come at once from an unrecoverable past and also from the glittering, not-quite-yet-intelligible New. Despite the work’s thoroughly modern musical and choreographic vocabulary, the subject and setting of the *Sacre* is an imagined version of Eastern European antiquity. The ballet’s subtitle, “Scenes of Pagan Rus’,” invokes the prehistoric, pre-national tribal roots putatively underlying the modern Russian nation, which – according to the scenarists’ conceit – will now be asserting themselves, through the medium of the ballet, on the stages of Europe’s modern nation-states. The scenario, by Stravinsky and the artist and ethnographer Nicholay Roerich, and realized in its original incarnation by Nijinsky for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, involves a succession of ritual games and dances by groups of prehistoric Slavs, leading up to the election of a Chosen One – a virgin who, in the closing “Sacrificial Dance,” dances herself to death amidst a circle of elders. As she falls, she is caught and borne up as an offering to the god of spring. Spurious as the ballet’s portrait of prehistoric Russia may have been, it wielded an influence almost comparable to that of Sir James Frazier’s *The Golden Bough* in consolidating the modernist fad for “the primitive,” and in introducing to the modernist imagination the image of the vernal sacrifice as a metaphor for the tortured birth of a new art and civilization. The latter is, for example, one of the dominant images of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a poem for which a summer 1921 performance of the *Sacre* at London’s Prince’s Theatre probably provided some of the inspiration. If the motif did not originate with Stravinsky and Roerich, Eliot’s influence would nonetheless help turn the *Sacre*’s
implication of a destructive vernal renewal of art and society – an adaptation of fin-de-siècle thinking, framed by the Great War – into a cliché of modernism. As early as 1923, the idea was already familiar enough to have come in for satire, at the hands of Eliot’s transatlantic rival, William Carlos Williams: in the opening prose sections of his volume *Spring and All*, Williams expatiates on ideas implicit in *The Waste Land*, while at the same time mocking Eliot’s tendency to “say what is in [his] mind in Sanscrit or even Latin . . .” The motif of human sacrifice, to restore the earth to fecundity after a literal and metaphorical winter, would eventually crop up again, in Christianized form, in Eliot’s 1935 play *Murder in the Cathedral* – confirming and extending the *Sacre’s* influence, direct and indirect, on the generation of the literary modernists.

By the time Eliot saw it in 1921, the ballet had already undergone the first of its many remakings. Nijinsky’s choreography, which had been at the centre of the 1913 controversy, perhaps as much as the music, had been replaced by a new, decidedly less confrontational, version by Léonide Massine. In the meantime, the original choreography was deliberately suppressed by Diaghilev and, as Taruskin has pointed out, Nijinsky’s contribution to the initial controversy quickly came to be, for the most part, forgotten. The deed to the “scandal” of the *Sacre*, and thus to its avant-garde cachet, was now almost exclusively in Stravinsky’s name. And the theatrical experience was irrevocably changed. Paradoxically, the new choreography emphasized the incongruity between the *Sacre’s* aura of futuristic innovation and the primitivism of its scenario. In his “London Letter” in the October 1921 issue of the *Dial*, Eliot lauds the music’s “quality of modernity,” its evocation of “the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life”; but he cannot overlook the tension between the music and what was happening onstage: “The spirit of the music was modern, and the spirit of the ballet was primitive ceremony.” He goes on to compare the *Sacre* to *The Golden Bough*, saying that while the latter represents “a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation,” in the ballet, “except in the music, one missed the sense of the present.”

Earlier the same June that Eliot saw the stage revival of the *Sacre* at Prince’s Theatre, the score had been performed in a concert version there, and then at nearby Queen’s Hall, under the baton (as Eliot notes in his review) of Eugene Goossens. It was in response to the second of these two performances that Siegfried Sassoon wrote “Concert-Interpretation (*Le Sacre du Printemps)*,” the one direct contemporary treatment *in verse* of the *Sacre* by a notable English poet, first
published in the autumn of 1921 in *The Nation and the Athenaeum*. Even in this early poem, the *Sacre* is seen through a lens of retrospection, as an object from the past that has lost some of its original acute meaningfulness and power to scandalize. But the poem’s formal and tonal instability and ultimate irresolution leave open the question of whether the music of the *Sacre* still speaks for the present – and, if it does, exactly what it has to say.

Part of the poem’s tension revolves around the fact that the Prince’s and Queen’s Hall concerts were not the first time *Le Sacre du printemps* had played in London. The original troupe had performed the Nijinsky choreography there, at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, in July 1913 – mostly without incident, though also without notable success. But it was largely through concert versions, beginning with one in Paris in the spring of 1914, that the music of the *Sacre* acquired its cutting-edge reputation. Abstracted from the violent spectacle of Nijinsky’s ballet, the score gained steadily in esteem and popularity. The 1921 London concerts were especially well received, and apparently well attended: Sassoon describes a “Gallery, cargoed to capacity” with spectators (31). Stravinsky, still smarting from the debacle of 1913, suddenly found his achievement vindicated. Before long, thanks to concerts and recordings – not to mention Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) – the cultural resonance of the music of *Le Sacre du printemps* would extend much farther than that of any of its theatrical incarnations. In the changed climate of opinion, the memory of the rancour at the first performance was no longer a mere embarrassment for the composer; rather, it contributed to the *Sacre*’s mystique, stoking the popular and critical imagination as to the music’s supposed avant-garde qualities. Recollecting the work’s Paris concert debut in his 1936 autobiography, Stravinsky writes gloatingly of the *Sacre*’s rehabilitation among both critics and the public, while also taking the opportunity to disparage Roerich’s original set decorations – at once reminding the reader of the initial scandal, and distancing his work from Diaghilev’s company:

> The audience, with no scenery to distract them, listened with concentrated attention and applauded with an enthusiasm I had been far from expecting . . . . Certain critics who had censured the *Sacre* the year before now openly admitted their mistake. This conquest of the public naturally gave me intense and lasting satisfaction.

Reflecting this “conquest of the public,” Sassoon’s poem depicts a performance of the *Sacre* as a society event. In heroic quatrains, terrifically bombastic diction, and absurd rhymes, it mocks both the philistinism of the earlier audiences, and their fashionable embrace of the revival. It then
takes a personal turn, exulting in the “frantic” state engendered in the poet by the music’s “corybantic rupturing of laws”: “But savagery pervades Me” (35-36). The speaker exhorts the polite crowd to respond in kind:

Come, dance, and seize this clamorous chance to function
Creatively, --- abandoning compunction
In anti-social rhapsodic applause!
Lynch the conductor! Jugulate the drums!
Butcher the brass! Ensanguinate the strings!
Throttle the flutes! ... (ll. 37-42; ellipsis in original)

The poem is characterized by a peculiar double vision. Not completely sardonic, it ascribes to the music an uncanny sense of “some drift of things / Omnific, seminal, and adolescent” (ll. 13-14), which militates against the decorousness of the concert hall and the fastidious form of the verse. The notion of the *Sacre* representing, or promoting, a cathartic release of the “primitive” energies repressed by modern society was a commonplace of early publicity and positive assessments of the work; and Sassoon’s adjective “adolescent,” doubtless an allusion to the “Danses des Adolescentes” (“Dances of the Young Girls”) in the *Sacre*’s first movement, betrays the influence of the “astigmatic programme-notes” (l. 33), and perhaps also the emerging critical consensus, on the poet’s impressions of the music. In this, at least, he may have more in common with the rest of the Queen’s Hall capacity crowd than he is willing to concede. For the poem portrays a 1921 audience to whom this “not-quite-new audacity” is already an embalmed classic, “As though it were by someone dead, -- like Brahms” (ll. 33-34) – a sentiment echoed in some of the contemporaneous London press.³⁰ And the verse itself works to civilize and normalize those aspects of the music that in 1913 “seemed cacophonous and queer,” by choking them with jingling rhymes and advertising copy: “*Quite the concert of the year!*” (ll. 2, 8). Apparently this performance has not been the avant-garde artistic provocation that the Nijinsky *Sacre* was for Stein. (Appropriately, the line where the poet declares himself set apart from the rest of the audience, pervaded by “savagery,” is the only one not yoked to another by a normalizing end-rhyme; but even there, the line-ending word “frantic” jingles with “corybantic” in the middle of the line immediately following.) Throughout the poem, the primary emphasis is on the layers of mediation through which the 1921 audience has its experience of *Le Sacre du printemps* – the programme notes, the memory of the original scandal, the crowd’s bourgeois manners, and the poet’s defensive irony. In the end, the music “expires” amidst “delighted” clapping (ll. 46-47),
and both poet and audience seem relieved by the *Sacre*’s domestication into an evening’s entertainment.

In its ambivalent and ironizing way, “Concert-Interpretation” is concerned with the then-new bourgeois prestige enjoyed by the music of *Le Sacre du printemps* – that is, with its burgeoning institutionalization. The poem is equally a piece of music criticism and wry sociology, interested in what Stravinsky’s music had come to mean both to critics and to the (privileged) public in the eight years since its debut. In Sassoon’s rendering, the *Sacre* has largely if not exclusively become the property of Europe's diversion-seeking moneyed classes; but it is unclear what the consequences of that situation might be for those artists, such as the poet, who have found themselves caught up in the music and its mystique. By foregrounding the music’s rapidly changing reception, “Concert-Interpretation” gestures towards a critical, even historicist inquiry into the *Sacre*’s increasing centrality to modern European arts culture, one that Sassoon was, perhaps, too close to that culture to provide. The same might be said of Stein, who would have had good reason to ponder the potential for institutional and bourgeois acceptance of forbidding modernism like *Le Sacre du printemps*. In the last pages of the *Autobiography*, “Toklas” relates a visit by the Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre: “She came and she said, the time has now come when you must be made known to a larger public. I myself believe in a larger public. Gertrude Stein too believes in a larger public but the way has always been barred.” As the text tells us in the same passage, the *Autobiography* was written at around the same time Stein was in the process of publishing one major work of a distinctly hermetic cast, *The Making of Americans* (which she had been trying to publish since as early as 1911), while composing another, the long poem *Stanzas in Meditation*. (There is a sense in which *The Making of Americans*, which goes through many vicissitudes on the way to finally finding a sympathetic publisher at the end of the narrative, is the true “hero” of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.) In fact, the *Autobiography* itself would be what brought Stein to “a larger public”; but it is tempting to read the memoir’s suspension of judgment about the music of the *Sacre* as reflective of Stein’s own as-yet-unfulfilled desire for the popular and critical reappraisal Stravinsky’s once-scandalous music had already undergone. For others, the wait would be longer still.
1.2 “Twenty years to finish this poem”

Probably the only important Anglo-American modernist to live into the Reagan administration, Djuna Barnes was almost ninety when she saw her final “new” work through the press, in the spring of 1982. She died that June, a week after her ninetieth birthday, and, incidentally, two days after the centenary of the birth of Stravinsky, who had died in 1971. About the right size for an epitaph, her last authorized publication was a poem of three lines, entitled “Rite of Spring”:

Man cannot purge his body of its theme
As can the silkworm on a running thread
Spin a shroud to re-consider in.

A typescript dated 25 May 1980 adds a terse colophon: “Twenty years to finish this poem.”32 The number of drafts bears this out: Hank O’Neal, who acted as her secretary during her last years, claims there were more than five hundred, and that in 1979 she told him the poem was “the most important one she has ever attempted.”33 But even after twenty years, it is hard to tell to what extent Barnes considered “Rite of Spring” finished. It was published, in the New York quarterly Grand Street, under the heading “WORK-IN-PROGRESS”34; the title “Rite of Spring” is given underneath. A note to a different typescript, this one probably from 1982, finds Barnes chattering excitedly about a “totally new idea . . . a poem ‘in progress,’ as Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’ was to become ‘Finnegans Wake.’” According to this presentation, instead of being the scarred last survivors of decades of agonizing toil and second-guessing – we may think of, perhaps, the three lines of Marianne Moore’s final approved version of “Poetry”35 – the three lines of “Rite of Spring” are to be taken as “the first new move, in poetry, a poem waiting, to be continued.”36 The punctuation is Barnes’s, and despite the glamorous rhetoric of novelty and discovery, under the weight of all those commas, the sentence lurches along, weary and inconclusive: twenty years, five hundred drafts, and no end in sight. Meanwhile, the doubly and unmistakably borrowed title – from Joyce, the most influential author of her generation, and Stravinsky, the most influential composer – belies Barnes’s lofty claims about innovation, making the poem seem, if anything, a few decades behind the times. Not to mention that it is a gesture distinctly out of character for a writer whose most famous work was named after a word she made up herself.37
The relevance of Stravinsky’s ballet to Barnes’s epigrammatic verses is not immediately obvious. On first glance, the title – which is the usual English rendering of Le Sacre du printemps – is simply enigmatic. For one thing, as O’Neal’s testimony implies, Barnes wrote many, many versions of the “Man cannot purge” verses, under various titles, in widely varying contexts over the span of decades.38 Nancy J. Levine, in an important but uncharitable article about Barnes’s late poetry, notes that “Rite of Spring” was originally the title of a “long poem cycle” rejected by the New Yorker, according to Barnes because she refused to change a single word; O’Neal says the title for that work was selected in 1979, but the relationship between it and the final three-line “WORK-IN-PROGRESS” is unclear.39 As an evocation of the cycle of seasons, the title “Rite of Spring” does contribute to the published poem’s general atmosphere of recurrence, of subjection to natural forces. The sense of recurrence is heightened by the third line’s emphatic bifurcation of “re-consider”: this is very unusual orthography for Barnes, though it is an attested early use, and has since become familiar from postmodern contexts. Barnes would have found a handful of seventeenth and eighteenth-century examples in her Oxford English Dictionary40; editions of the OED since the first (as the New English Dictionary, or NED) have distinguished two senses of this word, “to consider (a matter or thing) again,” or afresh, without a specific end in view, and the more familiar, “To consider (a decision, conclusion, opinion, or proposal) a second time, with a view to changing or amending it; to rescind, alter.” In the provided examples, the hyphenated form always denotes the first, neutral sense.41 Barnes’s orthography helps to establish the objectlessness of the silkworm’s act of “re-considering,” the sense that the act is an end in itself, rather than something done with an eye to changing its situation.42 In the self-contained negative analogy between the lots of human and silkworm that makes up the poem, the silkworm’s (seasonally?) recurrent act of contemplation is neutral, even therapeutic; but for the “Man” who is the poem’s grammatical subject, the title’s implication of recurrence invests the first line with the quality less of an aphorism and more of a chronicle of continual, fruitless effort, a periodic attempt at purging that has always failed. Inevitably, this chimes with Barnes’s account of her twenty-year struggle to produce the poem, as well as with its final declared irresolution and surrender to indeterminate continuation.

In the published version, the “theme” of which “Man” cannot rid his body would appear to be its essential carnality. This, we may infer, will always thwart his efforts to “consider,”43 let alone disinterestedly “re-consider,” whatever might be his equivalent to the silkworm’s shroud – that
is, to its natural creative compulsion – or that which the silkworm finds and contemplates inside its enclosure. Does Man’s embodiment, or simply his preoccupation with his embodiment, distract him from being able to engage with, or in, human cultural production? Is the undisguised allusion to Stravinsky’s ballet supposed to make us think of the increasingly hermetic “high” or avant-garde artworks of modernity, and the respective challenges they presented to artists and audiences? The poem is full of hints, from the title down, that it is about the world of art – about art’s meanings, uses, and difficulties in modernity – but the hints are oblique, their implications obscure. If we read “Rite of Spring” with, say, Eliot’s assessment of Le Sacre du printemps in mind, we may come away with the ironic inference that the residue of the “primal” (what Eliot calls “that vanished mind”) in the psyche of modern “Man” is what makes it difficult for him to relate to even an ostensibly primitivist modern work like the Sacre, even as this difficulty confirms the truth value of the ballet’s primitivist conceit. The implication, though, may be more general. Is Man, because of his absorption in the body, unable to take refuge in art, as the silkworm takes refuge in its shroud, unable to withdraw from life and contemplate the abstract human self, the “Man” that is the traditional subject of art, just as he is the grammatical subject of the poem’s single sentence? Paradoxically, the silkworm – a part of the fully embodied nature that man’s perennial “rite” aims to exorcise – seems to have an easier time coming to terms both with the compulsion to produce, and with the contemplation of its work and condition as ends in themselves. If its act is meant to be a corollary to “Man’s” act of purging, an evacuation of its body’s “theme,” there is, significantly, no reference to the change of state, the transformed re-emergence, that is the presumptive end result of a silkworm’s recourse to the cocoon. In the end, the cocooned silkworm is able to enjoy a respite from the rigors of natural recurrence which “Man,” despite his heightened subjectivity and capacity for wilful action, can neither escape nor forget. Indeed, he seems trapped mainly by his awareness of being trapped, in the cycle of the seasons.

But being printed underneath the title “Rite of Spring” also introduces to these lines a syntactic ambiguity that they lack in their other settings, and which may unlock the poem’s connection to Stravinsky’s ballet. Imagine a colon between the title and the first line, and the ambiguity becomes apparent: “Man cannot purge his body of its theme” can be read either as semantically self-sustaining, or as in apposition to the title, “Rite of Spring.” The suspension of a pronoun between two or more possible antecedents is a characteristically Barnesian dislocation of
univocal meaning; here, “its theme” can refer either to the body’s own intrinsic, carnal “theme,” or to the “theme” – which is, after all, a musical term – of the epoch-making musical composition from which the poem takes its name.

Though *Le Sacre du printemps* has other “themes,” musical and otherwise, the most notorious feature of its score, and maybe the last music clearly audible at the premiere before the rancour drowned out the hundred-piece orchestra, is a single eight-note chord, known as the “‘Augurs’ chord.” This is the chord that explodes out of the last notes of the “Introduction” to the ballet’s first tableau, “L’adoration de la Terre” (“The Adoration of the Earth”), at the head of a movement called “Les Augures Printaniers” (“The Augurs of Spring”); it is repeated obstinately for many measures. The chord consists of, from the standpoint of conventional diatonic harmony, an E-flat dominant seventh chord, over G, on top of an E major triad; that is, of chords from two different keys superimposed over top of one another. The “‘Augurs’ chord” thus, like its equally famous counterpart in Stravinsky’s concurrently conceived ballet *Petrushka* (1911), implies two diatonically unrelated keys simultaneously. The pianist and critic Peter Hill has identified this chord as the “motto chord” and “point of departure” for the *Sacre*’s entire harmonic vocabulary; but to early detractors of the *Sacre*’s score, such dissonances represented nothing less than an assault on the very foundations of harmony, and music, itself: “Mais dans le désir, semble-t-il, de faire *primitif*, préhistorique,” wrote the respected critic Adolphe Boschot in a review published the day after the premiere, “il a travaillé à *rapprocher sa musique du bruit*. Pour cela, il s’est appliqué à détruire toute impression de tonalité.” Complaining that he wasn’t provided with a copy of the score, Boschot huffed that the effect of this “éminemment amusical” work could be adequately approximated on two pianos – or by four hands on one piano – simply by banging out the same part, arbitrarily transposed into two different keys, at the same time. To ears trained in European classical tonality, inculcated in mistaking its laws for those of music (or nature) itself, such a dramatic transgression of common practice threatened to turn – or simply turned – the *Sacre* into something other than music, into sheer barbarousness and cacophony. The controversy around such techniques persisted even as the *Sacre* gained in popularity in the ’20s, with critics fastening on the “‘Augurs’ chord” as evidence of Stravinsky’s unprecedented renunciation of tradition: “Judged by the standards of Mozart and Beethoven, The *Rite of Spring* is a meaningless cacophony. . . . Successions of major and minor triads sounded simultaneously; chords – according to the old system of harmony – in many keys at once
reverberate amid a clash of tonal combinations never heard before.” Even today, a majority of the popular and “art” music heard in the West remains rooted in major-minor tonality, and sounds such as those in the initial sections of the Sacre retain their power to galvanize and disquiet. (In Disney’s Fantasia, the “Augurs’ chord” provides the percussive backing for a tableau of exploding volcanoes.) The enduring effect of these “shrilly dissonant tonal mixtures” (as Aaron Copland put it) is a significant part of the Sacre’s musical legacy; influential composers such as Copland and Leonard Bernstein would laud such “polytonal” effects as Stravinsky’s great innovation, and imitate them in their own compositions. If the controversy around the music of the Sacre has long since died down – had, in fact, long since died down by the time Barnes published her poem – the polytonality on which much of the controversy centred remains the Sacre’s best-known musical feature, and the “Augurs’ chord” the best-known instance of that polytonality.

Barnes was not unmusical. In fact, she had considerable technical knowledge of European classical music, as passages in her 1928 novel Ryder attest. In her youth, she had learned to read music, and could play a number of instruments, including a couple – banjo and guitar – on which knowledge of chords is fundamental. Anyway, it does not take much more than the most rudimentary musical knowledge to understand in a general way what is going on in the “Augurs’ chord,” or why it so impressed itself on the Sacre’s early audiences. Barnes, who could strum a guitar, could hear the “Augurs chord’,” “strummed” vigorously by the orchestra, with ready comprehension. Certainly, she could have told the difference between what it was, what it was accomplishing musically, and the mere noise that some of the work’s more intemperate early critics accused it of being. And, in her poem “Rite of Spring,” this famous chord may be more than just one possible antecedent for the first line’s Janus-faced genitive pronoun, the musical “theme” of which Man cannot purge his body; it may also be the model for that pronoun’s ambiguous syntactic function. To put it a different way, if we take the polytonal “Augurs’ chord” to be an expression of the main musical “theme” of the Sacre – as critics have done since the ballet was new – then in the context of a poem called “Rite of Spring,” Barnes’s ambiguously genitive pronoun (and her use of the word “theme”) can be read not just as a reference to this defining feature of the music of the Sacre, but, also, as an act of structural mimesis. The chord’s simultaneous implication of two unrelated keys is mimicked by the pronoun’s accommodation of two irreconcilable readings. For a reading that decides the “theme”
of which “Man” cannot purge his body is that of a man-made piece of art would appear to contradict one according to which Man’s embodiment is a hindrance to his ability to produce or engage with art. In this way, the first line of the poem “re-considers” the “‘Augurs’ chord,” re-enacting at the level of its own syntax and sense the effect the chord has on the ballet’s harmonic signature.

This is to say, just as the poem’s title, “Rite of Spring,” invokes the ballet, so its first line grammatically recreates the ballet’s signature musical element, giving the music a place, or perhaps a voice, in the poem. The ambiguous pronoun’s early position in the poem even parallels the position of the “‘Augurs’ chord” in the ballet. Above all, this act of mimicry shows Barnes’s appreciation of the Sacre’s musical legacy, and even embodies that legacy, imitating the Sacre’s brand of polytonality like so many of the composers Stravinsky influenced. This evocation of the Sacre’s musical resonance over time aligns Barnes’s poem with the historiographic bent of Stein’s Autobiography and Sassoon’s “Concert-Interpretation”; and the ambiguity by which it accomplishes this helps it to remain elliptical, like those texts, about the meaning and value of the Sacre itself, in and out of its original contexts. But the first line’s ambiguity is not the only way, or even the most obvious one, that the form of the poem evokes the recontextualization of the Sacre, or resists a stable determination of its meaning.

1.3 “a poem waiting, to be continued”

Besides “Rite of Spring,” Barnes’s only published reference to the Sacre is in “Lament for the Left Bank,” an episodic, mythopoetic memoir of Paris in the ’20s, which appeared in the American society magazine Town & Country in December 1941. The presence of such an article in such a publication is another pointed indicator of modernism’s – and the Sacre’s – bourgeoisification. An editor’s note at the end of the article establishes Barnes’s credentials to report on the time and place, situating her firmly amongst the literary and artistic “advance guard” of modernism, alongside a pointedly name-dropped Eliot. But Barnes’s technique in “Lament for the Left Bank” is notably impersonal relative to Stein’s in the Autobiography. In a fragmentary draft, recently made available under the title “Vantage Ground” (the name of the section of the magazine in which the article eventually appeared, alongside a “Lament for the Right Bank” by Erskine Gwynne), Barnes recalls “the period of . . . the Russian Ballet,
particularly *Le Sacre du Printemps*, in which an English ballerina (with a Russian name) came into her own . . .”\(^{55}\) This clearly refers to the revised version of the ballet, with Massine’s choreography replacing Nijinsky’s – the version, that is, that Eliot saw in Prince’s Theatre in the summer of 1921, and reviewed in *The Dial*. Eliot there identifies the ballerina as “Madame Sokolova,” and singles her out for praise in a similar way.\(^{56}\) Barnes goes further, omitting any mention of the music, scenario, or choreography, treating the whole production as a vehicle for the dancing of Lydia Sokolova (who was, in fact, English). The memoir’s abstracted narrative technique has the effect of turning this construction of the revival of *Le Sacre du printemps* into the judgment of history. Over the course of Barnes’s revisions to the passage, the content of the *Sacre* would become increasingly inextricable from Sokolova’s performance of it. In the finished version, Sokolova, no longer a “ballerina” but simply a “young . . . girl,” is transmuted, first, into one of the ballet’s *adolescentes*, and finally, into *l’élue*, the Chosen One, seemingly creating the ballet on her feet out of the materials of her own self and life: “There was ‘Sacre du Printemps’ and the young English girl (going under an old Russian name) who nearly danced herself to death in it and was picked up unconscious and famous.”\(^{57}\)

Thus the episode in the published version ends. In the draft, the passage continues, though that is the whole extent of its account of “the period of” the *Sacre* as well; the narrative, indeed the sentence, immediately switches gears, and turns into a vignette about a later performance “on the same stage, I believe” by the American composer George Antheil, that even before it could begin was drowned in “a rain of hisses, ripe tomatoes, and opened umbrellas in the audience where Picasso sat, and Joyce and Pound, and everyone that mattered from the countesses and kings to the concierge and cooks.”\(^{58}\) The composition in question has yet to be convincingly identified, partly because Barnes’s description of it varies so much and so outlandishly between drafts: at first it is a composition for four pianos, and then it becomes an “opera for eight pianos and a fog horn.”\(^{59}\) But the vignette’s collocation with the *Sacre* feels appropriate, because it is so reminiscent of those hyperbolic, conflicting retrospective accounts of the scandal of 1913, of which Stein’s is only the most famous.\(^{60}\) The magniloquently alliterative list of luminaries Barnes places at the Antheil show seems either to have been suggested by, or calculated to bring to mind, the *Sacre*’s all-pervasive influence on the era’s art and bourgeois elite.\(^{61}\) The whole passage in the draft reads like a miniaturized allegory in reverse for the vicissitudes of *Le Sacre du printemps*, for its rehabilitation from a “new audacity” in 1913 to the “concert of the year” of
1921, its place in European arts culture and the theatrical repertory by then so secure that there is no need to even name the composer. In Barnes’s narrative, the ballet finally has no author: it becomes the common property of the culture of modernism, free to be used by artists such as Sokolova for their own purposes. But the passage’s organization shows that the memory of the initial scandal will always make up a part of the Sacre’s context, regardless of its changes in form, function and status.

Barnes’s treatment of the revised Sacre in “Lament for the Left Bank” and its drafts – as a seemingly authorless piece of material which a dancer might remake at will, and out of which she might make a career – may shed light on her final relinquishing of authorial control over “Rite of Spring.” Perhaps that relinquishing represents another act of mimesis: leaving the poem “waiting, to be continued” reflects the essentially and inescapably provisional character of the music of the Sacre as a composition for the stage. For all “music” on paper is self-evidently provisional until performed, realized in sound and time; and the fact that Stravinsky’s composition is a ballet score makes its provisionalness as written, or even as performed by an orchestra, that much more fundamental. First, the composition on paper as Stravinsky wrote it is itself a musical realization of a scenario, Roerich’s “Scenes of Pagan Rus’”; the latter underlies the music, just as the Sacre underlies Barnes’s “Rite of Spring.”62 Divided into tableaux and “dances,” the written score then had to be realized by a choreographer, on the one hand, and an orchestra, on the other, in order to be performed according to its own structural specifications. The resultant totality is what was received by the Sacre’s first audiences, who heard the music through not less than two layers of mediation. This mediation is largely outside the composer’s control,63 and the extent to which it conditions the public’s reception of the music is considerable, if impossible to predict or quantify. This is one way of explaining the sudden reversals in the critical fortunes of the Sacre during the first years of its performing life: for even if a piece of criticism of the premiere run of the Sacre ostensibly deals only with its music, the critic had to have heard that music in the context of the totality of the production. The critical heritage of any piece of music written for the theatre starts with a particular audience’s impressions of a particular stage performance on a particular night. It is only later, once the work’s reputation has already begun to crystallize, and the immediate impulse to assess its merits has died down, that the music can truly be prised apart from its initial context. In the Sacre’s case, this prising apart was achieved, as we have already seen, by means of concert
performances, publication of the score (in 1921), and formal criticism; as well, the Sacre’s rehabilitation was particularly well-served by the still relatively new medium of the commercial phonograph record, which Stravinsky eagerly embraced, starting in 1929. As Taruskin notes, the composer was well disposed towards any endeavour, Fantasia included, that might serve to separate his music from its theatrical origins, the better to reassert his control over a product gaining in prestige and commercial value. His public efforts in this direction began at least as early as 1920, in the lead-up to the Massine revival, when he claimed to an interviewer that the score was to be thought of as “une ‘construction objective’[,] . . . une œuvre de pure construction musicale,” of which the scenario and Massine’s choreography was an outgrowth, and not the other way around. These pronouncements were followed by decades of prevarication on his end about the ballet’s origins. It is not surprising that Stravinsky, and later his champions, should aspire to “cleanse his score of ‘extra-musical’ taint,” as Taruskin put it, to consolidate the music’s claims to stability and permanence in the face of a constantly changing theatrical identity, and secure the magisterial authority of its composer in the process; but such revisionism does not alter the essentially provisional character of the composition as originally conceived – that is, its dependence upon being fulfilled in time and space by an orchestra, choreographer, and dancers.

What is generally true of ballet scores is especially true of the Sacre, which, as we have noted, has always been unusually subject to remaking and recontextualization, even during the period of its seminal performances. The fact that Barnes, in setting out her journalistically detached account of the heyday of Paris modernism and the Ballets Russes in “Lament for the Left Bank,” sees fit to refer only to the second theatrical incarnation of the Sacre, attests to its peculiar historical situation: as a ballet, Le Sacre du printemps has not one but two distinct “original” incarnations – at least two points of origin, that is, for its theatrical tradition. The 1914 Paris concert debut may yet constitute a third. The Nijinsky incarnation supplied the Sacre with its countercultural notoriety, the Massine version its classical dignity; in between, the concert version gave the music entree into the orchestral repertoire. The work’s unique prestige is thus built on multiple foundations, which may explain Taruskin’s paradoxical observation that it “took a long while for the score to achieve the awesome reputation we now assume it possessed from the beginning.” This proliferation of beginnings also shows how a necessary quality of incompleteness, of imperfect realization, can haunt a ballet all the way through, and beyond, its
“definitive” performance. This aspect of Stravinsky’s music the “to be continued” presentation of Barnes’s “Rite of Spring” imitates.

So we need not assume a contradiction between the poem’s presentation as a “WORK-IN-PROGRESS” and the May 1980 textual note describing it as finished. “Rite of Spring” was, in fact, “finished” in 1980, in exactly the same sense that Le Sacre du printemps was “finished” when Stravinsky signed off on his manuscript score: “Today, 4/17 November 1912, with an unbearable toothache I finished the music of the Sacre.” The score’s theatrical life is, from the composer’s perspective, in some sense an afterlife; Barnes’s note shows that she thought of the continuation of “Rite of Spring” in much the same way. (Indeed, Daniela Caselli has pointed to the presentation of the poem as evidence of “how the notion of the posthumous is inherent in the Barnesian canon.”) And so again, the poem follows the music’s example. Just as Stravinsky’s music provides the seed for the choreography, orchestration, and performance that make up the totality of the Sacre experienced by audiences, Barnes’s three lines provide the seed for an eventual, hypothetical, fully-realized poetic response to the Sacre, which would move beyond the unchanging, inescapable music (“Man cannot purge his body of its theme”) and encompass the entire theatrical identity and historical legacy of the ballet. Just as a concert performance of the music of the Sacre, unaccompanied by onstage spectacle or programme notes, helps produce the illusion of its abstract self-containment and self-sufficiency, so the single complete sentence of “Rite of Spring” produces its outward appearance of syntactic and conceptual unity and closure; but both works are necessarily enigmatic, mute about their intentions, without the fuller realization they are designed to prompt, and the criticism and adaptation that must follow.

By the time Barnes published “Rite of Spring,” or shortly after, there had already been more than a hundred distinct choreographic realizations of Le Sacre du printemps. Each had its own theatrical life, made its own contribution to the public consciousness and critical discourse about the work; at the same time, each successive production would be judged by how it measured up to an increasingly storied theatrical past. Stravinsky’s score thus earned its seeming permanence, its perennially modern quality, paradoxically through the accretion of ephemeral adaptations, authorized and unauthorized, each one forming a successively smaller part of the context of the next. Added to this were the innumerable orchestral interpretations and recordings, again both authorized and unauthorized, whose massive profusion helped confirm the composition’s status as an abstract ideal, constant, endlessly perfectible, without a definitive “original” and thus, in a
sense, perpetually new. Under these circumstances, no single subjective encounter with the 
Sacre, in whatever form, could ever be sufficient to assess its value or relevance; the latter has to 
be assumed. The testimonies of Eliot, Sassoon, and “Toklas” all register the moment when an 
institutionalized judgment of the Sacre’s significance was beginning to supersede those of 
individuals. Validated artistically by its revivals, the Sacre was more and more being seen as a 
defining artwork of an era marked by violent resistance to decorum and convention, a judgment 
for which the rancour at the ballet’s debut performance served as proof. The authors’ personal 
and anecdotal reflections are all to some degree infiltrated by this emerging consensus to which 
they, consequently, contribute: for even as the Sacre’s growing reputation supplies the 
autocritical rationale for Eliot, Sassoon, and Stein to write about it, as they write they cannot but 
be aware that its reputation hinges on their testimony, as much as their own artistic credibility 
might hinge on institutional acceptance of works such as the Sacre. By the time of Barnes’s 
“Lament for the Left Bank,” the consensus about the Sacre is firmly enough in place that the 
personal and the anecdotal are almost completely subsumed; but the construction of the draft’s 
passage on the Sacre and the Antheil concert – that is, on the modern music movement for which 
the debut of the Sacre was increasingly taking on the stature of a foundational event – suggests a 
continuing effort to balance the mutability of living memory with the totalizing stability of 
critical consensus. Finally, in “Rite of Spring,” the original significance of the ballet is about to 
slip out of living memory altogether, and the poem’s “to be continued” presentation 
acknowledges the limitations of the autocritical compulsion that prompted it.

Barnes’s highly uncharacteristic gesture of borrowing a title from a contemporary shows her 
awareness that the Sacre had become not just a defining “happening” of her era, but the artistic 
public domain of a century that, like her life, was nearing its end. She must have known that she 
herself was undergoing the same process the Sacre had, of coming to stand for an era, of 
becoming its common property. It is a process over which an artist rarely has much control, but 
Barnes, who outlived almost all of her contemporaries, was sometimes moved to resist it. For 
her, it had begun at least as early as 1939, when Anaïs Nin used the name “Djuna” (which had 
been invented by Barnes’s father) as the title of a novelette. Barnes was, reportedly, not pleased 
with the tribute. Her later years saw Nightwood more and more widely read and admired, and 
her private life subjected to increasing biographical scrutiny. But this late fame – so late that 
some assumed it to be posthumous before it was – clearly was not of the kind the author of
Nightwood wanted. Barnes was, and continues to be, remembered largely as a “lesbian” author, or through a romantic identification with a Paris expatriate community she had long since abandoned even by the time Nightwood was published. And though she lived and wrote for almost another half century, nothing she produced after Nightwood, not even the dazzling blank verse tragedy The Antiphon (1956), was successful – or has been successful – in attracting a significant public or academic audience. The unremitting poetic labour of her last decades shows the strength of her desire to be remembered for more than just a single once-sensational book, but she has yet to get her wish – at least, not to the degree that Stravinsky got his. For the bourgeois normalization of the Sacre du printemps, spearheaded by the composer and documented in its early stages by Sassoon, would provide the model for the legitimation of even the most rebarbative artworks of modernism; in the process, the Sacre became the index to a canon that includes Barnes’s life’s work. Her marginal reflection, “Twenty years to finish this poem,” reveals that, by the time “Rite of Spring” was ready to be published in 1982, the attitude of retrospection implied by the poem’s title could extend to the production process of the poem itself. In a sense, the composition of the poem – and, by extension, Barnes’s literary project as a whole – itself becomes the poem’s ultimate subject, the thing akin to the silkworm waiting to emerge transfigured from its shroud of remembrance. It may be that, for Barnes, the struggle of “Man” to rid his body of “its theme,” an image she had been wrestling with for so many years, and transplanted to so many different contexts, had finally come to signify her own inability to attain in life the detachment needed to produce the valedictory critique of modernism suggested by her doubly borrowed title. The part of her poem Barnes left unwritten is the part that would contain history’s final verdict on Le Sacre du printemps, and, by extension, on the whole era of modernism for which it had come to stand. It would be, therefore, a final verdict on her own life and work as well, a verdict she plainly could not render herself.
Notes


5 Throughout, except in direct quotations, I have used “Rite of Spring” exclusively to refer to Barnes’s poem, and Le Sacre du printemps (or the short form “the Sacre”) to refer to the Stravinsky ballet. The latter is the title under which the ballet was first performed, and all the literary texts dealt with here (except, of course, for Barnes’s poem) refer to it in that way. Its Russian title is Vesna svyashchennaya, “Holy Spring.”

6 “What seems certain is that the trouble started before the curtain rose [i.e., during the orchestral “Introduction”], and then got worse partly as a result of the bizarre spectacle of the Young Maidens . . . in their squawlike costumes, toes turned inwards, knees bent, their heads tilted on their hands, in utter contradiction of what the ordinary man understood by the term ‘ballet’ . . . If the music was heard at all, it can only have been as a component of the uproar, to which it must appreciably have contributed” (Stephen Walsh, Stravinsky: A Creative Spring – Russia and France, 1882-1934 [London: Jonathan Cape, 2000], 204).

8 E.g., “Ce trait, qui s’impose agressivement à l’attention, c’est qu’elle est la musique la plus dissonante que l’on ait encore écrite. . . jamais le système et le culte de la fausse note n’ont été pratiqués avec autant de zèle et de continuité que dans cette partition-là” (“This feature, which imposes itself aggressively on the attention, is that it is the most dissonant music yet written . . . never have the system and the cult of the wrong note been practiced with as much zeal and persistence as in this score”). Pierre Lalo, “Considérations sur le ‘Sacre du printemps,’” Le Temps, 5 August 1913, in Lesure, 33.

9 See George Perle, The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 7-8 for an account of a “disturbance” in the audience at the Vienna premiere of the Altenberg Lieder – which humiliated the composer, and led to his suppression of the work.

10 “. . . that opening night of Le Sacre represents a milestone in the development of ‘modernism,’ modernism as above all a culture of the sensational event” (Eksteins, 16). “The occasion of the first night of Le Sacre may represent the birth of modern art as confrontation, and indeed, the collapse of distinctions between world and work” (Bucknell, 13).


12 Eksteins, 14.

13 “The unknown” is Carl Van Vechten: in the Autobiography, Stein and Toklas meet him for the first time at this performance of the Sacre, where they are dazzled by the young man wearing “a soft evening shirt with the tiniest pleats all over the front of it. It was impressive, we had never even heard that they were wearing evening shirts like that” (Stein, 128). Marjorie Perloff

14 “Some people, like Gertrude Stein, so captivated, even if in retrospect, by this early twentieth-century ‘happening,’ have implied that they were present when they clearly were not” (Eksteins, 15); Stein, 190.


16 There are several contradictory accounts – by Stravinsky, Roerich, and others – of the ballet’s genesis, all of which are material to the question of its “authenticity,” but the most often cited is the one in Stravinsky’s autobiography. According to that version, the scenario of a sacrificial dance to propitiate the god of spring came to him in a vision in 1910; see Igor Stravinsky, An Autobiography (New York: Norton, 1962), 31. Roerich, on the other hand, claimed the idea was entirely his (Walsh, A Creative Spring, 138). The dispute has obvious bearing on the question of how far the ballet’s scenario is to be taken as a sincere effort at historical ethnography. Taruskin contends that, whatever earnest anthropological research might have gone into the creation of the
ballet’s ritual games and dances, “the idea of a ballet about a maiden sacrifice would never have occurred to Roerich spontaneously, for he was too scrupulous a connoisseur of authentic Slavonic antiquity”; the idea of the sacrificial dance “could only have occurred to someone steeped in the traditions and clichés of the romantic musical theatre,” i.e., Stravinsky (*Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 864).


22 Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 380-81. Taruskin goes so far as to claim that the music of the *Sacre* “was not the primary object of attention” at the 1913 premiere, and that the reviews in the Paris papers of the day hardly made any reference to it, focussing instead on the dancing. This claim has been widely cited, but Lesure’s *Dossier de presse* (admittedly a carefully selected collection) shows that many early reviewers were duly attentive, for better and worse, to the music.


Walsh, A Creative Spring, 212-14.

Previously, it had been debuted in concert in Moscow and St. Petersburg, in February 1914.


In Fantasia, an edited version of Stravinsky’s score provides the background for a creation-of-the-world sequence, concluding with the extinction of the dinosaurs.

Stravinsky, An Autobiography, 52.

“So far as London is concerned,” wrote one hostile critic, “the work is dead. A concert-giver in search of a sensation may still exhume the corpse now and then; but it will be only an inquest, not a resurrection” (Ernest Newman, “The End of a Chapter,” The Sunday Times, 3 July 1921; in Lesure, 74).

Stein, 235.

Poem and typescript notes from Djuna Barnes, Collected Poems, with Notes toward the Memoirs, ed. Phillip Herring and Osias Stutman (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 145.

Hank O’Neal, “Life is painful, nasty and short . . . in my case it has only been painful and nasty”: Djuna Barnes, 1978-1981: An Informal Memoir (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 61. According to Herring, 296 pages (not necessarily discrete drafts) survive in the “Rite of Spring” folder at the University of Maryland’s Djuna Barnes Collection (Barnes, Collected Poems, 16).


A March 1982 date for this undated note seems likely: Nancy J. Levine quotes a letter to Fran McCullough, dated 10 March, that contains a story also in the note about Barnes’s failure to place the poem in the *New Yorker*; the letter even uses the same phrase, “a totally new idea,” in reference to “Rite of Spring.” See Nancy J. Levine, “Works in Progress: The Uncollected Poetry of Barnes’s Patchin Place Period,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993), 194.

See Philip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995), 223, who corrects Andrew Field’s assumption that the title *Nightwood* was invented by Eliot: cf. Andrew Field, *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1983), 212. Making up words seems like it would be a natural gesture for an author whose name was itself made up, by her father (see Herring, *Djuna*, 32, 319n.24), but Barnes, unlike Joyce, did not do it very often. Barnes told O’Neal that the title *Nightwood* came from William Blake’s “forests of the night” (O’Neal, 104).

Of the versions published in separate editions by Herring and Stutman and Rebecca Loncraine, these include “Dereliction (*Man cannot purge...),” dated 1971, and “Satires (*Man cannot purge...),” dated 1968 (called “Satires of Don Pasquin” by Loncraine). In the latter 14-line version, there is also an invocation to St. Catherine to “purge the body of its dread” (9). In the six-line “Dereliction,” the silkworm aims to “metamorphose” (3) rather than simply “re-consider”; whereas in “Satires,” both “metamorphose” and “re-consider” are present, but the agent of either act is unclear (11-12). See Barnes, *Collected Poems*, 149-51, and also *The Book of Repulsive Women and Other Poems*, ed. Rebecca Loncraine (Manchester: Fyfield, 2003), 61, 72.
Levine, 194; O’Neal, 63. For the extreme instability of Barnes’s titles, and the difficulty establishing, at any given time before 1982, which set of lines, or even group of discrete poems, might have been encompassed by the title “Rite of Spring,” see Levine (188-89, 193), and Herring’s introduction and notes to Barnes’s Collected Poems (16, 144). The title “Rite of Spring” for these three lines has special authority only because, unlike virtually all of Barnes’s late poetry, it was published that way, with Barnes’s approval.

Barnes owned the complete 1928 OED at least as early as the writing of The Antiphon – i.e., before 1956 (Field, 22).

OED, s.v. “reconsider” 1.a. and 1.b.

The unidiomatic phrase “on a running thread,” which does not feature in the earlier versions of the “Man cannot purge” verses, does appear in Barnes’s early comic novel Ryder (1928), in a parable about two sisters, Molly and Eva. The latter is “a hussy, and a wanton, and a baggage, and her clothing was held together on a running thread, and the most private garments were chain stitch, so now you know how it was with her” (Djuna Barnes, Ryder [Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1990], 216). The precise meaning of the phrase as it appears in Ryder is ambiguous: Barnes might have had in mind a running stitch (OED s.v. “running,” adj., 25. a.: “a loose, open stitch”), or, less likely, a torn one (OED s.v. “run,” n., 1. g., “a tear in a knitted garment or stocking,” first citation from 1922), or both. If Barnes is using the phrase in the same sense in “Rite of Spring,” it may be the source of Bonnie Kime Scott’s contention that the silkworm’s act in “Rite of Spring” represents a “mending strategy”; see Kime Scott, Refiguring Modernism, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 2.106.

Relevant senses in the OED include the “archaic” “To view or contemplate attentively, to survey, examine, inspect, scrutinize” (1), and “To contemplate mentally, fix the mind upon; to think over, meditate or reflect on, bestow attentive thought upon, give heed to, take note of” (3).
Whole poems revolve around this kind of ambiguity; two examples, published at opposite ends of Barnes’s writing career, are the sonnet “To One Feeling Differently” (1923, especially the opening sestet) and the sonnet-like “The Walking-Mort” (1971) (see Collected Poems, 74, 138). Louis F. Kannenstine remarks on how this kind of ambiguity functions in the latter poem in The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 167.

This occurs starting at no. 13 in the score. See Igor Stravinsky, The Rite of Spring. Critical edition, based on the composer’s manuscript. Ed. Clinton F. Nieweg (Boca Raton, FL: E.F. Kalmus, 2000).

Hill, 44.

I.e., “But in the desire, it seems, to make it primitive, prehistoric, he [Stravinsky] has worked to bring his music close to noise. To that end, he has striven to destroy all sense of tonality . . . eminently amusical” (Adolphe Boschot, L’Echo de Paris, 30 mai 1913; in Lesure, 15-16. Emphasis in original).


of some of the early criticism of the *Sacre* (and also perhaps of *Petrushka*), which concentrated on the work’s harmony – or apparent lack of it.

51 See, especially, the four-handed piano duet performed by the sisters Louise (Barnes, *Ryder*, 39-41).

52 Herring, *Djuna*, 38. This information comes from an interview Barnes gave in 1971 (268); when the interviewer sent a transcript back to Barnes to proofread, she made a number of corrections, one of which was adding “guitar” to the list of instruments she had played during her teen years.

53 *Djuna* Barnes, “Lament for the Left Bank,” in *Town & Country* XCVI (December 1941), 92, 136-38, 148. This section with grateful acknowledgment to the anonymous *Town & Country* editor and archivist who provided me with offprints of the relevant pages.


55 Barnes, “Vantage Ground,” in *Collected Poems*, 237; Erskine Gwynne, “Lament for the Right Bank,” in *Town & Country* XCVI (December 1941), 93, 114. Herring and Stutman seem unaware of the relationship of the fragment they call “Vantage Ground” to “Lament for the Left Bank.” The title “Vantage Ground” was probably not Barnes’s, although she does use the phrase in the published version to represent the artistic advantage American expatriate writers gained by working in Paris (92). In the surviving pages of the draft, Barnes seems unsure about the title, and at one point in the text it becomes the more familiar phrase “Vantage Point” (Barnes, *Collected Poems*, 238).

56 “If the ballet was not perfect, the fault does not lie either in the music, or in the choreography – which was admirable, or in the dancing – where Madame Sokolova distinguished herself” (Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 189.) The Massine *Sacre* opened in Paris on 15 December 1920, and in London on 27 June 1921. In Paris, it ran for seven performances, the last of which took place on 27 December (Lesure, 171). Barnes arrived in Paris in April 1921 (Herring, *Djuna*, 130). Eliot
saw the first of the three London performances, the only one featuring Lydia Sokolova as the Chosen One (Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 244). Sokolova went on to play The Chosen One for the Ballets Russes throughout the twenties, but the chronology of this part of “Vantage Ground” is sketchy: it apparently takes place before the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in February 1922, but it mentions Jean Cocteau’s “conversion” to Catholicism, which happened in 1925 (Walsh, *A Creative Spring*, 482, 422-23).

57 Barnes, “Lament for the Left Bank,” 148. It may be that, with her revised characterization of Sokolova in the published version as “going under an old Russian name” (as opposed to the draft’s “with a Russian name”), Barnes means the ballerina to be performing-into-being the ballet’s Russian primitivism as well.

58 Barnes, “Vantage Ground,” in *Collected Poems*, 237. The passage about the Antheil performance is an editorial composite of two different descriptions, apparently from the same draft.

59 Barnes, *Collected Poems*, 8. Herring suggests that the performance Barnes was thinking of in the revision might be of Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1926); see *Collected Poems*, 273 n. 14, citing George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1945), 7-8, 184. But I have my doubts: most of the pianos called for by the *Ballet Mécanique* (which, by the way, can hardly be called an “opera”) are player pianos. This might, however, account for the other players not showing up – a detail Barnes mentions in the first version of the passage.

60 See Eksteins, 11-16.

61 Picasso had a brief association with the Ballets Russes, designing costumes for Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* (1920) and the Erik Satie/Massine/Jean Cocteau collaboration *Parade* (1917). His first marriage was to Olga Khoklova, who had been in the original 1913 version of the *Sacre du printemps* (Hodson, *Nijinsky’s Crime Against Grace*, xxv-xxvi), and it is possible that the *Sacre* itself directly influenced Picasso: the Massine revival version opened just seven months after *Pulcinella*, in December 1920, and had probably been in development in the company at around
the same time. As for Pound, he admired Stravinsky, and even composed some music which displays his influence, most notably the eccentric one-act “opera,” *Le Testament de François Villon* (1924), prepared with the help of Antheil. *Le Testament* is mainly a setting of verses by the eponymous 15th century French poet, and both its rhythmic and harmonic vocabulary owe something to the *Sacre*. Pound’s theories about rhythm and Stravinsky are expounded in a number of characteristically heterodox prose treatises; see *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*, ed. R. Murray Schafer (New York: New Directions, 1977), 258, 444, etc., and the next chapter. Joyce, on the other hand, seemed to have little interest in Stravinsky, or for that matter any other modern composer, aside from Antheil; see Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 669.

62 Hill’s “Commentary” on the music of the *Sacre* convincingly demonstrates how the score works as a “dramatic narrative” (89) realizing the scenario; as his work and Taruskin’s shows, Stravinsky’s music is demonstrably more an essentially narrative and theatrical piece than the pure abstraction the composer began insisting it was in 1920.

63 Hill notes how, in the weeks before the premiere, Stravinsky “meekly implemented” many changes to his orchestrations that had been requested by the conductor, Pierre Monteux. The composer, who had been an active presence at the dance rehearsals, did not attend the orchestral ones, “as if he had done his best and now washed his hands of the whole enterprise” (Hill, 29).

64 Stravinsky himself conducted several recordings of the *Sacre* (in 1929, 1940, and 1960), and there were other important early recordings by Monteux (1929) and Leopold Stokowski (1930), who had brought the *Sacre* to America in 1922. See Hill, 118-23, and 162-64, for a select discography.

65 Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 380-82. When Disney wanted to use the music of the *Sacre* in *Fantasia*, he (Stravinsky later alleged) used the argument that the work was not under copyright to get the composer, then in America, to agree to unfavourable financial terms. The

66 I.e., “an ‘objective construction’ . . . a work of purely musical construction.” Interview with Stravinsky by Michel Georges-Michel, “Les deux Sacre du Printemps,” Comoedia, 14 December 1920; in Lesure, 53. Hill’s chapter on “Stravinsky’s Collaborators” (105-17) provides a concise account of the composer’s latter-day prevarications (in interviews and his Autobiography) about the genesis of the Sacre and the relationship between its music and scenario, which until recently tended to be taken at face value. Thanks to scholars such as Taruskin, the structural extent of Stravinsky’s collaborations with Roerich and Nijinsky is now better understood.

67 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, 381.

68 Ibid.


70 Daniela Caselli, Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 103.

71 Barnes’s commitment to exposing the way artworks are implicated in history motivates much of her work after the Second World War. The idea is explored succinctly in her ten-line, Nuclear Age tribute to Eliot on his seventieth birthday, “Fall-out over Heaven” (1958; in Collected Poems, 131-3), another poem at least twenty years in the making. And the ending of The Antiphon (1956), set in England “during the war of 1939,” vividly displays Barnes’s discomfort with the compulsion to wrench art from its material and historical context. In the play’s last scene, Jeremy Hobbs, the favored son whose absence has been mourned throughout the play, finally comes out of his disguise as the coachman and “juggler” Jack Blow after a confrontation – sparked by a dollhouse he has built and brought onto the stage – that has ended with his mother killing his sister and herself. Addressing his uncle Jonathan, who as Julie Taylor points out
fulfills a function in the play of “collective witnessing of the past,” Jeremy speaks of his accomplishment with a mix of self-righteousness and self-pity:

Say I was a man, of home so utterly bereft
I dug me one, and pushed my terror in.
Stand back, uncle.

He then leaves the stage “with what appears to be indifference,” watched by his uncle in thunderstruck silence (Djuna Barnes, *The Antiphon* [Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2000], 203; Julie Taylor, “Revising *The Antiphon*, Restaging Trauma; or, Where Sexual Politics Meet Textual History,” *Modernism/modernity* 18 [2011], 126). The scene may represent a tacit rebuke on Barnes’s part of those of her contemporaries who had refused to take responsibility for the public consequences of their art’s entanglement with politics in the run-up to the war.

72 Hodson, vii (estimate as of 1987).

2 The Square and the Oblong

This chapter consists largely of a reading of E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf by the light of Arnold Schoenberg and Theodor W. Adorno: it explores how the latter two theorists’ ideas about the social and political implications of “classical” and “new” musical structures are reflected in the novelists’ depictions of musical performance and audience. Additionally, though, it considers the vice-versa, the ways in which passages about art music in Howards End and The Waves illustrate, and even anticipate, social ideas about music associated with the core theoretical texts of musical modernism, such as Schoenberg’s Harmonielehre and Adorno’s Philosophie der neuen Musik, as well as later works by Adorno’s heirs in the so-called “new musicology” of the last quarter-century. I am not, however, primarily concerned with claims about direct influence or causation. Rather, I am proposing that there existed in European modernism a shared climate of ideas about the social meaning of European art music, past and present, and the developments which were taking place in it, which found expression in literary and theoretical writing alike. This climate of ideas both responded to and drove continuing developments in the continent’s music, while also shaping the discourse by which new music was presented to the public, by its champions and detractors alike.

These pages trace the textual record of an increasingly pervasive – that is, increasingly institutionalized – change in thinking about the social meaning of European art music, a change brought on in large part, I argue, by the various exponents of the New Music, during the second, third, and fourth decades of the century. Conversely, I want to show how these literary traces can help illustrate and corroborate what theorists of the era of the New Music had to say about the historical status and social function of the traditional structures of European music: that is, I want to show how literary and theoretical writing together, and in conversation with one another, serve to document a general change in intellectual orientation towards the European musical traditions, a change that was in the process of acquiring institutional permanence. That such resonances between literature and theory are crucial to the institutional legacy of modern music is exemplified by the case of Adorno, who as a critic and public intellectual made a significant contribution to early institutional acceptance of the Schoenbergian project, and who, decades after his death, would resume the lead in influencing critical conceptions of the New Music’s
relationship to the European tradition – that is, in shaping the discourse by which the New Music’s institutional status is constituted.

With regards to the culture of modernism, the two lines of my argument make what is, I suppose, the obvious point that theorists and artists of the same time and place invariably breathe the same air: even across disciplines, the aesthetic and social theorists and artists of a particular cultural moment are steeped in the same institutional discourses, and draw upon the same resources, even if they sometimes disagree with one another in their understanding of that material, or put it to discrepant uses. This is a self-evident proposition when it comes to the theorist-artists of the New Music, such as Schoenberg, Ezra Pound, and even Adorno (who was an accomplished, if small-time, composer); but even if Adorno had never written a bar of music, it is equally self-evident that the “philosophy of new music” cannot have been born in a vacuum.

The first part of the chapter details the New Music’s new insistence, influentially articulated by Schoenberg, on the historical immanence of the European tonal system, and, with reference to *Howards End*, the attendant ideas about the social and political function of that system that lent a revolutionary aura to efforts such as Schoenberg’s to move beyond it. The middle, and largest, part shows how *The Waves*, written almost two decades after the sensational public emergence of the New Music, participates in the social critique of the tonal system invited by Schoenberg’s assertion of its historical immanence; in so doing, I argue, the novel can be seen to anticipate Adorno’s formulation (now widely cited) of the system’s social operations. This part of the chapter then goes on to suggest how Woolf’s novel finally adumbrates the attenuation of the New Music’s critical impulse, as reflected in Adorno’s later essays about an increasingly codified and institutionally entrenched serialism. The chapter closes with a consideration of the legacy of these ideas in the institutionalization of the Schoenbergian project, and in constructions of the European art music tradition as a whole in the present-day academy.

### 2.1 The System and Cult of the Wrong Note

In terms of technique, it is difficult to say in what ways, exactly, *Le Sacre du printemps* actually expanded the vocabulary of European art music. Its most obvious and frequently remarked break from the tonal system is its polytonal passages. But Stravinsky’s earlier, less controversial works,
notably *Petrushka*, also use polytonality in similar ways, as do works earlier than that by Stravinsky’s contemporaries, such as Bela Bartok.¹ One might nonetheless say that the *Sacre* popularized polytonality – and this is true to a point, but it did not do so singlehandedly, since *Petrushka* was popular too. As for the oft-repeated claim that the *Sacre*’s level of dissonance was unprecedented, that is probably not provable, since it depends on what, exactly, is meant by the word “dissonance” – by no means a straightforward matter.² Anarchic as it may have sounded to its first critics, it contains very little (if any) “atonality,” nor does it introduce any hitherto unknown scales or pitch relations into the language – so it cannot have contributed significantly to twentieth-century theories or practices of tonal organization. If certain aspects of its harmonic and rhythmic construction pose a challenge to musical conventions that had become, in Adorno’s terms, “second nature” to both composers and listeners, if it calls the hegemony of these conventions into question, it finally fails to help bring about an alternative.³

But when it comes to an artwork’s influence and cultural meaning outside its own medium, a reputation for innovation is tantamount to innovation itself. The extravagant claims, approving and otherwise, about the *Sacre* made by its early critics – who, like Adolphe Boschot, had neither the time nor the opportunity to study its score, nor even to hear the music a second time, before writing their reviews – gave it a subversive aura that it has never completely lost. Those first reviews vaulted the *Sacre*, with little strictly musical justification, to the head of a class of works that included some – namely those of the Schoenberg school of “twelve-tone” or “dodecaphonic” composition – that were, from the standpoint of tonality’s “laws,” of a genuinely revolutionary character. As François Lesure has observed, references to Schoenberg are frequent in the early reviews of the *Sacre*,⁴ and to this day the two composers’ names tend to be cited together as standard-bearers of “high” modernism in European art music. Stravinsky liked and admired *Pierrot Lunaire* – as Schoenberg had liked and admired “parts of” *Petrushka* – but despite his brief pre-*Sacre* experimentation with a *Pierrot*-style ensemble, that was the extent of any influence Schoenberg and his “Second Viennese School” had on Stravinsky until the 1950s.⁵ Still, the riot at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées made into “news” the efforts of this group of composers, with whom Stravinsky rightly or wrongly came to be identified, to defy, estrange, unravel, and find alternatives to, the still-standing rules of tonality. The riot helped expose to public view the feelings of musical impasse that had spurred those efforts, of having reached tonality’s expressive limits, of the incompatibility of the old system with the compositional
demands of the post-Romantic musical climate, and the sensory demands of modernity. The debut of the *Sacre* was the coming-out party of the New Music, and – perhaps most critically – of its radical reconstruction of the history of European music.

The insistence on the tonal system’s implication in human history is nowadays most closely associated with Theodor Adorno. In his 1949 volume *Philosophie der neuen Musik (Philosophy of New Music)*, which consists of a pair of essays whose titles have been rendered in English as “Schoenberg and Progress” and “Stravinsky and Reaction” – confirming the collocation of the two under the shared rubric of “New Music,” even as it opposes them – Adorno argues that the “second nature of the tonal system is an illusion originating in history. It owes its dignity to the closed and exclusive system of a society that is based on exchange, whose own dynamic tends towards totality.” Objections on aesthetic grounds to music that resists this tendency towards totality “are put forward as if the tonal idiom of the past 350 years were itself given by nature and as if it were an attack on nature to go beyond what has been habitually ground in, whereas, on the contrary, what has been ground in bears witness to social pressure.” Indeed, to Adorno, the New Music’s resistance to the laws of tonality is a matter of artistic necessity: in a political culture that fosters totalitarianism of one kind or another, “What sustains is only what denounces official culture.”

Adorno’s construction of the tonal system is distinctively and characteristically political; but its direct sources are easy to trace.

The origins of Adorno’s philosophy of New Music are almost entirely to be found in the European art music culture into which the *Sacre* appeared in 1913. “I do not,” wrote Schoenberg in an influential treatise, first published in 1911, “as apparently all theorists before me have done, consider tonality an eternal law, a natural law of music”; rather, to Schoenberg, tonality was clearly a social construct, one that had arisen out of societal conditions now undergoing changes sufficient to, in turn, necessitate a rethinking of tonality: “As for laws established by custom,” he adds with prophetic certainty, “they will eventually be disestablished.” Schoenberg’s book, it’s worth pointing out, is not a manifesto urging the abandonment of classical harmony; rather, it is a composition textbook, of a mainly conventional cast, designed to set forth, and assist in the teaching of, harmony’s fundamentals. In it, Schoenberg is relatively unconcerned with “The Frontiers of Tonality” (the title of a chapter), let alone the territory beyond those frontiers. And so what is remarkable, and historically significant, about these passages is not their revolutionary character, but their sense of determinism – the pervasive sense of the inevitability of the
revolution Schoenberg himself was heading up: “Let the pupil learn the laws and effects of tonality just as if they still prevailed, but let him know of the tendencies that are leading towards their annulment. Let him know that the conditions leading to the dissolution of the system are inherent in the conditions upon which it is established.” The early critical reception of the Sacre was pivotal in bringing these ideas out of the conservatory and into the popular conversation about modern art’s place in history and society.

It is easy to imagine how, in the first few decades of the Sacre’s performing life, an educated, informed, urban European or American audience of average musical knowledge could arrive at the theatre under the impression that they were about to hear a piece of music with no regard at all for the familiar structures of musical sense, and then be treated to this more than usually percussive and dissonant music, and come away from it feeling, if not simply appalled, more or less as T. S. Eliot had: that this was the kind of music necessitated by modernity, reflecting back upon it the fragmented, interminable noise of the modern city – its inundation by traffic, machinery, human cries, and inassimilable information – in a new ad-hoc order that modern art had generated whole out of modernity’s own materials and requirements, without regard for exhausted and irrelevant convention. Modern music, exemplified by the Sacre, seemed to have taken upon itself the artistic task of asserting aggressively the modern world’s radical difference from the one that had preceded it. The music was, in other words, conceived of as something other than timeless: rather than being figured as the expression of natural ratios, or the eternal human spirit, it could be as current and immediate as a newspaper, or, better yet, a radio news report, broadcasting above all a physical sense of the environment that had produced it, and the social and economic conditions in which its audiences lived and worked. The music thus became subject to social, political, and economic critique – was, indeed, imagined to itself be engaged in it, at the level of its harmony.

For, at this time, the liberation of (from?) tonality – what Schoenberg would later call “the emancipation of the dissonance” – carried an unmistakably utopian promise. In a digression from a passage on why it’s worth learning how to use clichéd “expressive” chromatic devices like the dominant seventh chord, Schoenberg strikes a declamatory pose:

I do believe in the new; I believe it is that Good and that Beauty toward which we strive with our innermost being, just as involuntarily and persistently as we strive toward the future. There must be, somewhere in our future, a magnificent fulfilment as yet hidden
from us, since all our striving forever pins its hopes on it. Perhaps that future is an advanced stage in the development of our species, at which that yearning will be fulfilled which today gives us no peace . . . The future brings the new, and that is perhaps why we so often and so justifiably identify the new with the beautiful and the good.\textsuperscript{10}

This discourse of striving and futurity is redolent of the rhetoric of the era’s revolutionary Marxism, on the one hand – another link to Adorno – but, on the other, it also anticipates some of the rhetoric surrounding the American jazz avant-garde of a half-century later, which (as we’ll discover in the next chapter) was another modernist-futurist movement linking liberation from formal musical constraints with social and spiritual liberation.\textsuperscript{11} These two reminiscences underscore the political implications of Schoenberg’s aesthetic eschatology. Implicitly, if the post-tonal world holds the promise of “magnificent fulfilment,” then the music and culture of tonality must be freighted with all the frustration, repression, oppression, dehumanization, and violence of the way things are. In resisting tonality, the New Music aligned itself with the larger avant-garde fight against, among other things, capitalism, “central authority, patriarchy, [and] bourgeois conformity.”\textsuperscript{12} The space of tonality was no longer one to which the modern listener could be content to be confined. Schoenberg’s discourse of “emancipation” invests his project, consciously or not, with a social mission; it helps convey the sense of a new music that, in Adorno’s words, “has its essence in the refusal to go along with things as they are, and has its justification in giving shape to what the conventional superficies of daily life hide.”\textsuperscript{13} (Adorno was, of course, one of Schoenberg’s staunchest champions.) It stands to reason that those disenchanted, disenfranchised, or worse by the patriarchal status quo could be attracted to the New Music, at least in theory, on the basis of such a promise. It follows, also, that the air of liberation surrounding the New Music could motivate a sceptical reappraisal of the aesthetic value and implicit formal politics of the tradition whose dictates the New Music was casting off – of “classical” music, and tonal music in general.

To artists, the New Music represented sheer artistic freedom, or at least, the freedom to devise wholly new aesthetic standards, in line with the requirements of modernity. Ezra Pound, probably the poet in English most excited by the challenge, not only composed some music of a vaguely Stravinskian cast, including an eccentric one-act “opera,” \textit{Le Testament de François Villon} (1923), with the help George Antheil, but also a slim \textit{Treatise on Harmony} (1924), a whimsical, colloquial, and irascible document which articulates ideas typical of the period with dilettantish polemical gusto. Its basic thesis is that “A SOUND OF ANY PITCH, OR ANY
COMBINATION OF SUCH SOUNDS, MAY BE FOLLOWED BY A SOUND OF ANY OTHER PITCH, OR ANY OTHER COMBINATION OF SUCH SOUNDS, providing the time interval between them is properly gauged.” Schoenberg’s theoretical writing was widely enough known and available by this point for Pound to make a dismissive reference to it in the *Treatise* – specifically to *Harmonielehre*. If Pound’s treatise seems not to have caught on as a handbook for composers the way Schoenberg’s treatises did, it nonetheless testifies to the musical attitudes (if not necessarily musical *tastes*) gaining prevalence at the time among self-consciously avant-gardist artists, and even the degree to which artistic attitudes in general were being shaped by musical ones. This is what lies in the background of, for example, the passage in Barnes’s “Lament for the Left Bank” where the sensational language experiments of Gertrude Stein are situated in the context of her having been “a pioneer in appreciation of . . . the music of Schönberg.” However one felt about the specific formulations given to the new freedoms by Schoenberg or Stravinsky, a precedent had been set, the old boundaries dissolved, and now the bourgeois public and the greater art world alike were on notice.

So Diaghilev’s proclamation that the debut of the *Sacre du printemps* represented “the moment of modern music” was not just self-promotion. The spring of 1913 really was a turning point in the public identity of modern music – and the *Sacre* was the catalyst, if not the cause. More than any intrinsic aspect of the composition itself, the initial reception of the *Sacre* led to widespread recognition of the New Music’s efforts to move beyond tonality, to call its aesthetic assumptions and formal conventions into question. The furore that the *Sacre* had touched off no doubt compelled artists and critics from other media, who were sympathetic for political reasons to the avant-garde project as a whole, but might otherwise have had little appreciation for the music, to take notice – and rally around both that work’s individual right to *épater la bourgeoisie*, and the larger musical revolution, the “system and cult of the wrong note” (to borrow a phrase from a 1913 review) it was supposed to be heading up. (The critic’s words “système” and “culte” imply, respectively, a body of theory, and a coterie of like-minded composers; neither applies to Stravinsky, but both evoke Schoenberg and his school.) As the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus has observed of the role of criticism in shaping the identity of the New Music, “literature about music, hardly different in this respect from literature about literature, forms an integral part of music as a historical event, and even as a perceived object. What one emphasises when listening to music is in part dependent on what one has read about it.” For the literary artists of
modernism, many of whom felt, like Schoenberg, at the limits of their medium’s traditional modes of expression, and who associated those limits with the political pressures constraining their personal and creative autonomy, the New Music’s apparent campaign to overcome the classical tradition provided a useful analogy for their own campaign against traditional structures of authority. Especially after the Great War, they seized on the New Music’s historicization of tonality as they would any chink in the armor of transhistoricity worn by the culture from which they felt themselves exiled. A wholesale change in literary thinking about the “laws” governing music – which had heretofore seemed transparent, natural, or ethereal, devoid of political content – followed.

This had swift ramifications in how both the performance and audience experience of music were represented in fiction. Though some authors reacted to the upheavals of modernity and modern culture in the manner of Edmund Wilson’s Symbolists, “excreting, like patient molluscs, iridescent shells of literature” between themselves and the world, others responded with an intensified, if newly introverted, programme of cultural critique, a conviction of the responsibility of fiction to convey the individual sensory experience of the present day, and the particular effects, however alienating, of the particular conditions and sensations of modern life on the individual psyche. In this way, the individual listener’s newfound alienation from the captivation, uplift, and transport that tonal music used to promise would seem a subject ideally suited to the modern novel. Virginia Woolf said as much: in a 1927 essay, “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” she outlines a new form of novel that will wed the lyric resources of poetry with the “freedom,” “fearlessness,” and “flexibility” of prose, in order to finally do justice to those things “which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist”; of these, the very first she lists is “the power of music.” In light of the new music theory’s exposure of the signature of patriarchal authority in tonal music, the word “power” here carries a double meaning. The rhetoric surrounding the effort to move beyond tonality supplied fiction with the terms for its own critique of the tonal system. If literary metaphor had struggled with musical sound when it was imagined to be essentially non-signifying, that sound now came with a whole complex of concrete political associations, indelibly coloring even the subjective experience of it. The New Music’s first and best gift to fiction was a new way of hearing the old.
2.2 This House Which Contains Us All

The change in thinking is starkly illustrated by comparing texts by authors of the same generation, from the same social and artistic community (here, the English “Bloomsbury Group”), depicting similar musical encounters, before and after the 1913 watershed. Just on the cusp of it, in 1910, comes E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*, in which a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony features as a pivotal episode. Forster was knowledgeable about music: the English composer Benjamin Britten, for whose 1951 opera *Billy Budd* Forster co-wrote the libretto, deemed him “our most musical novelist” – meaning not just that he “likes music or likes going to concerts and operas, plays the piano neatly and efficiently (all of which he does), but that he really understands music, and uses music in his novels,” as well as in his other writings. Britten’s portrait of Forster has the faint suggestion of dilettantism, evoking *Howards End*’s Tibby Schlegel, “who is profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee” as he listens to the symphony; and Britten goes into some detail about Forster’s “nineteenth century” tastes – although, he notes, “I have heard him react sympathetically to Stravinsky.” But, turning to the Beethoven’s Fifth episode, the “locus classicus” (as it apparently already was by 1969) of Forster’s musicality, Britten calls it a “remarkable passage show[ing] a most sensitive reaction to music,” and celebrates its “perceptive observations on Beethoven, profound enough to help explain why his music has kept its hold on the public’s affection all these years.”

Britten’s underwriting of the episode’s sincerity and musical insight cautions us against going too far in the ironical or narratological readings it seems to invite. For although the bulk of the episode is focalized through Tibby’s sister Helen, recounting in free indirect discourse what are explicitly her personal impressions of the symphony, it is in those impressions that almost all of the episode’s “sensitive reaction to music” is located.

The episode opens with the narrator – to Britten, clearly Forster himself – declaring the symphony “the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it” (26). The latter is a complicated assertion in a text that pivots on disparities of wealth and social status, and efforts to bridge them; but it articulates a humanist faith in the socially unifying potential, and universal accessibility, of great art music’s “sublime noise.” (Something of the Fifth Symphony’s transcendence, and also its universality, is communicated by the theological word “satisfied,” which will be familiar to readers of modernism from Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi” and Wallace Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry.”)
Although there is a tacit acknowledgment that the Fifth’s accessibility has economic limits—“such a noise is cheap at two shillings”—the narrator sets the horizons for his narrative interest well within those limits: the next chapter begins tartly, “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet” (38). The “very poor” are a pure abstraction, implicitly figures of (nineteenth century?) literary cliché, with no place in an up-to-date novel of social relations—especially not in this one, because they cannot afford a seat even in “Queen’s Hall, the dreariest music room in London” (27), cannot hope to access the civilizing and humanizing consensus experience of the Fifth Symphony. And so the tableau of the “all sorts” that follows consists entirely of members and associates of the Schlegel family, all “gentlefolk” and more or less moneyed. Significantly, it omits the young man Margaret Schlegel is talking to, one of those “who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk” (38)—Leonard Bast, the young clerk on the edge of “the abyss” of destitution, who in this chapter is introduced but never named. The music thus accomplishes its erasure of class disparity in the same way that the concert hall does, by excluding those without the means to access it, and marginalizing those (like Leonard) whose access is imperfect, whose cultural training is inadequate to comprehend it: Leonard, for example, is unsure how to pronounce “Tannhauser” (32). The narrative discourse takes the music’s cue, effacing both Leonard’s identity in the concert hall, and his experience of the symphony. The music then works—as the novel will—to obscure otherwise socially meaningful distinctions between those with the social and cultural wherewithal to be allowed inside. Asked by her Aunt Juley whether her sister “takes an interest in” the young man she is talking to, Helen Schlegel is prevented from replying: “Music enwrapped her, and she could not enter into the distinction that divides young men whom one takes an interest in from young men whom one knows” (27). The word “interest” is crucial; in Aunt Juley’s speech and indirect discourse, it connotes sexual desire—as in Helen’s “interest” in Paul Wilcox (49); but it more generally suggests a monetary or property claim, as in Ruth Wilcox’s attempted bequest of a “life interest” in Howards End to Margaret (85). The two senses encapsulate Helen’s eventual relationship with Leonard, which begins with her gently declined attempt to provide him with a legacy (217-18), and ends with her seduction of him (267). The two senses also encapsulate the whole novel’s way of bridging the class divide, which involves a redistribution of both sex and property. Like the music’s, the novel’s final equilibrium is based on the exclusion of inassimilables—including, by this point, Leonard, who has fallen into the abyss, and ends up not only dead but, at Margaret’s urging, forgotten (288). It gathers strength
and certitude from the subsequent denial that, among those left inside the exclusive structure, any significant distinctions of status or opportunity exist: for Charles Wilcox is not spared prison for his role in Leonard’s death, while Leonard’s child shakes off his patronymic taint of bastardy, and inherits Howards End (292). The neatness of this resolution – with its final comedic reconciliation of seeming oppositions, and the triumph of a new and humane hereditary order – is adumbrated in Helen Schlegel’s interpretation of the symphony; the satisfaction we feel with the former retroactively ratifies the latter.  

Helen’s most extensively reported impressions of the symphony are of its third and fourth movements. Perhaps in a reverberation of the nineteenth century vogue for programme music, her aural and structural sensations are transposed to the visual and the narrative. First there is the scherzo, which she hears as portraying “goblins, and then a trio of elephants dancing” (28). The goblins are the source of tension within the composition, menacing its ultimate affirmation of splendour and heroism by “merely observ[ing] in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world” (28). These goblins Beethoven allows to make themselves felt upon the music’s surface twice, confirming Helen in her feeling of “Panic and emptiness!”, before finally dispersing them with an Aeolian breath, which clears the stage for “splendour, gods and demigods contending with vast swords . . . on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death! Oh, it all burst before the girl, and she even stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible” (28). The process is then repeated almost exactly in the fourth movement, with another set of goblins, another chorus of “Panic and emptiness!”, and another vanquishing breath from the composer. Helen’s experience of the music is, in other words, of its absolute self-containment, self-fulfilment, and self-sufficiency: at will, it generates its own internal problems (“goblins” of dissonance), and then resolves them triumphantly into consonance. The seemingly deliberate outlandishness, even bathos, of her attempt to transpose its workings into the realm of the figurative underscores its closure.

Inscribed on the music’s resolution is both a sublime sense of transcendence (the music becoming synaesthetically “tangible”), and the magisterial signature of a human composer: “For, as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted” (28). One measure of Beethoven’s greatness is in how resoundingly he accomplishes the final resolution: the goblins of dissonance are conquered utterly, in “vast roarings of a superhuman joy” (29), by the close of the last movement – a coda consisting of twenty-nine
straight bars of a C major triad. The word “superhuman” implies that Beethoven’s achievement lies in the extent to which his composition measures up to a numinous musical ideal, to which even the greatest human composer has only intermittent access – an ideal apparently governed by the same structural principles as the symphony that has approached, or even fulfilled, it. Music’s glorious and eternal potential is realized in a major triad; it must reside, therefore, in tonality and classical harmony, which is here unmistakably a human aspiration rather than a construction.

Though the goblins of dissonance have been dispersed, they, unlike Leonard, are not forgotten:

“And the goblins – they had not really been there at all? They were only the phantoms of cowardice and unbelief? One healthy human impulse would dispel them? Men like the Wilcoxes, or President Roosevelt, would say yes. Beethoven knew better. The goblins really had been there. They might return – and they did. It was as if the splendour of life might boil over and waste to steam and froth. In its dissolution one heard the terrible, ominous note, and a goblin, with increased malignity, walked quietly over the universe from end to end.” (28-29)

Preserving a trace, the memory of dissonance’s menace – “the terrible, ominous note” – validates the violence that has been necessary to overcome it, and, by extension, the violence that will be necessary to bring about the novel’s final stable social order, for which tonality serves as a model. Meanwhile, the threat of resurgent dissonance and instability is present even in the symphony’s final resounding cadence – “the goblins were there. They would return” (29) – which makes the push-and-pull, the tension and release of tonality perpetual, a recurrence from which, to the hearer, there is no escape. And so in addition to being apotheosized, tonality – as an oscillation between “Panic and emptiness!” and “superhuman joy” – becomes a totalization of possible musical experience. This is the truth that Beethoven articulates “bravely,” the reason “why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things” (29): in taking both the consonance and dissonance upon which tonality relies to their respective extremes, the composer is honest about the violence each does to the other, and also about the inevitability and interminability of their conflict. For, in tonality, even when dissonance is so extreme that consonance seems impossible to achieve, it must arrive; and even when consonance is so consummate that anything else would be unimaginable, a goblin footstep is just barely audible in the wings. This is what keeps tonality’s hold on its audience, and the vision for society it promotes, permanent and inescapable. Something of this is implicit in the nature of the fecundity finally promised at Howards End, “such a crop of hay as never” (293): as consonance must return to dissonance and
back, so in summer’s abundance is contained the assurance of winter’s leanness, and vice versa; hence the need for haymaking.\textsuperscript{30}

Although both Beethoven and Forster “cho[o]se to make all right in the end,” the accent of the Beethoven’s Fifth episode in \textit{Howards End} does not, on balance, fall on consonance’s “gusts of splendour,” nor on the “ramparts of the world” that are re-erected and buttressed by a granitic major chord. Instead, what is emphasized above all, what lingers after the symphony is done, is the “terrible, ominous note,” squalling implacably out of consonance’s extremity and decay. According to Forster – or perhaps just his narrator, or Helen Schlegel – Beethoven’s deployment of this note is what gives the Fifth Symphony is truth value, in the age of “men like the Wilcoxes, [and] President Roosevelt” (29); it is as if the Edwardian, or Teddy-Rooseveltian, era calls for more of this kind of note, and less of the kind of chord that closes the symphony, in order for art to do art’s duty of reflecting the present back on itself. This hints at the necessity of a new musical system, one that will liberate and dignify the “terrible, ominous note,” the “wrong note,” to an extent in keeping with society’s need for it; perhaps it will show a way out of the musical binarism that has been thwarting the truth that can only be articulated by the note hitherto considered dissonant, unfettered by the compulsion to resolve.\textsuperscript{31} The development of a system with aims along those lines was well underway while \textit{Howards End} was being written, but the novel is not quite ready to acknowledge it.\textsuperscript{32}

One last aspect of the music in the Beethoven’s Fifth episode is worth pointing out, one that, in the wake of the subsequent decade’s “re-consideration” of tonality, would become especially salient. It relates, again, to the music’s capacity to satisfy “all sorts and conditions.” That would suggest a diverse audience could derive diverse kinds of satisfaction from it, that the music submits itself to a multiplicity of uses and interpretations. But in Queen’s Hall, this is not the case. The music does not submit itself to the needs of its audience; it requires its listeners to submit themselves to it. It speaks fully, and intimately, for (not just to) all musical subjects: to Helen, “the music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen to her in her career . . . life could have no other meaning” (29). But, paradoxically, it does so in more or less the same way for everyone: “Whether you are like Mrs. Munt . . . or like Helen, who can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music’s flood; or like Margaret, who can see only the music; or like Tibby . . .; or like their cousin, Fraulein Mosebach, . . .; or like Fraulein Mosebach’s young man . . . in any case, the passion of your life becomes more vivid” (26-27).\textsuperscript{33} Margaret and Helen are
said to quarrel over their interpretation of the music, but that is only after they have left the concert hall; while the music is playing, their experience of it is not that dissimilar. Margaret, “who sees only the music,” will later strenuously object to Helen’s idea of it having an extramusical referent, of being translatable into image or narrative (33), of being anything but what it is in itself; but to “see” music implies synaesthesia akin to Helen’s, an involuntary deviation on Margaret’s part from her own stated aesthetic convictions, a deviation induced by the immediate experience of the music. If the synaesthesia induced by the symphony in Helen is part of what confirms to her its transcendence, the other two Schlegel siblings appear to experience the same effect, and after a fashion take the same inference from it, of the music’s perfect self-containment. Tibby, like Helen, hears the music in terms of the fulfilment of its self-dictated formal design, with the present performance aspiring towards an impalpable ideal limned by the printed score. While Helen turns the music into image and metaphor, Tibby, like Margaret, fancies that he “treats music as music,” that is, hearing (or seeing) it in terms of classical music’s own notation and nomenclature, themselves inescapably metaphors for sonic events. Indeed, all the members of the audience whose impressions of the music are registered, however briefly, in the narrative share some element or elements of Helen’s experience, which as a consequence (and also because of its disproportionate length) emerges as definitive. And so perhaps Britten is not wrong to look for evidence of Forster’s own views about the music in Helen’s free indirect discourse. In any event, having the music sum up one’s life, as it does for Helen, to the point that it “could have no other meaning,” requires absolute identification with, and submission to, the masculine compositional authority of Beethoven. Perhaps because of the imprimatur of the “superhuman” that the music bears, its embodiment of a patriarchal tradition (“Classical Music”) and masculine subjectivity does not limit its reach, nor its audience’s capacity to identify with it and be captivated by it; its transcendence extends to categories of gender, age, nationality, and – to a degree – class. And there is no indication that this compulsory relinquishing of individual subjectivity to the composition is intended to be ominous.

Twenty years later, this kind of unexamined acquiescence to tonality’s hold on the European musical imagination, and to tonal music’s hold on its audience, would be almost unthinkable. As early as 1912, Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces* had had its world premiere at the London Proms, stirring up the expected hostile and uncomprehending responses, in addition to one or
two admiring ones. A mere sixteen months later in January 1914 – six months after Diaghilev had first brought *Le Sacre du printemps* to Drury Lane – the English public and critical establishment had become comfortable enough with the new music and its aesthetic principles to welcome a repeat performance, this time conducted by Schoenberg himself. It took place at, of all venues, Forster’s very own dreary Queen’s Hall. That same hall was also, as we saw in the last chapter, one of the two venues for the June 1921 concert revival of the *Sacre*, conducted by Eugène Goossens, whose incongruously polite reception prompted Sassoon’s “Concert-Interpretation.” The postwar period would bring, in addition to continued controversy, increasing public awareness and acceptance to Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, as well as to other exponents of, and ideas in, the New Music; and although the more musically inclined authors (such as Forster) never lost their personal appreciation for the “classics,” their critical understanding of the cultural meaning of those works, and the rules governing them, could not help but evolve apace with the bourgeois standard.

Woolf is a good example. For all her polemical commitment to things “modern” and “new” – words that recur constantly in her essays – it is well known now that she was as enthusiastic about Beethoven as Forster, and listened to concert performances and phonograph recordings of his compositions with intense pleasure. In a diary entry dated 22 December 1930, when she was working towards getting *The Waves* into its final form (and worrying about its “proportions”), she reports having come to a pivotal structural decision about Bernard’s final monologue “while listening to a Beethoven quartet.” This remark, along with another in a letter to the English composer Ethel Smyth (“I am writing to a rhythm and not a plot”) have prompted a good deal of critical speculation, and even some attempts to identify the presence of “musical” structures in the novel; but one need not go looking for sonatas or fugues in Woolf’s writing to have a sense of the significance of the statement about Beethoven for Woolf’s treatment of music in *The Waves*. Listening to a piece of “classical” music at home, rather than in the concert hall, with the help of one of the defining technologies of Walter Benjamin’s “Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the phonograph – which, like other technologies of its kind, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” – cannot but have made Woolf that much more sensitive to the anachronistic currency of this nineteenth-century music in her twentieth-century context. The phonograph was still a novelty to Woolf when she began writing to its accompaniment; for someone used to hearing classical music in venues like Queen’s Hall,
hearing it abstracted from such trappings of its cultural privilege and an accumulated history of performance conventions, out of sight of the performers, as a mere sonic event, no different from the Italian lessons she also listened to on phonograph, would only have contributed to the sense of detachment from and disenchantment with the classical tradition already engendered in the European intelligentsia by the ascendancy of the New Music. (It’s unclear just how familiar Woolf was with Schoenberg, Webern, or Berg, but she was definitely enthusiastic about Stravinsky, especially during the 1920s.43) It seems that Adorno’s experience was along these lines: early in his career, starting around the time Woolf was planning The Waves, he wrote a number of short speculative essays that have in common a concern with the technology of musical reproduction and the form of the phonograph record, and the way they work together to abstract musical sound from the human performer, and the act of musical listening from social activity and history.44 For Woolf, as with Adorno, such detachment both enables social critique, and leads almost inexorably to it.

And so, though the musical background for the composition of The Waves was furnished by phonograph records, the major musical event in the novel is a live public performance, by a female singer and then a string quartet, given at Wigmore Hall – a prestigious venue for recitals and chamber music, barely five minutes’ walk from Forster’s Queen’s Hall in central London.45 It is witnessed by Rhoda, the most tormented of the six friends whose voices make up Woolf’s “playpoem,” and her experience of the performance, especially of the string quartet, realizes all that was implicit in the 1927 essay about modern fiction’s mandate to document “the power of music.”46 Rhoda’s account of the music is a vision of the nature of that power – which is more ideological than metaphysical – and also its extent. The episode takes place just over halfway through the novel, shortly after the announcement of Percival’s death in India: “The figure that was robed in beauty,” Rhoda reflects, walking down Oxford Street, “is now clothed in ruin.”47 Such disillusion is the keynote of the sequence: “Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation” (115). On the way to Wigmore Hall, Rhoda stops to buy “stockings for a party” (115), which recalls her earlier efforts to imitate the assuredly embodied femininity of Jinny and Susan: “See now with what extraordinary certainty Jinny pulls on her stockings . . . That I admire” (29); “I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs” (94). Unlike them, Rhoda has “no end in view”; that is, she has been unable to secure a foothold in “the real world” (29) of normative femininity and
compulsory heterosexuality, unable to put her body to the prescribed uses of seduction (Jinny: “My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light” [93]) and reproduction (Susan: “I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation” [95]).

She has, as a consequence, become increasingly estranged from her physical being, from a sense of proprietorship of, or even of inhabiting, her body. She has always felt this way to some extent, even in her school days – “I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body” (30) – but in the wake of Percival’s death, the feeling comes to a frantic crisis of self-interrogation: “What then can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?” (115). Standing outside of patriarchal norms for embodiment, she occupies a space like that of Forster’s “very poor,” left to contemplate (as Annette Oxindine puts it) her “effacement within a social and linguistic system that denies her an articulation of self.”

To her old refrain, “I have no face” (e.g., 22, 29, 88, 163), she can no longer rejoin, as she once did, “I will seek out a face” (22); the Oxford Street sequence is the culmination of Rhoda’s sense of alienation from her body, and from the society that dictates its functions. It marks the end of her fearful efforts to conform (“I pretend, as I go upstairs lagging behind Jinny and Susan, to have an end in view” [94]), and the beginning of the angry and despairing renunciation that will end with her suicide.

The stockings transaction is a last doubtful glance in the direction of the fulfilment promised by gender convention and feminine embodiment, and also London’s consumerism; but already Rhoda sets that insubstantial whisper of “beauty,” which disperses as soon as the salesgirl speaks, in opposition to the “truth which I desire” (116). Modernity’s sundering of beauty from truth, so integral a concept in Adorno’s writings about modern music, is also one of the themes of Woolf’s 1927 essay; and the image of a shop selling stockings exposing the tawdriness of modern city life recalls Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.”

On Oxford Street, the whole human realm of faces and bodies presents itself to Rhoda as uniformly squalid, venal, and defiling: “faces and faces, served out like soup-plates by scullions; coarse, greedy, casual; looking in at shop windows with pendent parcels; ogling, brushing, destroying everything, leaving even our love impure, now touched by their dirty fingers” (115). As if motivated by her dinnertime simile, Rhoda’s cynicism immediately extends to “the friends with whom we sit and eat” (116), who are, in turn, trotted out in cameos depicting their utter self-involvement in the face of news of Percival’s death; the portrayals of Jinny and Susan are particularly venomous.
Suddenly, as if glutted with Oxford Street’s atmosphere of “hate, jealousy, hurry and indifference” (116), Rhoda turns away, and heads north, led to the music hall by an impulse to “recover beauty, and impose order” (117). The former is already a complicated and ironized objective for Rhoda, since it represents (by her own reckoning) a move away from truth; but the latter is a fitting tribute to Percival, since it was supposed to have been his special gift, what he brought to their last meeting (88), and what was expected of him in the colonies – “the Oriental problem is solved” (98). Instinctively, Rhoda turns to classical music to restore the harmony that has been “dishevelled” by Percival’s failure to realize his (and, by extension, the whole group of seven’s) youthful promise; by colonialism’s failure to realize the nation’s image of itself; by normative gender’s failure to accommodate the felt experience of embodiment and desire; by the city’s failure to civilize, or through its crowding and constant contact to bring about real empathy or intimacy; by intimacy’s failure to assuage loneliness; by (finally) consumption’s failure to deliver on its glamour of fulfilment. Implicitly, music promises a higher order, one which, unlike those that have failed, will elevate rather than subjugate: for while Louis, in his cameo, vows (as his tribute to Percival) to “reduce us to order,” if only we will submit (116), the music is imagined as “a wave to lift us” (117). In 1910 this seemed a reasonable enough expectation; what Rhoda seeks is no different than that which Helen Schlegel found in Queen’s Hall, which Beethoven, with a cadence, imposed so magisterially upon the goblins of modern life, and upon the narrative of Howards End.

But the degradation of Oxford Street extends even to the doors of Wigmore Hall, and beyond. Rhoda seems to avoid having to wait in a queue outside, but still imagines being “hung with other people like a joint of meat among other joints of meat” – a grotesque mockery of the disembodiment that has led her to the hall. Inside, images of affluence, again figured as corpulence, satiety, and indolence, predominate: “We have eaten beef and pudding enough to live for a week without tasting food.” Although the venue and programme are not too different from those of Howards End’s Queen’s Hall episode, this assembly of “walruses stranded on rocks” is altogether unlike Forster’s various gallery of rapt aesthetes. The concert hall has effected a reconciliation of sorts with the body, but only with that part of it which is basest, the insatiate consumption that Rhoda has fled Oxford Street (with its “faces served out like soup-plates”) to escape. And although The Waves is largely unconcerned with money matters51 – especially compared to Howards End – the fact that one must have some in order to access the
music is acknowledged here much more bluntly: “Here is a hall where one pays money and goes in,” Rhoda says, adding, as if as an afterthought, “where one hears music . . .” (117) The place is defined, first of all, by its charging a fee; the music is almost incidental. (The first draft of the novel sets the ticket price at “half a crown or so,” or just a few pence more than the amount dismissed as “cheap” in Howards End. Based on the average wages for women in the distributive trades during this era, and a six-day workweek, the cost of admission for Wigmore Hall in the first draft of The Waves would probably have been just over half the daily wage of the salesgirl who sells Rhoda her stockings. In the published version Woolf elides both a specific cost and a specific venue, leaving only an abstract sense of affluence and exclusivity.52) The cost of admission homogenizes the audience – a homogeneity, increasingly coded masculine, that engulfs Rhoda’s sense of herself once she is inside: “Decorous, portly – we have white hair waved under our hats; slim shoes; little bags; clean-shaven cheeks; here and there a military moustache . . .” The social levelling ascribed by Forster’s narrator to the music, but actually accomplished by the exclusivity of the concert hall, is more explicit here. As soon as Rhoda has entered Wigmore Hall, the subject of her first-person utterances changes from the singular to the plural, and remains so for the duration of her stay there; paying the admission fee has forced her into identification with the “coarse, greedy, casual” collective, even with the masculine oppressor – with his military moustache – embodied in her thinking most recently and ironically by Louis, the “snob” (116) and frustrated capitalist.53

And so, before the music begins, the only stimulation to be had is the lascivious pleasure of the singer’s body on display, “swollen but contained” (117) in satin – that is, carnally provocative, but bearing the marks of its confinement, its exploitation by the audience and within the patriarchal and commercial culture of which the hall is a microcosm. The penetrating concentration of the audience’s attention is signalled by the paragraph’s restriction to just the two grammatical subjects, “we” and “she” (or “the sea-green woman”), giving a sense of an adversarial, or even ritual, relationship between the two: she “comes to our rescue,” on the “rocks” and “dry shingle” of the audience’s torpor and indifference – evoking, perhaps, the “Danse sacrale” at the climax of the Sacre du printemps, with the nubile Chosen One performing her solitary restorative rite on the wastes left by winter, under the gaze of seated male elders. The audience (represented “onstage” in the narrative of The Waves, as with the elders in the staging of the Sacre) hems her in, and forces her to perform, but is also dependent upon her
performance; for she is treated as more of a representative of the nature which must be propitiated – the forest, or the sea – than of her own society.

The sea-green woman sings a note, “Ah!” – the surrounding text underscoring her physical exertion (“She sucks in her lips . . . inflates herself and hurls herself . . .”) – and it does seem, at first, to jolt Rhoda back to individual physical and aesthetic consciousness. At least, the paragraph breaks, and, for a sentence, so does the collective voice: “An axe has split a tree to the core; the core is warm; sound quivers within the bark.” But there is no first person in the thought, only an indefinite article, and what appears to be a Symbolistic metaphor for the sensory and emotional experience of the note, both of which imply further alienation from direct aesthetic experience, from the “beauty” Rhoda has come to the concert hall to recover. For her body, if in fact the felled tree stands in for it, is figured as a mere membrane for sound, barely animate, “warm” but incapable of resistance, a helpless object to which violence is done. Like all tonal music, the song, once it has moved on from its first chord, induces in its audience an involuntary longing for resolution; but the pain Rhoda has suffered submitting herself to other forms of imposed order makes her recoil from that resolution, leaving her with the unhealed wound of heard but unresolved dissonance. The music has, like Percival’s death, exposed Rhoda’s vulnerability and isolation; but, unlike Helen Schlegel’s vision of Beethoven’s Fifth, it provides no compensatory fulfilment, does nothing to provide her with a personal destiny, or bring about a congenial reconciliation with society, a social coherence that will make room for her subjectivity. And so her experience of the song consists only of Helen’s “panic and emptiness” – which, in accordance with the concert hall’s repression of her subjectivity, is here metaphorically masked, and then left floating free of an explicit feeling subject. Subsequently, and perhaps in a defensive reaction, her account of the song defers to what may be its text, a sentimental vignette set in Venice. The clichéd scenario insulates Rhoda from further emotional susceptibility to the music, the expanded critical distance signalled by a momentary shift to the narrative past tense: “‘Ah!’, cried a woman to her lover, leaning from her window in Venice, ‘Ah, Ah!’ she cried . . .”.

This narrativization helps Rhoda detach herself from both the music’s coercive tonal operations, and from that aspect of it which is a product of the performer’s bodily exertion, and thus makes her acutely conscious of her own disembodiment. By the end of the sentence, though, the scenario has been exhausted, and there is a return to the present tense; the last note of the song
again becomes a mere noise made by a performer on a stage, heard, this time, from a hard-fought position of detachment: “again she cries, ‘Ah!’” (Presumably at this point the singer leaves the stage, but the action escapes Rhoda’s notice.) Thus the song ends, with four more undifferentiated notes, each one represented, as was the first, as “Ah!”; the lack of melodic movement implied by this unvarying syllable, which functions as a kind of solmisation, mirrors the music’s failure – beyond the immediate, involuntary physical response – to move its audience, to reconfigure it socially, or to cause it to desire any such reconfiguration. It implies, then, the ultimate stasis of tonal music, as the avant-gardists conceived it – its resignation in the face of things as they are, its incapacity to bring about anything different. “She has provided us with a cry. But only a cry. And what is a cry?” (117) (The 1927 essay expresses a similar thought about lyric poetry.56) Whatever Rhoda is seeking, it is not to be found through identification with the singer, or the song: as Adorno would argue ten years later about the socioeconomic function of sentimental music for mass consumption, the identification and emotional involvement touted by such music can yield only the instrumental catharsis that resigns the oppressed to their oppression.57 Hence the reversion, in Rhoda’s speech, to the collective first person.

Already Woolf’s text has placed a much stronger accent than Forster’s on the concert hall’s consolidation of bourgeois privilege, and on the physical and emotional claims placed by musical sound upon its audience. (It has also intimated similar claims being placed on the performer.) To this it has added the implication that these claims, especially tonal music’s capacity to bring about an involuntary response, represent a threat to the listener’s autonomy as a subject – an idea unmistakably a product of the avant-gardist musical thinking that only gained wide currency a decade or so after Forster’s novel was published. In this light, it is tempting to read some of Schoenberg’s rhetoric of 1911 – his claims about humanity’s involuntary yearning for the new, and the potential for beauty and fulfilment inherent in the move beyond tonality – as a self-conscious co-opting of qualities associated, respectively, with tonal music’s listening subject and the classical tradition, in order to assert, perhaps paradoxically, the historical and high cultural legitimacy of his own work in the face of its traditionalist critics.58 In any event, for Rhoda in The Waves, the question of her status as a listening subject of tonal music comes to a head immediately following the song of the sea-green woman, during the string quartet. At the start of it, she observes “the beetle-shaped men . . . with their violins” taking the stage (117-18). The
curious detail, which originates in a marginal addition to the novel’s first draft, may well be an orthographic clue as to the music’s composer (Beethoven?). Phonically, though, and in the context of Woolf’s work of this period, it evokes the “Beadle” of A Room of One’s Own (1929), who shoos the narrator of that text (written concurrently with The Waves) off the turf of Oxbridge, where only “Fellows and Scholars” may tread. This echo reinforces one of the themes already established in the episode, the exclusion of Rhoda’s first-person “I” from the patriarchal space of the concert hall, in favour of the masculine-bourgeois “we”: “he was a Beadle;” (or, as the case may be, beetle;) “I was a woman.”

This sense of feminine subjectivity at the mercy of masculine will is deepened in Rhoda’s response to the quartet’s first notes, which takes the form of an extraordinarily complicated simile. The four players “wait; count; nod; down come their bows. And there is ripple and laughter like the dance of olive trees and their myriad-tongued grey leaves when a seafarer, biting a twig between his lips where the many-backed steep hills come down, leaps on shore” (118). The tenor of the simile – the “ripple and laughter” ostensibly actually produced by the four players – is itself the vehicle of a metaphorical rendering of the musical sound. This circularity, or accretion, of metaphor hints at what we have already seen in the context of Tibby and Margaret Schlegel’s reactions to Beethoven’s Fifth, the impossibility of moving beyond metaphor when speaking of the meaning of musical sound as such. In a sense, Woolf is dramatizing here what is only implicit in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future”: literary language, ill-equipped to render the intrinsically non-signifying workings of music itself, is better suited to articulating, or at least providing metaphors for, the subjective physical, emotional, or aesthetic experience of music, or (and no doubt all these categories overlap) the socio-political functions to which the music has been put, and with which the listener associates it – that is, the music’s extrinsic, social signification. Rhoda’s simile is impersonal – it speaks of what the music is like rather than what it feels like or reminds Rhoda of – and this, along with its recursive structure, puts her at least at a double figurative remove from direct aesthetic experience. The thought the simile expresses, therefore – and perhaps, as in Howards End, to an unconscious degree – is political.

The music’s “ripple and laughter,” for example, recalls the refrain of Jinny, one of Rhoda’s models in the performance of femininity: “I ripple” (7, 28, 73). Jinny’s constant, delighted, spontaneous movement, which defines her version of feminine embodiment, is here reimagined...
as the product of the calculated counting, nodding, and bow-work of Beadle-shaped men, low-level operatives of patriarchal authority. For in *The Waves*—as might be expected of a novel finally given over to Bernard, the compulsive phrasemaker, to “sum up” (176)—it is through the incantatory repetition of particular words and phrases by a given speaker that the sense of a distinct subjectivity is conveyed, and continuity of character preserved. The fact that Jinny’s private incantation, the word by which the text has consistently invoked her, can be produced in the same way by this group of musicians, this group of men, severely and poignantly undermines Jinny’s claim to proprietorship of her “character,” her body, and her actions. This is confirmed by the vehicle of the simile: the ripple of the quartet’s music is likened to the “dance” (another activity inextricably associated with Jinny) of trees by water, which evokes Jinny’s depiction of herself in the act of flirtation: “like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted, so that he may come to me” (73-74). Bernard too, in his final monologue, uses a similar image to impart his sense of Jinny’s essential truth to herself, her body, and the world: “She made the willows dance, but not with illusion; for she saw nothing that was not there. It was a tree; there was the river” (187). The appearance of this same formula, *dance-tree-water*, in Rhoda’s simile suggests something that has been elusive for her so far—a sense of likeness between herself and Jinny, of being subject to the same conditions; for Rhoda too has just figured herself as a tree on a shore, albeit one felled rather than left swaying by the song of the sea-green woman. Jinny dances while Rhoda is cut down, indicating that the former has been more successful in her performance of patriarchal femininity than the latter; but both, perforce, inhabit the same role. The presence in Rhoda’s simile of a whole grove of olive trees, with their myriad inarticulate tongues, suggests a new awareness of, and identification with, those who, like her, have found themselves silenced in patriarchal spaces and patriarchal roles. (She still cannot speak of these thwarted speakers as “we,” though, because the concert hall has already brought about a constituency by that name, which excludes them.) The seafarer declares his mastery over the shore by leaping on to it, and over the trees by taking a twig between his teeth; “the players” do the same with the character of Jinny, and the femininity she stands for, at least to Rhoda.

Jinny’s association with dance throughout the text almost by definition implies a deep feeling for music, especially in her historical context: the Ballets Russes, which Woolf had been following in London since as early as 1911, had done much to reaffirm the relationship of art music to
dance in Europe, and the place of the combined form at the forefront of modern art. But it is not until this passage that a sense emerges in *The Waves* of the role played by music in regulating the performance, or “dance,” of normative femininity at which Jinny so excels. The same social operation that sets Jinny in motion inflicts the violence, exclusion and shaming that Rhoda knows so well. Fraulein Mosebach’s observation, on seeing Helen Schlegel flee Queen’s Hall in *Howards End*—“The music has evidently moved her deeply” (29)—takes on a different, rather more literal, meaning when applied to Rhoda and Jinny. The idea of the music apportioning a personal destiny, a “meaning” of life, to each of its listeners in Forster’s Queen’s Hall is still present in *The Waves*, but it has been revealed (or reconceived) as the generalized assignment and enforcement of social role and function to the subject of patriarchy in the guise of a personal destiny.

The excision of composers’ names from the Wigmore Hall episode in the published version of *The Waves* underscores another crucial difference from *Howards End*, a difference undoubtedly as much a reflection of general Bloomsbury suspicion towards (especially 19th century) figures of patriarchal authority as a new conviction of classical music’s historical immanence: instead of the musicians being effaced utterly, or serving as mere instruments for the composer or composition, here the players are the sole acknowledged producers of the music. They are thus wholly responsible for it and its effects. The music belongs neither to any great genius (e.g., “Beethoven”), nor to any specific tradition (e.g., “Classical Music”). Rhoda has no notion akin to Tibby Schlegel’s of a transcendent musical ideal implicit in the written score, to which the orchestra aspires, realizing it imperfectly in time and space; rather, she regards the music as generated whole by this quartet of men, perpetuated in the present day and in the present society as political ideology is perpetuated, by individual women and (especially) men. This concentration, usually ironizing, of patriarchal power in individuals is a characteristic gesture of Woolf’s fiction, from the Beadle of *A Room of One’s Own* to the rarely-glimpsed Prime Minister of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to Percival in *The Waves*; it allows her to envision such power in much the same way that Schoenberg envisioned tonality, not as an “eternal law, a natural law,” but as law “established by custom,” which, like all customs, may be disestablished—must be disestablished—over time. This is not to say that the power wielded by the quartet of beetle-shaped men is not, for the time being, real: they may be, in their society at large, mere functionaries of a patriarchal order, and subject to it, but in Wigmore Hall they are its executives.
– and the music they make is both an exercise and a valorization of the same structures of power that are responsible for Rhoda’s alienation, the failed imperial enterprise symbolized by Percival’s fall, and the climate of war that forms the (rarely more than tacit) background of this seemingly least political of Woolf’s major novels.66

Rhoda’s metaphorical representations of the music so far have been increasingly revealing of its regulatory social function, but in the wake of the extreme convolution of the olive grove simile, and its remoteness from the initial musical stimulus, she sees the need for a more direct representational strategy: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” (118). Recourse to simile, “the semblance of the thing,” even for a something that otherwise defies representation, can be dangerous for someone with a commitment to “truth,” especially when there is a supply of ready-made images and narratives at hand (for example, the Venice vignette for the song of the sea-green woman) whose identity with “the thing” itself can go unquestioned, obscuring the potential social meaning of both. What Rhoda’s question immediately prompts, though, is a brief gush of imagery recapitulating her metaphors so far, which suggests either a flushing out of the remnants of the old strategy, or (again) the impossibility of moving past it, or both. This culminates with an entreaty: “Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering branch has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing.” A new awareness of patriarchy’s temporality, which is the “gift” Percival (who has personified it) has afforded her by dying, is what makes “see[ing] the thing” possible; “the thing,” then, must be the nature of patriarchy’s temporal operations, in language, in the city, in the drawing room, and, in this case, in the concert hall. Percival’s name is at least partly an allusion to Wagner’s final opera, Parsifal67; bearing that name, he embodies, among other things, the whole 19th century European art music tradition. His death enables the autopsy upon that tradition which Rhoda sets before herself. I mean “autopsy” not strictly in the sense of the dissection of something dead – for if classical music were truly “dead,” that is, without cultural currency, a critique of it would shed no light on Rhoda’s condition, on the “humiliation” that it was Percival’s “present” to Rhoda on Oxford Street to discover. The task Rhoda sets for herself in relation to European classical music culture is an autopsy in the literal sense of the Greek, αυτοψία, the act of “seeing with one’s own eyes”68 – to take advantage of her position of alienation and detachment to stand outside the music’s formal reaches and understand
the laws to which it is subject, and their ramifications in the society the music promotes or brings into being.

For, as in *Howards End*, the mode of representation will be visual, “seen” with the inner eye, but in this instance it will be more spatial than narrative, in line with Rhoda’s particularly spatial experience of alienation, and the spatial operations of the music’s social function. Rhoda entreats herself not to swerve in her commitment to represent that social function, that extrinsic dimension of the music which its formal and tonal closure, depicted so vividly in *Howards End*, obscure. This necessitates leaving behind the aesthetic “I” that is susceptible to the music’s closure – ushering in another, if this time self-conscious, reversion to the collective first person:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (118)

Rhoda speaks – somewhat sardonically, no doubt – on behalf of the listening community the music works to bring into being, in terms suggestive of a founding myth. Appropriately, the passage’s cadence and Hebraic parataxis recalls the first chapter of Genesis: like Elohim “in the beginning,” who comes upon an “earth . . . without form” and “waters,” the players make their “structure” out of uncreated, pre-existing raw materials. The oblong, a fixed substratum, provides the outer limits to which the players’ positioning of the square must conform. The performance consists entirely in the players’ manoeuvring of the square within the oblong – the coordination, that is, of a musical actuality within the limits of possible, or conceivable, musical sound. Those qualifiers (*possible, conceivable, musical*) are important, since the sonic territory mapped out by the oblong, though more extensive than that of the square representing the sounds the players actually do make, is still circumscribed: it does not contain all possible sound, since, in the period of counting and nodding and drawing up their bows, before the players “take the square” and make formal music, they (and the square) stand outside it. Presumably the oblong represents the range of tones available on Western chromatic instruments, which Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositional technique was designed to exploit to the fullest – taking the European tradition to the frontiers of its existing sonic vocabulary, if not beyond them. The square, which marks out
the musical territory covered by the composition – and by extension, by the tradition from which it derives – is yet more circumscribed, fitting entirely within the dimensions of the oblong. This is the first indication Rhoda has given of the players being subject to any kind of rule or restriction, albeit one which they, and their audience, understand and endorse intuitively, as an industrial standard to be met “accurately”: the task of the musician is to fit the square to the oblong as tightly as possible, so as to give the impression of occupying the whole expanse of it, or at least to come as close to doing so as possible. That done, the music can assume qualities familiar from *Howards End*: the square within the oblong becomes “the house which contains us all” (150), an apparent totalization of possible experience. Again, the visible structure resembles the concert hall: it accomplishes its social levelling (“we are not so various . . .”) through the exclusion, or expulsion, of the undesirable, inassimilable, destitute element (“. . . or so mean”).

The question of which structure is reproducing the other in the present instance is not very material for the audience; for them, the music primarily serves to reinforce, to legitimate retroactively, the programme of social exclusion enacted by the concert hall – the programme, that is, which has generated the audience as a coherent social community. Reflecting back upon that community a reassuring sense of its own affluent well-being, of sharing in a society of prosperity, and of unanimity, it apotheosizes what, in the larger public realm, the box office has to work to police. So understood, the music of Wigmore Hall becomes adaptable as a paradigm for social organization, and a justification for the exercise of coercive force in the process.

Such music derives its authority from the extent to which it fulfills, or rather is *heard* to fulfill, the utmost potential for musical expression – those ostensibly uncreated, absolute limits represented by the borders of the oblong. The extremes of dissonance accommodated by Romantic and Impressionistic permutations of tonality – what Forster hailed as the “brave” aspect of Beethoven’s Fifth – serve as proof of tonality’s capaciousness, and also its stability, the resistlessness of its order. That capaciousness, how tonality seems to have a place for even the most outlandish pitch relations, *and* the ability to bring them to resolution, is what makes it so easy to forget that there could be anything “left outside” – so easy to downplay what is, what *had* to be excluded in order to maintain the structure’s integrity, its harmonious univocality. Rhoda has already shown her (perhaps unconscious) investment in the quasi-Pythagorean idea of tonal harmony as supreme order, to which human law and society aspire; according to this idea, a society built on such foundations can lay claim to the same authority, the same structural
integrity, the same transcendent permanence. This, then, is the “triumph” Rhoda and the rest of the audience ultimately derive from the music – a cosmogony of the social order they inhabit, and the conviction of their active role in it.

By the end of the performance, Rhoda and the audience seem, on first glance, simply to have been moved to identify with the action of the players: “we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares.” But the order of the original action has been reversed, indicating that this is a different, or derivative, process. This time, the oblongs which the audience imagines having placed are deliberately “made,” rather than already “there” (i.e., intuitively discerned); these new, factitious limits on the possible or intelligible are imagined as fitted to squares like the one representing the composition, which suggests that its already twice-circumscribed musical superstructure, placed by the players, will itself become part of the substratum for progressively more restrictive social configurations. The music thus provides its listeners with a way of conceiving of the structural significance of their various individual lives in an increasingly authoritarian interbellum Europe; it encourages them to think of their assigned roles and inculcated behaviours as wilful action, and of their enforced compliance with patriarchal authority as a vital contribution to the consolidation of a transcendent and totalizing social order. Accordingly, by the end of the performance, the musicians have been subtly refigured, no longer as set apart and masterful, but as labourers, weary with their exertion: “The players come again. But they are mopping their faces. They are no longer so spruce or so debonair” (118); everyone in Wigmore Hall has his own place (Rhoda’s is “a seat by myself at the end of the hall”) and his own task in the service of a great endeavour, the society-building project. Having partaken of this, Rhoda can resume speaking in the singular, as she immediately does.

The collective triumph is thus – as the equation-like parallelism of “This is our triumph; this is our consolation” implies – a triumph of individual self-consolation. It is the recovery, through classical music’s consonance, of a sense of individual meaning and personal destiny from the doubt and disunity pervading modern life: “what is inchoate is here stated.” The disconcerting noises of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, crying out full of that doubt and disunity from the doors of Queen’s Hall just down the road, are, we may assume, well out of earshot. (Even in Howards End, that venue seems to be nearer to the vicissitudes of modern life than Wigmore Hall is in The Waves.) If, as Adorno would later argue, the hegemony of tonality’s closure and exclusivity is buttressed by the “closed and exclusive system of a society that is based on exchange,” the
converse is also true here: tonal music glorifies to the consuming subject the exchange and consumption culture of Oxford Street, of which the closed and exclusive Wigmore Hall is a part. The quartet’s music is, in Adorno’s terms, “an affirmative sound, the confirmation of what is”—a confirmation, that is, of the privilege of inhabiting such a culture, which has afforded its audience the means and the leisure to hear its way of life affirmed in such a way.

Is this not what Rhoda came to Wigmore Hall in search of? Not just to see order imposed, but to be convinced she herself has done something to impose it? Because it is the nature of the dominant ideology to make any alternative to itself unthinkable, the only available palliative for her terror and disgust at the economy of Oxford Street is to hear that economy, and her participation in it, upheld, in a language she has been conditioned to think of as transcendent. The consolation seems, at least in the short term, genuine, and personal, evacuating Rhoda of her repugnancy towards the faces and bodies and closeness of London:

The sweetness of this content overflowing runs down the walls of my mind, and liberates understanding. . . . I will fling myself fearlessly into trams, into omnibuses. As we lurch down Regent Street, and I am flung upon this woman, upon this man, I am not injured, I am not outraged by the collision. (118)

In this mood of abandon Rhoda leaves the concert hall, feeling possessed of an agency that is counterbalanced, or completed, by her subjection to external forces that are ineluctable but benevolent. And so she speaks of herself as both active and passive: she flings herself into trams and omnibuses, but is also flung around inside them, and both actions have the same effect of bringing her back to her physical self, and into contact, however fleetingly, with women and men, with a peaceful sense of shared humanity. It seems the satisfaction of a long, if obscure, desire. And so even if she had been speaking self-consciously at first, Rhoda does finally seem to identify sincerely with the collective for whom she speaks, and share its internalization of, and identification with, the music and the status quo. Twice, later in the novel, the second time during the group’s final meeting, she will recollect her vision of the square and the oblong—both times invoking it in a mixture of the collective and the singular first person, expressing similar ideas both ways, as if there is no strict demarcation between the two perspectives in Rhoda’s mind: “Then in some hall I parted the boughs of music and saw the house we have made; the square stood upon the oblong. ‘The house which contains us all,’ I said . . . A square is stood upon the oblong and we say, ‘This is our dwelling-place. The structure is now visible. Very little
is left outside’’ (150, 168; emphasis added). Even before she decides to seek refuge in music, she senses that her isolation is unsustainable, and that reintegration into a community is needed: “But what can one make in loneliness?” (117). That the building of the “dwelling-place” is a communal endeavour is crucial to the consolation Rhoda derives from it. Her estrangement from herself, from a sense of a coherent identity, makes it that much easier for her to yield to the collective – as does, in a more material way, being able to afford, at the spur of the moment, a seat in tony Wigmore Hall. She is not, at least in that limited sense, herself among the “very little” which is “left outside” the music’s visible structure.

And yet, all that said, she is keenly aware that such a space exists – that a certain amount of territory must, by definition, be left uncovered when a square “dwelling-place” is fitted, even as closely as possible, to an oblong foundation. Rhoda hears this exclusion inscribed in the music, and it is, in turn, inscribed in her representation of it. To speak, not just once but twice, of an ostensibly totalizing structure, “which contains us all,” as leaving any space outside, even “very little,” serves only to bring that space, and the act of exclusion that produced it, into relief. And even though its existence utterly vitiates the music’s claim to totality, and thus the integrity of the consolation it offers, neither Rhoda, nor the audience for whom she speaks, can ignore it; nor can they overlook that which the music fails to encompass and bring to order, that which (and, like the box office, those whom) it refuses to let in. Desperate as Rhoda is for beauty and order, which will compensate for the absence of Percival, her commitment to truth – to “the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” – gets the better of her. For this reason, the music’s consolation will not be lasting, as her eventual fate confirms.  

By 1931, the therapeutic vision of a humane, orderly society built on the Apollonian principles of classical music had been complicated irrevocably. Regardless of taste, a musically aware London audience, almost two decades after the Queen’s Hall premiere of Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces*, could no longer hear such music without being conscious of the vertical and horizontal relations it works unceasingly to deny. The New Music had made the space outside tonality’s “perfect dwelling-place” recognizable and intelligible as valid musical territory; and this was its effect regardless of whether a given listener approved of the sounds to be heard there or not. Sophisticated audiences were, anyway, approving more and more, or at least becoming less and less disapproving – an acclimation that, as we have seen, Schoenberg, as well as other theorists, regarded as a historical inevitability. (“Today’s ear,” he wrote in the ‘40s, “has become
as tolerant to these dissonances as musicians were to Mozart’s dissonances.” The extremes of dissonance achieved in, for example, the late quartets of Beethoven, could no longer stand as proof of tonality’s exhaustiveness when it came to musical sound; such dissonances only shed light on those pitch relations from which tonal music was always, ultimately, drawing back. In the wake of music that did not draw back, that did not have to return to a tonal centre, this could be felt as a lack – or, to borrow a phrase from Pound’s Treatise on Harmony, an “element grossly omitted.” So for Rhoda, who, reflecting on her reaction to the music and the society it promotes, recalls an intense compulsion to go beyond its reaches, the horizons it sets for experience, even if it brings her to the point of annihilation: “‘This house which contains us all,’ I said . . . yet I went to Greenwich. I prayed that I might thunder forever on the verge of the world . . . I said, ‘Consume me, carry me to the furthest limit’” (150). The word yet signals a transgressive impulse, a reaction to outwardly imposed and arbitrary order, recognized as such. “The house which contains us all” is, evidently, not a place Rhoda can stay in for very long.

Perhaps this is because, for Rhoda, the tendency of such structures has always been to exclude her, rather than to invite her in; to isolate and ostracize her, rather than to integrate her into the community. For example, the “dwelling-place” built by the players evokes an image from one of Rhoda’s earliest experiences. She and the novel’s other five speakers sit in a schoolroom, learning Latin and arithmetic. “‘Each tense,’ said Neville, ‘means differently. There is an order in this world; there are distinctions, there are differences in this world . . .’” But this inculcation in order and difference is already ominous for Rhoda, especially as the lesson turns to arithmetic: “Now the terror is beginning.” A problem is written up on the blackboard and one by one the boys and girls solve it – except for Rhoda. Her friends turn in their work and are allowed to go. Finally even the teacher, Miss Hudson, goes, and still Rhoda is “left alone to find an answer.” She picks up her pencil:

I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop, which I now join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, ‘Oh, save me, from being blown forever outside the loop of time!’ (13)

Rhoda channels into art the training she has been receiving, in order based on difference, distinction, and closure (hence her joining the loop, just “– so –”). But her failure to comprehend these differences, these distinctions, leaves her perpetually “outside the loop”: “They say Yes,
they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second” (29). She feels herself “porous” (40), and thus has no intuitive understanding of entirety or closure, except as a fact of society, that sets her apart and shuts her out. The tonal composition played by the quartet is another such closed structure, a musical correlative to Wigmore Hall’s cost of admission. Rhoda has been taught to think of the exclusion that typifies such structures as an essential condition of “the world,” as basic to its order; and so, in the schoolroom, tasked with finding “an answer” reflecting that order, she does her best to reproduce it. (The semantic frustration we feel reading this passage – it seems, at first, as if what Rhoda is about to “join” is “the world” – is premonitory of her later frustrated attempts to integrate into society.) Her collectively voiced reaction to the music of the quartet finds her engaged in a similar rite, imagining herself joining with the audience in building an effigy of modern London. But such acts of imaginative reproduction invariably end up reflecting her alienation back upon her, in magnified form. The collective’s consolation is no consolation at all for the collective’s victim.

And so Rhoda’s account of the response provoked in the Wigmore Hall audience by the quartet’s music cannot but be tinged by her alienation from, her unconformity to, the socioeconomic, political, and spatial status quo it shores up, which has always denied her full participation, while at the same time demanding her labour and compliance. But, at this moment in Europe’s musical history, one need not occupy a position of alienation as extreme as Rhoda’s to glimpse something like what she does in the performance. If the music is looked to, as Rhoda and the rest of the audience look to it, for an image of society, it becomes impossible not to perceive in it the violent exclusion that characterizes all acts of patriarchal social organization, and patriarchal thinking generally. The different versions and models of social order furnished by such a culture cannot, at least in this sense, be meaningfully distinguished. Despite Rhoda’s hopes going in, the music largely recapitulates her experience of Oxford Street; in turn, the consumer economy of Oxford Street is revealed as not of a radically different kind than the one Percival would have imposed on the Orient. The latter discovery is implicit in Rhoda’s funerary offering to Percival at the end of the chapter: when she tosses her “penny bunch of violets” from a terrace in Greenwich into the river below, she notes, apparently without a sense of incongruity or bathos, that they have been “torn up by the roots from the pavement of Oxford Street” (119); meanwhile, the ships among which they fall are said to be bound for India, carrying on unabated the spread of commerce, and the culture of leisure represented by the concert hall, to Europe’s imperial
frontiers. They sail, in other words, to impose order, and recover beauty – the very same cause in whose name Percival died, a cause now mixed up with so much selling of half-hose. For Rhoda, it is only a matter of brief reflection before her vision of order, the fulfilment of the hopes and expectations she brought to the concert hall, becomes another signifier of the desolation, degradation, and humiliation that have been the familiar conditions of her life:

A square stands upon an oblong. Here are mean streets where chaffering goes on in street markets, and every sort of iron rod, bolt and screw is laid out, and people swarm off the pavement, pinching raw meat with thick fingers. The structure is visible. We have made a dwelling-place. (118)

2.3 The Danger of the Dangerless

The idea, in *Howards End*, of classical music offering a redemptive vision of society, divested of illusion, recurs in *The Waves* – if only as another, especially stubborn, illusion, which will nonetheless be dispelled as listeners come to recognize the music’s closure and self-fulfilment as the historically and economically immanent structure it is. This is one of the ways that listening to, and contemplating, music in modernity “liberates understanding.” If the essential order of patriarchal society, manifested in this most refined form, is itself as mean as the chaffering of street markets, then it becomes possible, even tempting, to think of a society without it. Intermittently throughout her monologue in this chapter, Rhoda has seen flashes of an anarchic, Dionysian “world rent by lightning,” underlying the mundane business of Oxford Street. In that world, the houses of London, like Forster’s goblins, “are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air”; and the virile seafarer leaping on shore in the olive grove is a mere Ozymandian monument, clothed in shadow and fallen into ruin (115). As soon as Rhoda departs the concert hall, even in the midst of her musically-induced contentment, she seems to tilt back towards this vision – towards the “yet” in “yet I went to Greenwich,” towards, that is, the liquidation of civil order altogether, and of restraint: “Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked back desire to be spent, to be consumed” (119).

This compulsion to unleash “the checked, the jerked back,” the repressed impulse towards abandon and self-destruction, has obvious resonances with Freud’s work of the 1920s – work that, it’s worth noting, the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press, starting in 1924, was helping to introduce to
the English-speaking public. But, in this musical context, it also evokes the response of some of Woolf’s contemporaries to the New Music, notably Eliot’s and Sassoon’s to the Sacre du printemps. As we saw in the last chapter, for Sassoon, the Sacre’s “savagery” was both its essential meaning and its promise, an open invitation to its audience to “Incendiarize the Hall” with “anti-social rhapsodic applause!” His poem worries that bourgeois acceptance of the music, reflected in the polite applause of the Queen’s Hall audience, threatens to cut off this avenue of sorely-needed catharsis, co-opting the quondam sensation into a mere high-society event and luxury diversion. Of course, Queen’s Hall really would be “incendiarized,” during the Blitz; so would Rhoda’s Oxford Street, which would indeed be “rent by lightning” (“blitz” means “lightning” in German) along with the Woolfs’ own dwelling-places. To Adorno, the violence of Stravinsky’s music unmistakeably presaged, even called forth and exulted in, the destruction of the World Wars, and the privations of fascism. Woolf, who “shivered with excitement” after hearing an evening of Stravinsky music, is not likely to have taken the inference quite so far; but she may well have suspected that, if the emotions released by such music could be liberating, they could also, and for the same reasons, be dangerous. Such music was supposed to be about the violent defiance of decorum, convention, and tradition. There is a risk that, for a listener conscious of subjection or alienation, such emotions, such transgressive energies, once acknowledged and released, might no longer be containable. Perhaps this is why Sassoon’s applause is both rhapsodic and “anti-social”: a glimpse of life untrammelled by law or custom may only serve to taunt the subject who, in day-to-day life, is forced into self-denying conformity with them. Alienation and despair intensify, until they become unendurable – as they finally do for Rhoda in The Waves.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the phase of European music exemplified by the Sacre, as well as the earlier, freely atonal works of the Second Viennese School, was so short-lived. The First World War seems to have been another strike against the anarchy represented by those works, bringing on a resurgence of the compulsion towards order. Both Schoenberg and Berg served in it, and the experience at least coincided with a decisive change in Schoenberg’s thinking about tonal organization, a change which was quickly taken up and put into practice by his students and followers. Berg’s opera Wozzeck (1922), arguably the masterpiece of the early freely atonal style, was also one of the last works in it, and one of the few to appear after the war. As for Stravinsky, not long after the Sacre, he entered what is generally known as his
“neoclassical” period – producing works that, while mostly still up-to-date in texture, eschewed the provocative dissonances of his prewar work. Adorno would come to regard Stravinsky’s transition to neoclassicism not as a break from his past, but as the culmination of a career driven from the outset, even during its seemingly radical phases, by a reactionary “false musical consciousness.” It may be that the war only hastened a change in approach that was always in the offing. The abjuration of extrinsic order, real or ostensible, is hard to sustain in any art, but especially in music, where it can be as uncomfortable for the trained performer as for the audience: during the first Paris rehearsals for the Sacre, members of the orchestra reportedly kept stopping the conductor to ask whether their sheet music had been misprinted. Furthermore, taking the disestablishment of convention as one’s primary objective, even if it is in the interest of ushering in complete compositional and spectatorial freedom, can itself come to be felt as a restriction – reducing the artwork to a mere critique of tradition, and pushing it towards an expressive impasse. Adorno describes this double aporia of the New Music’s first phase thus:

The progress of music toward the complete freedom of the subject proves to be irrational insofar as – by the measure of existing music itself – this progress dissolves both the encompassing language of music and the comprehensible logic of music’s superficial coherence.

The composition had freed itself, but at the cost of losing any outside reference by which its success could be measured in anything but negative terms. The materials and trappings of the classical tradition retained by much of the New Music – the chromatic scale, the familiar instrumentation of the late Romantic orchestra, the same conductors, musicians, and venues – even if put to unprecedented usages, served as a constant reminder of the social basis for comprehension, so exultantly affirmed in Howards End, that the New Music had surrendered in the effort to set its own terms. Adorno imputes this feeling of a lost basis of comprehension to “Stravinsky and his followers,” but it was shared by the Second Viennese School as well, and no doubt even by some of the New Music’s most sympathetic listeners. (Mann, following fellow German exile Adorno, forces his Schoenberg analogue Adrian Leverkühn to confront the dilemma by placing it in the mouth of his Tempter in the pivotal dialogue of Doktor Faustus.) With the existing musical norm based on the affirmation of the community, the lack of a shared basis for comprehension of the New Music threatened to make the listening subject already alienated from her community that much more so. The plight of Woolf’s Rhoda may be a reflection of this aesthetic dilemma.
To Eliot, who in *The Waste Land* famously speaks of the “fragments I have shored against my ruins,” the great achievement of the *Sacre* was not that it merely reproduced the “barbaric cries of modern life,” but that it “transform[ed] these despairing noises into music.” The aesthetic tenet implicit in this judgment – of art’s duty to be recognizable as such, rather than chaos; to comprehend chaos, rather than simply imitate it – would find expression in the forms taken by much of the new European art music of the 1920s. While the works of the prewar period continued to be performed through that decade, and for the most part retained their avant-garde cachet, in the wake of the war’s catastrophe, and the glimpse it provided of a “world rent by lightning,” the best-known composers of the New Music all strove, like Rhoda in *The Waves*, to recover beauty by imposing order. Stravinsky, in the hopes of reinstating a social basis for the comprehension of his music, resorted to the conventional forms he had, for a decade, been accused of renouncing; while Schoenberg sought an integral basis for comprehension, a mode of composition that would consolidate his music’s absolute dissimilarity to tonality, while at the same time keeping its structuring principles always on view, thereby actively working to teach the listener how to understand it. Or, to take a more sceptical view – that of, for example, Stravinsky in the ’30s – the restrictions of tonality had been shaken off, but only to be replaced by the equally (or even more) restrictive and artificial regularities of serialism. In the earliest incarnation of this style, Schoenberg’s “twelve-tone technique” of the ’20s, a “row” consisting of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, arranged in order of the composer’s choosing (but without repetition), serves as the template for the entirety of the composition’s melodic and harmonic content. The row is transformed using techniques borrowed from classical harmony and counterpoint – transposition, inversion, and retrogression – to give the composition horizontal and vertical expansiveness, while avoiding any implication of a tonic note. To Schoenberg, such a methodical approach to chromaticism had become necessary in order to deliver the ear inculcated in tonality of its expectation of resolution, of its habit of listening for diatonic tonal relations in music meant to be devoid of them.

So within a decade of its sensational first phase, full of revolutionary rhetoric and public outrage, the music that had promised “magnificent fulfilment” through the explosion of tonality’s conventional stabilities was itself showing a marked tendency towards stabilization. Predictably, it was in this stabilized form that the New Music at last gained a permanent foothold in the academy, with serialism coming to enjoy hegemonic status in European schools of composition.
by mid-century. Writing after the Second World War of younger composers’ attraction to serial techniques, Adorno diagnoses their compulsion towards music’s “total rationalization” as a reaction to the psychological rigors of modern living – the same rigors documented by Eliot and Woolf: “Anxiety and pain have grown to an extreme degree,” he argues in “The Aging of the New Music,” “and can no longer be controlled by the individual psyche.” As a way of coping, the young composers have forsworn individual subjectivity altogether, abdicating their responsibility to devise new musical forms tailored to the specific internal demands of their musical material. Instead, they seek refuge in “collective schemata” such as Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique, which in its most vulgar applications enables a kind of Tayloristic automation of musical thinking. In turning to these schemata, the musical rationalists turn away from the expressive possibilities granted, and the creative challenge posed, by Schoenberg’s initial utopian bequest to composers, the unrestricted palette of total chromaticism. This Adorno speaks of as “the danger of the dangerless,” identifying it as the major affliction of European “avant-garde” music since the ’20s, but increasingly since the war. It manifests as a defensive “rejection of expression,” of “every impulse not already comprehended under collective schemata,” since those latter can only “bring to mind what cannot be admitted to consciousness.” The institutionalized version of serialism is, in other words, to Adorno both a symptom and an instantiation of the repression necessitated by modern life. In retrospect, the echo of fascism in institutional serialism’s enforced, rationalized musical order would be hard to miss: Mann’s Doktor Faustus is only the definitive literary monument of the cultural currents in German-speaking Europe leading to the catastrophe of the Second World War, and the definitive record in European literature of how these currents relate to, and perversely inscribe themselves within, the strictures of serial composition.

Part of the temptation to keep citing Adorno in these pages has been the numerous ways in which his thinking about music seems to parallel Rhoda’s musical experience in The Waves – or, to put it more historically, how Rhoda’s musical experience in The Waves seems to adumbrate some of Adorno’s ideas about the social implications of the different strains of European music in the first third of the twentieth century. Both Adorno and Woolf articulate, in similar terms and by means of similar imagery, the fundamental felt artistic dilemma – and arguably also the major political dilemma – of an era of avant-gardism: that is, whether it was more productive to retain, recover, or remake existing structures of thought and authority, or to do away with them.
altogether. Both ultimately express ambivalence about the potential psychic and social consequences for the individual subject of any of the proffered options, as well as scepticism as to their feasibility.

Now, that Woolf and Adorno should be found to have certain ideas in common when speaking to the same topic ought not, in itself, be surprising. Although Woolf was a generation older, a child of the Victorian era, the two did share a historical moment – were alike, for example, direct victims of German fascism. Though it is doubtful she would have been aware of them, Adorno’s major essays on music began to appear at the tail end of Woolf’s most prolific years; and when the mature Adorno looked back upon the political and artistic upheaval of his youth with the benefit of some decades of hindsight, he was reflecting on a period that coincided with Woolf’s artistic maturity. The critical detachment Adorno enjoyed, by virtue of his youth, from (for example) the ferocity of the New Music’s early controversies, his telescopic sense of their relationship to developments in European society Woolf did not live to see, notably the aftermath of the Second World War, helps to contextualize the immediacy of Woolf’s experience of those seminal events, her sensitivity towards the era’s social and artistic developments as they were underway, her profound interest in (and trepidation about) the social and political implications of artistic endeavours. Each balances the other, illustrates the other, finishes the other’s thought.

Although Adorno did write some accomplished music – for the most part during the ’20s and ’30s, in both freely atonal and serial styles – the dilemma he outlines in his postwar essays must have been one he thought of as largely the burden of others, of artists. Conversely, Woolf, though a prolific critic, worked and thought of herself primarily as a composer – that is, a maker of literary “compositions”; and so, like Barnes, like Stein, regardless of what her own aesthetic reaction to the New Music might have been at any given time, she could not but have been sympathetic to the challenges of making and experiencing new art in modernity, and conscious of the fraught position of the artist of the new in relation to the art and artistic conventions of the past. Above all, what the two have in common is a sense of the modern artist being at once a product of her society, and accountable to it for her contribution.

Mere historical coincidence cannot explain away the ideas and values Woolf and Adorno share, and there is probably no question of direct influence either. But if this were all we could say about the relevance of one to the other – we may as well add that they both liked Beethoven – then we would have said little towards the question of what is to be gained by talking about them
in the same breath, and nothing at all in the way of literary criticism. But the mutual resonances of the Wigmore Hall episode in *The Waves* and, for example, an essay like Adorno’s “The Aging of the New Music” do help to bring forward the social criticism at work in that episode, which Woolf’s critics have tended to interpret as purely abstract, philosophical, or aesthetical. In fact, the writings of that preeminent sociologist of music are of almost Midrashic value in pointing up the political dimension of Rhoda’s experiences on the way to, and then inside, the concert hall. His portrait of the young serialist – and, *a fortiori*, the young listener of serial music, and art music in general – as a victim of modernity, able to hear music only through a screen of his alienation, is inevitably also a portrait of Rhoda, listening to the quartet from her seat at the end of the hall. His diagnosis of an unprecedented intensification of anxiety and pain in modernity, how this besets the individual subject with inassimilable, uncontainable emotions, unmistakably evokes Rhoda’s time on Oxford Street, her feeling of sensory and moral assault at its culture of consumption, its debasement of the human into a joint of meat pinching at other joints of meat. And the way of coping Adorno describes, the yielding of the besieged individual consciousness to the collective, illuminates Rhoda’s yielding to the collective voice in Wigmore Hall, her affirmation, in that voice, of the collective’s institutions, as well as her compulsion in the first place to seek consolation in extrinsic schemes of order (Adorno’s “collective schemata” – in this case, that of classical music) as a corrective to her private discomposure, even though her own experience of extrinsic order has always been of exclusion, repression, and violence. From a historical perspective, these parallels between the writings of the novelist and the sociologist bespeak a complex of social ideas surrounding music in European culture in the first half of the century. From a literary perspective, they help to uncover the broader social implications tacit in one fictional character’s aesthetic experience, and they accomplish this even if Adorno’s dialectical imagination was oblivious to, or would have preferred to submerge within his larger indictment of authoritarianism and capitalism, those aspects of Rhoda’s social trauma that may be most obvious to us, that have most interested Woolf scholars since at least the 1980s.\(^\text{105}\)

If Adorno can seem cavalier about the fraught place of women in modern music culture, we expect Woolf not to be. Adorno in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* hardly acknowledges the gender of the *Sacre*’s Chosen One, treating her simply as an embodiment of “the subject” sacrificed to the will of the collective\(^\text{106}\); but to Woolf, the status of women in the culture of the modern was, understandably, an immediate and constant concern. She, like Barnes, would have had a hard
time overlooking the performance of “the English ballerina (with a Russian name)” who was creating the part, and “[coming] into her own” in so doing; and, at the same time, she would have been conscious of the uses to which the part – set down by a male scenarist and a male choreographer – was putting her. This is all, of course, only conjecture. I have not turned up a specific reference to the Sacre du printemps in Woolf’s reviews, essays, or diary. But the subversive emphasis of Barnes’s anecdote in “Lament for the Left Bank,” in which the achievement of the lead dancer eclipses utterly all the other artists involved in the production, including the masterful, patriarchal figure of the composer, seems like it would not be out of character for Woolf, that champion of the “mute and inglorious Jane Austen,” the creator of such artist figures as Miss La Trobe, the avant-garde country pageant dramaturge of Between the Acts (1941). The latter, as Elicia Clements has argued (citing Jane Marcus, who is not so sure), may have been inspired in part by Dame Ethel Smyth, the composer and “suffragette” with whom Woolf enjoyed a well-documented friendship, beginning in 1930.  

Sharing a podium with Smyth before the London National Society for Women’s Service in 1931, Woolf alluded to Smyth’s painful and continuing struggle to assert herself in a misogynistic musical and political establishment, and spoke of her own feeling of artistic kinship with the elder composer and writer: “when I read her books I always feel inclined to burn my own pen and take to music – for if she can toss off a masterpiece in my art without any training why should I not toss off a symphony or two without knowing a crotchet from a quaver?” This is neither flattery nor caprice. Woolf is indulging in one of the basic, paradoxical fantasies of modernism, the fantasy behind, for example, Stein’s notion of America as “now the oldest country in the world” – the fantasy of art without a history.  

We may recall Schoenberg in 1911, rhapsodic over the promise of “the new”: it is the cult of the unprecedented, the obverse of the contemporaneous anxiety over the loss of a shared basis for comprehension. This worship of the never-before underpinned much of the initial reception of the New Music, and probably no small part of its actual compositional activity as well.  

Adorno seemed to see the attraction to serialism as a mass delusion along exactly these lines. When the historical immanence of the “laws” heretofore thought of as governing music is exposed, and that history is revealed to be one and the same as that of Europe itself – a history, that is, of steadily increasing violence, violence that has failed to bring about a humane and stable social order – then the longing for an art that somehow leaves history behind, that bears no traces of it, that has emerged ex nihilo fully formed, is easy to understand. It is, perhaps, the creative correlative to Rhoda’s spectatorial impulse to “let loose”;
as we have already seen, the fantasy is bound to be especially strong in those who, by accident of birth, have been pricked out by history to be the victims of its violence.

For that reason, the fantasy was pervasive among artists of Woolf’s generation, even if it was acknowledged as one, as it generally was. Witness the scenarios of just some of the works we have already mentioned – *Petrushka*, the *Sacre*, *L’histoire du soldat*, *Pierrot Lunaire*, *Wozzeck* – and the concentration in them on subjection to, or futile struggle against, inexorable fate, inexorable authority. This radical amplification of one of the latent themes of 19th century musical theatre is accompanied, in all the works, despite their enormous musical differences, by a general allergy to the old strictures of classical harmony, as if one thing necessarily implied the other. Of course, their resistance to convention relies on the audience’s familiarity with that convention to be discernible; the avoidance of tonal resolution is not meaningful in itself, except as a temporal gesture, connoting other kinds of temporal resistance. Of this, Adorno seemed to feel in 1956, composers, critics, and audiences already needed reminding. Schoenberg’s project was never meant to be the inauguration of a new and radically distinct European musical tradition – “New Music” as a category out of time, recognizable in itself. It was, rather, an effort to expand the expressive potential of the existing one from the inside, by making strange its clichéd associations and dead metaphors. Woolf knew, and this is one of the themes of both *A Room of One’s Own* and her address to the National Society for Women’s Service, that even an artist working from a position of marginalization or oppression must have reference to a tradition, whether it be in an attitude of resistance, or of shoring up an artistic heritage that is itself on the margins of the dominant culture.

For new art to penetrate into existing institutions and effect a change in their workings, it must, in some way, comprehend those workings, and therefore, be inscribed by them. The new word must be written down in the script of the old; and in music, as in literature, this is literally true. A musician must be trained to play that bit of Beethoven’s Fifth that Tibby Schlegel is at such pains to point out, the “transitional passage on the drum,” in order to have the skill and knowledge to execute as written the fractured rhythms of a “modern” composition such as Edgard Varese’s percussion-only *Ionisation* (1933). Schoenberg’s pedagogy of 1911 reflects this: the pupil must learn the conventions of classical harmony before he (to Schoenberg the pupil is invariably “he”) can even begin to think of what lies beyond its “frontiers,” before he can begin, that is, to address himself to the necessary work of the composer of modernity. The
revolutionary potential, the critical and socially meaningful dimension, of the new art resides precisely in its comprehension of the old – its calling upon and unsettling its audience’s conditioned expectations for a work of art, and in the process exposing those expectations as conditioned.\textsuperscript{112} We see the result of this in the disillusioned treatment of classical music in The Waves. Therein lies the new art’s quality of resistance, which is neither inherent nor permanent, but contingent and immanent to history. No artwork, it goes without saying, can be avant-garde forever, since avant-gardism consists entirely in the work’s resemblance to, and deviation from, hegemonic forms. The latter are, of course, subject to change over time. The seeming “paradoxical permanence” (as Carl Dahlhaus put it) of the New Music’s newness, its “quality of incipient beginning, of ‘for the first time’ . . . felt in almost undiminished form” even a century later, is, in fact, nothing more than a testament to the tenacity of tonality’s hold on its hegemonic, or “second-nature,” status, well into our century.\textsuperscript{113} The current paradox is that the “revolutionary” forms have by now themselves become part of an expanded and stabilized “classical” repertory. But perhaps that is no paradox at all. Any work of art, no matter how initially unsettling to the senses or to established convention, can become an instrument of the dominant culture, insofar as it is put to the use of enforcing or validating coercive authority.\textsuperscript{114} Both Adorno, in his essays on the New Music, and Woolf, through Rhoda’s experience in Wigmore Hall, want to ensure that this message is not lost in the avant-gardist push to renounce the old and ring in the new.

In the last few decades, the so-called “new musicology,” led by critics such as Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Susan McClary and Richard Leppert, has expanded considerably on the social and ideological critique of music culture pursued by Adorno in his essays of the ’30s, ’40s, and ’50s.\textsuperscript{115} Notably, McClary and the late Philip Brett have focussed on some of the issues skirted by Adorno, examining the ideologies of gender and sexuality that find expression in music culture, including in the “New Music.”\textsuperscript{116} Adorno himself has taken his place as a patriarch of this new musicology, with all of the complications entailed by such a designation.\textsuperscript{117} At the very least, he has been a constant interlocutor of contemporary critics of both popular and “art” music, a fact attested by recent efforts to get more of his work into reliable English.\textsuperscript{118} Given his centrality to the way music – as both a social and aesthetic phenomenon – is now thought of in the American academy, a concerted effort towards the historicization of his musical thinking seems overdue. This has, indeed, been underway in some quarters of Adorno studies since at
least the 1990s.¹¹⁹ A substantial contribution to this effort would be beyond the scope of a project on the role of the literary record in the institutionalization of modern music, and perhaps beside the point as well. My aim in these pages has not been – or has not simply been – to bring forward Virginia Woolf, and certain of her contemporaries, as evidence in support of Adorno’s claims about what particular kinds of music signified to particular audiences in the first third of the 20th century. If I would like to see the establishment of a historical basis for Adorno’s ideas, it would not be as an end in itself.

It seems to me, and this is the point I have been trying to make since leaving off talking directly about *The Waves* at the end of the last section, that many of the ideas about the period of musical modernism that the “new musicology” treats as originating with Adorno – ideas about events he was too young to have experienced first-hand, and whose revolutionary character he was too young to have felt as such – were, in fact, prefigured in the writings of those who were there, writers who, for one reason or another, were attentive to avant-garde developments in the arts and were keen to invest those developments with larger social or political significance. The Wigmore Hall episode in *The Waves*, for example, even helps to fill in, from a roughly contemporaneous perspective, what is now a keenly felt gap in Adorno’s sociology. These early intimations of Adorno’s ideas do, in a sense, corroborate their historicity; but, in an admittedly circular way, the same claims, thus corroborated, then yield a fresh way of looking at literature about music from the heyday of the “new,” one that manages to draw on the theories of a critic of increasing importance for our own understanding of modern music culture, while also being, I think, historiographically tenable, since the same critic was gaining in importance then as well, playing his own significant role in the burgeoning institutionalization of the New Music. It is this more circular kind of reasoning, which would be unacceptable in a thoroughgoing work of history or philosophy, that I have been indulging here. Now, one could make the perfectly legitimate objection that, in finding auguries of Adorno or his disciples in the likes of Woolf, Pound, or Forster, I am simply showing how irrevocably my interpretation of the latter group of authors has been conditioned by my reading of the former. To this, I have no reply. One cannot unread what one has read. But I can point out that the new musicology has, above all, striven to open up Adorno’s basically Marxian interpretation of European music culture to feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives – and that these perspectives all have obvious pertinence to *The Waves*, a novel thoroughly interested in the inner and public lives of women, suffused with
diverse eroticism as well as the paraphernalia of late European imperialism. That all of these aspects of the novel happen to come to a head during the Wigmore Hall sequence, when Rhoda is listening to a string quartet playing classical music, strongly suggests that when Woolf writes of such music in *The Waves*, she is engaging with it in a critical spirit not alien to that of the scholars I have just named. If the new musicology’s way of thinking was, by its own admission, in large part made possible by the work of Theodor W. Adorno, then the evidence of a text like *The Waves* is that thinking such as Adorno’s was itself made possible by the first movements of the New Music – of which Woolf’s generation provided the first witnesses and the first critics. This, Adorno would have readily conceded. His, and his followers’, historicist understanding of the conventions of European music was a consequence, partly, of the New Music’s expansion of the boundaries of imaginable musical sound; but, perhaps just as much, it stemmed from the language, the utopian rhetoric, by which the music’s protagonists, starting with Schoenberg, presented their project to the world.

This brings us back to the matter of the New Music as a problem for literature. As we have seen, from a literary perspective, the major accomplishment of Schoenberg’s modernism was more than just an opening of the European public’s ears to hitherto unthought formal and expressive possibilities for music. Starting with its sensational first decade, the New Music prompted a decisive re-evaluation of the cultural and historical status of the music its champions and critics alike defined it in opposition to, the music that had inscribed itself indelibly onto European culture, that had come, in fact, to be synonymous with that culture, even if it seemed also somehow transcendent of it. Both Schoenberg and Adorno believed in, and celebrated, the formal autonomy of a sophisticated composition, whether classically tonal or not. But the historicization of tonality that followed necessarily from Schoenberg’s repudiation of its conventions, his decree of their obsolescence, forced the audience of European music to hear the latter not just as the fulfilment of its own impulses, or of something greater than human, but as a reflection, on some level, of the character and structure of European society. The resulting interpretation could be crude – with 19th century music standing in for 19th century social values – or it could encompass, as it did for Adorno and Woolf, much more complex interrelations. Whatever the specific interpretation, the form taken by a piece of music, its relationship to tradition, suddenly seemed aquiver with significance about the culture of modern Europe, that precarious stack of squares on top of oblongs. This quality of social signification was something
that neither listeners nor composers could ignore; nor could those, such as writers of literature, who occupied a position in between. This, then, was the revelation opened up to literature by the moment of modern music, the rediscovery of music’s nature as a product of human society – shaped by its history, fraught with its conflicts, but also, full of its promise.

Notes

1 Elliott Antokoletz, The Music of Bela Bartok: A Study of Tonality and Progression in Twentieth-Century Music (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984), 14, etc. A number of composers, including the American Charles Ives, preceded Stravinsky in using polytonality. Deliberate polytonality actually has a sporadic history about as long as tonality’s itself – even Mozart used it once, albeit probably in jest; see Rudolph Reti, Tonality in Modern Music (New York: Collier, 1962), 79.

2 See, for example, James Tenney, A History of ‘Consonance’ and ‘Dissonance’ (New York: Excelsior, 1988).

3 I’ve adapted this point from Elizabeth Grosz in a different context: “a feminist text must not only be critical of or a challenge to the patriarchal norms governing it; it must also help, in whatever way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces – new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms – that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception” (Elizabeth Grosz, Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies [New York: Routledge, 1995]), 23. Adorno describes tonality’s hegemony, and resultant second-nature status, in a 1953 essay: “All of [Western] music from the beginning of the age of figured bass [i.e., the Baroque period, ca. 1600-1750] until today forms a coherent ‘idiom’ that is largely given by tonality, and that still exerts a persistent power even in the present-day negation of
tonality. What is called ‘musical’ in everyday parlance refers precisely to this idiomatic character, to a relationship to music in which the material, by virtue of its reification, has become second nature to the musical subject” (“The Relationship of Philosophy and Music,” trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in Essays on Music, 145).

4 Lesure, 6.

5 Walsh, A Creative Spring, 189-90.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, Philosophy of New Music, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 13. In this translation, Adorno’s essay title “Strawinsky und die Restauration” is rendered more literally, as “Stravinsky and the Restoration.”


8 Ibid., 29. “The music of the first decades of the present [i.e., 20th] century . . . is far more appropriately viewed as a maximalizing phase within the traditions established over the course of the preceding century than as a departure from them” (Taruskin, “A Myth of the Twentieth Century,” 6-7).

9 Schoenberg, “Opinion or Insight?” (1926), in Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg, rev. ed., ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984), 258, 260, 261. In this essay, “the emancipation of the dissonance” seems to be mainly a compositional process. By 1941, though, it has become in Schoenberg’s writing the cultural moment when dissonances have attained a “comprehensibility, which is considered equivalent of consonance’s comprehensibility. A style based on this premise treats dissonances like consonances and renounces a tonal centre” (“Composition with Twelve Tones [1]” [1941], in Style and Idea, 217). Schoenberg subsequently reported, with touching optimism, “It is in fact correct to contend that the emancipation of dissonance is at present accomplished, and that twelve-tone music in the near future will no longer be rejected because of ‘discords’”
(“Composition with Twelve Tones [2]” [c. 1948], in Style and Idea, 246). See also Dahlhaus, Schoenberg and the New Music, 120-27. Thomas J. Harrison, somewhat anachronistically, uses this concept as the unifying metaphor of his study of “Mitteleuropean” Expressionism, 1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance.

10 Schoenberg, Theory of Harmony, 239; emphasis in original.

11 “The music of the future” (“zukunftsmusic” or “la musique de l’avenir”) was a concept with its own connotations in the European art music tradition. In the mid-19th century, the term had attached itself to Richard Wagner, in particular, in writings both by his champions (notably Liszt) and – in the sarcastic sense of “not the music of today” – his detractors; see Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., Music in the Western World: A History in Documents, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 324-29. In Schoenberg’s hands, though, the figure acquires new implications, not of the conceptual elaboration and formal expansiveness of the Romantic symphony and musical theatre, but of renunciation and repudiation, the retirement of exhausted musical “custom” in search of essential principles. Schoenberg’s music of the future represented manumission from the sway of convention and tradition, and perhaps even from the historical and cultural specificity of the European tonal system (hence speaking from the point of view of the “species” rather than that of a people or nation).


especially as it relates to the ideas in the Treatise, in Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics (79-99).


16 Again, the phrase is from Pierre Lalo’s review of the premiere of the Sacrè; see Lesure, 33.

17 Dahlhaus, Schoenberg and the New Music, 5.

18 One may, for example, think of the numerous sarcastic glances at John Milton’s canonical status in Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own: see A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas, ed. Morag Schiach (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 8, 48 (“that one gift which it was death to hide” – a co-opting of Milton’s sonnet on his blindness to represent the frustration of the would-be woman writer without independent means), 50, 63 (the lament for “some mute and inglorious Jane Austen,” a play on Thomas Gray’s “mute inglorious Milton”), 73, 118, 135, and the final injunction to “look past Milton’s bogey” (149). For Woolf, Milton was “the first of the masculinists” (417n.50).

19 On the modernist mood of exile, see Eksteins, 48-49, and also Anders Olsson, “Exile and Literary Modernism,” in Modernism: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, vol. 2, ed. Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 735-54. Olsson draws a distinction between “voluntary” (e.g., Joyce’s) and “enforced” (e.g., by fascism) exile; but the distinction is complicated by the fact that the former is typically “motivated by deeply felt restraints,” which leads to the voluntary exile’s “tendency to build a myth around himself as brutally expelled” (737).

20 Edmund Wilson, Axel’s Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 224. It is not inconceivable that Wilson’s simile is one of the sources of Barnes’s image of the silkworm in its shroud in “Rite of Spring”; Wilson and Barnes evidently enjoyed a complicated literary and personal relationship, which neither of her biographers quite does justice to (see Field, 63, 235, who claims Wilson proposed marriage to
Barnes, but was rebuffed because he liked *Ethan Frome* [!], and cf. Herring, *Djuna*, 134-35, who tells a similar story, but doesn’t mention a proposal. But even if it could be established as a conscious allusion, whatever evidence it might provide of the degree of the poem’s engagement with the outside world (e.g., with the *Sacre*, or its canonicity) would still be inconclusive, because paradoxical: it is a poetic image of insularity, but appropriated from a piece of prose criticism – that is, from outside the province of poetry.


24 Ibid., 81-2.

25 See *OED*, s.v. “satisfy,” 3: “To make satisfaction, full payment, reparation, or atonement,” used for Christ’s redemption of humankind. Eliot’s and Stevens’s uses of the word are more ambivalent, but play with the same meaning; cf. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi,” ll. 30-31, on the arrival at the place of the birth of Christ: “. . . not a moment too soon / Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory” (in *The Complete Poems & Plays*, 103-4); and Stevens, “Of Modern
Poetry,” ll. 23-24: “. . . It must / Be the finding of a satisfaction” (in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Vintage, 1990], 239-40). This point with thanks to Jill Levenson.

26 For the complicated ways in which the liberal-humanist social ideas of its day find expression in *Howards End*, see David Medalie, *E. M. Forster’s Modernism* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-62, especially 16-21 (on the narrative treatment of Leonard Bast, before and after his fall into “the abyss”). Forster’s own later essay on George Orwell may shed some light on the economic politics at work in *Howards End*: “When there is a collision of principles, would you favour the individual at the expense of the community as I would? Or would you prefer economic justice for all at the expense of personal freedom?” (Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 58).

27 Forster’s Harvard address begins with the assertion that “music is the deepest of the arts and deep beneath the arts” (Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 107). Several critics have cited this remark (and others like it) as a basis for identifying “musical structures” in Forster’s novels. For example, Andrea K. Weatherhead has argued, rather fancifully (though on the basis of substantial musical evidence), that the structure of the whole of *Howards End* is based on that of the Fifth Symphony; see “*Howards End*: Beethoven’s Fifth,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 31 (1985), 247-64. Interpreting “Helen’s sexual career” as the “chief catalyst for the story” (251), Weatherhead sees Beethoven replacing Forster’s earlier use of the figure of Pan as a symbol of human passion; Beethoven provides both the god’s “primal energy,” as well as “the element of order necessary for society” (248). The latter hints at the regulatory social function performed by music, and tonality, in the text.


29 Marshall Brown has related the “closure” of the nineteenth-century novel – that is, its insistence on a final reconciliation of apparent oppositions – to that of the music of the period, the “precise, inflexible law” that “every piece must end with a cadence in the same key in which it began,” resolving dissonance into consonance. By the end of the 19th century, Brown argues,
this closure had become outmoded, and was supplanted in both literature and music by the “continual modulation,” the fragmentary form, of modernism. Brown concludes that “such parallels can confirm one’s sense of what is truly general in the artistic culture of a period. No influence is in question here, no common heritage, no particular shared problematic” (Marshall Brown, “Origins of Modernism: Musical Structures and Narrative Forms,” in Music and Text: Critical Inquiries, ed. Steven Paul Scher [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992], 75-92). I would argue that in Howards End, the emulation of tonal resolution by the narrative is deliberate and self-conscious, an affirmation of the former as a model for society. By Brown’s standards, this would weaken the novel’s claim to truly “modernist” status, and indeed the question of Forster’s modernism, at least at this stage, has always been controversial; see Medalie, 2, and Malcolm Bradbury, “Two Passages to India: Forster as Victorian and Modern” (in Stallybrass, 123-42).

30 Medalie interprets the closing promise of fecundity in light of Margaret’s injunction to Helen a few pages earlier: “Develop what you have: love your child. I do not love children. I am thankful to have none. I can play with their beauty and charm, but that is all – nothing real, not one scrap of what there ought to be. And others – others go further still, and move outside humanity altogether” (288). Identifying the child with “little Morgan Forster, surrounded in his childhood by his mother and a host of quasi-matriarchs,” Medalie reads Margaret’s speech as an impassioned defence of “that distinctive and unique difference which is homosexuality” (22). The promise of fecundity issued to the son of Helen Schlegel and Leonard Bast at Howards End may thus be a qualified one, which does not extend to a new hereditary line to be founded by the child himself. It is, in any event, uncertain how the society inaugurated at Howards End can be much different from the one from which it has emerged: whatever may be his procreative potential, and regardless of Helen’s confidence that he will be “lifelong friends” with the farm boy Tom (286), the apparent social ascent of Leonard Bast’s child has not quite been a proletarian revolution; nor, as Medalie has shown, is it straightforwardly explicable in terms of the novel’s ambivalent engagement with the eugenics debates of its time (Medalie, 18-22). What remains of Leonard will be naturalized into the Schlegel family, and thus promised from birth a Schlegelian cultural education; this, along with what remains of the Schlegel wealth, will grant
the child enter into the concert hall, and inculcation in the exclusionary ideal it promotes as to what constitutes a just and humane society, and its “closed,” binaristic model of social relations. Perhaps his birth was fated, and the social vicissitudes of the novel, finally yielding a version of the concert hall status quo, another reverberation of tonality’s binarism: Helen and Leonard do, after all, first meet in the concert hall; her intensely emotional reaction to the music, her sense that it has “summed up all that had happened or could happen in her career,” is what causes her to abscond with Leonard’s umbrella, initiating their relationship (29).

31 Once the dissonant note is recuperated in this way, it ceases to be such: “. . . dissonance by no means signifies a responsive judgment of pitch combinations that sound harsh, ugly or disagreeable. It identifies rather the functional moment of any sonorous event that is expected to resolve, while the moment to which it ultimately resolves is then deemed consonant. Should the framework for the normative expectations of this kind not be present, or should the apparent resolution tendencies and outcomes be thwarted consistently, as may happen in some compositional styles of twentieth century art music, neither consonance nor dissonance can be said to exist” (Norman Cazden, “The Definition of Consonance and Dissonance,” International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music 11 [1980], 157).

32 The most up-to-date musical allusions in the novel are to Edward Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance” (1901), which is performed at the same Queen’s Hall concert (30-31), and to “something about a faun in French” – that is, Claude Debussy’s Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1894) – which “Helen went into ecstasies over” (33). Debussy’s composition would later be choreographed by Nijinsky for the Ballets Russes, for a production that premiered in May 1912. Walsh claims that Diaghilev “superstitiously delayed the premiere” of the Sacre du printemps in 1913 until 29 May, so that it would coincide with the anniversary of the premiere of the Après-midi d'un faune (A Creative Spring, 202).

33 Melba Cuddy-Keane, who cites Howards End in order to (as I am about to do) contrast its methods in the representation of sonic experience in modernity with Virginia Woolf’s, reads this passage as an attempt to use music “to inscribe a textual pluralism,” tracing “polyphonic lines” in
the “different discursive meanings” the various characters attribute to the music, “depending on
their interests and cultural positionings” (“Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New
Aurality,” in Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, ed. Pamela L. Caughie
[New York: Garland, 2000], 96 n.12). I would argue, though, that there is stronger evidence of
univocality in this episode than plurality, especially while the music is playing; differences of
interpretation and response among the characters – for example, between Margaret and Helen –
emerge largely after the fact.

34 See Michael Spitzer, Metaphor and Musical Thought (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), 1-3 and passim.

35 One of the most telling responses is that of the Schlegels’ German cousin Frieda Mosebach,
whose experience of the music is to hear embodied in it the European liberal society, even the
ethnocentrism – Beethoven being “echt Deutsch” – that the concert hall promotes and is a model
for, as well as the “high” European culture (“Classical Music”) it exemplifies (27). The
capitalization of “Classical Music,” suggestive of a proper name, implies the particularity,
restrictiveness, and historicity of the tradition, even if it is ostensibly based on an eternal verity
(i.e. tonality). That said, it could also merely suggest that the narrator is treating Frieda
ironically, as a philistine nationalist.

36 See MacDonald, 20-21; and Deborah Heckert, “Schoenberg, Roger Fry and the Emergence of
a Critical Language for the Reception of Musical Modernism in Britain, 1912-1913,” in Riley,
49-66.

37 Joseph Auner, “Proclaiming a Mainstream: Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern,” in The
Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music, Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, eds.

38 Elicia Clements, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia

The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1929-31, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 204. Clements, for example, has argued (in a manner similar to Weatherhead about Howards End and the Fifth Symphony) that the six movements of Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 13 (op. 130), and its original and eventually superseded final movement, the Grosse Fuge (op. 133), provided Woolf with the model for the six subjectivities presented in The Waves, plus the “silent” seventh figure of Percival (“Transforming Musical Sounds into Words,” 160-181). See also Gerald Levin, “The Musical Style of The Waves,” The Journal of Narrative Technique 13 (1983), 164-71.


Levin (164) and Sonita Sarker have likened Woolf’s narrative technique (in The Waves and 1941’s Between the Acts, respectively) to Schoenberg’s method of twelve-tone composition; see Sarker, “An Unharmonious Trio? Georg Lukàcs, Music, and Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts” in Virginia Woolf and the Arts, ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace
UP, 1997), 158-65. There is little evidence, though, that this music held much aesthetic interest for Woolf. Among modern composers, she clearly favoured Stravinsky: Hermione Lee reports that Woolf “shivered with excitement” after seeing “new” Stravinsky ballets – it’s not clear which ones, or how many – at London’s Haymarket Theatre in the summer of 1926 (Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf [New York: Vintage, 1999], 495). In a diary entry from 11 July 1927, Woolf ruefully records having to miss a performance of Stravinsky’s L’histoire du soldat (1918), starring Lydia Lopokova (The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. 3, 147).


45 The venue is named in the first draft, but only implicit from the context in the published version. See Virginia Woolf, The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts, ed. J. W. Graham (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976), 254. Wigmore Hall is still in operation; Forster’s Queen’s Hall was bombed out in 1941.

46 The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. 3, 139, 203.


The last stanza of the poem’s twelfth section, depicting modern Fleet Street (“. . . where / Dr. Johnson flourished”), reads:

Beside this thoroughfare
The sale of half-hose has
Long since superseded the cultivation
Of Pierian roses.


The only capitalist of the group, Louis, exemplifies the novel’s attitude towards such matters when, embarking on a working life as the other boys go to school, he says, “I go vaguely, to make money vaguely” (46). Neville and Bernard, by contrast, seem to live primarily on inherited wealth (see, e.g., 192).

Woolf, The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts, 254. Wage figures from Colin Clark, The National Income 1924-1931 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1932), 58; they are from 1924, but Clark’s overall findings suggest little change in earnings between then and 1929, when most of the first draft of The Waves was written.

In the next chapter, the two will become, in his word, “lovers,” a relationship that will coincide with her almost complete effacement from the narrative. It will consist solely in two passing references in his own speeches (“for we are lovers” [123] and “Rhoda left me” [148]), while she will be entirely silent for the duration, mentioning it only, obliquely, at the group’s final meeting (170). Her silence was, Louis reflects in the wake of their separation, what drew him to her in the first place (148); inferentially, it is a consequence of her experience in Wigmore Hall.

A version of this longing is articulated in a passage from an American novel published not long after Howards End, Willa Cather’s The Song of the Lark (1915). In this Künstlerroman, Thea Kronborg, an operatic soprano in training, attends a performance of Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9 in E Minor (“From the New World”) in Chicago: “She was too much excited to know
anything except that she wanted something desperately, and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that” (Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, in *Early Novels and Stories* [New York: Library of America, 1987], 468). Thea’s experience mingles the implacable desire for resolution engendered by tonality with the same sense of the music’s formal closure, or perfect self-sufficiency, which defines Helen and Tibby Schlegel’s experience of Beethoven’s Fifth. Although Cather’s novel dates from (or just postdates) the sensational period of the European musical avant-garde, it shows no sign of being influenced by those ideas, perhaps partly because the major works of the new European music, such as Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces*, were only starting to make their way to America in the mid-1910s; some of the most notorious and influential compositions (including the *Sacre* and *Pierrot Lunaire*) were not performed there until the ‘20s. As the *Boston Transcript* reported in May 1914, “The name of Igor Stravinsky has crept across the Atlantic – thanks to America’s newspapers, not to its orchestras” (quoted in Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000], 48).


56 “Thus when we ask poetry to express this discord, this incongruity, this sneer, this contrast, this curiosity, the quick, queer emotions which are bred in small separate rooms, the wide, general ideas which civilization teaches, she cannot move quickly enough, simply enough, or broadly enough to do it . . . She gives us instead lovely lyric cries of passion; with a majestic sweep of her arm she bids us take refuge in the past” (Woolf, “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future,” in *Selected Essays*, 79).

57 “Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, ‘Come and weep, my child.’ It is catharsis for the masses, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line. One who weeps does not resist any more than one who marches. Music that permits its listeners the
confession of their unhappiness reconciles them, by means of this ‘release,’ to their social dependence” (“On Popular Music” [1941], in *Essays on Music*, 462).

58 As Auner points out, for Schoenberg, making the case for his being a legitimate inheritor of the German classical music tradition was a major concern, especially from the ‘20s on – since, by that time, he and his school “had come to represent a rejection of the past and a deliberate spurning of the audience” (228-29).

59 *Woolf, A Room of One’s Own*, 7. The image of Louis signing his name over and over – “I, and again I, and again I” (121,124) – which opens the next chapter also evokes the “straight dark bar” afflicting modern men’s fiction in *A Room* (130).

60 Elaine Scarry makes a similar argument, with reference to Virginia Woolf’s essay “On Being Ill” (1930; *Selected Essays*, 101-10), about the problem of articulating physical pain: “Because the existing vocabulary for pain contains only a small handful of adjectives, one passes through direct descriptions very quickly and […] almost immediately encounters an ‘as if’ structure: it feels as if . . .; it is as though . . . .” (Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985], 15). The limitations of language force the sufferer into metaphor. Scarry’s argument is of particular relevance to Rhoda’s initial response to the song of the sea-green woman, which conveys a sense of the music through the pain it inflicts.

61 Rhoda’s cameo depiction of Bernard’s compulsive phrasemaking shows a bitter awareness of this tendency of his, and perhaps of the novel as a whole, whose narrative discourse he dominates. Her alienation from society thus involves a certain degree of alienation from narratability itself, at least on the novel’s own terms – as her near-total effacement from the narrative during her affair with Louis also shows. Later in life, Bernard will express his own doubts about the facileness and emotional abstraction of his phrasemaking, echoing Rhoda’s reaction to the sea-green woman’s song: “A phrase. An imperfect phrase. And what are phrases?” (159).
E.g., “I dance. I ripple” (7); “[Susan:] Jinny dances; Jinny always dances. . . . [Jinny:] I move, I dance; I never cease to move and dance” (28-29); “[Bernard:] She made the willows dance” (187). She is, additionally, depicted at least five times in the act of pirouetting (16, 23, 38, 70, and in Rhoda’s cameo of her, 116), and, at one point, narrates a dance she is engaged in as it takes place (74).

Hermione Lee, 300, 364.

The first draft stipulates that the composition is by Mozart; the beetle detail has been added marginally. By the second draft, the composer is no longer identified, but before the music begins, the audience – evidently discussing the programme – talk of both Mozart and Beethoven (Woolf, *The Two Holograph Drafts*, 256, 577). See also Clements, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words,” 164, on Woolf’s skepticism towards Beethoven’s cultural prestige, citing Bernard’s sardonic purchase of a framed picture of Beethoven (“Not that I love music”), and his subsequent interrogation of the ideas the composer and other cultural “masters” like him represent – “this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie” (187-89).

In Cather’s *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), a bleak retelling of *The Song of the Lark* in the face of a dramatically changed American musical scene, such an interpretation – “attribut[ing] to the artist much that belonged to the composer” – is a sign of young Lucy’s inchoate musical sensibility (Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* [New York: Vintage, 1995], 32). This remark arguably shows Cather’s continued investment in the supremacy of the composer, an idea of which Woolf is suspicious.

One of the few explicit references in *The Waves* to the European conflicts of the first part of the century is Bernard’s passing observation at the start of his closing monologue: “An army marches across Europe” (182). See also Judith Lee, “‘This Hideous Shaping and Moulding’: War and *The Waves’,” in *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed. Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1991), 180-202, for the use of (mainly figurative) military imagery throughout the text, which Lee interprets in terms of the theories of Elaine Scarry (whom q.v.).
The sometimes variable spelling in the drafts strengthens the association—see, for example, in the first draft, just before the Wigmore Hall episode: “He [Louis] hated Percifal” (The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts, 254). Woolf wrote a rapturous review of a performance of Parsifal at Bayreuth, where the opera was composed, for the Times in 1909 (The Essays of Virginia Woolf, vol. 1: 1904-1912, ed. Andrew McNeillie [San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989], 288-293). But, as McNeillie points out, Woolf’s attitude towards Wagner had turned hostile by 1913 (293 n. 3). The 1909 review is nonetheless intriguing for its suggestive opening remarks on the “indecision which marks our attempts to judge new music. As for the old, we take it for granted” (288).

68 OED, s.v. “autopsy, n.”

Molly Hite, in her annotations to the novel, points to other passages in the published version of The Waves and its first draft that evoke the first chapter of Genesis; see Woolf, The Waves, 221 n. 3.

That is, into, for example, “microtonal” intervals smaller than an equal tempered semitone, typical of certain non-European musics. As Roy E. Carter notes in his “Translator’s Preface” to Schoenberg’s Theory of Harmony, “Finer subdivision of the octave Schoenberg did not accept as, at that time, technologically feasible or culturally necessary” (in Schoenberg, Theory of Harmony, xvii). The unfretted instruments of the string quartet, unusually for Western instruments, are actually quite capable of accommodating these finer subdivisions.

71 See OED, s.v. “mean, adj.1” 2.


As Jane Marcus argues, Rhoda “is visualizing a moral and social structure formed by the patterns of the music, but she is also saying that the greatest art makes the reader or listener feel
he has come home” (Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987], 24). Yet, at the same time, Rhoda’s vision is oddly reminiscent of a remark in Pound’s Antheil – a companion essay to the Treatise on Harmony initially published in the same volume – on the Sacre du printemps, comparing that decidedly un-homelike work with another: “The ‘Sacre’ stands, but its cubes, solid as they are, are in proportion to [Antheil’s] Ballet Mecanique [1924] as the proportions of architecture are to those of town-planning” (Ezra Pound and Music, 315).


76 Again, compare Thea Kronborg’s experience of the Dvorak symphony in Cather’s Song of the Lark: “her mind became clear; instant composure fell upon her, and with it came the power of concentration. This was music she could understand, music from the New World indeed!” (467). As in The Waves, the music’s perceived resemblance to the society inhabited by the hearer is what makes it, and also that society, comprehensible. The difference is in the quite discrepant relationships the two characters enjoy with their societies: Thea’s is much less strained, and The Song of the Lark concludes with her triumphant assumption of her patronymic as a stage identity – by the end of the novel, she has become simply “die Kronborg” (637, 641). This point with special thanks to Tara Yelland.

77 As Tamar Katz observes, “While Rhoda’s images promise relief, it is notable how quickly the novel unravels their promise.” Katz goes on to argue that the passage accomplishes this unravelling through a concretization of the initially abstract objects, rooting them in urban space and physical effort, resulting in a “diminution of the square and oblong and their capacity to stand for transcendent refuge” (Tamar Katz, Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England [Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2000], 186).

78 Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositional method, developed in the 1920s, operates in a countervailing fashion, by refusing as far as possible pitch relations that might imply a tonal
center. This is accomplished by, for example, not repeating any pitch in a given melodic line until all eleven others in the diatonic scale have been sounded, since “the emphasis given to a tone by a premature repetition is capable of heightening it to the rank of a tonic. But the regular application of a set of twelve tones emphasizes all the other tones in the same manner, thus depriving one single tone of the privilege of supremacy. It seemed in the first stages immensely important to avoid a similarity with tonality” (“Composition with Twelve Tones [2],” in Style and Idea, 246.). Adorno explores the implications of reacting to tonality’s restrictions with a new and equally restrictive set of rules, which themselves then become doctrinal, in “The Aging of the New Music” (Essays on Music, 181-200).

79 Schoenberg, “Composition with Twelve Tones [2],” 246. What Schoenberg appears to mean by this sentence (which, in context, is somewhat ambiguous) is that audiences had come to hear the unrestricted pitch relations of free chromaticism in terms of tonal harmony – that is, as tonal dissonance; twelve-tone composition was supposed to correct this habit.

80 Pound is actually referring in this phrase to the “element grossly omitted from all treatises on HARMONY . . . except the treatise now being composed” – namely “TIME. The question of the time-interval that must elapse between one sound and another if the two sounds are to produce a pleasing consonance or an interesting relation, has been avoided.” That said, the idea of the rules of tonality as shutting out legitimate musical sound is implicit in Pound’s treatise, since “the simplest consideration of the physics of the matter by almost the simplest mathematician” would establish the musical correctness of totally free pitch relations, as long as “the time interval . . . is properly gauged” (in Ezra Pound and Music, loc. cit.).

81 In another passage from her school days, Rhoda appears to be under the guardianship of an “aunt” (18), rather than a parent. This detail can be interpreted in various ways, including as a slight hint that Rhoda is the product of an unconventional, or possibly traumatic, upbringing. In any case, it provides another example of Rhoda’s estrangement from the norms of patriarchy, and her exclusion from its foundational closed structures – in this case, the nuclear family. Appropriately, the character who seems the most sensitive to Rhoda’s difference is the one who
is most mindful of his own patrimony – Louis, who constantly reminds us that he is the son of “a banker in Brisbane” (e.g., 14). In light of all this, Rhoda’s belief, which is explicit in the first draft version of the novel, that the closed structures of Wigmore Hall and the music within will provide “the quickest escape” from the alienation of Oxford Street, takes on double poignancy – underlined by her position in the hall itself: “The quickest escape is music – here – the Wigmore Hall – here half a crown or so – here a seat by myself at the end of the hall . . .” (Woolf, The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts, 254-55). Her efforts to comprehend the social order that has isolated her only confirm her in her isolation, in a “seat by myself at the end of the hall.”


84 Woolf had published reviews of some of Sassoon’s work, and knew him socially; Hermione Lee speculates that he may have been a model for Septimus Smith in Mrs Dalloway (782 n.96).


86 Hermione Lee, 729-32.

87 On the Sacre, Adorno wrote, “the work not only resounds with the uproar of the coming war, but takes its pleasure openly in a profligate splendour that would have been easily understood in the Paris of Ravel’s Valse noble et sentimentale [i.e., Valses nobles et sentimentales, 1911]. . . . It not only asserted that the retrogression of musical language and of the corresponding consciousness was up-to-date; it also promised to help hold ground against the looming
liquidation of the subject by making this liquidation its own concern, or by at least having registered it artistically as a superior, impartial observer” (*Philosophy of New Music*, 113).

88 Hermione Lee, 495.

89 MacDonald, 55-56, 275.

90 See *Philosophy of New Music*, 10, 150-52.


92 *Philosophy of New Music*, 105.


95 “These composers expressly intend to reconstruct the authenticity of music: to give it from the outside the mark of consecration, to equip it with the power to claim for itself that it is as it must be and could not be otherwise. The music of the Vienna school hopes to participate in this same power by immersing itself limitlessly in itself through integral organization . . . Carried through in itself, it wants the listener to participate in this, not just react to it after the fact” (Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 105-106).

96 As Arnold Whittall points out, Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositions also show much stronger investment in the “concentrated variation processes” (such as the canon, fugue, and passacaglia) of the classical tradition than those of his earlier, “exploratory period”; later in the century, this “concern to preserve specific links with the ways in which earlier tonal composers in the royal line of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms conceived and deployed their musical ideas” would become controversial among those serial composers who were themselves working in

97 Ibid., 281.

98 See Whittall, esp. 1-30, who provides an accessible overview of this complex subject. I can take credit only for the errors, distortions, and oversimplifications in my account of it.


100 Adorno, “The Aging of the New Music,” *Essays on Music*, 191. A reference to “pointillism” indicates that Adorno is speaking of the generation of, for example, the French composer Pierre Boulez (b. 1925).

101 “The ‘stabilization of music,’ the danger of the dangerless noticeable as early as 1927, became even stronger after the world catastrophe [i.e., the Second World War]” (ibid., 181).

102 Ibid., 191.


104 Woolf uses this conventional word for literary writing – a use more than a century older than the musical one (see *OED*, s.v. “compose,” 5-6) – in various places, e.g. in a diary entry from shortly after the publication of *The Waves* in October 1931: “Now for a cigarette, & then a return
to sober composition” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Four, 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell [Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982], 47). In her essays, though, and in contrast to Stein, she seems to prefer to reserve the word for artistic *arrangement* (*OED* sense 8, from the visual arts) rather than creation. Stein’s lecture, “Composition as Explanation” was, incidentally, first published by the Woolfs’ own Hogarth Press, in 1926.

105 Renée Heberle, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2006), offers a variety of perspectives on the complicated question of Adorno’s interest and relevance to gender issues. Rebecca Comay’s essay “Adorno’s Siren Song” notably touches on the implications along these lines of Adorno’s writings about popular culture, including music (see esp. 49-58), remarks complicated somewhat by Mary Caputi in her essay “Unmarked and Unrehearsed: Theodor Adorno and the Performance Art of Cindy Sherman” (see esp. 303-308).

106 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 118-120.


108 *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume 5: 1929-1932*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2009), 637. The “mute and inglorious” figure from Thomas Gray and *A Room of One’s Own* recurs in this speech, this time in reference to Smyth. The latter, by the way – as most everyone who has written about her has seen fit to point out – was musically no avant-gardist, but composed in a quite traditional, sometimes Brahmsian, idiom, reflecting her early training in Leipzig – which led to the critical charge, after the turn of the century, that her work was “old-fashioned” (Hermione Lee, 579-80). See also Roberta Lindsey, “Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-

109 In a well-known passage from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein explains that, “because by the methods of the civil war and the commercial conceptions that followed it America created the twentieth century, and since all the other countries are now either living or commencing to be living a twentieth century life, America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in the sixties of the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world” (*Selected Writings*, 73). The passage is a revision of one that originally appeared, as a response to a survey question, in the journal *transition* five years earlier (“Why Do Americans Live in Europe?”, *transition* 14 [1928], 97-98). There she specifies that America is “the right age to have been born in and the wrong age to live in. . . . one wants to have been born in the country that has attained and live in the countries that are attaining or going to be attaining. . . . A country this the oldest and therefore the most important country in the world quite naturally produces the creators, and so naturally it is I an American who was and is thinking in writing was born in America and lives in Paris” (reprinted, without context, in *Gertrude Stein’s America*, ed. Gilbert A. Harrison [New York: Liveright, 1996], 67-68).

110 Writing on the occasion of his teacher’s fiftieth birthday, Alban Berg, in his essay “Why is Schoenberg’s Music so Hard to Understand” (1924), describes Schoenberg’s method – in a fairly early and tonal composition, the D Minor Quartet (1905) – thus: “As we have seen, its richness – the thematic, contrapuntal, and rhythmic beauties – have created these very difficulties. There remains only to discuss the harmonic richness, the unending supply of chords and chord combinations, which, after all, are nothing but the result of a polyphony *quite unique* in contemporary music; a juxtaposition of voices, the melodic lines of which possess a flexibility *heretofore unknown*” (emphasis added; Alban Berg, “Why is Schoenberg’s Music so Hard to Understand?”, in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, exp. ed., ed. Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs [New York: Da Capo, 1998], 65-66).

For this “critical spirit” in Schoenberg, see Schorske, 358.


On the institutional hegemony of “difficult” modernist music, at least in the United States, see Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. David Schwartz, et al. (U P of Virginia, 1997), 54-74, esp. 60-62. One might argue that what McClary calls “postmodern” musics have attracted much greater attention and esteem in universities since her essay was first published in 1989, but much of her argument still stands.


The title alone of Tia DeNora’s *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) establishes Adorno’s foundational role in this (still relatively new) field.

119 Much of the effort in this direction has been with an eye to rehabilitating Adorno at his most intransigent or unfashionable. In the mid-1990s, for example, there were at least two important studies aimed at contextualizing Adorno’s brilliantly withering “On Jazz” (1936; in *Essays on Music*, 470-95): they included J. Bradford Robinson’s “The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno: Some Thoughts on Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany,” *Popular Music* 13 (1994), 1-25; and Evelyn Wilcock’s “Adorno, Jazz and Racism: ‘Über Jazz’ and the 1934-7 British Jazz Debate,” *Telos* 107 (1996), 63-80. Subotnik’s early essays on Adorno (collected in *Developing Variations*) also represent part of this project.

120 “Without my study of Adorno, I could not have undertaken any of the projects presented in this volume, for I would have had no way of getting beyond formalism” (McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 29. She goes on: “Yet there are many areas of human experience that Adorno overlooks or denigrates as regressive, such as pleasure or the body.”)

121 Adorno was candidly influenced by the polemical aesthetic writings of the Second Viennese School. To name just one example, as Leppert points out in his notes, Adorno’s “Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?” (1931) displays the immediate influence of Alban Berg’s similarly-titled essay from seven years prior, “Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich?” (*Essays on Music*, 133 n. 1).
3 Bessie, Bop, or Bach

Whereas the preceding chapters revolved around the putative revolution in European art music, this one turns its attention to a somewhat later musical revolution, firmly based in the culture of the United States. This chapter examines both the discursive roots and early literary reception of the so-called modern jazz movement, and especially its initial manifestation in the music known as bebop. The latter is the small-group style that emerged during the Second World War, marked by (compared to earlier jazz styles) a much intensified focus on individual improvisation, rhythmic fragmentation and instability, extraordinary elaboration of jazz harmony, and a high degree of chromatic dissonance, accompanied by a self-consciously modernist public rhetoric and artistic attitude. Bebop established both the technical foundations and the basic artistic self-consciousness of the “modern jazz” styles that followed. And it is with the origins of those techniques and that artistic self-consciousness that this chapter is concerned.

I argue, first, that the institutionalization of the music of European modernism – effected in part, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, by literary modernism – and indeed that of modernism generally, including the Harlem Renaissance, played a role in shaping modern jazz’s conception of its own cultural function; and, second, that African-American literary modernism, and especially the later poetry of Langston Hughes, in turn played a role in modern jazz’s own eventual attainment of institutional status. Like the texts of Barnes, Stein, Sassoon, Forster, and Woolf considered in previous chapters, Hughes’s late poetry both reflected and contributed to the music’s incipient bourgeois privilege. But more so than any of the authors I have already discussed who wrote of modern developments in music, Hughes was in a position to shape institutional conceptions of both modern jazz and the “jazz tradition,” to set the terms of still-active debates about the aesthetic, social, and economic meaning of jazz.¹ There are even ways, I argue, in which Hughes’s characterization of modern jazz can help resolve tensions in the current critical orthodoxy surrounding the music’s commercial status and social meaning, as well as its relationship to both the African-American vernacular traditions and the larger modernist project.

The first section of the chapter surveys current scholarly positions on the origins, art status, and artistic self-conception of modern jazz. It then turns to how the adoption of techniques related to European modernism contributed to the musical development and public rhetoric of jazz musicians at the close of the “Swing Era” in the mid-1940s; and it describes the cultural climate
that made this line of influence possible. Finally it turns to a transitional figure between swing and bebop, the tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, and his 1948 solo performance, “Picasso,” as an illustration of the music’s new modernist compulsion. The second section traces this compulsion to some of its sources in the African-American artistic thought of the first half of the twentieth century. It attempts to show, also, how the current scholarly debates surrounding modern jazz were anticipated by the ambivalent responses to bebop of the African-American literary establishment of mid-century (including Ralph Ellison and Gwendolyn Brooks); and it suggests that the ambivalence of these responses, and bebop’s own modernist self-image, alike derive from the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, and the modernist musical mandate established for that movement by two of its most influential authors, Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson. The third section narrows its focus to Langston Hughes’s intervention into the dialogue, and the ramifications of that intervention for the music’s eventual attainment of institutional status: this section demonstrates how Hughes’s interpretation and synthesis of the aforementioned discourses, musical and critical, gave rise to the conception of modern jazz’s social and artistic function set forth in the verse cycles Montage of a Dream Deferred and Ask Your Mama. I argue, in particular, that Hughes saw bebop as fulfilling a bridging function between the African-American vernacular traditions and white-dominated institutions of cultural authority, with the shared language of modernism serving as common ground. The chapter concludes by exploring how Hughes’s rationale for admitting bebop into the modernist canon helped spur scholarly attention to jazz as a whole, and formulate scholarly responses to the radically avant-garde music that followed in bebop’s wake.

3.1 Hawking Picasso

“You've got to be modernistic,” averred the seminal American jazz pianist and showtune composer James P. Johnson in a sloganeering diagnosis of the zeitgeist of 1929: “Modernistic, futuristic, / Realistic, that's the way to dazzle 'em . . .”2 In American culture of the ’30s and ’40s, and the entertainment business especially, this outlook was hard to escape, a reflection of the prevailing institutional and commercial attitudes. For the most immediately influential – or just plain fortunate – exponents of European modernism, it had not taken long before institutional and bourgeois acceptance stamped itself like a gold plating of uniform thickness on the rough
metalwork of the movement’s fractious abutment with “tradition.” Before that, the notion that the distinctive language and forms of modern art were both inevitable and self-justifying must have been a comfort to those who had dedicated themselves to the most rebarbatively up-to-date idioms. The perseverance and exacting discipline demanded by a project like Schoenberg’s – with no real model against which to measure success or failure, and no promise of a receptive audience beyond his own circle – could only be sustained by such a conviction; the same is true, to some extent, of what Woolf was doing in her fiction and, as we have seen, it inscribes itself explicitly on the works of Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. But the latter two speak for a considerably changed situation. In the wake of the mainstreaming of European modernism, the achievement of institutional status would become, paradoxically, not just the fond hope of the avant-garde, but its expectation – indeed, its object. For those artists against whom political and economic forces had ranged to bar access to the very means of artistic production that avant-garde art – particularly that of what Peter Bürger called the “historical avant-garde movements” of the early 20th century – was understood to affront, the rationale for this expectation, and the attendant compulsion to “be modernistic,” was obvious. Johnson’s jingle hints at how much was at stake:

Modernistic, optimistic,
Then you’re sure to be characteristic;
Modernistic, that’s all!

So it was with a substantial number of young African-American musicians, based largely in New York City, during the period coinciding roughly with the Second World War. This was the period of transition between the “Swing Era” of the thirties, when large, highly professionalized and competitive dance bands dominated the American musical entertainment industry, and the ascendancy, towards the end of the war, of the small-group form that would come to be known as bebop. The factors leading to what Ralph Ellison reckoned in retrospect (as early as 1958) “a momentous modulation into a new key of musical sensibility” and “a revolution in culture” are not just part of jazz folklore, but have been a matter of scholarly debate almost from the outset. As the historian and musicologist Scott DeVeaux has pointed out, until fairly recently, the critical orthodoxy about the birth of bebop drew implicitly on an analogy with what Leo Treitler has termed the “crisis theory” of 20th century European music: just as Stravinsky’s use of
polytonality, and Schoenberg’s abandonment of “the consonance-dissonance concept” represent disparate attempts to reinvigorate the “static condition” of European music in the 19th century, so bebop’s expansion and disruption of the harmonic and rhythmic language of big-band swing, in which most of the new movement’s musicians had begun their careers, ought to be taken as a musically necessitated response from the inside to the popular form’s depleted musical possibilities.6 (Ellison expresses the idea succinctly, even using Treitler’s terminology: “For jazz had reached a crisis and new paths were certain to be searched for and found.”) The attraction of such an analogy is not hard to find, since it seems to explain at once the unprecedented technical demands of bebop – immediately apparent from the fusillade of high notes that makes up Dizzy Gillespie’s unaccompanied trumpet “break” on his signature composition “A Night in Tunisia” – as well as its unsettling discordancy compared to earlier forms of jazz. As with the effect of the first wave of modernism on the musical practices of Europe, the changes wrought by bebop on jazz as a discipline were decisive: the highly chromatic, dissonant, rhythmically asymmetrical grammar of bebop swiftly became the lingua franca of postwar jazz, the proliferation of styles that followed under the general rubric of “modern jazz”; and, as Ellison noted, bebop technique before long established itself as the fundamentals of jazz as a course of formal study.8 It may be that the widespread adoption of techniques from what had initially seemed a “radical, chaotic, bewildering music” contributed to the relegation of jazz as a whole to a niche audience by the late 1940s.9 On the other hand, the bebop movement’s implicit – and sometimes explicit – reframing of jazz history as an art music tradition played a significant part in laying the groundwork, and setting the terms, for the institutional status jazz as a whole would eventually come to enjoy.

The analogy with European modernism finds support in some of the promotional material of the time, and also in the rhetoric and even musical techniques of some of the most prominent musicians of the style. Contemporary handbills place bebop stars like Gillespie, tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, altoist Charlie Parker, and pianist Thelonious Monk at the forefront of “modern jazz”10; record jackets tout pianist “Bud Powell’s Modernists” and saxophonist “James Moody and His Modernists.”11 Kenny Clarke, the inventor of the music’s distinctive cymbal-centered drumming technique, confirmed in 1955 that, though the word “bebop” was not yet in general use among musicians in the early ’40s, “we called ourselves modern.”12 A recently discovered 1945 concert recording of the Gillespie-Parker quintet – the music’s definitive
performing and recording outfit – features the influential disc jockey “Symphony Sid” Torin, who at this early date seems unsure of the argot and even the trumpeter’s name, but has clearly been instructed (presumably by Gillespie, who had a hand in putting on the show) to frame the music as “modern” jazz. In his 1979 autobiography, Gillespie remembers wondering in late 1942 whether he and other like-minded players could “survive as modernists, without any further ties” to the swing bands or the business of mass entertainment. In the late ’40s, musicians such as Parker – who, with Gillespie, was the public face of the movement – pronounced bebop’s radical separateness from established jazz styles; and they spoke of its relationship to the realities of modern life in terms unmistakably evocative of T.S. Eliot’s appraisal of the Sacre du printemps: “Modern life is fast and complicated,” said the arranger Gil Fuller, “and modern music should be fast and complicated”; Gillespie, quoted in the same 1948 New Yorker article, concurred: “That old stuff . . . was alright for its time, but it was a childish time.” Parker’s own enthusiasm for Stravinsky – the Firebird suite and the Sacre especially – is well attested, and appears to have influenced younger musicians, like almost every aspect of Parker’s life and art.

Elsewhere, the musicians spoke of their music verging on equal footing, in terms of musical development, with the European art music tradition: as Parker put it in a 1953 interview, “They’re different ways of saying things musically . . . in 50 or 75 years, the contributions of present-day jazz will be taken as seriously as classical music. You wait and see.” According to Gillespie, and many subsequent commentators, it was with the bebop movement that this conception of “modern” jazz emerged, a conception announced to the public through such events as Gillespie’s bebop recital (featuring Parker) at Carnegie Hall in September 1947. (Even as concerts such as these became more frequent in the late ’40s, the nightclubs of Manhattan’s 52nd Street remained the epicentre of the music’s ongoing development.) At least so far as the bebop generation was concerned, the identification of their music as modernist seems to have been the major constituent of its overt claim to the status of art music – as if the latter depended on the former. To that end, just as Duke Ellington’s music had absorbed the extended harmonies of impressionism – as Adorno noted, with an eye to pointing up even the best jazz’s retrogressive and parodic qualities – bebop, consciously or not, took on a number of the distinctive musical features of European modernism. The blues remained integral to the music, both as a melodic mode and a harmonic structure, albeit often in highly abstracted form; but new to the jazz vocabulary were polyrhythms and pervasive rhythmic fragmentation, polytonality (through
Parker’s half-tone “side-slipping” transpositions, along with other methods of chromatically “sidestepping” a key, including the “flatted fifth,” the characteristic dissonant sonority of bebop, and a high degree of chromatic dissonance, particularly compared to swing’s basically diatonic melodic language. For Philip Larkin, this “chromatic revolution” marked the dividing line between the jazz he had loved as a young man and the “modern” music – modern in the same sense as Picasso and Pound – that he could scarcely recognize as jazz, let alone bear to listen to: it was the “something fundamentally awful [that] had taken place” within jazz “to ensure there should be no more tunes.” Isolated experiments playing without a fixed key centre led to speculation among musicians and critics about the potential for even more radical abandonment of existing jazz structures; later on, disciples of Parker in jazz’s so-called New Thing of the late ’50s and early ’60s would extend the musical palette of bebop to free chromaticism (“atonality”) in themes and improvisations, and even to serial techniques. The 1961 composition “Red Planet” (also known as “Miles’ Mode”), for instance, a collaboration between the saxophonists Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane, opens with a twelve-tone row and its retrograde; that same year, their mutual associate, the pianist Mal Waldron, recorded a piece with Dolphy called “Thirteen,” whose theme is a polyphonic development of a highly chromatic, if not strictly atonal, series.

Although the analogy with European modernism is in line with a marked tendency among jazz’s proponents to see its development as roughly parallel to (albeit much faster than) that of the European art music tradition, as DeVeaux notes, its failure to take into account the extra-musical factors, especially economic and social, that contributed to the bebop “revolution” is one of its salient shortcomings. This is clear from Ellison’s memoir of the movement, “The Golden Age, Time Past,” which, as if by way of correction, takes care to establish a basis for “the new sound” – with its heightened focus on individual improvisation – within the cooperative and competitive Swing Era musicians’ culture of after-hours jam sessions and “cutting contests” at Minton’s Playhouse, a Harlem club that opened in 1938. And though Ellison writes of, for example, Monk’s contributions to the distinctive “chordal progressions and hide-and-seek melodic methods of modern jazz,” much of bebop’s original repertory (including several of Monk’s compositions) consists of contrafacts – that is, new melodies superimposed over the borrowed, modified, and recontextualized harmonies of Swing Era popular songs such as “How High the Moon,” “Oh, Lady Be Good!,” “What Is This Thing Called Love,” and, particularly, “I Got
Rhythm,” which spawned innumerable compositions based on what came to be called, in musicians’ parlance, the “rhythm changes.” Because, under U.S. law, only melodies, not chord progressions, can be copyrighted, this kind of adaptation offered musicians with access to the recording and publishing business a valuable source of new copyrights and extra income. The borrowed harmonic underpinnings of much of its original music are perhaps the clearest indication, in terms of technique, of the after-hours, jam session origins of bebop’s experimental ethos, on the margins of the American popular entertainment industry.

For the most part, though, if economic, social, or political forces enter into the currently prevailing conceptions of the origins and aims of bebop culture, it is with the music’s jagged edges figured as an abstract expression of African-American militancy and rebellion against commercial exploitation: jazz becomes modernist in pursuit of artistic autonomy, independent of the vicissitudes of the industry, which in turn expresses the musicians’ longing for social and political autonomy. This is the notion given perhaps its most widely cited formulation – “Bebop is music of revolt” – by the record producer Ross Russell in a 1959 essay; and as a basic axiom of the sociohistorical branch of jazz scholarship that arose in the 1960s, led by authors such as LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) and A. B. Spellman, it has continued to hold, with the explicit political rhetoric accompanying works by some of the younger bebop musicians – Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Sonny Rollins – and their followers in the late 1950s and ’60s frequently called upon as evidence. Spellman, in his seminal and widely discussed 1966 book *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, surmised that bebop “may be said to have been the artistic vanguard of the dynamic social action that the later decades were to experience, ranging from the court actions of the NAACP all the way to the Watts riots.” One of the manifestations of this thinking is what DeVeaux has termed the “Whig interpretation of jazz history,” according to which the pursuit of “freedom,” implicitly or explicitly politicized, is what drives the development of jazz from the Swing Era to bop, and then to its apotheosis in the “free jazz” of saxophonists Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and Archie Shepp in the 1960s. Within the last two decades, this construction of jazz history has been complicated by greater attention to, on the one hand, bebop’s relationship with (and dependence upon) the marketplace, and, on the other, its roots in the African-American intellectual climate of the period following the Harlem Renaissance. Striking a helpful balance between earlier characterizations of bebop as a radical social and artistic movement, and the more recent scholarly concentration on jazz
(including bebop) as a popular and commercial art form, Eric Porter has argued that, while bebop “should not be read as a direct expression of black militancy,” it can be seen as “a product of a worldly intellectual orientation and an experimental aesthetic sensibility,” expressing a spirit of resistance to social and artistic boundaries, instilled in “formal and informal educational networks” consolidated in the 1930s within African-American communities. Persistent as it continues to be, the identification of bebop with European modernism is increasingly being regarded as a framework imposed by critics from outside on the historical actuality of continuous musical and commercial activity, rather than as part of how most of the musicians at the time viewed themselves and their work. In the 1990s, books by DeVeaux and David W. Stowe strove, in different ways, to fill in the gaps left by the then-prevailing critical assumptions about the transition from swing to bebop. In the background of their efforts – and perhaps, to some degree, spurring them on – were the large-scale reissue campaigns of the late ‘80s and ‘90s heyday of the compact disc, as major labels and media corporations strove to capitalize on the catalogues of the independent jazz labels they had acquired in the previous decades, resulting in an unprecedented promotional push for modern “jazz masters,” anthologized in lavish boxed sets marketed to well-heeled and sophisticated consumers. What these books have in common is an effort to resituate bebop in the American entertainment business of the prewar period, and to understand its avant-gardist rhetoric – verbal and musical – in the context of the Swing Era’s pressure of professionalization and the promotional requirements of touring and the recording industry. Stowe is more aggressive in seeking to debunk the notion of bebop musicians as self-conscious practitioners of art music, treating the music instead as a “variant of swing,” bound up in performance practices and audience expectations inherited, and not radically altered, from the jazz style that had immediately preceded and engendered it. Furthermore, as Stowe points out, if bebop musicians aspired to “cultural legitimacy,” so had many of their swing predecessors, and they sought it in many of the same venues, including the classical concert hall. To DeVeaux, the identification of bebop with modernism reflects “the heroic effort” by its champions “to reassert its autonomy in the face of co-optation” – in the face of, that is, its dependence on the machinery of what Adorno calls the “culture industry” in general and the recording industry in particular. While never downplaying the differences in musical approach, rhetoric, and commercial status separating bebop from earlier jazz styles, DeVeaux argues that, at least initially, the musicians constituting
movement were less likely to aspire to revolutionary artistic change than to a secure place in a competitive entertainment industry, which despite its systemic prejudice in favour of white artists, had provided young African Americans with one of the few avenues for achieving a middle class lifestyle and something like professional respectability.\textsuperscript{36} If musicians such as Parker and Gillespie were casting about in the mid-1940s for an artistic justification beyond the folk “authenticity” of the blues and the popular appeal of dance music, looking for creative autonomy and status commensurate with the virtuosity they had had to cultivate to find work in the big bands, they never lost their desire for general acceptance and commercial success. The complexity of their music was thus, according to DeVeaux, not a conscious effort to cultivate a sophisticated niche audience, but simply a way of capitalizing on the professional competence they had worked hard to develop, and of pursuing the few opportunities available to them, especially once it became clear that the bottom was falling out of the swing business. This “taking advantage of the disadvantages” was necessitated by the fact that any conditions adverse to the success of swing bands – including wartime transportation restrictions and manpower shortages – had a disproportionate impact on black groups.\textsuperscript{37} The modernist posture of bebop musicians was simply the best way of making their hard-earned virtuosity pay off – in terms of both money and professional status – when its original intended outlet had closed off, like so many other opportunities for African Americans in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

The findings of Stowe and especially DeVeaux have been widely influential on ensuing jazz scholarship, helping to reshape critical conceptions about the forces that led to the end of the Swing Era and the rise of bebop. But the evidence of a performance like Coleman Hawkins’s “Picasso” (1948\textsuperscript{38}) reveals the problems of too decided an effort to qualify bebop’s association and apparent self-identification with modernism. Indeed, the performance suggests that there may, after all, be a place for the analogy with European modernism in a social history of bebop, although for reasons quite different from the aesthetic and political ones that motivated the analogy in the first place.\textsuperscript{39} Given its innovative properties, significant distribution at the height of the bebop period, and long critical history, it is remarkable that DeVeaux, despite his extensive discussion of Hawkins, does not mention “Picasso.” Hawkins was not of the bebop generation – he was thirteen years older than Gillespie and Monk, and sixteen years older than Parker – but, as DeVeaux notes, he maintained a continual association with the movement,
playing with its protagonists, alternately anticipating and taking up their innovations.\(^{40}\) (“There’s no such thing as bop music,” Hawkins told a British interviewer in 1949, “but there’s such a thing as progress.”\(^{41}\) In 1944, DeVeaux argues, it was Hawkins, not Parker or Gillespie, who was “best positioned, artistically and professionally, to give the new music instant credibility. Had Hawkins been sufficiently motivated to exploit the situation, he could easily have become the public face of bebop.”\(^{42}\) The first twenty years of his career made him witness to almost every major stylistic development on the road to “modern jazz”; and, according to DeVeaux, his commitment to “the progressive ideal” ensured that, more often than not, he was a leading participant in such developments.\(^{43}\) He had played in the famous Fletcher Henderson band of the 1920s with Louis Armstrong, jazz’s “first great soloist,”\(^{44}\) whose influence helped shift the music’s disciplinary focus towards individual improvisation, the “hot solo.”\(^{45}\) In response, Hawkins worked tirelessly at his own technical development. By the beginning of the 1930s, he had set the template for the tenor saxophone as a vehicle for jazz improvisation, and become the leading tenorist – indeed, the leading saxophonist, arguably the leading soloist – of the Swing Era. In the process, he paved the way for the heightened focus on individual soloing and technical and harmonic virtuosity that were among the hallmarks of bebop’s break from previous jazz styles. Conversely, Hawkins’s achievement is, as DeVeaux’s study suggests, one of the clearest arguments for bebop’s continuity with earlier jazz.

In 1934, with the Depression softening the market at home, Hawkins, seeking new opportunities and, perhaps, independence from the American dance band business, began a five-year, self-imposed exile in Europe.\(^{46}\) There, he led groups of varying size, including at least one symphony orchestra, playing concert halls and variety stages that no doubt made a sharp contrast with the ballrooms, movie theatres, and Prohibition-era speakeasies, nightclubs and restaurants of home.\(^{47}\) As the “feature attraction” at these august venues, an opera lover and professed admirer of the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals, who claimed to have been “listening to Stravinsky when I was a kid,”\(^{48}\) Hawkins came, over time, to cultivate a public persona modelled on that of a concert virtuoso in the European tradition, presenting a version of jazz denuded of its then-inescapable associations with popular entertainment and commerce.\(^{49}\) A provocative posture at the time, it would provide a model for the young New York-based avant-gardists to follow.

Hawkins’s greatest commercial success came upon his return to the United States in 1939, when his harmonic improvisation on the challenging popular ballad, “Body and Soul,” became a
jukebox hit. The record’s novelty of sound almost immediately attracted the admiration and study of musicians, as well as a few puzzled reactions to Hawkins’s deployment of “wrong notes.”\(^{50}\) The pared-down arrangement, with the saxophonist supported for most of the song by just piano, bass, and brushed drums, brings into unusually (perhaps unprecedentedly) sharp focus Hawkins’s highly chromatic elaboration of the song’s harmony. These elaborations, including the signature use of tritone substitution (or “flatted fifth”), would unmistakably help shape the emerging harmonic grammar of bebop.\(^{51}\) And its oblique and elliptical treatment of the song’s melody presages bebop’s manipulation of the “standard” showtune and Tin Pan Alley repertoire. In addition to becoming Hawkins’s calling card, “Body and Soul” would later be re-released by Victor Records in the summer of 1944, and become a current hit once more on \textit{Billboard’s} “Harlem Hit Parade” in the midst of bebop’s efflorescence, when Hawkins was himself leading a bebop-oriented group (playing tunes such as “Ornithology,” later associated with Charlie Parker) on 52\(^{nd}\) Street, with his protégée Monk on piano.\(^{52}\) Meanwhile, he continued to present himself, above all, as a concert artist, touring (along with Parker) as one of the stars of jazz impresario Norman Granz’s mobile “Jazz at the Philharmonic”: a recording from September 1949 features Granz calling Hawkins – “here he is, the master himself” – onto the stage of Carnegie Hall, to deliver a ceremonial reading of “Body and Soul.”\(^{53}\)

For all its technical complexity and virtuosity of execution, and all the unordinariness of its treatment and presentation, Hawkins’s version of “Body and Soul” is still basically a lyrical rendition of a familiar song. Its popularity, which extended far beyond the small but growing constituency that took jazz the least bit seriously as an art form, gives proof of its accessibility. “Picasso,” recorded nine years later, is a much more dramatic and calculated flouting of audience expectations for the jazz artist as a popular entertainer. In almost its every aspect, it takes up the gauntlet thrown down by the younger musicians just then bringing bebop to a larger audience. Taking the earlier recording’s focus on the soloist to extremes, Hawkins performs “Picasso” unaccompanied, then a virtually unprecedented configuration for a commercial jazz recording.\(^{54}\) (The gesture would still seem daring when Rollins and Eric Dolphy imitated it more than a decade later, in their case performing unaccompanied versions of standard ballads.\(^{55}\)) The idea of recording unaccompanied was, among other things, Hawkins’s tribute to Casals, best known then as now for his recordings of Bach’s Cello Suites.\(^{56}\) Unmoored to any fixed chord progression, tempo, or even key signature, and lacking a clear statement of theme at either end, “Picasso”
sounds offhand on first listen, and that was indeed how Hawkins chose to characterize it in later years: “It came out spontaneously, that morning.” But, as his biographer John Chilton points out, it was the product of considerable premeditation, more than any other Hawkins recording project. In the studio, “Picasso” went through hours of preparation on piano, and then “innumerable run-throughs” on tenor before Hawkins settled on a satisfactory take.

In the absence of a more conventional accompaniment’s stabilizing effect, the discontinuities of Hawkins’s style are exposed. Passages in a more explicitly “jazzy” or “bluesy” mode alternate suddenly with freely chromatic ones, most strikingly from about 0:58 to 1:10. A rubato introduction establishes the performance’s harmonic parameters: a general tendency to settle (albeit momentarily) on B major and, especially, F sharp minor is determinedly occluded by Hawkins’s restless wending, throughout the piece, through a thicket of implied keys. (The latter feature is, perhaps, what is responsible for what Chilton calls the performance’s “mood of atonality.”) The predominantly diatonic material of swing is dispensed with for long stretches of the performance; even relative to the “breaks” and cadenzas of Parker and Gillespie, the harmonic implications of Hawkins’s improvisation are daringly free and ambiguous. As the composer and musicologist Gunther Schuller put it, “Picasso” is “a free-form, free-association continuity which breaks the bounds of anything previously conceived in jazz.”

Perhaps thinking of Casals brought to mind another famous Spanish Pablo. The title of the piece may shed some light on Hawkins’s intentions for it. Eschewing the in-jokes, puns (Powell’s “Tempus Fugue-It”), abstract musical exposition (Monk’s “Epistrophy”), self-reference (Parker’s “Chasin’ the Bird”), and onomatopoeia (the word “bebop” itself) endemic to modern jazz titles, it implicitly aligns Hawkins with the prototypical practitioner of modern art, whose break from the traditional functions and aesthetic values of European painting is manifest at a glance. Calling the performance “Picasso” suggests both tribute and identification, even a claim of identity between what Hawkins is doing in the piece, and the painter’s artistic project. Along with the performance’s showily heterodox and disorienting musical design, the title indicates, at once, a portrait of Picasso as an artist, and a self-identification of Hawkins’s musical goals with the revolutionary modernization of art for which Picasso’s name stands. Even if the title wasn’t chosen by Hawkins (there is no evidence it wasn’t, but in those days, song titles were often chosen by record producers), it is expressive of the attitude of the piece with regards to the conventions of jazz performance, even the ones not already unsettled by bebop.
Hawkins’s devotion to artistic progress also expresses itself through the performance’s dramatic presentation. Running unaccompanied through arpeggios and scales, ascending and descending, in a variety of tempos and keys, hammering at comparatively hard keys for the saxophone such as B natural and F sharp, alternating technical abstraction with snatches of familiar melody and idiomatic elements, all these features of “Picasso” evoke the ritual of solo practising that, like its communal counterpart the jam session, is fundamental to expanding both individual skill (“chops”) and the expressive palette of jazz as a whole. Jazz lore is full of tales of heroic practice regimens. The account of the alto saxophonist Earl Bostic (as told to the younger tenorist Benny Golson) is a relatively restrained one: “I knew I was going to New York, so I approached it like a job. I would start at 8 o'clock, take a lunch break from 12 to 1, and play to 5, every day except Sunday.” Bostic was not a “modernist,” but a master technician, and an important early employer and mentor of John Coltrane – the leading figure of the 1960s jazz avant-garde, and another legendary “practiser.” The version that Hawkins himself told to a Scottish reporter in 1934, in which his mother has to interrupt his constant practising to tell him it’s meal time, is typical. Hawkins’s later revisionist touting of “Picasso” as unpremeditated serves only to strengthen its evocativeness of the private, ephemeral music of the practice session, the uncompensated and undocumented technical work that lies behind the paid work on the bandstand and in the recording studio.

In evoking this private ritual of artistic and professional development – and, audaciously, putting it on public display, “on the record,” as it were – Hawkins calls to mind another version of Picasso, Gertrude Stein’s portrait of him in 1912 as a dedicated professional, “one who was working,” who “was needing to be working so as to be one being working.” If, in fact, Hawkins’s “Picasso” is also to be taken partly as a portrait of the painter, its implications – through the medium of jazz performance – are similar to that of the Stein portrait. Stein’s insistence on Picasso’s disciplinary application – she refers to him “working” more than twenty times – seems intended, at least in part, as a defence of the artistic integrity of his work, and, by analogy, hers as well: even if the product of his, and her, labour is sometimes “a perplexing thing, a disconcerting thing, . . . a complicated thing . . . a repellant thing,” the labour itself is its justification, its guarantee of legitimacy, even more than its immediate or eventual influence. That said, to Stein, Picasso is also, above all, “One whom some were certainly following” and there can be no doubt of Hawkins’s influence on his peers, although by 1948 the popularity of
his rival Lester Young’s sparer tenor saxophone style had diluted his pre-eminence somewhat. (Young, not Hawkins, was the favourite soloist of Parker and most of the bebop generation.) Hawkins’s decision to perform solo expresses his determination not to give ground, forcing other musicians into the position of following his lead, rather than collaborating with him directly, in his innovations.

Mainly, though, “Picasso” is both an expression and a defence of the state of the art: just as Stein does for Picasso’s new art in her portrait, Hawkins’s exposure of the “offstage” work of practising in “Picasso” emphasizes the discipline, the commitment to technical development, that lies behind the new jazz’s unfamiliar noises. Such artistic self-affirmation might have been among the objectives of the “exhibitionist” tendencies that at least a couple of critics at the time alleged had infiltrated Hawkins’s performances during his European exile. For all avant-garde art, in its refusal to be bound by convention and audience expectation, opens itself up to questions of credibility and competence; and perhaps Hawkins also recognized that, particularly in the case of African-American avant-garde art, the questioning of competence would inevitably be shaded and sharpened by the assumption, or implication, of racial inferiority. Understood in this context, Hawkins’s display of solo virtuosity and flaunting of “modernist” musical elements have a purposeful, rather than merely ostentatious, ring. If Stein's publication of her portrait in 1912 announced her endorsement of, and affiliation with, Picasso and the postimpressionist movement, Coleman Hawkins’s recording and release of “Picasso” is an announcement too: using a rhetorical strategy analogous to that of Stein’s portrait, it defiantly affirms its own art value, and at the same time specifies the aesthetic standards according to which it ought to be understood and judged. But Hawkins’s much greater cultural, geographic, and chronological distance from Picasso’s sensational period make the self-reflexive resonances of his tribute quite different from those of Stein’s. At the very least, for Hawkins as an African-American popular musician in the Jim Crow-era United States, the stakes were much higher. The professional and cultural circumstances of the bebop period compelled Hawkins to interpret Johnson’s dictum (“be modernistic”) more narrowly than he might have during the swing boom. With Picasso’s cultural authority – and the cultural authority of the modern art movement for which his name stands – enormously amplified from the time Stein published her portrait, any claims of artistic legitimacy by association or analogy were necessarily going to be one-way. Even more than his inhabiting the role of the concert virtuoso, performing at the Los Angeles Philharmonic
Auditorium and at Carnegie Hall, “Picasso” is Hawkins’s boldly unambiguous assertion of his music’s claim to the status of art music – and not just art music, but modernist art music, with all the cultural mobility that status entails.

3.2 New Lester Leaps In (For Sentimental Reasons)

It seems almost inevitable, if only in retrospect, that the experimental small-group jazz of the post-swing period should have come to conceive of itself along these lines. Although the after-hours jam session was, as Ellison put it, “the jazzman’s true academy,” most of the bebop generation, and almost all of the avant-gardists that followed, had received some degree of formal music instruction. Most had taken lessons, or studied music in school, or played in school bands. Some, as Ellison notes, were conservatory trained: the trumpeter Miles Davis, who first came to prominence in Parker’s quintet – and later, as a popular bandleader, would shepherd modern jazz through a number of stylistic changes of fashion – spent a year at Juilliard between 1944 and 1945. Somewhat later, returning veterans had the option of attending private music colleges on the G. I. Bill of 1944. Eric Porter describes a few of the formal and quasi-formal music education programs, some of them funded by the New Deal, that proliferated in African-American communities of the ’30s and ’40s; these taught a broad range of theory and practice – teachers were university- as well as jazz-educated – and contributed to the training of many future jazz stars, including Dexter Gordon and Charles Mingus. The young musicians who benefitted from these higher levels of instruction entered a pedagogical environment in which the techniques and theory of European modernism were freshly – but already quite firmly – entrenched. Stravinsky was revered and widely studied; the teaching of harmony may well have been facilitated by Schoenberg’s Harmonielehre, then gaining currency in American institutions. (The programs cited by Porter were based in Los Angeles, where Schoenberg himself began teaching in 1936.) Those who were exposed to this environment, either directly or through their instructors, would have encountered not just modernism itself, but the spectre of a “progressive,” “radical,” even “revolutionary” music that had nonetheless rapidly acquired academic respectability. Such prestige – such mystique – can only have compounded the intrinsic allure of the new and the musically exotic. If, for young African-American men during the swing boom, musical proficiency carried the promise of social advancement, modernism suggested that this
could be accomplished without artistic compromise; indeed, it suggested that a particularly desirable kind of respectability, seemingly independent of the whims of the marketplace, could only be achieved through technical experimentation. And students and teachers alike within the “educational networks” described by Porter would have had ample reason to be drawn to the aura of social, aesthetic, and psychic liberation that had accrued to modernism’s implied critique of the classical tradition. It seems likely that this pedagogical environment at least contributed to the nascent artistic self-image of many members of the bebop generation. And it may explain why, for those musicians, the recognition of their music as a “serious,” autonomous art presupposed some degree of identification with modernism. In any event, the modernist techniques and lore picked up by those fortunate enough to have access to such instruction soon entered the common pool of professional knowledge, spreading through word of mouth, shared practice sessions, public performances (including records), and, of course, “the jazzman’s true academy.”

For the critics, mostly white and university educated, whose experience of modernism’s institutional entrenchment had been that much more direct and pervasive, the up-to-date dissonances of bebop supplied (often after an initial reaction of bewilderment and disgust) a ready framework for understanding what was happening in jazz, as well as in African-American music generally. The widespread adoption of these techniques by musicians, either for art’s own sake or simply to stay current, implied to many commentators an attitude of collective resistance toward the jazz mainstream. In light of the period’s rapidly stabilizing critical conceptions of the aims of modern art, it was easy to draw a parallel between this ostensible attitude of resistance and modernism’s fraught relationship with the popular audience, as well as (less often) the growing political resistance of young African Americans. Meanwhile, the commitment to technical development evinced by the new jazz’s constantly expanding musical vocabulary seemed self-evidently in line with modernism’s ideology of evolutionary artistic progress; indeed, the “progress” of jazz, after all a wholly modern art form, could be traced through a succession of “periods” or “eras” – none lasting much longer than about a decade – from folk origins to the polyphonic “New Orleans” style to swing, culminating in the present avant-gardism. The potential for further development was a matter of fervent speculation. Some critics – including the ones who promoted a teleological periodization of jazz history – assumed that integration with modern art music in the European tradition was inevitable, “the
logical and desirable outcome of the jazzman’s attempt to achieve musical maturity.”82 Still others, as Eric Porter has shown, weighed the possibility that the larger movement for African-American artistic and political self-determination might subtend the future development of jazz.83 This view, which emerged at the end of forties, would gain general currency a decade later. (The title of LeRoi Jones’s 1967 collection of essays on the jazz avant-garde, Black Music, encapsulates the critical framework connecting jazz modernism to African-American cultural nationalism.) Philip Larkin’s synthesis of these ideas, composed in 1968 as the introduction to his volume of record reviews, All What Jazz, is probably the most notorious; but, by his own admission, Larkin’s assessment of the meaning, origins, and destiny of modern jazz is idiosyncratic mainly in holding the standard analogy with modernism against it: to Larkin, the technical involution of modern jazz, like that of “modernist” art generally, only marked its decisive and increasing disconnection from “human values,” reflecting an artistically barren turn toward mystification and outrageousness for its own sake. Above all, to Larkin, modern jazz was an expression of politicized insolence toward the music’s former, predominately white audience: “From using music to entertain the white man, the Negro had moved on to hating him with it.”84

For the most part, though, as DeVeaux has argued, critics of a musicological and even historical bent opted to play down the role that socioeconomic factors and political energies might have played in shaping bebop’s fractured rhythms and starkly dissonant sonorities – the better to help create for jazz, and especially modern jazz, an aura of creative autonomy as “America’s classical music.”85 The musicians too tended to shy away, at least in public, from the overtly politicized rhetoric of even some of their Swing Era predecessors,86 as if conscious of how vulnerable to political (to say nothing of racial) assault were their nascent and socially useful claims to high art status, how dangerous might be any suggestion of militancy. Exceptions were few until the mid-to-late sixties, when the assassination of Malcolm X and the emerging Black Power movement would embolden musicians such as the “New Thing” tenorist Archie Shepp to engage in explicit social critique in the pages of industry journals such as Down Beat, and from the stage at the prestigious Newport Jazz Festival.87 Now that the connections between what DeVeaux calls bebop’s “unmistakable edge of resistance” and the sociopolitical conditions and emotions that gave rise to African-American cultural nationalism are virtually an accepted fact of jazz scholarship,88 Ellison’s remark (in a 1964 review of Jones’s Blues People) that the architects of bebop were “the least political of men” is, on first reading, perplexing. It could be that, in
responding to what he read as Jones’s after-the-fact characterization of bebop as “a conscious gesture of separatism,” Ellison simply overstated his point; but his outsider’s perspective on the politics of the movement is revealing of how the bebop “revolution” might have presented itself to politically engaged observers.  

Perhaps this partly explains the ambivalence with which the development of jazz was treated by the African-American intellectual establishment during, and even well after, the advent of bebop. The historian Jonathan Gill if anything understates the pervasiveness of the controversy when he notes (invoking Alain Locke’s Harlem Renaissance touchstone The New Negro) that bebop “divided New Negroes from Newer Negroes.” In fact, many of the latter were as nonplussed by bebop as the former, for a complex of social and aesthetic reasons. Already uncertain attitudes towards earlier forms of jazz – in its prior guises as a modern vernacular music and an industrially co-opted mass entertainment – were bound to be brought to crisis by the new avant-gardism. In the prologue to Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), the eponymous narrator smokes reefer and listens to a recording of a Louis Armstrong trumpet solo in the solitude of his underground bunker, implicitly situating jazz improvisation within the hermetic isolation and detachment synonymous with European modernism. Armstrong’s music even serves a subversive function on the alienating urban landscape of modernity, taking the form of a weapon (the trumpeter “bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound”) in the narrator’s private war against “Monopolated Light & Power.” At the same time, an essentialist conception of artistic authenticity, reminiscent of Eliot’s theories on “tradition,” is suggested in the way the passage has Armstrong’s improvisation evoke the original catastrophes of African-American heritage and art: the narrator hears inscribed in the music the image of “an old woman singing a spiritual,” and beneath that “a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body.” Such a troping of the jazz improviser’s relationship to African-American heritage is not original to Ellison: Langston Hughes’s slightly earlier poem, “Trumpet Player: 52nd Street” (1947), revolves around a remarkably similar conceit. Ellison would later make explicit the analogy between Armstrong’s relationship to his musical heritage and Eliot’s poetic technique in a 1962 essay on Charlie Parker. In both that essay and Invisible Man, Armstrong’s art (and, in Hughes’s poem, the anonymous 52nd Street trumpeter’s art) figures as a quintessentially modern aesthetic, the cosmopolitan culmination of a vernacular tradition, freighted with authentically African-
American history and historical trauma, but with a thoroughly up-to-date frame of reference and cultural function. That is to say, in this Eliotic (or perhaps ultimately Poundian) formulation of the status and meaning of modern art, Armstrong’s improvisations at once express the political present, and the essence of a racial heritage. But what is the place in this formulation for artists such as Hawkins and Parker, who self-consciously aspire to modernism?

Looking over the writings of those who were, or have come to be regarded as, the major figures of African-American thought during this time, one finds little to corroborate the contemporary cultural critic Eric Lott’s assessment of bebop as “one of the great modernisms,” or his claim that it “made a virtue of isolation” from mass culture. Given the inescapability of swing bands in the popular media and performing business of the ’30s and ’40s, the idea that any kind of jazz could set itself apart from the marketplace must have seemed far-fetched. Ellison himself seems never to have definitely decided what the musical abstractions of bebop signified, and tailored his characterization of the movement’s ambitions and achievement to his immediate rhetorical purpose and venue. For Esquire in 1959, bebop was a “revolution in culture”; to encounter it was to look upon “the serious face of art.” But for the New York Review in 1964, it was merely “a fresh form of entertainment,” whose bracing superficial novelty was calculated to create a niche for young African-Americans – “their fair share” – in the heretofore white-dominated entertainment market. (Ellison’s claim recalls the statement of intent attributed to Thelonious Monk, and seized upon by Larkin: “We’re going to create something they can’t steal, because they can't play it.”) Elsewhere, in the essay on Parker (for the Saturday Review), Ellison draws a contrast between Armstrong – who, in his stage persona and with his instrumental prowess at once inhabits, parodies, and transcends the traditional role of clown and minstrel – and the jazz modernists who strive to “rid themselves of the entertainer’s role,” in pursuit of a “purity of status which by definition is impossible for the performing artist.” Turning their backs on what they saw as the elder musician’s Uncle Tomish self-effacement, Parker and his school end up misprizing Armstrong’s genuinely modernist achievement, his music’s encapsulation of tradition. According to Ellison, the result of this “thrust toward respectability” is a “crabbed and constricted” style, and a no less degraded relation to the audience: in the artist’s determination to escape the role of the entertainer, he makes his own private dissolution into a clownish spectacle for public consumption, leaving both life and art finally “drained of human significance.”
Ellison’s characterization of the public’s attitude towards Parker illustrates one reason why African-American intellectuals might have been suspicious of “modern” jazz’s potential to effect a change in audience relations established during the Swing Era. The selling of the music’s novelty, and its air of “authentic” (i.e., black) urban seediness, to a sensation-starved public, figures in Gwendolyn Brooks’s early “reportorial” poem, “I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s,” from her second book Annie Allen (1949). The poem records, with sardonic effusiveness, the expectations and eventual disappointment of a group of moneyed white visitors to a cafe in the predominately black Chicago neighbourhood of Bronzeville. Like their friends, who rent “a very large cabana, / Small palace” in Venice, “and eat mostly what is strange” (ll. 16-17), these patrons of Benvenuti’s are tourists of a kind, also amateur ethnographers: they arrive giddily bent on “observing tropical truths” about the “dusky folk, so clamorous! / So colorfully incorrect, / So amorous” (ll. 2-5). (“That used to be a very popular sport for whites,” Brooks reflected in a 1986 interview, “to go to black cafes and watch the natives perform.”

Like Ellison’s audience for Parker, they come looking to be shocked, but along specific, preconceived, racialized lines: violence, lasciviousness, squalor, “clowning,” “One knows and scarcely knows what to expect” (l. 9).

To that end, they feed the jukebox. A hit parade-like stanza announces its contents:

They play “They All Say I’m The Biggest Fool”
And “Voo Me On The Vot Nay” and “New Lester Leaps In” and “For Sentimental Reasons.” (ll. 38-40)

Sandwiched in between a Buddy Johnson rhythm and blues hit, a “jive” novelty by the vocal group the Basin Street Boys (properly called “Voot-Nay on the Vot-Nay”), and what is probably Nat King Cole’s hit version of a pop standard – all from 1946 – is Lester Young’s revision, from the same year, of his 1939 signature small-group theme, “Lester Leaps In.”

The tourists’ – and the poem’s – fastening on this title plays up the novelty appeal, the promise of ephemerally “new” sensations, at the heart of the marketing of the bebop generation’s favourite tenor, and the laconic dissonances of his style. Here, the marketing is direct, and the transaction explicit: the recording is “bought” for a nickel. Among the sensations being sold is Young’s provocative “hipster” public persona: of the four record titles given, only his is broken by enjambment, effecting a crucial dislocation of emphasis, whereby instead of simply designating the record as a
new version of the saxophonist’s signature tune, the title heralds the disruptive “leaping in” – enacted at the start of the next line – of a “New Lester,” the embodiment of trendy, insolent, African-American “cool.”\textsuperscript{103} But the product is disappointing:

For all the nickels in
Have not bought savagery or defined a “folk.”

The colored people will not “clown.” (ll. 42-44)

The music compounds the “subtle treasons” of the cafe’s patrons and wait staff, who refuse to “take the part of jester” (ll. 32-33), its coolly sophisticated surface representing impudence of a different kind than the “antics . . . / Dirty, rich, carmine, hot, not bottled up, / Straining in sexual soprano” (ll. 10-12) that the tourists expect. Their discomfiture may well constitute the first act of the “grim comedy of racial manners” of which Ellison writes in the Parker essay, the initial result, that is, of modern jazz’s undeferential stance towards its audience.\textsuperscript{104} On the other hand, the poem’s lone simile suggests that the tourists’ experience of Benvenuti’s, including Young’s music, might make further cultural rapprochement possible: set apart by the conspicuousness of the trope and in their booth – neither full participants in the exchange culture of the cafe, nor strictly spectators – they sit at a table that is “initialled, rubbed, as a desk at school” (l. 30). Their point of contact with “the colored people” is literally inscribed by those black customers who have occupied the same position – physically, and as consumers – before, and it promises the kind of education that the last stanza provides, as the tourists and their expectations recede and the cafe’s function as part of the commercial economy of Bronzeville is laid bare: “The colored people arrive, sit firmly down,” purchase and consume their meals (listed with the same banal specificity as the records in the jukebox), and “go firmly out of the door,” all almost without a sound (ll. 45-48). The likes of “New Lester Leaps In” fill in the silence, so long as there is someone willing to pay to hear them: the records are as much a part of the merchandise of Benvenuti’s as the “Express Spaghetti.”

This is the context Brooks’s poem gives to Young’s art. Jazz scholars often treat Young as a “transitional figure” on the road to modern jazz (but then, what highly influential player is not, in some sense, “transitional”?); he was not, perhaps, a wilful modernist, or striver after respectability, like Hawkins, but – as we have already noted – he was the primary influence on Charlie Parker, and his style helped give rise, not just through Parker, to the disjunct melodic
motion of bebop generally. “Lester Leaps In” itself swiftly became one of the “standard” original uptempo themes of modern jazz, performed by Parker (as a feature of Granz’s “Jazz at the Philharmonic,” and also in other settings), James Moody, and Sonny Stitt, as well as countless others. Young’s status as a progenitor of the jazz avant-garde was thus apparent from early on, as was the place of “Lester Leaps In” in the repertoire. But in “I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s,” Young’s re-recording of the song is quite literally compartmentalized within the strictly commercial context of the jukebox, closed off from musicians’ culture and the networks of enculturation therein. It exists as little more than a fleeting low-cost diversion, unmistakably a mass-produced product of American industry. If the music is more mannered or abstract than its purchasers expect, if it fails to satisfy their quintessentially modernist-era taste for “savagery,” it is nonetheless unable to transcend or even momentarily escape an environment of monetary exchange. So long as it is in the jukebox, it will always be on sale, sold, and unowned; customers can pay for it, but cannot take it home. In this way, its potential aesthetic, social or cultural value is similarly constrained. Certainly, it has failed to execute the manoeuvre described in Brooks’s celebrated sonnet from the sequence “The Womanhood” in the same volume, the movement from the vernacular to the “civilize[d]” space signified by the change of instrument from “fiddle” to “violin.” In a no-man’s land of late capitalism between the vernacular and the conservatory, it speaks on behalf of (or to) no particular subject or social class; nor does it stand apart, self-sufficient in the manner of high art – the latter represented by the litany of European composers in Brooks’s earlier poem “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” or, for that matter, in the relentlessly elevated discourse of much of Annie Allen. In more local terms, the collocation of Young’s recording with a pair of popular hits and a humorous novelty shows the difficulty faced by any music presented as jazz, or with evident roots in a jazz style, in attempting to break free artistically or in terms of audience perception from established mechanisms of popular music promotion and reception.

If resistance to the insidious mediocrity and deadening restrictiveness of mass culture was one of the standards for African-American art of the generation after the Harlem Renaissance, it makes sense that modern jazz, which aspired to a general audience by taking on the trappings of high art, would fail to measure up. For all its musical allusions to Stravinsky, its dance-resistant rhythms and seeming disregard for memorable melody, modern jazz was neither independent of, nor could it afford to be indifferent to, the demands of the market. Whatever intrigue its avant-
gardist superficies might hold, its critique of mass culture, and the social conditions engendered by the economic and political status quo, could in that sense appear fundamentally compromised. Of bebop’s subversive air, Ellison was sceptical: “today,” he wrote in the New York Review, “nothing succeeds like rebellion.” But even if he did not think of the music’s apparent higher ambitions as in some sense fraudulent, he did tend to regard the idiom as too limited to realize them. Despite referring to the music’s “self-assertive passion” in Esquire, he was elsewhere dubious of modern jazz’s capacity to turn the creative and personal frustrations of young African-Americans into viable, self-sustaining art. But at least he liked what he heard – some of the time. Some listeners – notably among them Ellison’s friend and sometime rival Richard Wright – who might have welcomed, at least in theory, an African-American music of a truly radical cast, found themselves with little patience for the aesthetic actuality of bebop. If it tells us nothing else, Ellison’s seemingly two-minded attitude to the subject encapsulates modern jazz’s double bind: either its frenetic surfaces represented mere pandering to a popular entertainment business driven by novelty and sensation, or they were artistically sincere, and socially or even politically meaningful, but too repellent to celebrate.

That repellency, once conceded, could itself become a topic of debate, as writers speculated as to the causes and significance of the unprecedented demands placed by the new jazz on its audiences’ attention and comprehension. Could it be that there was an expressive relationship between the unsettled tone of the music, with its unresolved dissonances and sudden outbursts from the drums (“bombs”), and the discrimination and violence encountered by the musicians as a matter of course in New York and other northern cities? In one of a long-running series of prose dialogues showcasing the social commentary of the fictitious Harlem Everyman Jesse B. “Simple” Semple, published in 1949 in the Chicago Defender (probably the premier African-American newspaper of the time), Langston Hughes traced the percussive sound of bebop to the familiar urban social fact of unpremeditated police assault:

“Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says ‘BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP!’ [. . . ] That’s where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro’s head into those horns and saxophones and the piano keys that plays it.”
Such beatings, and the charges of resisting arrest and disorderly conduct that invariably came with them, were common in northern cities well into the ’60s. Miles Davis, by then world-famous, was the victim of one in New York City in 1959, prompting a lawsuit and transatlantic outcry. A decade and a half earlier, in Philadelphia in 1945, Bud Powell was – allegedly – beaten over the head badly enough that his mental functioning was permanently impaired. For “Simple,” these abuses do not simply account for the sound and spirit of bebop, but fundamentally constitute “what Bop is.” At least, the constant threat of violence under which young African Americans live provides the sine qua non for comprehending the music: “Folks who ain’t suffered much cannot play Bop, neither appreciate it. They think Bop is nonsense – like you.” The dialogue’s final impasse illustrates this incommensurability:

“Your explanation depresses me,” I said.
“Your nonsense depresses me,” said Simple.

The music is figured as virtually an involuntary response to violence (“. . . beaten right out of some Negro’s head into those horns and saxophones . . . ”). But it takes its artistic justification from that very immediacy. This sets Hughes’s contextualization of bebop apart from those of his contemporaries, notably among them Simone de Beauvoir, who diagnosed the music as a similarly automatic, but creatively inert, reaction to the desperation and overstimulation of modern city life. Hughes does not play down the youth and restlessness of bebop musicians (“Them young colored kids who started it, they know what Bop is”), nor the music’s inescapable association with earlier, commercialized jazz styles (Simple’s improvised “nonsense singing” along to a Dizzy Gillespie recording reminds his interlocutor of “Cab Calloway back in the old scat days” of the 1930s). But – to Simple, at least – neither is allowed to detract from the music’s autonomy as art, its seeming creation ex nihilo out of no pre-existing musical materials: it is unambiguously “started” (as opposed to synthesized, developed, or promoted) by its authentic practitioners, and involves no inauthentic musical “imitation” (“. . . like most of the white boys play”) – except, perhaps, in the Aristotelian sense. Its sole materials are the political, sensory, and emotional ones of modernity, specifically as apprehended by young African Americans. To Simple, this pedigree imbues bebop with its essential and lasting noteworthiness as a cultural phenomenon. And, indeed, scholarly studies of bebop, including DeVeaux’s, almost invariably
cite this dialogue as evidence of the music’s social resonance, taking Simple’s views to be more or less a reflection of Hughes’s own.

To Simple’s interlocutor, bebop is already “passé, gone, finished,” and the Gillespie record – which could not date back any further than the end of the American Federation of Musicians’ recording strike of 1942-1944 – already “old.” Indeed, bebop’s short stay in the sun as a commercial proposition and large-scale popular fad was all but done by the end of 1949. But the fact that the two men are still debating the movement’s significance at that late date indicates that it is an issue of continuing currency – that its cultural moment has not wholly passed, and that the sound of its protest still resonates: as Simple puts it, “its riffs remain behind.” (The social and political “riffs” of bebop – no longer conceived of as a thing of the past – would later become a major structuring conceit of Hughes’s 1951 verse sequence, Montage of a Dream Deferred.) The readiness with which Simple is able to refer the music’s motivating impulse to current events – “bring[ing] race into everything, [ . . .], even music,” as his interlocutor complains – assumes for modern jazz much wider-ranging social resonance than Brooks or (for the most part) Ellison. When Simple plays his Dizzy Gillespie record on a Sunday, “filling the Sabbath with Bop,” and sings responsively, his actions suggest, at once, the music’s enduring centrality to Harlem’s spiritual life, and the veneration reserved for the object of art in a secular age.

Although the dialogue is thus in some ways implicitly a defence of the art value of bebop, at this point Hughes’s interest in the music is primarily in the way it can be seen to express the conditions, social and psychic, for urban musicians and their young, similarly alienated enthusiasts. This much Hughes has in common with other commentators of the time who concentrated on the social and political resonance of jazz modernism. But even if this perspective helped to establish that the new jazz was worthy of critical engagement, it did not make it any easier to embrace aesthetically; and the music’s at least vestigial entanglement with the entertainment business made it easy to dismiss out of hand – or treat “reportorially,” like Brooks – for those cultural avant-gardists who had no taste for it.

This is not to say that the desire for an original, distinctively African-American, modern art music wasn’t of long standing among African-American intellectuals by mid-century. Hughes,
for one, would have remembered it as among the original desiderata of the Harlem Renaissance – as would Ellison, who studied composition at the Tuskegee Institute in the ’30s, under the tutelage of the prominent Renaissance composer William L. Dawson. At least until the beginning of the Swing Era, it was widely assumed that such music might even come out of jazz – or at any rate have prominent jazz elements. In an essay published in Harper’s in 1928, James Weldon Johnson wrote of the closing of the period of African-American “folk creative effort,” and the coincident emergence of “the individual Negro artist, the conscious artist.” The examples Johnson cites of the former, expressions of the innate “creative genius of the race,” are mainly musical, so it is with some impatience that, towards the end of the essay, he asserts that “with all the great native musical endowment he is conceded to possess, the Negro has not in this most propitious time produced a single outstanding composer.” Implicit in this hortatory passage is the expectation that the existing products of the African-American “native musical endowment,” including “his secular music – Ragtime, Blues, Jazz, and the work songs,” would and should inform the work of such a composer. Earlier in the essay, Johnson proposes that a similar amalgam of “folk” and “conscious” elements, namely the integration of spiritual songs into classical structures, as executed by the country’s “serious composers,” may yet produce “the ‘great American music’ that has so long been looked for.” Since, as Johnson notes, “The one thing that may be termed artistic, by which the United States is known the world over, is its Negro-derived popular music,” the incorporation of jazz techniques, along with other elements from African-American vernacular music culture, is integral to his sense of the modernist mandate of the American (and thus African-American) composer.

The idea had already figured in Johnson’s novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, first published anonymously in 1912, then reissued under his name in 1927, shortly before the appearance of the Harper’s essay. The narrator, a nameless but prodigiously gifted pianist, dreams of creating a “new American music . . . based on Negro themes,” fusing the techniques and vocabulary of his classical training with those of the ragtime he discovers in New York (“Jazz,” as such, “was unknown then,” as Carl Van Vechten points out in his preface to the 1927 edition. Ragtime, with its syncopated rhythms and improvisation, was, in a sense, a precursor to later jazz, and especially jazz piano, styles.) Fired by “an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form,” he seems poised to become, according to the exact specifications set forth in the Harper’s essay, the
world’s first great African-American composer, until a lynching he witnesses while song-collecting in the South compels him to trade on his light skin and pass (106, 126-29). So he comes to abdicate the cultural mission ordained for artists in the Harper’s essay, of advancing the cause of African-American enfranchisement by promoting the distinctive contributions of African Americans to American culture as a whole. In the end, he gives up music altogether, and in the novel’s famous closing passage, looks over his abandoned compositions with the feeling that he, like Esau, has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage (140). Despite its narrator’s ultimate defeatism, The Autobiography is an important document of early African-American musical modernism, as well as of modern jazz’s prehistory. In one especially prescient passage, Johnson has his narrator perceive (albeit with a touch of derision) an affinity between the techniques of an African-American ragtime virtuoso and those of “the modern innovators who strive after originality by seeing how cleverly they can dodge about through the rules of harmony and at the same time avoid melody” (81-2). The narrator himself admits, recalling his childhood music lessons, an impish attraction to “strange harmonies” at the piano’s extreme reaches, and a fascination with the dissonances that can be produced with the instrument’s “black keys” (32). One wonders what Johnson would have made of bebop’s conscious gestures in this direction, had he lived to hear them, and not died in his car in 1938, at the height of the Swing Era.

Johnson’s Ex-Coloured Man speaks condescendingly of the “modern” impulse in European art music, but his own modernist inclinations are readily apparent, both in the stated aims of his musical project, and in his excitement over the repeatedly stressed “novelty” of ragtime. But it is a complicated and contradictory modernism. His breathless account of this “music of a kind I had never heard before,” with its “barbaric harmonies,” “audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another,” and “intricate rhythms” in which accents fall “in the most unexpected places” (80), anticipates one of the central paradoxes of the literature of modern jazz: as in Ellison, the artistic integrity of the music is ascribed in one stroke to its radical modernity, and to its “authentic” manifestation of African-American folk tradition. And, as in Ellison, the tension cannot quite be resolved or synthesized with the musical materials at hand, and makes itself felt discursively. Hence the ragtime virtuoso who is at once conceded to be the “master of a good deal of technique,” but also utterly ignorant of theory (knowing “no more of the theory of music than . . . the theory of the universe”), naively guided by “natural musical
instinct and talent” (80). The potential for resolution presumably rests in the narrator’s unrealized, and possibly at this time unrealizable, musical project. Perhaps for this reason, the thwarted and equivocal modernist ambitions of the Ex-Coloured Man would reverberate in the mainstream of African-American artistic thought for decades, manifesting in recognizable form as late as Melvin B. Tolson’s massive, largely unfinished poem of the 1960s, *Harlem Gallery*, in the tragic artist-figure of Mister Starks, “the piano-modernist / of the Harlem Renaissance.”125 That appellation, conferred upon Starks by Tolson’s narrating “Curator” of the African-American artistic tradition, exploits the double meaning of the name of Starks’s instrument: the implicit musical direction in “piano-modernist” expresses at once the stifled potential, the compromises, isolation, and final suicidal silence yielded by the unresolved discursive and social dissonances inherent in Starks’s musical designs, as well as the artistic fate he has inherited from Johnson’s Ex-Coloured Man.126

Both in the *Autobiography* and in the *Harper’s* article, despite Johnson’s apparent conviction that the language of jazz might help to bring about a distinctively and authentically African-American art music, there is an attendant assumption that higher artistic legitimacy for freely improvisatory vernacular musicality can only be obtained by transposing it to the disciplined sphere of “classical” music. The idea is present, too, in more than strictly vestigial or ironic form, even in Tolson’s heavily ironic epic: both Tolson’s “Curator” and Mister Starks seem to imagine a career trajectory for the African-American modernist whereby the nightclub gig and jukebox hit are necessarily mere stepping-stones on the way to the symphony hall. (Meanwhile, the solitary reference Tolson’s poem makes to modern jazz is a bitingly dismissive one.127) This aspirational model expresses the compulsion, typical of the Harlem Renaissance generation, as the musician and cultural critic Salim Washington has explained, “to improve African-American music by transforming it into forms developed for the European art music tradition.”128

Johnson’s Ex-Coloured Man himself characterizes the reverse procedure – the infusion of European classical techniques and structures into a vernacular idiom – as “a comparatively easy task,” at best a mere display of ingenuity, without the same potential for elevating the material (102-3); classical music, implicitly, has less to gain in the transaction, and more to lose. In a 1997 book extolling (and subtitled) “the Success of the Harlem Renaissance,” Jon Michael Spencer sums up that movement’s musical aims in terms similar to, if less critical than, Washington’s: pointing to such formally and orchestrally oriented African-American composers
of the ’20s, ’30s, and ’40s as William L. Dawson, R. Nathaniel Dett, and William Grant Still, Spencer asserts that “the Renaissance in music [was] a ‘classical movement’ – that is, a Renaissance of black vernacular sources but classical forms. Ragtime, blues, and jazz were the wells to which the Renaissance artists went for the substance – the themes, rhythms and ‘feel’ – of their ‘high’ art.”

Perhaps the prevalence of this attitude during the first third or so of the century sheds additional light on the already marked dual motion of the modern jazz movement, towards the classical recital hall, on those rare occasions when it was accessible, and towards the conservatory, by then thoroughly pervaded by European modernism. However different may have been their sense of its artistic potential, the generation of African-American musicians who took it upon themselves to “modernize” jazz in the ’40s and ’50s had been raised on the teachings, aspirations, and prescriptions of Johnson and other African-American cultural critics of his era. (As DeVeaux points out, the “bop pioneers” were nearly all born between 1917 and 1924.)

The Harlem Renaissance ideology of “mastery of form” (as Spencer terms it, linking concepts from Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Alain Locke), applied to the conventional forms of European art music as well as to those of the vernacular musics, had extraordinary tenacity: it would influence African-American composers in the jazz idiom from Duke Ellington well into the period of the politically radical jazz “avant-garde” of the 1960s, with works such as Charles Mingus’s “ballet” *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* aspiring to classical grandeur by modelling themselves on European orchestral styles in form, technique, and even theme, while at the same time advertising the “folk” derivation of their source materials. Such conceits became less common as orchestral jazz declined in popularity, and as modern jazz artists began to promote a reappraisal of their idiom as an art music tradition in itself. But the persistence of efforts to adapt African-American vernacular music to the structures and spaces of European art music attests to the formative influence of this Harlem Renaissance initiative on the more artistically serious quarters of jazz culture. Long after Johnson’s death, African-American musicians would continue to shoulder the responsibility of creating “high” art that would honour, but be formally distinct from, the “folk” (and later, “popular”) arts of the past.

But even as Renaissance composers took up the call in the late ’20s and ’30s, not all commentators affiliated with the movement were convinced that the transposition of folk elements into classical structures was all that was needed to bring African-American music in
line with the demands of modernity. “Eventually the art-music and the folk-music must be fused in a vital but superior product,” wrote Alain Locke in his scholarly 1936 treatise *The Negro and His Music*, at the time the most comprehensive text on the subject to date. Tracing African-American musical expression from spirituals, blues, and work songs through minstrelsy, ragtime, and then-current developments in jazz, Locke distinguishes “jazz classics” – technically exemplary performances of “typically racial or ‘pure’ style” – from “classical jazz,” art music in the European tradition, but with jazz influences (94, 10). In the latter category, he places two Ellington compositions, “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1927) and the extended work “Reminiscing in Tempo” (1935), as well as George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). The discussion of Gershwin and Aaron Copland, among others (112-15), attests to the increasing number of forays by white American and European composers during this period into a musical mode not far off from the one envisioned by Johnson’s *Ex-Coloured Man*. (Stravinsky, for instance, having in the late teens composed two short “ragtimes” for group and solo piano, in 1936 or 1937 composed a two-minute “Praeludium for Jazz Band,” and then, in 1945, the more expansive *Ebony Concerto* for the clarinettist Woody Herman’s band.) Surveying the current musical situation and looking to the future, Locke affirms that “[b]oth the jazz classic and classical jazz are examples of the serious possibilities of the Negro’s music, and both have been vital contributions to the new modernistic music of our time” (97). But he remarks on a tendency in the first phase of “classical jazz” towards “artificial hybrids” – as opposed to “genuine developments of the intimate native idioms of jazz itself” (113-14). Exactly what he means by the distinction is unclear, although elsewhere in the book the word “artificial” is associated with sentimentality, popular entertainment, and commercial co-optation, all of which would be inimical to the desired and anticipated “true union and healthy vigorous fusion of jazz and the classical tradition.” Towards reaching that goal, though, “much yet remains to be done, and one has a right to expect a large share of it from the Negro composer” (114). In the end, Locke wonders if “[e]ven ‘classical jazz,’ promising as it is, is perhaps only a transitional form” (130).

What Johnson, Locke, and other subscribers to W. E. B. Du Bois’s campaign to bring liberal education to the “Talented Tenth” could not have foreseen was the level, and kind, of musical education that would pervade African-American communities as a result of the swing boom. This concentration of musical energies would virtually ensure that the impetus for the development of a self-consciously modernist African-American art music would come from
within jazz itself. Locke does admit that possibility, albeit tentatively, in *The Negro and His Music*: “There is enough genius, however, in the ranks of the professional jazz musicians to do the job” – that is, to overcome the artistic constraints of the commercial music industry, and produce innovative work of lasting quality – “independently” (102). But even so, he speaks of “genius” rather than the very specific training that was, as DeVeaux and Eric Porter demonstrate, the essential precondition for the birth of a jazz avant-garde. That such training would include exposure to the emancipated dissonances of Schoenberg and Stravinsky – already beginning to be absorbed into the standard curriculum of American musical education – resulting in a calculatedly technical music that disconcertingly juxtaposed “popular” forms with bracing (and unmistakably “modern”) discordancy, would also have been hard for Johnson to anticipate. Renaissance-reared authors such as Brooks and Ellison, writing in the wake of the Swing Era, were caught similarly off guard, unprepared for the music’s seemingly sudden change in self-image, ambivalent about its avant-gardist trappings, and politically and artistically suspicious of its residual ties to mass culture. In this way, Langston Hughes, working in the same cultural climate, stands apart: for Hughes was among the very first literary writers, and certainly the first connected with the Harlem Renaissance, to recognize bebop as a conscious modernism, a fulfilment of the Renaissance’s syncretistic musical ambitions, and even a somewhat belated outlet for the movement’s larger cultural aspirations.

### 3.3 Breaks and Disc-tortions

Perhaps this is because Hughes, having by the second half of the ’40s entered a new social realist phase after a decade thoroughly steeped in Marxian dialectics, had begun to think of his own poetic project in similar terms.\(^{138}\) (In this, he makes an instructive contrast with Tolson, who – while at least as interested in the legacies of modernism – shied away both from the roles of social realist and dialectician, and from currents in jazz after the thirties.) Although the title *Montage of a Dream Deferred* invokes the vocabulary of cinema, Hughes’s prefatory note to the sequence defines his technique entirely by analogy with the new jazz modernism:

> In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed – jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop – this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner
of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. \textit{(CP, 387)}

The thinking remains basically dialectical. Hughes’s coinage “disc-tortions” accentuates, as in the Simple story and Brooks’s poem, the technology (and industrial machinery) of music reproduction and distribution as a factor in jazz modernism. It is striking how utterly the musical accompaniment of Hughes’s “be-bop” cycle is alienated from the physical act of playing an instrument, coming instead from the playback of mass-produced, studio-recorded vinyl discs.\textsuperscript{139} Although – as numerous critics have noted\textsuperscript{140} – the form of \textit{Montage} does enact the fragmentation of live bebop improvisation, with its multiplicity of voices, parodic quotations, stock phrases (Hughes’s “figurines” and “figurettes”), responsive choric “commentary,” and other “impudent interjections” (even reproducing Dizzy Gillespie’s signature cry, “Salt’ peanuts!”), the act of playing or witnessing bebop in performance is mentioned explicitly in the text only rarely, in passing, and in detached, elegiac contexts.\textsuperscript{141} One of the few examples, the irregular lyric “Flatted Fifths,” takes its name from the characteristic dissonant sonority of bebop, treating it as a figure for the severely restricted economic and social opportunities available to Harlem youth. Hughes invokes, formally as well as verbally, the “Little cullud boys with beards” who, “frantic, kick their draftee years / into flatted fifths” and the “sudden change[s]” of the new jazz, in pursuit of an unattainable “fantasy” of prosperity \textit{(CP, 404)}. In performance, the music transmutes Harlem’s “flatter beers” into “sparkling Oriental wines / rich and strange,” expressing and even momentarily fulfilling the players’ longing for escape; but, at the same time, the dangers, disappointments, and privations of Harlem life inscribe themselves, in the form of the harmonically diminished “flatted fifths,” indelibly upon their improvisations. Harmonic diminution serves here not just as a metaphorical vehicle for, but also a dramatic expression of, the diminution of opportunity from which the players cannot for long distract themselves. Although they wear, armor-like, the defiant Gillespie-imitating bebop uniform of beards and berets, when they bring their instruments to their lips and “re-bop be-bop mop and stop,” they expose inexorably their essential vulnerability as “little cullud boys with fears,” as well as the political forces contributing to that vulnerability, to those “fears” (ll. 1-8, 15-16).

A rhyming cameo, almost a charm, which follows a few pages after “Flatted Fifths” in the sequence, illustrates one concrete form their escapist “fantasy” might take, with its depiction of “Be-Bop Boys // Imploring Mecca / to achieve / six discs / with Decca” \textit{(CP, 409)}. For these
“Be-Bop Boys,” the attainment of a recording contract is the ultimate Dream Deferred, the mass-produced commercial record having become a fetish-object of pseudo-religious devotion. If, as Adorno argued in 1938, in a society built on commerce, audiences revere commercial music for the exchange value it represents, these “boys,” whose acknowledged status (in “Flatted Fifths”) as prospective draftees exemplifies their consciousness of subjection to structures of power to which they have no access or recourse, worship the recording industry because of the promise it offers of otherwise unimaginable (“undreamed-of”) economic and social mobility.142 Perhaps this begins to explain why, in Montage, despite the prefatory note’s ambiguous genitive phrase “the music of a community in transition” (which may or may not be read as possessive), Harlem’s prior claim to bebop as a living art seems for the most part relinquished to the overriding claims of commerce, and an industry decidedly not based in Harlem nor apt to serve its interests. As some of his earlier poems show, Hughes was well aware of the dangers of co-optation, exploitation, degradation, and dilution that the entertainment industry posed for African-American artists.143 And yet his identification of “disc-tortions” as one of the techniques of bebop implies that resistance to the stabilization and containment of the improvisatory act entailed by recording is inherent in the music. To speak of a commercial music as engaged in “disc-tortion” is to suggest that it has the capacity to subvert or sublate (to use the Marxist term) the very channels of industrialized production and promotion that enable its mass distribution. Bebop improvisations will always disrupt efforts to drain them of social significance, to turn them into mere signifiers of exchange value, even once they have been stamped onto shiny black plastic discs, packaged and sold as novelties. In Montage, bebop’s implication in the marketplace, its aspiration towards a larger audience, is part of its inalienable strategy of critique. Regardless of other consequences, including the potential for attenuation of effect, taking advantage of the channels of commercial record promotion and distribution will – as with the bebop boys’ imitation of Gillespie’s sartorial and musical style – serve to perpetuate the critique. This promise of repetition and further disc-tortion is underscored by a reprise (“Tag”) of “Flatted Fifths,” starkly relineated for emphasis (and with another Gillespie echo appended), which immediately follows “Be-Bop Boys” in the sequence:

Little cullud boys
with fears,
frantic,
nudge their draftee years.
Although “nudge” might suggest a containment or compromise of the insurgent “kick” of “Flatted Fifths,” it carries the additional implication of purposiveness, of intent to attract attention. As enacted by the relineation, the wider distribution of bebop’s “disc-tortions,” made possible by the commercial recording industry, allows the music not merely to register in the moment of performance its makers’ frustrations over the conditions they inhabit, but also to issue an invitation, beyond the borders of the jam session and of Harlem, for social reform.

Similarly dialectical assumptions appear to underpin Hughes’s construction of his project’s modernism, and its connection to bebop. The tortuous syntax of the prefatory note’s long single sentence reflects the complexity and recursiveness of the rhetorical and autocritical manoeuvre it executes. More than simply an analogy between the style of Montage and bebop, it ties the critical lot of one to the other. The trope is difficult to categorize: outwardly a simile, its ascription of idiomatic musical properties (“riffs,” “runs,” “breaks,” as well as the ambiguous in context “changes”) to the poetry suggests porousness of tenor and vehicle, a statement of identity more than similarity. This presents itself as a sudden turn. At first, the note gives the impression that Hughes is positioning his work with reference to “current Afro-American popular music” generally, or the lineage of “sources” – of which bebop is just the last named – “from which it has progressed.” But the invocation of musical “progress” calls to mind the progressivist rhetoric of bop-aligned musicians such as Hawkins (“... so many people in music won’t accept progress,” Hawkins told a journalist in 1946. “Look what medicine and science have accomplished in the last twenty or thirty years. That’s the way it should be in music – that’s the way it has to be”147). And this notion of progress seems to redirect the focus of the simile that follows, and to predetermine its artistic and social resonances: taking into account the prefatory note’s strong identification of bebop with Harlem, an assumed association of the music with “progress” appears to motivate the characterization of the cycle’s setting and subject as a “community in transition” (a wooden, if portentous, phrase, as Arnold Rampersad observes).148 In a clear literary instantiation of Harlem Renaissance cultural thinking, here, artistic progress has, at least on a textual level, helped to actualize social progress.
But what kind of progress does bebop represent? And how does it relate to the work that Hughes has set for himself in *Montage*? The singling out of bebop for comparison underscores its position in the prefatory note at the end of the lineage of musical “sources,” investing it with an air of culmination, while also setting it apart. Hughes’s formulation implies that bebop embodies and incorporates, by turns organically and parodically, in its borrowed song structures, its “riffs, runs, [and] breaks,” the whole African-American vernacular musical tradition, even as it emerges from it. For if bebop has passages “in the manner of” the blues and the popular song, such mannerism implies that it is not itself a “popular” idiom in the same sense. Such a construal of the art status of bebop is in nuanced accordance with the one promoted by the Parker-Gillespie school, whose public rhetoric and performance practices alike carefully balanced the new music’s comprehension of historical jazz styles and its calculated, “modernistic” separateness from them. As the critic Robert O’Brien Hokanson has noted, *Montage* imitates the “composite form and revisionary approach of be-bop,” with its intermittent reversion to blues forms and easy-rhyming couplet passages “in the manner of . . . the popular song” (“Cheap little rhymes / A cheap little tune”) evoking the abstracted pop and blues song structures that furnish bebop’s harmonic backdrop, even as the metrical and typographic irregularity of these passages gestures towards its fracturing of pop rhythms. In the same way, *Montage*’s frequent deployment of blues language (as opposed to its more frequently remarked “bop language”) forms a rough analogy with bebop’s continued reliance on the blues as a melodic mode, its most obvious continuity with earlier jazz styles. But the distinct stylistic integrity of bebop subsumes these traces, synthesizes their “conflicting changes” into an aesthetic unity. So, too, with *Montage*, whose designation in the prefatory note as a singular “poem” rather than a collection of disparate fragments reflects Hughes’s conviction of its essential aesthetic integrity, not to mention its essential formal distinctness from his other volumes of poetry to date. The outer form of the prefatory note – an uncharacteristically hypotactic, discursively multivalent single sentence – dramatically buttresses its assertion of a unity that subsumes apparent discontinuity.

It is through this insistence on the unity of *Montage*, both in the prefatory note and in the cinematic metaphor of the title, that the reflexivity of Hughes’s analogy with bebop reveals itself. In likening *Montage* to bebop, Hughes appeals to the latter’s expressiveness of the “current” conditions of the Harlem populace as his cycle’s guarantee of contemporary social resonance, its status as an artwork of modernity; conversely, the cycle’s insistence on its own artistic unity
provides, by analogy, an artistic validation of the discursive discontinuities, the “sharp and impudent interjections,” “broken rhythms,” “breaks” and “disc-tortions,” that mark bebop as a style, conferring upon them an underlying and conscious coherence of purpose in line with Hughes’s modernist project. In effect, each provides the artistic justification for the other: the analogy grants Hughes’s cycle its socially significant formal logic, while in return giving bebop the imprimatur of the Harlem Renaissance, the institutionalized standard for African-American artistic achievement. As Ellison did in the technique of Louis Armstrong, Hughes seems to have identified in bebop the conscious aesthetic of discontinuity that became the defining feature of modern art after Eliot, the “artful juxtapositioning” of disparate discourses with varying degrees of cultural authority. For Hughes, this tension between fragmentation and artistic unity, along with the tension between traditional or vernacular forms and formal experimentation, between the harmonic strictures of the popular song and the free improvisatory exchange of the jam session, and between the artistic constraints imposed by the commercial recording industry and the musicians’ expansive artistic and social ambitions, are constitutive of the specifically African American brand of dialectical modernism that Montage derives from bebop.

Something of the transformative potential with which Hughes invests the music is reflected in the testimony of the putative undergraduate author of “Theme for English B” (CP, 409-10), likely the piece of the cycle most commonly excerpted, anthologized, and taught. The “theme” is the student’s answer to an assignment, reproduced in the poem in a set-off quatrain whose facile rhymes and mincing rhythm burlesque the voice of the instructor:

Go home and write
A page tonight.
And let that page come out of you –
Then, it will be true.

The author of the page in question is not so sure: “I wonder if it’s that simple?” (ll. 2-6). Throughout the composition, the instructor serves as the sceptical student’s interlocutor in absentia. In seemingly improvisatory lines that riff on the cadence and rhyming sounds of the instructor’s speech, as well as its correlation of verbal self-expression and truth (“So will my page be colored that I write? / Being me, it will not be white” [ll. 27-28]), he works to fulfil the assignment, while at the same time interrogating the institutional assumptions underpinning it,
and the structural disparities between himself and his instructor. He presents, at first, a capsule autobiography:

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class. (ll. 7-10)

Giving an account of his tastes, he balances an acute awareness of the perception of difference that attends his presence in the classroom, and the very real difference of experience between himself and the instructor, with the conviction of a mutual potential for dialogue (“you, me, talk on this page”) and understanding:

I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life. ( . . . )
I guess being colored doesn’t make me not like
The same things other folks like who are other races. (ll. 19, 21-22, 25-26)

In the face of the profound social divisions to which these lines allude, human trivia ceases to be trivial. And it ceases to be outside the province of academic discourse, as the poem’s final, declarative line – “This is my page for English B” – asserts (l. 41). In that spirit, the student makes note that he would “like a pipe for a Christmas present, / or records – Bessie, bop, or Bach” (ll. 23-24). The latter would be a significant disclosure even outside the context of a cycle so thoroughly permeated by recorded sound, and declaredly marked by “disc-tortion.” It is not just that the student’s musical tastes are wide-ranging. The order in which he presents them is considered. The formulation “Bessie, bop, or Bach” is rhythmically felicitous in a way that, say, a chronological list would not be, bringing the line and the student’s statement of personal taste into conformity with the iambic cadence of the instructor’s speech. And placing bebop between representatives of the African-American vernacular (the blues singer Bessie Smith) and European art music traditions, respectively, suggests a bridging function, a link between the pillars of African-American popular culture and white-dominated institutions of cultural authority. Bridging the two, it must in some way comprehend both, even as it distinguishes itself from them, with the language of bebop absorbing into itself aspects of both the African-American and European traditions, as in, for instance, the impudent interjection “Be-Bach!” that follows a couple of pages after “Theme for English B” in the cycle (CP, 412). (Bach is a
recurring figure in *Montage* for cultural aspiration.\(^{154}\) It is the same bridging function envisioned and fostered by Hawkins, Gillespie, and Parker for modern jazz; and it is the same one envisioned by Johnson and Locke for African-American musical modernism, in line with the Harlem Renaissance ethos of applying artistic discipline towards the attainment of institutional recognition for the traditional idioms of African-American culture.\(^{155}\) It is the same bridging function, too, being fulfilled by the nominal author of “Theme for English B,” at the crossroads of Harlem and the white world, south and north (he stays at the YMCA, a kind of way station between permanent residences), and youth and adulthood. And it is the same bridging function envisioned by Hughes for *Montage*, with its juxtaposition of traditional African-American and high modernist forms and techniques.

Bridging the divide between African-American artists exiled by racism and the established institutions of cultural achievement and authority was one of the causes to which Hughes was drawn as a mature poet. In an earlier short story, “The Blues I’m Playing” (1934), he had questioned the compromises to which African-American art might have to be subjected in order to gain access to such privileged cultural spaces.\(^{156}\) As the Jim Crow era wore on, and with the death of Johnson marking the effective close of the Harlem Renaissance, the problem presented itself in increasingly public and provoking ways. Several of Hughes’s writings of the ’40s, including *Montage*, make reference to a 1939 incident in which, on account of a recently codified racial policy, the Daughters of the American Revolution barred the world-famous, operatically trained singer Marian Anderson from performing at their Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., at the time the only significant concert venue in the city.\(^{157}\) But the ascendency of the modern jazz movement afforded Hughes the opportunity to consider the problem of gaining institutional recognition for African-American musical achievement from a new perspective. Without discounting its longing for a larger audience and more general acceptance, here was a self-sustaining, almost strictly African-American arts community, operating on the margins of the marketplace, honouring traditional African-American idioms such as the blues, but driven by experimentation and collaborative development, with an increasingly exacting set of professional and disciplinary standards. And it was beginning to accrue to itself its own set of privileged spaces, as well as a pantheon of acknowledged and revered innovators: a sequence of “Neon Signs” in *Montage* includes one marking the entrance
of Minton’s Playhouse, the Harlem after-hours club memorialized by Ellison as the epicentre of the movement. Hughes adds a parenthetical comment, to whatever degree tongue-in-cheek, lauding the club as the “altar of Thelonious” – Monk’s surname goes without saying (CP, 397, ll. 4-5). The institutional status of both Minton’s and Monk (the club’s house pianist during the development of bebop in the early ’40s) would only become more secure with time; upon revision in 1959, Montage’s Minton’s would become the “ancient altar of Thelonious,” as if marked out as a heritage site, or an archaeological site.158

When Montage was published in 1951, the institutionalization of the achievements of Parker, Gillespie, Monk, and others was already underway, in jazz culture as well as in the African-American community at large. (A. B. Spellman, in Four Lives in the Bebop Business, quotes the controversial avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor using a metaphor familiar from Ellison for this process of institutionalization: “I don’t have the academies to forward my tradition, but I do have that small department that Bud Powell was teaching.”159) It was a process of cultural approbation and canon formation which Hughes’s poetry at once reflected and participated in. Although it took place apart from the institutions in which the music of European modernism had become entrenched a generation earlier, it echoed that precedent in a number of ways, some of which register in the poetry. For all its interest in the social resonances of the music, the cycle’s concentration on bebop as explicitly recorded sound gestures toward the kind of abstraction from particular performance contexts that had enabled, for instance, the critical stabilization of the Sacre du printemps, which (as we saw in the first chapter) was itself partly made possible through Stravinsky’s embrace of phonograph recording. Publication of the score of the Sacre also contributed to this process of abstraction, taking the music out of the realm of the temporal and into the spatial, thus inviting formal analysis and formalized study; the same is envisioned for bebop in Montage, in a passage that looks forward to a day when “Manhattan Island will whirl – / like a Dizzy Gillespie transcription . . .” This comes in the same “Projection” in which, in the juxtapositional, discourse-mixing manner of the cycle, “Sammy Davis and Marian Anderson / will sing a duet,” and the integrated Swing Era landmark the Savoy Ballroom will go “jitterbugging / with the [Harlem?] Renaissance” (CP, 403-4, ll. 1, 3-4, 12-13, 16-17). By referring to the autodidactic practice of transcribing solos by the most accomplished improvisers in the idiom, Hughes not only identifies bebop as a discipline increasingly marked by formalized
study, but ushers in an era when it and other touchstones of modern African-American culture will take their place in a locus of cultural privilege.\textsuperscript{160}

The death of Charlie Parker in 1955, at the age of thirty-four, provided a symbolically attractive way of marking the end of bebop as a discrete artistic movement and subculture, distinct from the jazz mainstream. This too helped make possible bebop’s retrospective critical stabilization, even as the old avant-garde was being succeeded within jazz by newer ones, technical and political, themselves inevitably tracing their lineage to Parker and his quondam Minton’s compatriots. Not coincidentally, by this time jazz as a whole had already lost the lion’s share of its mass audience to rhythm and blues and rock and roll.\textsuperscript{161} The drastically changed face of the jazz scene, the shift, over the course of the late forties and fifties, of the impetus for jazz modernism from the purlieus of the mass entertainment business and a marginalized Harlem youth culture to a network of midtown Manhattan clubs, independent record labels, journals, and quasi-formal “jazz workshops,”\textsuperscript{162} with an educated and sophisticated clientele, struck Hughes with its suddenness. (By 1958, Hughes himself was sitting on the board of directors of the Newport Jazz Festival, whose wide-ranging programmes and cosmopolitan audiences made it a symbol of modern jazz’s new legitimacy.\textsuperscript{163}) His next – and, as it turned out, last – major poetic undertaking, the cryptic and typographically experimental cycle Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz (1961), persistently refers back to the question left “not resolved by Charlie Parker,” even as it addresses itself to the new music of Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, with its tonal and timbral freedom “burning like dry ice against the ear” (CP, 531). The marginal musical directions to the section titled “Jazztet Muted,” for example, trace the transition from “Bop blues into very modern jazz,” with the latter phrase cuing the re-entrance into the body text of “THE BREATH OF ORNETTE COLEMAN”; and yet, even in the face of this apparent welcoming of the radical new, the poem ends with an invocation of the salvific figure of Parker: “HELP ME, YARDBIRD! / HELP ME!” (CP, 521-2, ll. 9, 22-23)\textsuperscript{164}

The canonization of “Bird” and the style he had helped create was not confined to a steadily shrinking jazz culture. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, modern jazz performers gained newfound status as intellectuals and creative artists in the African-American community at large. At the same time, university jazz programs, their faculty and pedagogy steeped in bebop, were slowly beginning to spring up.\textsuperscript{165} Another section of Ask Your Mama, titled “Horn of Plenty,” registers with ambivalence the new middle-class respectability of modern jazz
musicians, with its depiction of avant-gardists of both the current and previous generations

“WHO BREAK AWAY LIKE COMETS $$$$$$ / FROM LESSER STARS IN ORBIT $$$$$$$ / TO MOVE OUT,” away from “THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES,” to the comparatively affluent suburbs (CP, 497-501, ll. 20-22, 26). The locale – the St. Albans neighbourhood of Queens – and its position relative to Manhattan and Harlem are represented by the dollar signs that decorate the right-hand side of the column of text. There, the new members of the black bourgeoisie take their place amongst the leading lights of the current African-American ballet and concert stage, retired barrier-breaking athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis, and holdover Harlem Renaissance artists such as the composers Margaret Bonds and William Grant Still (ll. 8, 15-17). (Marian Anderson is also there, at least in monumental form, as “THAT STATUE / ON BEDLOE’S ISLAND MANAGED BY SOL HUROK” [ll. 3-4].166) The bourgeoisification of modern jazz appears complete, along with the alienation of its critical impulse from the political and economic conditions that gave rise to it. The poem is voiced, in the first person, by an African-American celebrity speaker (“FAMOUS – THE HARD WAY – / FROM NOBODY AND NOTHING TO WHERE I AM”) who has himself “MOVED OUT TO LONG ISLAND / EVEN FARTHER THAN ST. ALBANS,” into an otherwise white neighbourhood (ll. 30-31, 35, 38-9). Given the identification between Hughes’s project and modern jazz established in Montage, “Horn of Plenty” may be seen as of a piece with the poet’s sceptical late-career reflections on the political significance of his own achievement of bourgeois acceptance, such as “Dinner Guest: Me” (CP, 547-8).

In other respects, though, Ask Your Mama further fleshes out the representation of bebop and its legacy begun with Montage. According to Hughes’s headnote, the cycle’s musical “leitmotif” is the “traditional folk melody” of the jazz standard “Hesitation Blues,” with its refrain, “How long must I wait?” (CP, 475; 479-80). (Coleman Hawkins, the prototypical jazz progressive, also liked to quote this phrase – as, for instance, in his solo on the blues “The Big Head,” recorded around the same time as “Picasso.”167) And yet it is the questioning dissonances of the former and current jazz avant-gardes that the cycle uses to express – like the later “Dinner Guest” – Hughes’s impatience over the admonition from white America and the black bourgeoisie to “wait” for solutions to political, social, and economic inequalities: “can we look to monk or Monk? Or let it rest with Eric Dolphy?” (CP, 531). In this way, Hughes at once documents and gives rhetorical form to the politicization of jazz that was taking place in the early 1960s. Written
in the wake of the admissions riot that forced the closure of the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival – even as a “Newport Rebels” counter-festival, directed by Hughes’s sometime collaborator Charles Mingus with an eye to greater artistic self-determination, was taking place across town – Ask Your Mama records how the tensions of the time are concentrated in the controversial new music:\footnote{168}

\begin{verbatim}
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
ORNETTE AND CONSTERNATION
CLAIM ATTENTION FROM THE PAPERS
THAT HAVE NO NEWS THAT DAY OF MOSCOW.
(“Cultural Exchange,” CP 476-81, ll. 53-56)
\end{verbatim}

Here, Coleman’s revolutionary musical futurism, advertised through album titles such as The Shape of Jazz to Come (1959), Change of the Century (1960), and Free Jazz (1961, with cover art by Jackson Pollock), directly stands in for political revolution, literally occupying the same cultural space as the capital of communism.\footnote{169} At the height of the Cold War, Hughes has Coleman stand metonymically for the adversary, making his art, at least for its African-American audience, a vehicle for the subversive politics forcibly kept “TACIT” (the musical direction for this passage) in the political status quo. If the potential for social critique and social change with which Hughes invests modern jazz owes something to the climate of ideas that produced Adorno’s construal of the compulsion in European music to break free of tonality, it does not seem as susceptible to attenuation and stabilization over time. A decade on from Montage, the revolutionary associations of jazz modernism are only amplified. Perhaps this is because of the quality of rupture which for Hughes is inherent in the music, the “breaks and disc-tortions” by which he distinguishes bebop from other jazz styles. Whatever the reason, the ambivalent question in the cycle’s concluding prose “Liner Notes (For the Poetically Unhep)” as to whether or not to “let it rest with Eric Dolphy” can be read as an implicit call for continuing musical experimentation, for further freeing of form and expression, for perpetual self-renewal of the avant-garde impulse in order to stave off the stabilizing effects of institutionalization. This is what Ornette Coleman represents in Ask Your Mama; and not just in Ask Your Mama, but in the larger critical construction of the “jazz tradition” that was taking shape in the 1960s, and would eventually – in a sense paradoxically – become academic orthodoxy.

More so even than that of Montage, the text of Ask Your Mama crystallizes Hughes’s dialogic role in the formation of what we now call the jazz tradition. For if the musicians who would
make up the jazz avant-garde of the 1960s had been raised on the record of Hughes’s own early achievements, the mature Hughes in turn did his part to ensure that future students of African-American history and culture would be raised on the record of the jazz avant-garde’s achievements, a record to which he made an appreciable contribution. And if, as I have tried to show, Hughes’s attitudes towards modern jazz were informed by a particular complex of pre-existing discourses, if, indeed, *Ask Your Mama* responds to a changed situation that Hughes himself had helped to create with *Montage*, it is through such dialogism that Hughes works to bring about the institutionalization of jazz as a whole. Although *Ask Your Mama* continues to treat the birth of bebop as a turning point, it, much more than *Montage*, is also willing to acknowledge a shared impetus linking the current avant-garde to the historical African-American vernacular traditions. Without the ambiguity of the prefatory note to *Montage*, *Ask Your Mama* imagines jazz – especially in the institutionalized form documented in “Horn of Plenty” – as a continuum: framed by a mythopoetic quotation attributed to Louis Armstrong, who serves, as in Ellison, as a kind of embodiment of the essence of jazz (“DO YOU READ MUSIC? AND LOUIS SAYING / NOT ENOUGH TO HURT MY PLAYING”), it proceeds through an unpunctuated spectrum of currently-active (as of 1961), artistically progressive representatives of the tradition, “JAZZERS DUKE AND DIZZY ERIC DOLPHY” (“Horn of Plenty,” ll. 8, 11-12). The lack of differentiation, the designation of these musicians alike under the single category “JAZZERS,” implies a shared vocation that transcends their considerable differences in terms of musical approach and historical experience. In this context, the appeal in the face of the current avant-garde to “HELP ME YARDBIRD” comes off less as a plea for intelligibility, coherence, social immediacy, or political instrumentality, and more, like the quotation attributed to Louis Armstrong, as a seeking out of the new music’s originating impulse, a reflection of an arts culture and a modernity increasingly turning back on itself in the historiographic endeavour and in the search for the “authentic.”

The balance of wilful artistic experimentation and continuity of tradition that underlies this vision of jazz is characteristic of the approach of *Ask Your Mama* as a whole, not to mention crucial to Hughes’s intervention in the emerging construction of the jazz tradition. The cycle’s title gestures towards its most frequently remarked discursive feature, namely its evocation of the African-American competitive taunting ritual known as the Dozens. First brought to a wide literary audience in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1938 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the ritual
was just then beginning to attract scholarly attention, from folklorists, social psychologists, and cultural historians. It may be that Hughes saw fit to couch his “Moods for Jazz” in the form of the Dozens because he perceived an affinity between the ritual’s turn-taking and one-upmanship, and the give-and-take structure of sequential soloing which modern jazz had inherited from the jam session. It may be, as Scott Saul argues, that Hughes seized on the confrontational aspect of the Dozens, but turned outward towards white America, as a vehicle for the social defiance of the avant-garde “Newport Rebels.” (The confrontation is literalized in the closing lines of “Horn of Plenty,” as the speaker plays the Dozens with his unwitting neighbours: “THEY RUNG MY BELL TO ASK ME / COULD I RECOMMEND A MAID. / I SAID, YES, YOUR MAMA” [ll. 96-98].) In any case, the incorporation of this old and resolutely vernacular discursive form, a signifier in Hurston of unco-opted African-American folk culture, is in line with the text’s overall orientation towards the provenance and meaning of African-American art, an orientation that, while not entirely new to Hughes, is at least more sharply defined here than in Montage, and which allows Hughes’s construction of the jazz tradition to dovetail with one form it was increasingly taking in the early ’60s – for instance, in the essays of LeRoi Jones.

It is tempting to classify Ask Your Mama as part of the movement, identified by DeVeaux, within the music itself as well as in the criticism, to associate authenticity and artistic legitimacy in jazz with the expression of “authentic” African-American ethnic identity. Driven by the “upheavals of racial politics” that defined the era, and a concomitant aversion to the “implicit assimilationist agenda” of earlier jazz modernism’s high-cultural aspirations, the movement saw jazz as, above all, an African-American art, its historical progress subtended by the progress of African-American culture as a whole; from this perspective, jazz’s variety of “legitimate” historical forms could be reconceived as essentially unified, and set apart from white “mainstream” culture, by their fundamental reliance on “traditional” African-American idioms, and their shared expression of the collective African-American experience of history. By 1961, this conception of the jazz tradition was pervasive enough to inflect even the avant-garde’s continued interest in the techniques of European modernism. In Dolphy and Coltrane’s “Red Planet,” for example, the tone row that forms the first part of the theme is a witty musical double entendre, whose first four notes (B, D, E, D flat), when stated retrograde in their second iteration, unmistakably evoke a minor blues cadence; the suggestion is immediately hammered home by a pentatonic blues riff in the same implied home key of B. The composition thus flaunts the (European) modernist
pedigree of Dolphy and Coltrane’s art, while still asserting the blues – an original African-American idiom – as its ultimate basis. Thus the piece works to resolve the apparent contradiction between the two prevailing markers of musical authenticity for jazz as it entered the ’60s.

For Hughes, who privately praised Mingus’s music both for its modernism and its gospel-honouring “beat,” this was a natural move, both in the music itself and in the literature of it. In Ask Your Mama, the appeal to African-American heritage as ultimate artistic authority expresses itself not just in the cycle’s deployment of the form of the Dozens, but in the terms of its accompanying apparatus, the headnote which speaks of the “Hesitation Blues” in the language of an ethnographer or anthropologist, not (as in Montage) as an example of a “popular” style, but as “traditional,” as “folk” art. At the same time, Ask Your Mama is Hughes’s most formally experimental text; and, when it addresses itself to the jazz tradition, it generates a lineage of artists defined by how each pushed the formal and technical boundaries of the style he inherited – Armstrong, Ellington, Monk, Parker, Gillespie, Coleman, and finally, Dolphy, whose music in 1961 was a lightning rod of critical controversy, and whose admission into this company is Hughes’s most radical gesture of canon formation. (Dolphy was still new to the jazz scene in 1961; the references to him in Ask Your Mama may well be the first in a published work of poetry.) Typical of the artistic thinking of modernism, pushing formal boundaries inevitably connotes pushing social and political ones; moreover, for Hughes, deliberate innovation – for example, in the improvisatory one-upmanship of the Dozens – is, like political resistance, integral to the African-American cultural heritage. It is in Ask Your Mama that Hughes does the most to establish for jazz that quintessentially, paradoxically modern institution, an avant-garde tradition. As for the higher cultural aspirations given voice in “Theme for English B,” the reclamation of jazz history as part of the greater African-American cultural heritage, and the identification of jazz and especially avant-garde jazz as a locus of black cultural nationalism, would help ensure the music’s privileged place in the emerging academic discipline of African American studies, and later, in the academy at large. With the tradition from which it came thus enshrined, James P. Johnson’s musical imperative – you’ve got to be modernistic! – could begin to diminish into the past tense.
Notes


2 Recorded twice by Johnson, once on solo piano and once with “His Orchestra,” in the 1930s, the song had debuted in the 1929 version, quoted here, by the pianist Clarence Williams, with vocals by Eva Taylor. This version can be found on the CD The Chronological Clarence Williams, 1929-1930 (Classics 810, 1996).


4 DeVeaux explains that the word “bebop,” which was applied to the style somewhat after the fact, imitates a two-note phrase ending characteristic of the original tunes of the period (ibid., 383); see also Leonard G. Feather, The Encyclopedia of Jazz (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1956), 27. There are a number of other hypotheses, though, about the word’s origin; see Marshall W. Stearns, The Story of Jazz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), 218-19. In any event, as Eric Porter notes, the word was often controversial among musicians and their proponents, especially when the music and the subculture surrounding it was under attack in the press; see What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002), 94-95. Ralph Ellison complained that it was “A most inadequate word which . . . throws up its hands in clownish self-deprecation before all the complexity of sound and rhythm and self-assertive passion which it pretends to name; a mask-

5 Ibid., 201.


7 Ellison, Shadow and Act, 210.


9 Owens, 3; Owens states, somewhat quixotically, that “time and familiarity softened and even eliminated” initial objections by musicians and audiences to bebop’s difficulty. The evaporation of instrumental jazz’s mass audience after the Second World War suggests otherwise.

10 Reproduced in DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, xii.

11 Bud Powell’s Modernists, “Bouncing with Bud” b/w “Wail” (Blue Note 1567, 1949); James Moody and His Modernists with Chano Pozo (Blue Note BLP 5006, 1952).

12 DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 217-8; Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds. Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 350. See also Clarke’s similar remarks in Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, To Be or Not . . . to Bop (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009), 142.

13 See Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, Town Hall, New York City, June 22 1945 (Uptown UPCD27.51, 2005). As the liner notes by Ira Gitler reveal, Coleman Hawkins was at the top of the bill for this “New Jazz Foundation” concert series – but only speculatively, and he never did show up.
14 Ibid., 173.


16 See Carl Woideck, Charlie Parker: His Music and Life (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996), 30, 162, 171. The saxophonist Jimmy Heath recalls how he and John Coltrane – who would eventually become the preeminent public face of avant-garde jazz – as young bebop musicians in 1940s Philadelphia would go to the public library to listen to recordings of Stravinsky’s Firebird suite and Le Sacre du printemps, “because we heard that Parker was carrying around miniature scores of Stravinsky. . . We knew that that was what we were supposed to do!” (Quoted in Lewis Porter, John Coltrane: His Life and Music [Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998], 63.) Ornette Coleman would later imitate Parker’s practice of quoting the opening bassoon theme of the Sacre in his own composition “Sleep Talk” – most strikingly in a chamber-music arrangement, with two basses, on the 2005 live recording Sound Grammar (Phrase Text SG 11593).


18 “I’ve struggled to establish jazz as a concert music, a form of art, not just music you hear in clubs or places where they serve whiskey” (Gillespie, To Be or Not . . . to Bop, 448); Eric Porter, 74-5. The idea of bringing a programme of modern jazz to Carnegie Hall, with the intention of conferring cultural legitimacy on the music’s newest forms, may have been inspired by Benny Goodman’s celebrated concert there in January 1938; see David W. Stowe, Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), 17-23.

Woideck, *Charlie Parker*, 58-9; DeVeaux notes that the “flatted fifth,” or tritone substitution, a dissonance popularized in jazz harmony by bebop, when left unresolved, tends to suggest “a slippery kind of polytonality” (*The Birth of Bebop*, 380 n. 6).

Owens, 4.


The pianist Lennie Tristano recorded group improvisations without a fixed key centre in 1949. Parker recorded with him in 1951, and made some ambiguous comments about Tristano’s experiments in a 1953 radio interview (quoted in Woideck, *Charlie Parker*, 209). A 1949 article ascribes to Parker the admission that “the music may eventually be atonal” (quoted in Woideck, *Charlie Parker*, 172, citing Levin and Wilson, 1).

Waldron’s “Thirteen” is on his album *The Quest* (New Jazz 8269, 1961). “Red Planet” is available in a 1963 performance, with orchestra, on Dolphy’s *Illinois Concert* (Blue Note 7243 4 99826 2 8, 1999), and also in versions by Coltrane’s group, with Dolphy, on *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings* (Impulse!/GRP 232, 1997), and without Dolphy on *Coltrane* (Impulse! AS-21, 1962). Dolphy is credited as sole author on his recording of the composition; other releases credit Coltrane. David Wild’s liner notes for *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings* discuss both the authorship of this composition, and its use of dodecaphonic techniques. My own speculation is that Dolphy is responsible for the tone row and its retrograde, and Coltrane the pentatonic blues riff that follows. The riff is very much in Coltrane’s style for this period, and Coltrane did not seem to understand twelve-tone technique at this time; see, e.g., Benoit Quersin, “Interview with John Coltrane,” in Chris DeVito, ed., *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago Review P, 2010), 185, 188.

DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 499, and *The Birth of Bebop*, 1-29.

Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 204.
27 Ibid., 202; see Owens, 15, 35, 36, etc., and DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 305.

28 E.g., “The sharp contraction of the ensemble in bebop, together with the emphasis on individual virtuosity and dissonant (to swing-attuned ears) sonorities, suggests . . . the racial militancy taking root among African-Americans in the late 1940s” (Stowe, 11). See also DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 497, 501, and Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 210-11.

29 Ross Russell, “Bebop,” in *The Art of Jazz: Essays on the Nature and Development of Jazz*, ed. Martin Williams (New York: Oxford UP, 1959), 202. Russell was the founder of Dial Records, an important independent record label during the bebop period; many of Charlie Parker’s most influential recordings were on Dial.


scholarship, albeit one that reifies (and in the process, capitalizes) the “Free” impulse in post-bop jazz.

33 Eric Porter, 57-63.

34 Stowe, 92, 202-20. To Stowe, the real pivot point in jazz history is the “turn away from the loose, open-ended, and nonhierarchical playing of 1920s jazz towards the more regimented modes of swing,” which registers “the move toward larger, more bureaucratic, and more rationalized units of organization characteristic of American society during the 1930s.” He sees swing’s “much-noted quality of enabling the individual voice to contribute to the collective whole” as according with “the notion of a cooperative commonwealth central to Franklin Roosevelt’s vision of America” (10-11).


36 Ibid., 49-54.

37 Ibid., 146-51, 242-44. As DeVeaux points out, one major factor, counterintuitively, was the passage of equal rights laws in northern states, which prohibited discrimination in admittance to public functions. Club owners, fearing lawsuits should they continue to turn away patrons on the basis of race, simply stopped hiring black groups. This, along with a saturated market, led to all but the first tier of the latter folding. The small groups and club engagements in which bebop was born thus represented, at least in part, a strategy by young musicians to profit from the disciplinary gains made in the swing bands in a catastrophically changed economy (*The Birth of Bebop*, 150).

38 The precise recording date is uncertain. Hawkins recorded what sounds like a preliminary version for issue by the French instrument company Selmer, probably in January 1945; see John Chilton, *The Song of the Hawk: The Life and Recordings of Coleman Hawkins* (London: Quartet, 1990), 261, and Jean-Francois Villetard, *Coleman Hawkins Volume II (1945-1957)* (Amsterdam: Micrography, 1985), 45.01. “Picasso” may have been recorded at around the same time, but most

39 Bernard Gendron identifies the roots of the analogy in a clash of modernist discourses, starting in the late 1930s, pitting so-called “moldy figs,” or critical partisans of the New Orleans jazz revival, against those of so-called “progressive” jazz. At first, the latter category was represented by swing, but later, the language of the debate was repurposed for bebop. Of course, by that point – not coincidentally when jazz’s progressive wing began to be dominated by African Americans – some critics had begun looking for real jazz modernism elsewhere, in white avant-gardists like Tristano and Stan Kenton (Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002], 121-60).

40 See DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 277, 282-3, 306-8, 319, 381-408, etc.


42 Ibid., 319.

43 Ibid., 277.


45 DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 73.

46 Ibid., 86-87.
47 Ibid., 89-90, 126-7.

48 Chilton, 125, 245, 332.


50 Chilton, 164-5.

51 DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 104-10. See, esp., 104-6, for a concise explanation of “tritone substitution,” and 109-10, for the difference between it and what musicians call the “flatted fifth.”

52 Ibid., 324-5. As DeVeaux explains, *Billboard*’s “Harlem Hit Parade” accounted for “seventeen strategically placed stores in black neighborhoods in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Atlanta, and Richmond” (325 n. 2).


54 Earlier recordings of groups – including “Body and Soul” – had included brief, unaccompanied cadenzas. And, as noted above, Hawkins had recorded an unaccompanied performance in 1945, although it was released only in Europe and only as a promotional item. That recording (“Hawk’s Variations”) sounds intermittently like a dry run for “Picasso,” which had been in the planning stages as early as 1944 (Chilton, 261).


56 Chilton, 261.
Coleman Hawkins, addressing the Duke Ellington Jazz Society, 24 February 1969; quoted in Chilton, 261. Brian Priestley, in the liner notes to the CD reissue of The Jazz Scene (as The Complete Jazz Scene, Verve 314521661-2, 1994), claims there is aural evidence that “Picasso” is based on the chord changes to the popular song “Prisoner of Love,” which Hawkins recorded in 1957 with Ben Webster. The musicologist Lewis Porter has tested the claim and found it unconvincing: “Other artists of that time, when invited to perform ‘free improvisation,’ generally came up with a blues or ‘Rhythm changes’ . . . Perhaps we have been too quick to identify the Lennie Tristano recordings of 1949 as the first freely improvised jazz recordings – Hawkins was already there” (313 n. 15). I do not hear many similarities between “Picasso” and Hawkins’s splendid version of “Prisoner of Love” either.

Norman Granz, interview with Priestley, quoted in the liner notes to The Jazz Scene; Chilton, 261.

Hawkins, “Picasso,” on Verve Jazz Masters 34.

One wonders whether the tape recorder was running slow: B natural and F sharp are awkward keys for the saxophone, although Hawkins did pride himself on his mastery of such keys (see DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 216-7).

Chilton, 261.


Lewis Porter, 90; see also 64, 254-5.

Quoted in Chilton, 4.

Hawkins’s 1961 comments also align with the narrative that was just then beginning to emerge in jazz literature, the “Whig interpretation of jazz history,” discussed above, according to which
the trajectory of jazz’s development is inexorably towards greater and greater “freedom” of individual expression.

Stein, “Picasso,” in Selected Writings, 333-5.

Ibid.

DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 90.


See DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 55-57.

Ellison, Shadow and Act, 208, 10.


John Coltrane was a notable beneficiary of this program; see Lewis Porter, 50-51, 309 n. 11. The trumpeter Kenny Dorham, a gifted soloist and composer who first came to notice in the late ’40s in Charlie Parker’s group, was another (see Ira Gitler, liner notes to Dorham’s Whistle Stop [Blue Note BLP 4063, 1961]).

Perhaps it goes without saying that the swing business did not hold the same promise for women, African-American or otherwise. There were, of course, a few successful female vocalists; and a small number of “all girl” instrumental groups did flourish during the war years, as Sherrie Tucker reveals in her extraordinary history Swing Shift: “All Girl” Bands of the 1940s (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000). But the swing band industry was otherwise inescapably male-dominated, and resistant to acknowledging the abilities and contributions of women instrumentalists. With the rise of bebop, as modern jazz strove to denude itself of the trappings of “entertainment,” opportunities for women became even scarcer, and what few were extended were in the form of the “backstage” roles of composer and arranger, represented by figures such as Mary Lou Williams and Melba Liston; see Eric Porter, 75-83.

I refer here to the Schoenbergian idea of the “emancipation” of music from tonal resolution heralding emancipation from intellectual and political subjugation, outlined in the last chapter.

It may be that the deployment of techniques and structures associated with European modernism – and specifically the Second Viennese School – by musicians such as Dolphy and Waldron represents, in part, an acknowledgment of the role played by this pedagogical environment in shaping the self-image of modern jazz. Dolphy attended Los Angeles City College while Schoenberg was teaching at UCLA; Waldron studied composition, and took a B. A. in music, at Queens College in New York. Countless other musicians of their generation received similar training.

Bernard Gendron points to the influential magazine Metronome, whose editors during the late forties, Leonard Feather and Barry Ulanov, were “strongly committed to the legitimization of what was being called ‘bebop,’ as a modernist art movement within jazz” (Gendron, “A Short Stay in the Sun: The Reception of Bebop [1944-1950],” in The Bebop Revolution in Words and Music, ed. David Oliphant [Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The

81 DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 499.


84 Larkin, 22-28.

85 DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 483-4, 497-500. This is not to say that all, or even most, critics of the time aimed to conceal the impact of racism on musicians’ day-to-day lives, those “socio-racial factors that determined the associations and the frustrations of the men who created” be-bop; see DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 20, citing Feather, The Book of Jazz, 39.

86 See DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 26, and Eric Porter, 84-86.

87 See Kofsky, 241-51, and Archie Shepp, “Scag” on John Coltrane/Archie Shepp, New Thing At Newport (Impulse! AS-94, 1966). In turn, as Baraka’s work attests, the political and intellectual leaders of the movement looked to the “free” jazz artists of the time – including Shepp, Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler – for inspiration.

88 DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop, 27. As Eric Lott argues in an influential essay, first published in 1988, “bebop was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of the moment. Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy fought out in the streets. If bebop did not offer a call to arms, . . . it at least acknowledged that the call had been made” (Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” in O’Meally, 459). See also Stowe, 11, and Thomas, 97-98.


92 Ibid., 9.


94 “Consider that at least as early as T. S. Eliot’s creation of a new aesthetic for poetry through the artful juxtapositioning of earlier styles, Louis Armstrong, way down the river in New Orleans, was working out a similar technique for jazz” (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz,” in Shadow and Act, 225). For some suggestive remarks on the parallels between Ellison’s conception of the jazz tradition and Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and the relevance of these parallels for Ellison’s technique in Invisible Man, see A. Timothy Spaulding, “Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man,” Callaloo 72 (2004), 481-501, esp. 486-7, 499 n. 7.

95 Lott, 462.

96 Ellison, Shadow and Act, 201, 204.

97 Ibid., 252.

100 Gwendolyn Brooks, “I love these little booths at Benvenuti’s,” in *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper, 2006), 59-60. Hereinafter cited parenthetically by line. To an editor’s complaint that the poem was too “reportorial,” Brooks replied that she had “wanted it to be reportorial, but of course ‘poetically reportorial!’” (quoted in George E. Kent, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* [Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1990], 78).


103 For the cultural and political significance of Young’s “hipster” persona, cultivated after his discharge from the army at the end of the Second World War, see Joel Dinerstein, “Lester Young and the Birth of the Cool,” in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African-American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 239-76.


106 Brooks, “The Womanhood: the children of the poor, 4 (*First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string,*),” in *Selected Poems*, 54; ll. 1, 13-14. This is not to say that the sonnet is necessarily in some way “about” modern jazz. The troping of creative, and especially poetic, endeavour as music-making is conventional, and critics have tended to read the poem’s central metaphor expansively along these lines, often as anticipating the political militancy of Brooks’s later poetry, rather than as addressed to specifically musical problems: see, e.g., D. H. Melhem,

107 In that poem, from her first book A Street in Bronzeville (1945), the eponymous Bronzeville hustler’s alienation from the likes of “Saint-Saens, piquant elusive Grieg, / . . . Tchaikovsky’s wayward eloquence / And . . . the shapely tender drift of Brahms” is situated with reference to his more immediate concerns:

. . . whether or not his mattress hurts:
The little dream his father humoured: the thing
His sister did for money: what he ate
For breakfast – and for dinner twenty years
Ago last autumn: all his skipped desserts (ll. 102-13; in Selected Poems, 12-18).


108 Ellison, Shadow and Act, 253, 204.

110 Gill, loc. cit.


114 Beauvoir reports that, in 1947, Richard Wright brought her to a Harlem club in which bebop was being played. Within a half hour, they had stormed out in disgust. Beauvoir, who had been attracted to jazz before the war, found the new music little more than a “breathless, exasperated expression of New York's restlessness” (Simone de Beauvoir, America Day by Day, trans. Carol Cosman [Berkeley: U of California P, 1999], 352). Her remarks echo, unconsciously perhaps, those of earlier European critics who diagnosed the likes of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Satie with neurasthenia; see Claire Taylor-Jay, “‘I am Blessed with Fruit’: Masculinity, Androgyny and Creativity in Early Twentieth-Century German Music,” in Masculinity and Western Musical Practice, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 194.

116 Larkin speaks of his alienation from modern jazz in the same terms, albeit in a more overtly ironic register: “In a humanist society, art – and especially modern, or current, art – assumes great importance, and to lose touch with it is parallel to losing one’s faith in a religious age. Or, in this particular case, since jazz is the music of the young, it was like losing one’s potency” (Larkin, 22). The latter analogy draws on the standard alignment of jazz and (black, male) sexuality mocked by Adorno in “On Jazz.”

117 See Eric Porter, 90-91.


120 Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, in Essential Writings, 102-4 (hereinafter cited parenthetically). The narrator’s ambitions are evocative of the later career of Scott Joplin, whose opera Treemonisha incorporates ragtime and folk elements into a classically elaborate musical framework to convey an allegorical narrative about African-American educational self-realization. (Joplin had earlier achieved fame with the publication of his “Maple Leaf Rag,” in 1899.) The opera, published in 1911 at Joplin’s own expense, was never produced in the composer’s lifetime; its first complete staging did not take place until 1972, during a belated revival of interest in Joplin’s work. See Edward A. Berlin, King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 193-228, 251-3.

121 Carl Van Vechten, “Introduction to Mr. Knopf’s New Edition,” in Johnson, Essential Writings, 25; see also Salim Washington, “Of Black Bards, Known and Unknown: Music as Racial Metaphor in James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” Callaloo 25 (2002), 233-56, esp. 245-46. The continuity between ragtime and jazz has always been clear, although commentators of the ’20s and ’30s had different ways of formulating it; Alain Locke, in his influential 1936 treatise The Negro and His Music, explained that while the “Negro folk
idiom,” expressed in melody and “syncopated rhythm,” results in ragtime, “carried over to harmony and orchestration, it gives us ‘jazz.’ It is one and the same musical spirit and tradition in two different musical dimensions” (Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* [Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1968], 71). In fact, as James Lincoln Collier points out, jazz piano initially evolved out of ragtime piano players modifying their style to accommodate the characteristic swung rhythms and “less formal, more varied” approach of jazz (Collier, “Classic Jazz to 1945,” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, Cook and Pople, eds., 125-6, 136-7). To put it a different way, early jazz, in contrast to ragtime, was not piano-based; as the jazz ensemble expanded to include piano, jazz piano technique developed, naturally deriving influence from existing ragtime and post-ragtime styles. And so in terms of the piano, at least, the dividing line between “ragtime” and “jazz” is difficult to discern on strictly musical terms, ragtime having always been a part of the jazz piano vocabulary.


123 Salim Washington points out that this passage need not merely be read as an instance of “heavy-handed” symbolism: Johnson was well enough versed in the mechanics of music to know
that, whereas the white keys of the piano spell out the diatonic scale that is the foundation of European major-minor tonality, the black keys spell out the pentatonic scale, the “basic melodic lexicon of most African-American musics up until the present day” (Washington, 240). And so the passage foreshadows not only the narrator’s resolution to bring “glory and honour to the Negro race” (51), but also, more narrowly, his later interest in the musical materials of African-American culture.

124 In another prescient bit of wording, the narrator refers to ragtime as a “new thing” (81), a term that would later affix itself to the politically and musically confrontational jazz avant-gardism of the 1960s; see, for instance, the album by John Coltrane and Archie Shepp, New Thing at Newport (Impulse!, 1965).


126 For the concept of artistic, discursive (and implicitly social and psychic) “dissonance” in a different musical context in Harlem Gallery, see “Mu,” l. 157 (p. 266). There it connotes the same sort of barriers to the acceptance of the African-American artist vis-à-vis both Harlem and the “Great White World” that stymie Mister Starks later in the poem. Starks’s instrument is invested with metaphorical significance at numerous points in the text, notably in the poem-within-a-poem of “Harlem Vignettes,” in which Starks reflects on the then-familiar rhetorical figure of the piano’s black and white keys working in harmony, representing integration (“Upsilon,” ll. 479-81 [p. 320; see also 445 n. 479 for the source and prevalence of this figure]).

127 See “Upsilon,” ll. 1-45 (pp. 302-3), and “Psi,” l. 222-3 (p. 349), in which Tolson’s “Curator” likens the distinctive effects of bebop (“the flatted fifth and octave jump”) to the “theatrical” pop
of a cork in a champagne bottle of dubious provenance, in an extended compound oenological metaphor about the spuriousness of racial categories. The implication is that bebop’s demanding technical grammar is showy but lacking in artistic substance.

128 Washington, 247; emphasis in original.


130 DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 169. Hawkins, born in 1904, was a notable exception, being of the same generation as Hughes (b. 1902), a decade older than Ellison (b. 1913) and Brooks (b. 1917).


132 See Saul, 181-201, and Todd S. Jenkins, *I Know What I Know: The Music of Charles Mingus* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 97-101. Mingus insisted that his label present *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* (Impulse!, 1963) as both a dance suite in six elaborately titled movements and a “folk” composition; the jacket announced “the New Wave of Folk Is on Impulse!” Other albums on the label bore the inscription “the New Wave of Jazz Is on Impulse!”; the replacement of the word “jazz” on the cover of the Mingus album is telling of the composer’s conception of the piece.

133 A notable example from bebop culture is the pianist John Lewis, who composed and arranged fugues and other Baroque-influenced but blues-based polyphonic music for his Modern Jazz Quartet, a breakaway faction of the late ’40s Dizzy Gillespie big band. See, for instance, “Concorde” and “Versailles (Porte de Versailles),” on the albums *Concorde* (Prestige, 1955) and *Fontessa* (Atlantic, 1956), respectively.

Gershwin’s composition was premiered by the popular bandleader Paul Whiteman at a celebrated concert at New York’s Aeolian Hall in February 1924. This concert may have been the inspiration for one of the best-known literary mockeries of the so-called “Jazz Age,” Nick Carraway’s distracted account of a performance of “Vladimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World” in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925); see Gerald Early, “Pulp and Circumstance: The Story of Jazz in High Places,” in O’Meally, 397, 408-9. The episode in *Gatsby* depicts the attraction to jazz elements by white American and European composers and audiences as a pretentious, prurient fad; the conductor announces the piece “lustily,” implying, as in Larkin and Adorno, the standard alignment of jazz and sex (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* [New York: Scribner, 2004], 49-50). A fad it undeniably was, as Locke’s substantial survey of this (quite short-lived) period of musical activity shows.


Although by the late ’40s the center of live jazz in New York had shifted from Harlem to West 52nd Street in midtown Manhattan, bebop in performance remained integral to Harlem
cultural life (DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 229; Gill, 348). In light of this, the paucity of references to live jazz performance in *Montage* is all the more striking, as is the presence of a lyric like “Juke Box Love Song” (*CP*, 393), which personifies and eroticizes Harlem to the drumbeat inscribed on a spinning record, amidst subtle quibbling on hi-fi and turntable terminology (e.g., “tone their rumble down”).

Several critics have examined the improvisatory, “bebop” rhythms or ethos of the cycle, and the artistic challenge bebop (as a mode or set of performance conventions) presented to Hughes as a poet of an older generation, steeped in earlier jazz styles. Robert O’Brien Hokanson argues that the “discontinuous, nonlinear form of *Montage* not only mirrors the musical and social dissonance of the bebop years but also reflects the deeper structures of the jazz tradition. In terms of jazz, the poem can be thought of as a sequence of distinctive voices that play off each other while building a freeform, improvisational whole” (“Jazzing it Up: The Be-Bop Modernism of Langston Hughes, in Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Langston Hughes, new ed., ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008], 122). Edward Brunner distinguishes in the *Montage* the alternating rhythms of “boogie-woogie” (an early, virtuosic blues piano style related to ragtime) and bebop, a contrast by which Hughes “acknowledges a pluralistic and multi-generational Harlem community” as well as emphasizing its rapid artistic evolution –“an advance, it goes without saying, unmatched in the social realm.” Brunner argues that the “bop talk” of *Montage* “exists not to be decoded . . . . Its unintelligibility, however, is deliberate, not helpless: a gesture and a promise toward the future. To hear a dream, especially one that has been set aside, requires sensitivity to the moment of deferral” (*Cold War Poetry: The Social Text in the Fifties Poem* [Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 2001], 133-42).

The elegiac dimension of Hughes’s treatment of bebop is literalized in the two-by-two funeral march of “Dead in There,” which sardonically eulogizes a “cool bop daddy” who may or may not have been a musician (and who may or may not have been a small-time con artist or drug dealer; see *OED*, s.v. “hype”), but whose instrument is in any case never specified (*CP*, 399, l. 5). The dimeter march is significantly, if only momentarily, disrupted by the mention of “Squares / Who couldn’t dig him” (ll. 18-19), lines evocative of then-current critical
controversies over bebop, already noted. For “figurines” and “figurettes,” see *CP*, 392 and 398, respectively, and also 388, 390 (the cry of “Salt’ peanuts!”), 391 (a responsive “Comment on Stoop” counterpart to the “Comment against Lamp Post” on page 398), 408-9, 424, etc. Although these figures are often simply onomatopoetic (“De-dop!”), they are sometimes ingeniously signifying, as in the mocking figurette that follows the exclamation of the surprised repeat father-to-be in “What? So Soon!” – “De-daddle-dy!” (*CP*, 398). Cf. Ellison on the fragmentary, mimetic, and parodic aspect of Charlie Parker’s improvisations (*Shadow and Act*, 222-3).


143 Two earlier poems, “Note on Commercial Theatre” (1940) and the explicitly Marxist “White Man” (1936), the latter of which refers directly to the commercial appropriation of Louis Armstrong’s recordings (*CP*, 194-95; ll. 15-17), speak to this issue. The legacy of misappropriation of African-American artistic forms is the theme of the former, which accuses the entertainment industry directly:

You’ve taken my blues and gone –
You sing ’em on Broadway
And you sing ’em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed ’em up with symphonies
And you fixed ’em
So they don’t sound like me. (*CP*, 215-16; ll. 1-6).

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Hokanson, 119; the verses are from Montage, “Sliver,” ll. 1-2 (CP, 425). The reference in the prefatory note to bebop’s “conflicting changes” may well be meant specifically to indicate a degree of inbuilt idiomatic tension between the dissonant surface and artistic ethos of the music, and its borrowed vernacular harmonic underpinnings (“changes”). DeVeaux points out that the “new rhythmic configuration” developed by Kenny Clarke for bebop “undermined [the] tendency” of incorporated vernacular rhetorics such as the blues and the popular song “to sameness and continuity” (The Birth of Bebop, 269); the same effect is imitated in the linear form of much of Montage.

The seminal critical text on Hughes’s use of blues language is Steven C. Tracy’s Langston Hughes and the Blues, 2nd ed. (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2001); see, especially, the third chapter, “Creating the Blues” (141-265), for some instructive remarks on Montage and Hughes’s recorded collaboration with Charles Mingus.

In a letter to the poet Arna Bontemps, Hughes described Montage as “a full book-length poem in five sections” – later, six – and also “what you might call a precedent shattering opus,” comments (to whatever degree tongue-in-cheek) calibrated to present it as an essential unity, and a radical novelty, and yet also a culmination of existing discourses (“... a tour de force”) (quoted in Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II, 151). In truth, many of the individually titled vignettes in the volume had been separately published as early as 1946 – one of them, “Brothers,” in 1924!

Ellison, Shadow and Act, 225; Ellison also refers to bebop as “a texture of fragments” (203). As Brunner points out, the early reception of Montage was itself marked by unfavourable comparison to The Waste Land, the allegation that Hughes had “merely reproduced urban voices in helpless fragments that indicated his inability to provide a perspective ample enough to be transformational” (133-5). Brunner by contrast situates Montage in a class of postwar long poems (or “symphonic epics”) with William Carlos Williams’s Paterson (1946-58), Charles Olson’s Maximus (1950-70), and John Berryman’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet (1956). The
comparison with *The Waste Land*, initially used as a stick against *Montage*, has since become commonplace in the criticism. Both Hokanson and Peter Brooker draw analogies between the two (and also with Pound’s *Cantos*), although Brooker’s is more qualified: though the *Montage* “shares a topology or problematic with these and other modernist texts, a structure of aspiration and failure to achieve coherence, . . . there is much too that it does not share; in its sources, its social complaint, and democratic sympathies” (“Modernism Deferred: Langston Hughes, Harlem, and Jazz Montage,” in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000], 245-6). See also Anita Patterson, “Jazz, Realism, and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes” (in Bloom, 135-64).

153 According to Michael Borshuk, the fragmentary, “disjunctive” bebop aesthetic “fashioned a way for Hughes to articulate” a distinctive, personal, complex African-American modernism, “stylistically experimental, openly political, and yet rich with the folk-derived expressivity that the poet espoused throughout his career” (*Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African-American Modernist Literature* [New York: Routledge, 2005], 61-90).

154 See also “Deferred” (*CP*, 413-14), a survey of Harlemites’ economic, material, social, cultural, and spiritual aspirations, which incorporates a voice declaring, “I’d like to take up Bach” (l. 48). It is met with an announcement of the title of the cycle and its refrain, “Buddy, have you heard?” – as if to suggest that *Montage* itself is on some level a fulfilment of these aspirations.

155 See, e.g., Johnson, *Essential Writings*, 211, 220.


157 See Hughes, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand” (*CP*, 299) and “The Heart of Harlem” (*CP*, 311-12), as well as “Projection” in *Montage* (*CP*, 403-4). The Constitution Hall incident galvanized the press, the African-American community, and the Roosevelt White House; see Raymond
Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert That Awakened America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 91-151. The incident may have also provided part of the inspiration for Hughes’s satirical vignette “Old Ghost Revives Atavistic Memories in a Lady of the DAR,” published in the *Chicago Defender* in July 1949 (see Sullivan Harper, 240).


159 Spellman, 41. That said, as Spellman observed in a new introduction (written in 1985) to a reprint of *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, “in this era of exponential growth in the number of arts institutions of all kinds, there does not exist one jazz organization that could be called an institution by virtue of the security of its endowment or the commodiousness of its facilities” (*Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, new ed. [New York: Limelight, 1994], ix). The situation has improved somewhat since 1985, but it’s worth keeping in mind Spellman’s cautioning remarks when speaking of the “institutionalization” of jazz.

160 The poem was first published in 1946, under the title “Projection of a Day”; when revised for *Montage*, the passage referring to Gillespie was changed to refer to Lionel Hampton, a jazz vibraphonist and transitional figure between swing and bop, whose band employed many players who would go on to become leading figures in modern jazz, including Gillespie. Hughes later restored the reference to Gillespie (*CP*, 674 n. 403). For the importance of transcription to the formalized study of jazz, see Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 11, 105-21, etc., and Kurt Ellenberger, *Materials and Concepts in Jazz Improvisation: A Theory of Jazz Improvisation for Beginning and Advanced Players* (Grand Rapids, MI: Keytone, 2005), 27-28.


162 Charles Mingus’s by turns cooperative and despotic Jazz Workshop, formed in 1955, was among the first, and surely the most influential aggregation to operate under that name. For a discussion of Mingus’s “Jazz Sweatshop,” complete with an illuminating comparison between its
methods and those of Lee Strasberg’s contemporary Actors Studio, see Saul, 154-64; and for an account of its genesis and early incarnations, see Spellman, 215-16.


164 The figuration of Parker as a jazz messiah was an element of bebop lore even before his death; Ellison explores the figure and plays with it (see *Shadow and Act*, 204-5, 222-27). The line could also be an echo of the well-known story of the last words of Allen Foster, a mentally impaired young African-American who was the first prisoner in North Carolina to be executed by gas chamber in 1936. Just before the gas overtook him, Foster is said to have cried out, “Save me, Joe Louis!” (Scott Christianson, *The Last Gasp: The Rise and Fall of the American Gas Chamber* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2010], 110-11). The most famous version of this story is the one related by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his 1964 book *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964). There, the episode serves to contrast the “helplessness, the loneliness, and the profound despair” of African-Americans in the earlier part of the century with the new widespread resolution to effect social and political change: “the bizarre and naive cry to Joe Louis [has been] replaced by a mighty shout of challenge” (111). The iconic importance of Joe Louis in the African-American imagination of mid-century figures in both *Montage* and *Ask Your Mama*.

165 On Dolphy’s *Illinois Concert*, recorded in March of 1963, the saxophonist is accompanied by two student bands from the University of Illinois, one of which includes Cecil Bridgewater (who would eventually find success as a professional modern jazz trumpeter) on French horn. As Vladimir Simosko’s liner notes point out, Dolphy had been invited by the university’s music faculty, although when he appeared he was subjected to hostile questioning concerning his heterodox musical theories and practices; see liner notes to Blue Note 7243 4 99826 2 8, 1999.

166 The “statue on Bedloe’s island” is the Statue of Liberty; Hurok was Anderson’s manager. Still and Hughes collaborated on the opera *Troubled Island*, about the Haitian revolution of the 18th
century; it premiered in 1949. Bonds set several of Hughes’s texts to music for piano, voice, and orchestra during the ’40s and ’50s.

167 The quotation occurs during the first chorus of “The Big Head.” The recording is on both *Verve Jazz Masters 34* and *The Complete Jazz Scene*.

168 The festival ended, not as planned, with a “Blues Afternoon” on Sunday, 3 July, after Newport city council had already made the decision to terminate the festival early as a result of the Saturday night riot. Acting as emcee, Hughes composed a “Goodbye Newport Blues” which was set to music and performed by the Muddy Waters group, and later released on an LP (*At Newport 1960*, Chess LP-1449, 1960). For accounts of the riot and its relationship to *Ask Your Mama*, see Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II*, 314-17, and Saul, 117-36, who discusses both the Newport festival and Mingus’s “Newport Rebels” counter-festival, as well as “Goodbye Newport Blues.” Both authors also provide useful commentary on Hughes’s use of the “dozens” as the dominant idiom of the cycle and how it responds to the Newport situation, and also on Hughes’s treatment of African-American celebrity. Saul argues that names such as Coleman’s “are interjected into *Ask Your Mama*, less as figures who play a role in the poem's narrative and more as totemic, inspirational presences” (138), a claim complicated somewhat by the acrid tone of the cycle as a whole and especially “Horn of Plenty.”

169 Coleman’s albums, all on the Atlantic label, have the catalogue numbers 1317, 1327, and 1364, respectively.

170 John Coltrane, to name just one example, copied out a Hughes poem as part of a fifth-grade assignment on African-American history; he also wrote about Marian Anderson for the same assignment (Lewis Porter, 15).

171 The quotation may be apocryphal; at least, it probably did not originate with Armstrong. The bassist Hank Jones calls it a “joke about Louis Armstrong” but adds, “Knowing Louis, I think he really said it” (quoted in Gene Lees, *Waiting for Dizzy* [New York: Oxford UP, 1991], 74). The
quotation has also been attributed to Chet Atkins and Pete Seeger, as well as any number of unnamed “old” musicians.

172 I have borrowed a phrase from the title of Gary Giddins’s piecemeal history, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), which makes a structural and historiographic principle of this same balance.

173 “‘Great God from Zion!’ Sam Watson gasped. ‘Y’all really playin’ de dozens tuhnigh’” (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [New York: Harper, 2006], 79). As Saul and Rampersad note, the first and most influential academic study of the Dozens was by the social psychologist John Dollard; entitled “The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult,” it was published in the journal *American Imago* in November 1939. Hughes had a copy of this article, and acknowledged its influence on him (Saul, 133). A useful account of the Dozens can be found in Lawrence W. Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 344-58.

174 Saul, 129-43.

175 There is ambiguous textual evidence to suggest that the speaker of the poem might himself be a musician of the embattled new jazz avant-garde. Certainly, the punning title, “Horn of Plenty,” suggests a musical focus, despite the diversity of public figures name-dropped over the course of the poem. And, like Coleman in the earlier “Jazztet Muted,” the speaker is characterized as having his “NAME IN THE PAPERS EVERY DAY!” (l. 37). Reporters question him, in the same breath, about his temperament, his political attitudes, and his musical associates: “THEY WONDERED WAS I SENSITIVE / AND HAD A CHIP ON MY SHOULDER? / DID I KNOW CHARLIE MINGUS?” Of course, Hughes himself did know Mingus (whose own “sensitivity” is attested by the liner notes he commissioned from his psychiatrist for *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*), and collaborated with him on a number of projects, including the album *The Weary Blues*. The carefully-cultivated ambiguity of the speaker’s identity (is it a version of Hughes, or a musician character, an embodiment of the jazz avant-garde – or some
other hypothetical African-American celebrity?) only strengthens the identification between Hughes’s poetry and the music established in the preface to *Montage*.


178 For the critical controversies surrounding the music of Coleman and Dolphy during this time, see Iain Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007), 49-92.
Conclusion

More overtly than Djuna Barnes’s works-in-progress on *Le Sacre du printemps*, Hughes’s responses to bebop and its stylistic successors present the act of writing about modern music as an act of implicit, provisional, and – at least in the case of *Ask Your Mama* – retrospective self-criticism. But Hughes could be no less mindful than Barnes of the myopia of the autocritical perspective. For both, working in their respective Manhattan apartments, geographically close by if socially far removed, music served as a vehicle for conveying their mutual interest in a project they could not, themselves, complete: for Hughes was no more likely to see through Harlem culture’s “transition” into institutional stability than Barnes was to see the rumours of her notorious life give way to the detached discourse of academic study. Though the political stakes were different for them, they were both thoroughly invested in the retrospective assessment, historical explication, and institutional legitimation of the endeavour to bring art into line with the conditions of modernity, an endeavour to which they had, in their respective and highly idiosyncratic ways, devoted their working lives.

And yet even as they invited this retrospection, even as they helped supply the materials – the references, the quotations, the critical framework – by which to go about it in an empirical way, they also sounded a note of caution. As artworks and art movements age, they become both more and less intelligible: if the cultural historian’s work can lend artistic innovation an air of inevitability, it can also occlude its original social significance, the revelatory or even revolutionary promise it might have once seemed to hold. Hughes’s riddling, provocative “Liner Notes” to *Ask Your Mama* appear to aim at a kind of mocking insulation against this transformation of context; at the same time, their pseudo-scholarly form tacitly concedes its inexorability, even its necessity. In marking out their judgments as explicitly provisional, both Barnes and Hughes strive to balance the gains and losses of retrospect, and warn against any perspective’s pretense of finality or certainty.

Neither Barnes nor Hughes could identify perfectly with the musical vehicle, and not just (or even primarily) because of the difference in medium. From her “Lament for the Left Bank” – with its ascription of the success of the *Sacre* to “a young English girl (going under an old Russian name),” rather than to Stravinsky, Nijinsky, or Massine – we get the impression that Barnes identified more with the arts culture that had produced the ballet, and registered its
impact, than with the work itself. As for Hughes, bebop was inescapably the music of a younger generation, to which he must have known he was giving an elder statesman’s seal of approval. In both cases, and in the cases too of Forster and Woolf in their respective renderings of the expanding European tonal system, this necessary sense of detachment is what makes the critical impulse viable, and allows it to manifest itself in literature.

All of the authors I have considered in this project grapple in this way with the “new” music as a condition of modernity – as a problem, therefore, for the modernist literary artist. Their work registers the quandary of the first encounter with an art for which there seems to be no ready aesthetic reference point; by turns, they describe, interpret, critique, mimic, and metaphorically transmute its effects. Finally, as public intellectuals, with their provisional and varied responses, they feed a growing institutional consensus, an evolving comprehensive historical narrative about the aesthetic and political objects of their time, and their involvement with one another. But the need to counterpoise identification with detachment, and vice versa, results in representations and interpretations that complicate institutionally dominant narratives about the origins and meaning of modern art in productive ways. These texts thus represent critical contributions of enduring value. Hughes’s dialectical construction of bebop’s relationship to the commercial recording industry, for example, is just one of the ways in which his representation of jazz modernism can help to resolve very real tensions in the current critical orthodoxy about the music’s art status and connection to modernism as a whole. Above all, these texts remind us how much is apt to be forgotten in too neat a distillation of the various, sometimes conflicting, discourses and products that make up the stuff of cultural history.
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