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JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE AESTHETICS OF MUSIC

By

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ABSTRACT

An essential relationship between science, subjectivity, and music is evident in the work of Joseph Conrad. The origins of this interdependence can be traced back to the Romantic metaphysics of the early nineteenth century, when the aesthetics of absolute music began to defend the primacy of music as an unmotivated, autonomous form of art. Despite the influence of scientific positivism during the second half of the nineteenth century, music continued to enjoy a privileged reputation and is cited by Conrad in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* as the highest art. Conrad’s interest in music was specifically related to the alternatives that its temporality provided for new narrative forms, and in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad makes an explicit attempt to create a narrative voice based on the aesthetics of absolute music. This attempt proves problematic, however, and in his late novel *Victory* Conrad reflects on the tragic contradictions inherent in the relationship between music and the realization of subjective autonomy.
INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the nineteenth century music’s position in European thought underwent a radical transformation. In the late eighteenth century a new aesthetics of what would later come to be known as “absolute music” had just begun to justify instrumental compositions as independent of the traditional tripartite definition of harmonia, rhythmos, and logos; by the end of the next century the reputation of instrumental music was such that poetry, literature, and philosophy explicitly cited music as a model for their endeavors. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), referring to music, repeatedly argued in The Birth of Tragedy (1872) that it is “only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified,”\textsuperscript{1} the French Symbolist Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) demanded “Music before all else” (“De la musique avant toute chose”) in the opening line of his poem “Art poétique,” and in one of Modernism’s most famous aesthetic pronouncements the English art critic Walter Pater (1839-1894) declared in “The School of Giorgione” (1877) that “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”\textsuperscript{2} Oscar Wilde later articulated a position very similar to Pater’s, when he explained in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) that “[f]rom the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician.”\textsuperscript{3} By 1940 the relationship between music and literature was so solidified that Virginia Woolf could write in confusion to her violinist friend Elizabeth Trevelyan that “It’s odd, for I’m not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them.”\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1} Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999): “nur als aesthetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt.” Translated by Walter Kaufman as The Birth of Tragedy in Basic Writings of Nietzsche (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 52.


\textsuperscript{4} Virginia Woolf, Leave the Letters Till We’re Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 6: 1936-1941, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1980), 426. Woolf would write to Ethel Smyth later in the same year with the
In philosophy music came to be considered not merely a form of metaphysics, as it had been by Romantics like E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), but as something higher than even philosophy itself. In one of logical positivism’s early manifestos Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) asked rhetorically if “when a metaphysician gives verbal expression to his dualistic-heroic attitude towards life in a dualistic system, is it not perhaps because he lacks the ability of a Beethoven to express this attitude in an adequate medium?” and concluded that “Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability.” On the opposite side of the analytic philosophical divide Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is reported to have pronounced upon hearing Schubert’s final Sonata in B-flat (D. 960) that “We cannot do that in philosophy.”

Given the intellectual richness of this period and the wide variety of conceptual frameworks that were used to discuss music, there is no single vocabulary that can fully account for what music “was” or what it was understood to mean. “Music” could be variously explained as a scientific, religious, philosophical, aesthetic, institutional, or textual phenomenon. I have chosen in this thesis to focus primarily on explicating music in its relationship with language and subjectivity. One of my main reasons for focusing on these two aspects of the Modernist understanding of “music” is historical; music has been traditionally talked about in these terms in

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6 Much of Carnap’s “Elimination of Metaphysics” essay is in fact directed specifically at Heidegger, in particular the latter’s claim in “Was ist Metaphysik” that “Das Nichts selbst nichtet” (“Nothingness negates itself”).
7 Andrew Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity; from Kant to Nietzsche (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 15.
Western culture since at least Plato. The relationship between music, language, and subjectivity becomes particularly important, however, in nineteenth-century intellectual culture. Carl Dahlhaus has argued that Romanticism’s understanding of music’s transcendence was derived from the literature of the late eighteenth century, and in a book on *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, Andrew Bowie begins a chapter about “Music, language and literature” by pointing out that “the relation of music to language, whether in the sense of music being seen as a language, or as revealing what language is unable to say, serves as an important indicator of the ways in which aesthetics in this period is linked to truth. Music can be regarded as a deficient means of articulation, or as a privileged one. This nexus is fundamental to the philosophical history of subjectivity being considered here.”

In order to investigate this nexus, I have chosen to focus in particular on the work of Joseph Conrad, whose personal interest in music has been well documented. As Jeffrey Meyers notes in his biography of the novelist, “Music played a surprisingly pervasive role in Conrad’s life and art.” Conrad’s first childhood memories concerned his mother and music, and he heard Italian and French operas during his early years in Marseilles. Émilie Briquel, whom Conrad unsuccessfully attempted to court in 1895, was a pianist and recorded in her diary how Conrad

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9 Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Hacket Publishing, 1992), 76: “We shouldn’t strive to have either subtlety or great variety in meter. Rather, we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune to his words, not his words to them.”

10 Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63: “Furthermore, it is in novels—Moritz’s *Andreas Hartknopf* and Jean Paul’s *Hesperus*—that the prehistory of romantic music esthetics emerged. Paradoxically enough, the discovery that music—specifically instrumental music free of object or of concrete concept—was a language ‘above’ language occurred ‘in’ language itself: in literature. There is nothing that justifies the assumption that Jean Paul merely put into words an esthetic that already existed in the consciousness of educated contemporaries; instead, by formulating it, he created it in the first place. In other words: literature about music is no mere reflection of what happens in the musical practice of composition, interpretation, and reception, but rather belongs, in a certain sense, to the constituent forces of music itself. For insofar as music does not exhaust itself in the acoustical substrate that underlies it, but only takes shape through categorical ordering of what has been perceived, a change in the system of categories affects the substance of the things itself.”


liked to listen to her play and was especially fond of the music of Schubert, Massenet, and Chopin. The last time Conrad saw Briquel, he gave her a score to *Carmen* and turned the pages for her as she played. In his reflections on “My Boyhood with Conrad,” Robin Douglas also described how Conrad “loved music, and would sit back with his eyes closed when his wife played the piano.”¹³ This appreciation for music was captured in Muirhead Bone’s 1923 sketch of Conrad listening to Brahms.¹⁴ A number of Conrad’s close friends were musicians, and he met some of the finest pianists and composers of his time. Arthur Rubinstein, introduced by Norman Douglas, visited Conrad in 1914, and in 1924 Conrad was introduced to Paderewski by Woodrow Wilson’s adviser Colonel House. Conrad met Maurice Ravel twice in London in 1923.¹⁵

Music plays an important role in at least three distinct areas of Conrad literary thought, so that his oeuvre offers the advantage of allowing multiple methodological approaches to be taken on the same fundamental issues. First, like many of his contemporaries, Conrad frequently makes explicit and laudatory references to music in his discussions of aesthetics. In the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* Conrad argues that “all art . . . must strenuously aspire . . . to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts,”¹⁶ an assertion that sounds very much like Pater’s famous dictum. In an “Author’s Note” to *Heart of Darkness* he again uses a musical metaphor to explain his artistic agenda when he explains how the “sombre theme [of the novel] had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.”¹⁷ Second,

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¹⁵ Meyers, Conrad, 334-35.
the fact that Conrad did not simply theorize about aesthetics in the abstract but also wrote purportedly “musical” novels, like *Heart of Darkness*, means that it is possible to analyze his prose style to get a better idea of how he understood music, language, and the relationship between them. Finally, several of Conrad’s novels explicitly feature musicians or other characters have an important relationship to music. Lena and Axel Heyst, the two protagonists of *Victory*, are respectively described as a performer in a traveling women’s orchestra and a “dreamer, to whom it is given sometimes to hear the music of the spheres.”¹⁸ A thematic analysis of these characters’ relationship with music in the novel can provide yet another perspective on Conrad’s understanding of music.

There is further evidence, however, that suggests that Conrad’s attitude towards music was more complicated than this initial information might indicate. Despite the importance that Conrad places on music, he was an avowed critic of aestheticists who sought simply to recreate in literary works the sensuous beauty of music. Within the same Preface that calls music the “art of arts,” Conrad also dismisses artistic movements and explains how “the cry of Art for Art itself, loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality. It sounds far off. It has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper.”¹⁹ Evidence within several of Conrad’s novels also complicates our picture of his attitude towards music. *Lord Jim* and *Victory*, for example, have frequently been read as criticisms or outright parodies of aestheticism and of attempts to model one’s life as a work of art understood on the model of music. Axel Heyst, the protagonist of *Victory*, might be a “dreamer to whom it is given sometimes to hear the music of the spheres,” but he also dies at the end of the novel as a result of his complete inability to exert any agency in

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¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Victory* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1915), 74. (Subsequent citations will be included parenthetically.)

the real world. Thus, although Conrad is very interested in music and his work reflects many elements of Romantic thought, it is also characterized by what we might tentatively call a Modernist skepticism about many of these very same ideas. The availability of the three complementary perspectives mentioned above makes Conrad’s work particularly rich for approaching questions about how the relationship between music, language, and subjectivity could be understood in the early twentieth century.

These questions in general and Conrad’s work in particular have been largely neglected in the scholarly research on “music and literature,” much of which has focused on other writers. Daniel Melnick’s *Fullness of Dissonance: Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music*, for example, includes chapters on Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce. Brad Bucknell’s *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics* specifically addresses the work of Walter Pater, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. The essays included in Robert McParland’s edited collection *Music and Literary Modernism* focus on Stéphane Mallarmé, W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. Eric Prieto’s *Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative* uses works by Robert Pinget, Michel Leris, and Samuel Beckett as case studies. A number of monographs have been written dedicated to the relationship between music and literature in the work of other novelists, including Michelle Fillion’s *Difficult Rhythm: Music and Word E. M. Forster* and Emma Sutton’s *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music: Politics, Aesthetics, Form*. Other

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20 Fully substantiating this characterization of “Modernism” in general would take us far beyond the scope of this thesis. For this particular investigation, I am primarily interested in analyzing how the conflicts in Conrad’s understanding of the relationship between music, language, and subjectivity arose out of tensions inherent in the Romantic tradition that he inherited. For a broader discussion of these issues, see, for example, Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2-3: “in a kind of strange recuperation of a romantic belief in the expressive potential of music and in its capacity to go beyond the mere rationality of language, many moderns do indeed turn to music in their search for a form to represent both conscious and unconscious levels of emotion. The attempt to claim music as a model for inwardsness is part of a musical-expressivist aesthetic paradigm that had grown on many fronts in the nineteenth century. As such, the move towards music seems part of a tension within modernism itself which seeks both to abolish and preserve its romantic past at one and the same time.”
books on “literature and music” have been less concerned with investigating the interrelationship between music and literature as such than with using treatments of music in literature as means to other intellectual ends, as in Phyllis Weliver’s study of the representations of female musicians in Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction: 1860-1900 and Delia da Sousa Correa’s discussion of the relationship between music, gender, and science in George Eliot, Music, and Victorian Culture.

To the extent that Conrad’s relationship with music has been discussed, these investigations typically focus on hunting down allusions to musical culture but fail to explain how his prose is itself musical. John DiGaetani’s Richard Wagner and the Modern British Novel includes a chapter specifically dedicated to “‘The Magic Suggestiveness of Music’: Richard Wagner and Joseph Conrad,” but DiGaetani focuses almost exclusively on Conrad’s references to Wagnerian “mythic” themes, to the exclusion of any careful analysis of his prose style.21 Other studies, including Joshua Epstein’s dissertation on “Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer,” characterize Conrad’s prose as musical but avoid the difficult questions about the historical conditions that made it possible for Conrad (and his subsequent readers) to conceptualize prose as “musical” in the first place.22 Without such an understanding, descriptions of language as “musical” risk being either anachronistic or critically empty, insofar as the word is applied to any writing that the reader finds in some way pleasing. Beginning from the

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21 John Louis DiGaetani, Richard Wagner and the Modern British Novel (Teaneck, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978), 56: “Like Wagner, Conrad was interested in myth and its potential for exposing the recurrent problems of mankind. Concepts like the death-wish, the power of money, the might of the sea, the curse of loneliness, redemption through love, and human determinism and images like the magic garden, incorruptible but corrupting metal, moving water, and purifying fire are common to both Wagner and Conrad. . . . [I]t is impossible to prove that the rhythms in some of Conrad’s prose are specifically Wagnerian, but they certainly are musical and their combination with the Wagnerian patterns we have noticed does create an operatic, staged, and mythic atmosphere.”

22 Joshua Benjamin Epstein, “Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008), 4: “[Conrad’s treatment of noise in Lord Jim] offers a wedge into the modernist musical and literary treatment of noise . . . [In order to] signify the psychological and institutional pressures of modernity, or to signify the dialectical relation between sound and silence, [Conrad] strains the English language to the point that at moments of crisis it collapses into noise or into silence. These dilemmas also charge Conrad’s language with meaning to the extent that they result in a recognizably dense, stylized, dare I say musical prose.”
observation that the concepts “music,” “language,” and “subjectivity” have been very important to Western thought in general and the work of Joseph Conrad in particular, this thesis seeks to provide a more conceptually and historically nuanced analysis of their relationship with one another.
CHAPTER 1

JOSEPH CONRAD, SCIENTIFIC POSITIVISM, AND ABSOLUTE MUSIC: THE PREFACE TO THE NIGGER OF THE “NARCISSUS”

One of literary Modernism’s best-known aesthetic statements occurs in the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” where Joseph Conrad praises music as the “art of arts” and argues that sculpture, painting, and literature must seek its “magic suggestiveness.”¹ Although in many ways Conrad’s claims represent widely held aesthetic views in his era, some have found his exposition in the Preface somewhat confounding. In The Life of the Novel, for example, David Goldknopf summarily dismisses the Preface and characterizes it as an incoherent jumble of ideas and intellectual movements: “I cannot make coherent sense of it. I do find repeated statements of faith in visualization, embodied in a hodgepodge of platonic, positivistic, and romantic sentiments. And when these are shaken out, there remains, I suppose, a credo of impressionistic realism—in Henry James’s phrase, solidity of specification—qualified by the somewhat obsessive emphasis on the optical process.”²

Even Conrad had doubts about his own ability to write literary criticism and had come to the conclusion that “the form of writing consisting in literary appreciation of other men’s work, implying analysis and an exposition of ethical and aesthetic values . . . is not my way.”³ He had reservations about the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” in particular, and when he included it along with a letter to Edward Garnett on August 24, 1897, begged Garnett “not to be impatient with it and if you think it at all possible to give it a chance to get printed. That rests

¹ Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” 146. (Subsequent citations in this chapter will be included parenthetically.)
entirely with you . . . you know very well I daren’t make any move without your leave. I’ve no more judgment of what is fitting in the way of literature than a cow.” 4 When Richard Curle proposed including a copy of the Preface, which was still unavailable to the British public, in his forthcoming study on Conrad, the author was reluctant and told Curle that “I would sound declamatory, even windy, against your pages.” 5 Yet, Conrad’s own reservations notwithstanding, Goldknopf’s supposition that he can extract a theory of “impressionistic realism” from the Preface by “shaking out” the “sentiments” that make the interpretation difficult does unnecessary violence to the essay, especially considering how explicit Conrad is in rejecting such “creeds”:

> It is evident that he who, rightly or wrongly, holds by the convictions expressed here cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft. The enduring part of them—the truth which each only imperfectly veils—should abide with him as the most precious of his possessions, but they all: Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism. . . all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him . . . (147)

If Conrad is not promoting a specific technique or theory of literature, however, this raises some questions about what exactly he is trying to accomplish. Conrad’s categorical requirement that fiction must “care for the shape and ring of sentences” and aspire to the “magic suggestiveness of music” is particularly difficult to make sense of, since his stated opposition to specific styles would seem to rule out the possibility that he is advocating for something like a particular kind of “musical prose.” Even Conrad’s praise for music, and in fact art itself, is qualified: Conrad calls music the “art of arts” but also describes how “the cry of Art for Art itself, loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality. It sounds far off. It has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper” (147). The Preface is attached to the beginning of a novel, but it says nothing at all about that novel in particular, nor any other for that matter. The discussion touches on

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important philosophical issues, but, by his own admission (and Goldknopf’s assessment), Conrad is not really doing philosophy, or at least not philosophy that merits consideration in the terms of that discipline. Conrad approaches questions about the ontology and epistemology of art, topics that traditionally fall into the category of “aesthetics,” but in other respects the Preface is recalcitrantly opposed to aesthetics. In the penultimate paragraph Conrad even suggests that the only reason we talk about art is to make up for the failure that necessarily results from our pursuit of a nearly impossible task: “Art is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim—the aim of art which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult—obscured by mists” (148).

It would be remiss, however, to understand Conrad’s skepticism as evidence of some sort of post-modernist irony. Despite the doubts that he raises, the positive assertions that Conrad ventures about science, music, and literature appear sincere. Even if the aim of art is nearly impossible and “obscured by mists,” he still ends the Preface with the claim that “sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished—behold! all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest” (148).

The difficulties that the Preface presents with respect to its genre do, however, mean that an interpretation cannot proceed according to any particular set of established hermeneutical norms. If anything, one of its defining characteristics is the degree to which its content undermines our use of the very categories we need in order to interpret it in the first place. Thus, rather than attempting to understand Conrad’s Preface by providing a single coherent

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6 Conrad seems here to be repurposing a Classical expression (“Ars longa, vita brevis”) in a distinctly fin-de-siècle context. Although the expression was originally intended as a reflection on how difficult it is to accomplish everything that needs to be done in the short time that humans are allotted, Conrad is using it to emphasize the obscurity of the goal itself and not merely to indicate that he might lack the time he needs to get there.
“interpretation,” I will begin by showing how this situation arose historically. The problems that preoccupied Conrad and his range of possible responses were specific to his intellectual climate, and even if Conrad’s ideas cannot be formulated as a univocal rational system, it is nonetheless to understand how it had become possible for him to formulate problems which could not be satisfactorily answered on his own terms.7

In an essay on the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* Ian Watt has convincingly argued that much of the essay can be firmly placed in a Romantic literary tradition that extends back to poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. By the end of the eighteenth century, a number of social and scientific advances had forced literary critics to confront new questions about their art. The empiricism of Newton and Locke had created three far-reaching questions with which Romanticism had to deal: (1) the kind of truth embodied in literature; (2) the social tendencies of the French revolution and Utilitarianism required a justification of the usefulness of literature to mankind at large; and (3) various mechanist models of mind raised questions what mental processes could account for the creation and understanding of literature in the first place. According to Watt, the Romantic response to these challenges held that

[1] literature embodied kinds of humanly necessary truths or values which were not attainable elsewhere; it therefore had a higher kind of utility than the material and the quantitative; and it was produced by, and communicated to, constituents of the human personality, usually described as the imagination or the sensibility, which were not available to scientific psychological study but were nevertheless necessary to explain not only man’s aesthetic impulse but the grounds of his religious, moral, and social life.8

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7 The suggestion that Conrad is some kind of “skeptic” is not, it should be noted, at all new. See, for example, Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), xiii-xiv: “Conrad’s most important writing participates in a tradition of philosophical skepticism that extends from Descartes to the present . . . As Conrad knew well, participation in a tradition—whether philosophical, literary, or maritime—not only empowers but constrains, and Conrad’s interest as a skeptic is heightened by the degree to which he resists the insights proffered by his own skepticism.”

In a sentence-by-sentence analysis Watt then proceeds to show how Conrad’s Preface is “centered on these three large Romantic issues” and “offers answers which are recognizably similar.”

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth identifies the first of the issues Watt names, the nature of truth in literature, asserting that the philosophical antithesis of poetry is not prose but “matter of Fact, or science,”⁹ and Conrad begins the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* by differentiating the methods of the arts from those of science and philosophy. All three endeavors seek “truth” in the “visible universe,” but philosophers and scientists are principally concerned with the pragmatic concerns that “fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living.” Their works are highly regarded, since they write about “the cultivation of our minds and the proper care of our bodies, with the attainment of our ambitions, with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims” (145). Yet, Conrad argues, answering the second of the issues that Watt identifies, art reveals a kind of truth that is inaccessible to the sciences. The artist’s appeal is “less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring [than that of the sciences]—and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom” (145). Conrad identifies the third of Watt’s questions and explains how the artist’s appeal is made to these “less obvious capacities,” which “because of the warlike conditions of existence” are necessarily “kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities” (145). Rather than concerning itself with the practical, contingent truths of scientific or discursive thought, fiction attempts to reach this “secret spring of responsive emotions” (146).

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Despite the continuities between the ideas expressed by early Romantics like Wordsworth and the position articulated in the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad’s essay reflects specific philosophical and aesthetic concerns of his era. During the second half of the nineteenth century scientific positivism had gained an increasingly powerful influence over European art and culture, literature included, and when Conrad referred to the aesthetics of Realism and Naturalism, he was responding to writers such as Émile Zola, who noted in *Le Roman experimental* (1880) that he had used Claude Bernard’s *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* as a model for the theory of the novel. According to Zola, an author should write by creating a laboratory experiment based on real life experiences and then simply place characters into that setting to see their responses, stating that his intention was to prove for my part that if the experimental method leads to the knowledge of physical life, it should also lead to the knowledge of the passionate and intellectual life. It is but a question of degree in the same path which runs from chemistry to physiology, then from physiology to anthropology and to sociology.  

Yet despite Conrad’s opposition to scientific Realism as an aesthetic theory, he was convinced by the empiricist premise that all knowledge began with sense-impressions. Mark Wollaeger has pointed out that “Though not formally trained in the new academic disciplines, Conrad’s letters reveal familiarity with contemporary science unusual for a literary man,” and Conrad’s repeated insistence in the Preface upon the “visible universe” accounts for Goldknopf’s comment about his “somewhat obsessive emphasis on the optical process.” In order to avoid falling into Realism’s and Naturalism’s physiological reductionism, however, in which the artist’s

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10 Émile Zola, *Les Oeuvres complètes, V: Le Roman experimental* (Paris: Bernouard, 1927), 12: “Je vais tâcher de prouver à mon tour que, si la méthode expérimentale conduit à la connaissance de la vie physique, elle doit conduire aussi à la connaissance de la vie passionnelle et intellectuelle. Ce n'est là qu'une question de degrés dans la même voie, de la chimie à la physiologie, puis de la physiologie à l'anthropologie et à la sociologie.” Translated by Belle M. Sherman as *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* (New York: Cassell, 1893), I.

immediate sensory experience was directly transferred to the reader via the text, like the
developing of a photograph, Conrad’s “lonely region of stress and strife” within the artist is
meant to communicate with a parallel faculty in the reader that remembers, compares, and
combines the impressions made by the external world, and seeks to determine their meaning and
importance. This “appeal” to the temperament of another person can only be made through the
senses, and it is here that Conrad claims that literary prose “must strenuously aspire to the
plasticity of sculpture, to the color of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which
is the art of arts” (146).

This praise reflects another difference between Conrad’s intellectual world and that of the
early Romantics, who had also shared an aversion to scientific reductionism but tended to praise
nature rather than art itself as the ideal source of truth. The narrator of Wordsworth’s “Tintern
Abbey” (1798) might hear the “The sad, still music of humanity” when he goes to the country to
escape the “din / Of towns and cities,” but it is evident that art is subordinate to nature, which
Wordsworth treats with a metaphysical awe bordering on pantheism. When Keats wrote his “Ode
to a Nightingale,” he was more interested in the bird’s association with nature than with its song
as an autonomous work of art:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth they soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.12

144.
In fact, Conrad’s description of music as the “Art of Arts” had its roots in the intellectual tradition of another country. Although Wordsworth and Keats believed that there were truths that went deeper than those that could be provided by science, the idea that music was particularly, even ideally, suited for such a task first originated in German metaphysics. When in 1813 E. T. A. Hoffmann asserted in his famous review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony that music could say things that were impossible to express in language, he was breaking with a tradition that went back to Plato, which understood *logos* as one of music’s necessary components:

> When we speak of music as an independent art, we should properly refer only to instrumental music, which, scorning the assistance and association of another art, namely poetry, expresses that peculiar property which can be found in music only. It is the most romantic of all the arts, one might almost say the only really romantic art, for its sole object is the expression of the infinite . . . [Beethoven] is consequently a purely romantic composer, and is it not possible that for this very reason he is less successful in vocal music, which does not surrender itself to the characterization of indefinite emotions but portrays effects specified by the words rather than those indefinite emotions experienced in the realm of the infinite?¹³

In his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* Arthur Schopenhauer even went so far as to claim that music was a “reflection” or “image” [Abbild] of the “Will” [Wille] that lay beyond the world of representation [Vorstellung], and that listening to music was a metaphysical activity:

> For music, as stated, differs from all the other arts in that it is not an image of the phenomenon, or more accurately, of an adequate objectivization of will, but immediately

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an image of will itself, and thus for all the phenomena the thing itself. One could accordingly just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will.\textsuperscript{14}

As a consequence, in terms of our view of music, higher than Leibniz’s, whose above-cited pronouncement [\textit{Musica est exercitium arithmeticae occultum nescientis se numerare animi}. Music is a hidden arithmetic exercise of the soul which does not know that it is counting]\textsuperscript{15} is entirely accurate from a more lowly standpoint, I say that we can parody it in the following way: \textit{Musica est exercitium metaphysicæ occultum nescientis se philosophari animi} [Music is a hidden metaphysical exercise of the soul which does not know that it is philosophizing].\textsuperscript{16}

By the middle of the century even Richard Wagner, the proponent of the so-called “total work of art” (Gesamtkunstwerk), declared in his 1857 open letter “On Franz Liszt’s Symphonic Poems,”

“Hear my creed: Music can never and in no possible alliance cease to be the highest, the redeeming art. It is of her nature, that what all the other arts but hint at, through her and in her becomes the most undoubtable of certainties, the most direct and definite of truths.”\textsuperscript{17} Over the course of the nineteenth century, music’s status in the pantheon of the arts had reached such a height that when Paul Valéry, speaking for the poets of his generation, reflected on the past, he found that “there came an epoch when poetry felt itself fade and weaken before the energy and resources of the orchestra. . . . we were nourished on music, and our literary minds dreamed only


\textsuperscript{16} Schopenhauer, \textit{SW I: WWV}, 369: “. . . also die wahre Philosophie sein würde und daß wir folglich den oben angeführten Ausspruch Leibnizens, der auf einem niedrigeren Standpunkt ganz richtig ist, im Sinn unserer höheren Ansicht der Musik folgendermaßen parodieren können: > Musica est exercitium metaphysicæ occultum nescientis se philosophari animi < [Die Musik ist eine unbewußte Übung in der Metaphysik, bei der der Geist nicht weiß, daß er philosophiert.]” Translated by Richard E. Aquila as \textit{The World as Will and Representation} (New York: Pearson Education, 2008), 315-16.

of extracting from language the same effects, almost, as were produced on our nervous systems by sound alone.”

More had happened in the years between Wordsworth and Conrad, however, than the substitution of music for nature in the field of metaphysics. Despite Schopenhauer’s highly metaphysical account of music, his specific ontology of the “Will” was largely ignored even by people who were otherwise sympathetic to his philosophy. When Wagner coined the expression “absolute music” in his program to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (1846), he did so under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach and used it as a pejorative to criticize composers whose music, like Hegel’s “absolute philosophy,” lacked a sufficient grounding in the real world. In an extension of the ancient Greek idea that music necessarily existed in conjunction with language, Wagner polemicized viciously against composers whose music he deemed insufficiently grounded in reality, and even after his conversion to Schopenhauer’s philosophy Wagner continued to argue his thesis from Opera and Drama (1851) that music was dependent on language and dance for formal motives, writing in the same Liszt essay in which he praised music as the highest art that

obvious as this is, it is equally certain that music can only be understood in forms drawn from a relationship to life, or an expression of life, forms that, originally foreign to music, only receive their deepest meaning through music, as if through the revelation of the music latent in them. . . . Thus, we agree on this point, and grant that, in this human

\[\text{19 Dahlhaus, The Idea of Absolute Music, 18.}\]
\[\text{20 For Feuerbach’s criticisms of Hegel’s absolute idealism, see, for example, Ludwig Feuerbach, Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft (Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1922), 55: “Ein nur und zwar abstrakt denkendes Wesen hat gar keine Vorstellung von Sein, Existenz, Wirklichkeit. Sein ist die Grenze des Denkens; Sein als Sein ist kein Gegenstand der, wenigstens abstrakten, absoluten Philosophie. Die spekulative Philosophie spricht dies selbst indirekt dadurch aus, daß ihr das Sein gleich nicht sein – Nichts ist. Nichts ist aber kein Gegenstand des denkens.” Translated by Manfred Vogel as Principles of the Philosophy of the Future (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 40: “A being that only thinks and thinks abstractly, has no idea at all of what being, existence, and reality are. Thought is bounded by being; being qua being is not an object of philosophy, at least not of abstract and absolute philosophy. Speculative philosophy itself expresses this indirectly in so far as it equates being with non-being, that is, nothing. But nothing cannot be an object of thought.”}\]
world, the music of the gods required a binding or, as we have seen, a determining force in order to make its appearance possible.\textsuperscript{21}

In Wagner’s view, then, although music could express something like the “innermost nature of the world” [der innerste Wesen der Welt]\textsuperscript{22} described by Schopenhauer’s aesthetic, it still required a basic formal motive in order to take shape in the empirical world. The French critic François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) went so far as to characterize Wagner as “one of the followers of this philosophy of ‘positivism,’” which Mr. Auguste Comte has founded in France.\textsuperscript{23}

The fundamental premise of even Wagner’s notoriously metaphysical \textit{Tristan and Isolde} had a greater basis in the material world than is commonly acknowledged; as Wagner indicated in a letter to Matthilde Wesendonck, “it is a matter of demonstrating a path of salvation recognised by none of the philosophers, particularly not by Sch[openhauer],—the pathway to complete pacification of the will through love, and not an abstract love of mankind, but the love


\textsuperscript{22} For a representative example, see Schopenhauer, \textit{SW: I: WWV}, 363: “Die Erfindung der Melodie, die Aufdeckung aller tiefsten Geheimnisse des menschlichen Wollens und Empfindens in ihr, ist das Werk des Genius, dessen Wirken hier augenscheinlicher als irgendwo fern von aller Reflexion und bewußter Absichtlichkeit liegt und eine Inspiration heißen könnte. Der Begriff ist hier wie überall in der Kunst unfruchtbar: der Komponist offenbart das innerste Wesen der Welt und spricht die tiefste Weisheit aus, in einer Sprache, die seine Vernunft nicht versteht.” Translated by Richard E. Aquila as \textit{The World as Will and Representation} (New York: Pearson Education, 2008), 311: “The invention of melody, the exposing of all the deepest secrets of human willing and feeling, is the work of genius, whose working lies more open to sight here than elsewhere, far from all reflection and conscious intention, and could be called a kind of inspiration. Concepts are here, as everywhere in art, unfruitful. The composer reveals the innermost essence of the world and pronounces the deepest wisdom in a language his reason does not understand.”

\textsuperscript{23} Jane Fulcher, “Wagner, Comte, and Proudhon: The Aesthetics of Positivism in France,” \textit{Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures} 33.2 (1979), 142: “In 1852, an accusation was made against the composer and theoretist Richard Wagner in one of the major French journals of music, the \textit{Revue et Gazette musicale}. The critic, François-Joseph Fétis, indignantly accused Wagner of being “un des adeptes de cette philosophie du ‘positivisme’ dont M. Auguste Comte est le fondateur en France.”
which actually blossoms from the soil of sexual love, i.e., from the affection between man and woman.”

Materialism was no less characteristic of the aesthetics of Eduard Hanslick, Wagner’s principal polemical foe in his mid-century disputes. Hanslick had appropriated the expression “absolute music” from Wagner for the opposite purpose of reviving E. T. A. Hoffmann’s thesis about the superiority of instrumental music. Despite his sympathy for Hoffmann’s conclusion and use of the Hegelian word “absolute,” however, Romantic metaphysics were notably absent from Hanslick’s aesthetics, and in On the Musically Beautiful (1854) he argued for an empirical position that dissociated the “purely musical” from language and other arts. It is worth pointing out that when Valéry praised music, he did so in terms of the “effects . . . as were produced on our nervous systems by sound alone.”

Thus, by the late nineteenth century, music, which Conrad holds up as the “art of arts,” had become the focal point of many of the problems that characterize the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” as a whole. The metaphysics of English and German Romanticism had argued that something existed beyond the reach of scientific inquiry, and the idea that musical art was the paradigmatic source of such knowledge survived in German thought despite a radical secularization. As Andrew Bowie has explained,

One of the paradoxes of the period during which Wagner’s work emerges is that an anti-metaphysical approach to music . . . can be linked to a Romantic view of it as an autonomous form of articulation which “says” what verbal language cannot. The latter view is, as it is in Hoffmann – and in Schopenhauer – often advanced in the name of a thoroughly metaphysical conception, in which music is to replace discursive metaphysics as the form of access to the super-sensuous world.”

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This “paradox,” which entails transcendence without any supporting metaphysics, is indeed deeply problematic. Metaphysics can be understood as a special way of talking about the world, and when writers advance metaphysical theories, they are trying to convince other people that their language does a superior job of describing it. When Plato suggested the existence of ideal forms, they could be described completely rationally within his philosophical language, even if they ranked higher than the material world in his ontological hierarchy. The nineteenth-century idea that music transcended language altogether was truly radical, however, and broke with the entire Western tradition of metaphysics (or, from another point of view, music could be understood as transcending language when metaphysics began to break down). As Charles Taylor wrote in his discussion of absolute music,

A love song evokes our being moved profoundly by some love story which seems to express a human archetype: Romeo and Juliet, say. The love song, play, opera gives us both the response expressed, and the intentional object of this response. Now with the new absolute music, we have the response in some way captured, made real, there unfolding in front of us; but the object isn’t there. The music moves us very strongly, because it is moved, as it were; it captures, expresses, incarnates being profoundly moved. (Think of Beethoven quartets.) But what at? What is the object? Is there an object?26

With an understanding of the skepticism that naturally resulted from the aesthetics of absolute music, it begins to become possible to understand the significance of Conrad’s reference to music in the Preface to The Nigger of “Narcissus.” For a historical positivist, Conrad’s argument that music is the “art of arts” and that literature must aspire to its “magic suggestiveness” is a claim which might be judged simply right or wrong based on some relevant set of objective criteria. If, pace Goldknopf, rather than “shaking out” the tensions in Conrad’s thought in order to arrive at a rational “creed,” we instead pursue a hermeneutical interest in understanding

Conrad on his own terms (or in understanding how his world was a problem for him on his own terms), it is important to give due credit to the historical traditions that informed his thinking, as problematic as they might be. A major step on that path involves the recognition that when Conrad spoke of the “magic suggestiveness of music,” he was also invoking the paradoxical constellation of epistemological and ontological tensions that had become necessary to make such a claim intelligible.
CHAPTER 2

ABSOLUTE MUSIC, NARRATIVE, AND VOICE: HEART OF DARKNESS

Having outlined the intellectual history that constituted the background for Conrad’s understanding of music, language, and subjectivity, and having provided an exegesis of his theoretical understanding of the relationship between these three concepts, we move on in this chapter to an analysis of their practical relationship in Conrad’s fictional prose. We have already seen how Conrad differentiated the aims and methods of the arts and sciences in the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” and staked out a viewpoint in opposition to Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism as aesthetic schools of thought. Despite his criticisms, however, Conrad is frustratingly short on detail, explaining only that “all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon [the writer].” The specific problems with these styles are articulated much more clearly in the memoir of Conrad’s literary collaborator Ford Madox Ford, who, reflecting on the discussions that he had shared with Conrad about aesthetics and literary theory, specifically focuses on the representation of objects in traditional narratives:

We agreed that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind. A novel must therefore not be a narration, a report. Life does not say to you: In 1914 my next-door neighbour, Mr. Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox’s green aluminum paint. . . . If you think about the matter you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr. Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will then try to remember the year of that occurrence and you will fix it as August, 1914, because having had the foresight to bear the municipal stock of the City of Liège you were able to afford a first-class ticket for the first time in your life. You will remember Mr. Slack – then much thinner because it was before he found out where to buy that cheap Burgundy of which he has since drunk an inordinate quantity, though whisky you think would be much better for him! Mr. Slack again came into the garden, this time with a pale, this time with a pale, weaselly-faced fellow . . . Cox’s Aluminum Paint! You remember the half-empty tin that Mr. Slack showed you – he had such an undignified cold – with the name in a horseshoe over a blue circle that contained a red lion asleep in front of a real-gold sun. . . . And if that is how the building of your
neighbor’s greenhouse comes back to you, just imagine how it will be with your love affairs that are so much more complicated. . . .

According to Ford’s account, Conrad’s primary objection to scientific positivism and Realism’s preoccupation with accuracy was that the reduction of objects to “facts” presented in a rationalized, linear narrative fundamentally misrepresented the manner in which human beings actually experience them. All knowledge might arise, as Conrad repeatedly insisted in the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”” from our encounter with the “visible universe,”” but experience does not provide knowledge in the form of instantaneous, atomic facts. Unlike the practitioners of Realism and Naturalism, who wanted to provide scientifically factual narratives, Conrad was more concerned with recreating the feeling of, in Ford’s words, “the general effect that life makes on mankind.”

Conrad’s presentation of visual images from the point of view of the human observer has elicited comparisons between his novels and the paintings of Claude Monet. Donald Benson, for example, has claimed in an article devoted to “Impressionist Painting and the Problem of Conrad’s Atmosphere” that “In its visual aspect atmosphere was of course a veritable fact of Conrad’s Malay experience in particular, as the morning mists of the Seine were of Monet’s.” In fact, although the painter’s works are static in time and cannot convey the psychological flow of associations from one visual image to another, Ford and Conrad recognized a fundamental similarity between their own agenda and the visual aesthetic that sought to capture the external world as impressions rather than scientifically real objects:

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We accepted without much protest the stigma “Impressionists” that was thrown at us. In those days Impressionists were still considered to be bad people: Atheists, Reds, wearing red ties with which to frighten householders. But we accepted the name because Life appearing to us much as the building of Mr. Slack’s greenhouse comes back to you, we saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions.  

In his study of the *Heart of Darkness*, Ian Watt has provided a thorough analysis of Conrad’s attempt to render these “impressions,” rather than narrate, in his prose. This aesthetic is particularly well exemplified in one scene in the novel, as Marlow’s boat nears Kurtz’s station. Marlow is standing on the deck of the ship and watching the poleman sound the depth of the water, when, as Marlow sees it, the man “give[s] up the business suddenly and stretch[es] himself flat on the deck without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in.” We are told how Marlow is puzzled by the actions of other people on the ship as well, and he remarks that “At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed.” Marlow begins to recognize that something strange is happening, but he is still confused: “Then I had to look at the river mighty quick because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about, thick; they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house.” It is only after this significant delay that Marlow is able to interpret properly what has been going around him: the flying “sticks” are actually arrows, the poleman has been shot and killed, and the other men on the boat are ducking for cover: “We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!”

In an “Author’s Note” that he wrote for the 1923 edition of the collection *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*, Conrad explicitly associates his resistance to traditional forms of narration to music. Using a metaphor to explain how his understanding of narrative had

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changed between his composition of *Youth* (1898) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Conrad writes that

*Youth* is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience; but that experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and its outward colouring, begins and ends in myself. *Heart of Darkness* is experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers. There was no longer a matter of sincere colouring. It was like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.4

It is well known that Conrad drew on his personal experiences for many of his novels, including *Heart of Darkness*.5 As the Author’s Note makes clear, however, Conrad explicitly differentiates the “feat of memory” performed in his “factual” novel *Youth* and the more musical, if less historically accurate, *Heart of Darkness*, further suggesting that it is precisely the latter’s lack of chronological reportage which allowed it to “[bring his experiences] home to the minds and bosoms of the readers.”

Thus, we see emerging in Conrad’s thought an understanding of music as a fundamentally physical (sensory) phenomenon that can evoke the immediacy of subjective experience precisely because of its ability to impress itself on the listener without the rationalizing tendencies of narrative. This is almost an exact description of the aesthetics of absolute music outlined in the previous chapter, and Conrad’s work can be interpreted as an application of these same ideas to a literary genre. In absolute music, the sonorities are no longer understood as mimetic or referential, and they do not depict any narrative beyond themselves. Instead, the object of representation is understood as present within and as the sound itself.

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The specific techniques by means of which Conrad hoped to accomplish the effects of absolute music in language were the same, as well. In the passage from *Heart of Darkness* analyzed above, Conrad manages to evoke in the reader a sense of first-person experience not, as in the manner of the Realists, by including a surfeit of facts that fully describe the situation, but rather by omitting information, so that the reader only has access to what Marlow knew at the time of his experience. When Marlow’s ship first comes under attack, he lacks the context to understand what is happening and instead sees the arrows flying into the boat as “sticks.” When the poleman is killed, Marlow sees him apparently decide to lie down and stretch out. In both cases Conrad intentionally withholds the facts and, instead of a fully formed narrative, presents a series of fragments to the reader. As a result, readers are forced to insert themselves into the narrative, as if they were there in person, in order to make sense of it: “Oh! The ‘sticks’ are actually arrows, and the boat is being attacked.”

The idea that an artistic work could achieve a special form of immediacy by forgoing its reliance on an external reality to form it into a coherent totality, and instead forcing its viewers to insert a part of their own subjectivity into the experience to turn a collection of fragments into a unitary whole, was pioneered in absolute music. Richard Taruskin, for example, has found in his exegesis of Schumann’s comments on the program notes to Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* that

[m]usic, [Schumann] insists, that leaves too little to the listener’s “own fancy,” that excludes the listener from the co-creative process, finally leaves the listener (out in the) cold. The alternative, for Schumann, is certainly not music without expressive (or even descriptive) content, but rather a music that by leaving such content undefined to a degree—by asking “Warum?”—allows and even forces the listener to participate in its creation. It is the music that requires this involvement on the part of the listener that affords the experience of what would later be called “absolute” music—a music absolutely, rather than merely particularly, expressive.6

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Conrad’s Author’s Note to *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories* is almost an exact echo of this same aesthetic principle. It was precisely because *Youth* was a “feat of memory” preoccupied with “facts” that it, in Taruskin’s words, “excludes the listener from the co-creative process [and] finally leaves the listener (out in the) cold.” Conrad’s professedly musical *Heart of Darkness*, in contrast, “allows and even forces the [reader] to participate in its creation” and is thus, in Conrad’s words, brought “home to the minds and bosoms of the readers.”

The horizon for the intersection between an incomplete music and a subjective consciousness that must provide its own answers to musical questions (“Warum?”) is provided by temporality. Historically, music’s temporality has often been taken as a weakness in the art form, but it is precisely music’s temporality that provides it with its essential relationship to subjective experience. Music, like the external world in general, does not present itself as a self-sufficient narrative for the listener to observe disinterestedly. Instead, it presents itself as a succession of individual impressions that require a subjective contribution to be synthesized into a meaningful whole. As Andrew Bowie notes in his discussion of Schelling’s lectures on the *Philosophy of Art*, “Without time there would be no music, because music’s form is ‘succession,’

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7 See, for example, Johann Gottfried Herder, “Ob Malerei oder Tonkunst eine größere Wirkung gewähre?” (Gotha: Carl Ettinger, 1785), in which the muses of Music, Poetry, and Painting debate their relative merits. At one point, Painting addresses Music: „Kann jemand wohl, was Töne sagen wollen, sagen? reden sie nicht die verworrenste Sprache von Halbempfindungen, die sich unserer Seele immer zu nähern scheinen und sie nie fassen; die immer wie Sand oder Wellen des Meers uns umspühlen, uns umrauschen und nie ihre Wirkung in uns nur halb vollenden. Vorüber sind sie, wie der Bach, wie das Lüftchen und wo ist nun ihr Bild? wo ihre Stimme und Sprache? Ich hingegen darfs rühmend wiederhölen, mache die bestimmteste, klärste, daurendste Wirkung. Meine Formen sind auf eine reine Weise da; man weiß doch und behält, was man an mir siehet. Man behälts nicht bloß im Gedächtniß, sondern im Blick, vor den Augen der Phantasie und der spätesten Erinnerung. Ich schreibe und zeichne mit dem Sonnenstral; meine Wirkung ist auch wie das Licht der Sonne ewig“ (133-39). Translated by Gregory Moore as “Does Painting or Music Have a Greater Effect?” in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): “After all, can anyone say what tones mean to express? Do they not speak the most confused tongue of half-sensations, which seem always to draw near our soul and yet never take hold of it; which always, like sand or the ocean waves, wash around us, roar around us, and do not nearly completely their effect in us? They are gone, like the brook, like the breath of the wind; and where now is their image, where their voice and language? I, by contrast, may proudly reiterate that I produce the most definite, clear, and enduring effect. My forms have a purity; one knows and retains what one sees of my work. One retains it not only in one’s memory, but in one’s gaze, before the eyes of the fancy and before the latest recollection” (348).
in which the particular moment only is a particular moment because of its being in a connected sequence of particular moments. . . . Music requires the material form of vibration that combines the temporally different moments into one sound. The sound is apprehended as a unity by hearing, and, as such, is connected to the being of the I, which combines different moments in itself and thus renders the world—including music’s succession of sounds—intelligible.”

The relationship between Conrad’s prose and nineteenth-century musical aesthetics can be pushed even further by looking at a more recent, if still quintessentially “absolute,” account of music. In his explanation of music in *A Theory of Art*, the musicologist Karol Berger explains that

what I actually experience when I experience the tonal tendency of a sound is the dynamics of my own desire, its arousal, its satisfaction, its frustration. It is my own desire for the leading tone to move up, the satisfaction of my own desire when it so moves, the frustration thereof when it refuses to budge or when it moves elsewhere, that I feel . . . .

Thus, the precondition of my being able to hear an imaginary pattern of lines of directed motion in a tonal work is that I first experience the desires, satisfactions, and frustrations of this sort. In tonal music, the direct experience of the dynamics of my own desire precedes any recognition of the represented object, of lines of directed motion, and is the necessary precondition of such a recognition. I must first experience the desire that the leading tone move up, before I can recognize the representation of an imaginary ascending line when it so moves . . . .

It follows that tonal music, like a visual medium, may represent an imaginary object different from myself, an imaginary world, albeit a highly abstract one, consisting of lines of directed motion. But, unlike a visual medium, tonal music also makes me experience directly the dynamics of my own desiring, my own inner world, and it is this latter experience that is the more primordial one, since any representation depends on it. While visual media allow us to grasp, represent, and explore an outer, visual world, music makes it possible for me to grasp, experience, and explore an inner world of desiring.

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10 For an earlier account of the importance of the listener’s expectations, see Leonard Meyer’s *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956). E.g., “Like other intentional activities listening to music is preceded by a number of mental and physical adjustments, performed consciously or unconsciously, which serve to facilitate and condition the subsequent responses made to the expected stimulus. These adjustments are known as the ‘preparatory set.’ The specific adjustments made are the product of (1) the listener’s beliefs about aesthetic experience in general and musical experience in particular, (2) the experience and knowledge previously acquired in listening to and studying about music, and (3) information gathered on the particular occasion in question” (73).
As Taruskin did in his examination of Schumann’s music, Berger places the primary aesthetic responsibility on the listener, and his account helps to clarify the specifically temporal dimension of human experience. Tonal music, Berger points out, cannot be objectively experienced as something that exists entirely outside of the listener. Although the listener does hear specific frequencies, which can be described scientifically, he also “hears” his own expectations about what is going to happen next. The temporal pull of the dominant toward the tonic is an essential component of it, and someone who does not predict this motion, or who does not remember the tension of the dominant during the experience of the tonic, is simply not hearing the music. Without these temporal expectations, music would cease to be music and regress into mere sound. On the other hand, listeners who have expectations about where the music will go have the opportunity to experience their own subjectivity directly. In the music to Wagner’s *Tristan*, the listener will find not merely an imitation or narrative about desire but the consummate incarnation of desire itself.

In *Heart of Darkness*, instead of presenting interpreted facts, Conrad gives his readers the verbal equivalent of raw sound, and, as in the experience of tonal music, the readers must supply their own expectations in order for it to have any meaning. Neither the reader nor Marlow expects the ship to come under attack, so when it does both the reader and Marlow and experience a sudden confusion. Lacking the expectations that could make temporal sense of what is going on, the world suddenly breaks down into noise, as it would during the intrusion of an unexpectedly dissonant passage or modulation to a foreign key, and it is only after the fact that these sense impressions can retroactively receive a meaningful interpretation: Marlow’s “flying sticks” become “an attack on the boat” in the same way that unexpected pitches become recontextualized in a new key. Rather than giving his readers “facts,” Conrad forces readers to
provide their own temporal expectations to a series of raw visual impressions. By satisfying or denying these desires like the composer of a musical composition, Conrad allows the reader to experience the event subjectively, or, in Berger’s words, “grasp, experience, and explore an inner world of desiring.”

Thus, as we have seen, Conrad shares the same aesthetic goals as the idea of absolute music, and he uses discernibly musical techniques to achieve his aims. Given these similarities, it should not be surprising that Conrad’s prose also demonstrates the same ontic ambiguity that we discussed in Chapter 1 with respect to absolute music. Once the mimetic or representational link between music (or language) and the external world is broken, the work of art risks losing its connection with anything outside of itself. We have already seen hints of this ambiguity in the confusion that resulted when Marlow took the arrows to be “flying sticks.” Although Marlow eventually realized that the “sticks” were actually arrows, his misunderstanding reveals a fundamental philosophical problem at the basis of the reader’s aesthetic experience. Because Conrad’s prose gives subjective experiences rather than narrating facts, then it must as a result necessarily lose some of its grasp over facts. If Conrad is not providing the facts to the reader but is instead allowing readers, by contributing a part of their own subjectivity, to enter into the experiences made possible by an “absolute” work of art, then what exactly is the nature of readers’ resulting knowledge?

Conrad repeatedly acknowledges the ontic ambiguity of narrative based on absolute music. In the Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* he refers to “magic suggestiveness of music,” and the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* describes Marlow’s stories as “inconclusive experience[s]” and explains how for Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in
the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.” As in the music to Wagner’s Tristan, which incarnates the experience of an irrational desire founded on a love potion, prose modelled on absolute music can evoke sentiments but cannot guarantee their truth or validity. By setting up the autonomous work of art as the paradigmatic representation of human experience, the human subjectivity defined by those experiences risks falling into solipsism. In Berger’s account of aesthetics, we hear only ourselves in the musical experience, and Conrad’s reader must skeptically ask, as Taylor did in our discussion of absolute music in Chapter 1, “The music [literature] moves us very strongly, because it is moved, as it were; it captures, expresses, incarnates being profoundly moved. . . . But what at? What is the object? Is there an object?” On one hand, the “absolute” work of art embodies the autonomy of subjective experience; on the other, this very autonomy seems to model a solipsistic subject that has lost any rational grasp on the external world.

In the narrative domain, this issue surfaces in the problem of voice: whom do we hear (or read or see) “speaking” in the work of art? The question presupposes a strict distinction between the two terms of the formulation (the words that a speaker utters express what he means, but he nonetheless remains ontologically distinct from them), which creates a number of paradoxes in “absolute” art, which refuses to rely on an authority outside of itself. In order to reconcile this conflict, the speaker must be completely removed from the work art, which is to say that there is no speaker but only speech, or the speaker is speech and nothing else. The former is the approach adopted by aesthetic formalists, who see the meaning of the work contained entirely within the work itself, while the latter is infamously one of post-structuralism’s principal doctrines. Neither approach applies to absolute music, however, in which we see an attempt to reconcile, or to at

1 The “irrational” power of Wagner’s music to overtake listeners’ intellectual faculties has, of course, historically made it a source of moral and political unease.
least mitigate the contradictions of, a paradox wherein the musical composition is understood as formally autonomous and as the expression of some underlying “voice.” (Thus both the power and the problem of Wagner’s Tristan, where the distinction between speaker and speech vanishes and listeners immediately experience the music as desire “itself” rather than as an imitation or representation of what is going on in the plot, despite their better knowledge that this desire is irrational and ultimately results in tragedy.)

Conrad’s literary work aspires to the same ideals and therefore also struggles with this fundamental conflict. This can perhaps be made the clearest by contrasting, as Conrad himself did, the narrative voice he employed in Youth and his more musical Heart of Darkness. In each story Marlow does not directly convey his adventure to Conrad’s reader but instead addresses a group of young men, one of whom subsequently recounts the story to the readers of Conrad’s novel. Despite their shared use of a frame structure, the two novels situate Marlow’s narrative within vastly different contexts. In Youth Marlow delivers his tale in a traditional social situation; as the outer frame narrator tells us, his audience sat with him “round a mahogany table that reflected the bottle, the claret-glasses, and our faces as we leaned on our elbows.” The environment evokes a story-telling tradition in which a respected and epistemically privileged speaker uses the power of his language to convey his knowledge to others who were not present at the event and thus cannot know what he knows. This accords with Conrad’s own account of the story as an “act of memory,” and as Julie Napolin has observed, Marlow’s repeated demand within the story to “pass the bottle” reminds us of “a social scene of direct transmission.” In Youth Marlow’s voice possesses a transcendent authority that allows him to objectively communicate his experiences to others in a rational narrative form.

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The authority of Conrad’s voice is more ambiguous in *Heart of Darkness*. Instead of addressing a group of interested friends in a traditional social environment, Marlow speaks to a group of men sitting on the deck of the *Nellie* as the sun begins to set on the Thames. Soon after Marlow has begun his tale, it has become so dark that the men cannot see each other, and some of them might even have fallen asleep. Instead of providing a bardic narrative in a “social scene of direct transmission,” Marlow becomes a disembodied voice, speaking in the darkness to nobody in particular:

> It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river (27).

Within Marlow’s inner narrative, Kurtz, the principal object of Marlow’s journey to the Congo, is also principally associated with his voice. When someone suggests to Marlow that Kurtz might already be dead, Marlow realizes how much he had identified the man with his ability to speak:

> I realized suddenly that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, “Now I will never see him,” or “Now I will never shake him by the hand,” but, “Now I will never hear him.” The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (33)

When Marlow finally encounters Kurtz, he finds that

> [h]e was very little more than a voice. And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices – and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. (33)
It is possible to read Marlow’s description here as an implicit argument that speech acts are necessarily reduced to “vibration . . . without any kind of sense,” when they are separated from their human source, which would seem to provide evidence for the formalist position we sketched above. Ivan Kreilkamp has argued something like this an influential interpretation of the novel. Although the recent invention by Edison is not referred to in *Heart of Darkness*, Kreilkamp claims that the novel is pervaded by a “phonographic logic” and that “‘voice’ in *Heart of Darkness* is not an expressive trace of the fully human, but a material sign, a part-object standing for nothing beyond itself.”

As he argues,

The early phonograph did not demystify so much as it remystified voice; in severing the link between a human agent and speech, the phonograph opened the way to a new conception of voice not as the sign of presence but as the fragmentary material phonemes of a circulating, authorless language. It is this conception of voice, language, and technology—one another distinct from and prior to a later modernist paradigm of “mechanical reproduction” as the abjected other of the production of high art—which Conrad stages in *Heart of Darkness*.

According to Kreilkamp, Marlow’s lie to Kurtz’s “Intended” at the end of the novella about her fiancée’s final words indicates his inability to come to terms with the “realism” on which Conrad founded his novel:

By offering the Intended a comforting deathbed scene that conjures human presence, Marlow distances himself from the workings of a mechanical universe and its authorless, inhuman language. But unlike Marlow, who draws away from the “horror” of disembodied phonographic language, Conrad . . . does not close his ears to it, recognizing the sound of such a universe as the harbinger of a new literature, a transformed realism.

Such an interpretation is clearly at odds, however, with the distinction that Conrad makes in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* between the aims of art and science. As the Preface and Ford’s memoir make clear, Conrad opposed traditional narrative forms because he

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believed that they were insufficient for rendering artistic truth and not, as Kreilkamp argues, because the existence of a narrative voice could not withstand scientific scrutiny. The suggestion of a strict dichotomy between Marlow and Conrad is especially strange, considering the similarities between Marlow’s description of his “linger[ing]” memory of Kurtz’s voice as a “dying vibration” and Conrad’s stated desire to give *Heart of Darkness* “a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.” Although Kreilkamp claims that Marlow recoils from Kurtz’s final words (“The horror! The horror!”) because they emerge from a disembodied voice, Marlow specifically claims that this voice came with a sense of “presence,” and the “fragmentary” nature of language was, as we saw, exactly what allows the reader to experience it as meaningful.

Marlow characterizes Kurtz’s voice with a series of opposites (“bewildering” and “illuminating,” “the most exalted” and “the most contemptible,” a “pulsating stream of light” and a “deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness”), which summarizes at the highest level of discourse in Conrad’s narrative form the paradox of absolute music. If *Heart of Darkness* is going to convey the “general effect of life” rather than provide a collection of facts, Marlow, the narrator of the principal story in the novel, must be placed within an outer frame and then literally immersed in darkness so that we hear “pure” speech rather than a narrative. The fragments of visual impressions that emerge force us to insert our own knowledge and expectations into the work, and consequently to come to experience the events firsthand. The artist can convey the totality of his experience only by removing himself from his work and presenting a collection of fragments to his audience, who experience their own desires and expectations in it. Conrad is rightly skeptical of such an enterprise, but something like the hope
for a reconciliation with the world and the fullness of experience nonetheless remains present for Conrad in the ideal of absolute music.
CHAPTER 3

MUSIC, AESTHETICISM, AND ART-FOR-ART’S SAKE: VICTORY

The preceding two chapters have examined the role that music plays in Joseph Conrad’s understanding of science, narrative, and subjectivity. Chapter 1 took an historical perspective by looking at how the Preface to Conrad’s Nigger of the “Narcissus” could be situated with respect to the evolving relationship between music and scientific positivism. Chapter 2 adopted a more technical approach by looking at how Conrad’s understanding of the temporality of music and human subjectivity are reflected in his narrative prose. Rather than focusing on the relationship between musical aesthetics and the details of Conrad’s representation of subjectivity, this final chapter will adopt a more thematic approach and investigate the role that music and its aesthetic contemplation play in the achievement of subjective autonomy for the characters in Conrad’s novels.

Walter Pater is famous for his association with the so-called “Art-for-Art’s Sake” movement, and Conrad’s arguments about music in the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” bear a striking resemblance to Pater’s claim in his Studies in the History of the Renaissance that “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.” Yet, these apparent similarities notwithstanding, Conrad explicitly rejects the tenets of any form of aestheticism, writing in the same Preface in which he praises music as the “art of arts” that “the supreme cry of Art for Art itself loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality. It sounds far off. It has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper.” There is evidence internal to his novels, as well, that

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complicates the picture of Conrad-as-aestheticist. In his analysis of *Victory* Bruce Johnson has argued that by “play[ing] upon the Schopenhauerian background he had so often used as a stimulus to his own original attitudes,” Conrad “sets out to refute a variety of skepticism that is undeniably Schopenhauerian.” In discussing the treatment of sound in *Lord Jim*, Joshua Epstein makes a parenthetical comment that raises doubts about Conrad’s commitment to aestheticism, claiming that the novel “suggests an institutional alignment of material facts with noiselessness, an imperative to keep things quiet in the service of the facts (whose reliability the novel repeatedly questions).” And in an essay on *The Secret Agent*, Deborah McLeod argues that the absence of noise in the protagonist’s home indicates “the ways in which their combined desire for secrecy has enabled the family to exist,” even though the “lack of knowledge instilled by the home’s silence not only creates a false sense of family, it eventually proves fatal to Verloc, Winnie and Stevie.” In each of these cases, Conrad seems to adopt certain elements of aestheticism while also expressing skepticism about its validity or total adequacy. The issue of aestheticism is particularly important in Conrad’s late work *Victory*, which will serve as the basis of our investigation of the thematic role of music in Conrad’s novels.

Early in *Victory* the protagonist, Axel Heyst, is described as a “dreamer, to whom it is given sometimes to hear the music of the spheres.” For much of his life he pursues this ideal music by roaming from one Indonesian island to another, finally taking up residence on the abandoned Samburan, where he can remain surrounded by a silence that is likened to a kind of magic:

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5 Deborah McLeod, “Disturbing the Silence: Sound Imagery in Joseph Conrad’s *Secret Agent,*” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (Fall 2009), 118.
6 Joseph Conrad, *Victory* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1915), 74. (Subsequent citations will be included parenthetically.)
Heyst, the wanderer of the archipelago, had a taste for silence which he had been able to gratify for years. The islands are very quiet. One sees them lying about, clothed in their dark garments of leaves, in a great hush of silver and azure, where the sea without murmurs meets the sky in a ring of magic stillness. A sort of smiling somnolence broods over them; the very voices of their people are soft and subdued, as if afraid to break some protecting spell (74).

A paradoxical kind of motionless agency is granted to silence. One sees the islands, which do not move, “lying around.” The amplifying adjective “great” is used to describe the “hush” that Conrad uses to characterize the colors silver and azure. We are told that a stationary sea “without murmurs” nonetheless actively “meets the sky in a ring of magic stillness.”

Silence is granted a particular power that allows for the emergence of some kind of magical presence or truth. Silence plays a similar role in the death scene of Axel Heyst’s father, which is worth quoting in full:

They had been talking a long time. The noises of the street had died out one by one, till at last, in the moonlight, the London houses began to look like the tombs of an unvisited, unhonoured, cemetery of hopes.

He had listened. Then, after a silence, he had asked—for he was really young then:

“Is there no guidance?”

His father was in an unexpectedly soft mood on that night, when the moon swam in a cloudless sky over the begrimed shadows of the town.

“You still believe in something, then?” he said in a clear voice, which had been growing feeble of late. “You believe in flesh and blood, perhaps? A full and equable contempt would soon do away with that, too. But since you have not attained to it, I advise you to cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity. It is perhaps the least difficult—always remembering that you, too, if you are anything, are as pitiful as the rest, yet never expecting any pity for yourself.”

“What is one to do, then?” sighed the young man, regarding his father, rigid in the high-backed chair.

“Look on—make no sound,” were the last words of the man who had spent his life in blowing blasts upon a terrible trumpet which had filled heaven and earth with ruins, while mankind went on its way unheeding.

That very night he died in his bed, so quietly that they found him in his usual attitude of sleep, lying on his side, one hand under his cheek, and his knees slightly bent. He had not even straightened his legs (194-95).
The emphasis on silence throughout this scene is particularly notable. It is suggested that silence is a precondition for the appearance of truth, since the final conversation between father and son can take place only after the “noises in the street had died down.” Heyst must ask for guidance “after a silence.”

The advice to “make no sound” is particularly striking, since it indicates Heyst Senior’s deathbed renunciation of his own life’s work. We are told early in the novel that he was a philosopher who had “written a lot of books,” and the narrator’s friend Davidson voices his perception of Heyst Senior’s temperament: “Seems to me he must have been something of a crank, too. Apparently he had quarreled with his people in Sweden” (37). These descriptions give the impression of an iconoclast of the nature of a Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, a characterization that is confirmed in the scene of his death, when we are informed, in apocalyptic language, that the father had destroyed his son’s faith in the world through a series of “blasts upon a terrible trumpet.”

Since a lifetime of arguments had no effect on a civilization that “went on its way unheeding,” Heyst Senior can only offer a kind of self-criticism of the philosophical agenda that had characterized his life, which points to a deep paradox inherent in any fatalist or radically pessimistic doctrine. If the world really is as irrational as Heyst’s father suggests, then it should be impossible for rational philosophical arguments, even if true, to be heard and understood; they will simply be drowned out.

There is another, deeper issue, however, that places the self-consistency, rather than merely the communicability, of such a doctrine into question. If the world is really as irrational as a philosopher like Heyst’s father argues, then it should not be amenable to philosophical

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7 Rev. 8: 2-7 King James Bible: “And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. . . . And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up. . . .”
theorization in the first place. Any form of irrationality that can be subjected to a philosophical explanation is, to an extent, contained by that explanation and thereby rendered less impotent than the theory itself purports. Thus, the final admonition to “Look on—make no sound” can be understood as a kind of meta-critique of the rationalist philosophical agenda, a suggestion to embrace a kind of abnegation that can be communicated only under particular, and paradoxically “silent,” conditions.

The threat posed by sound is confirmed later in Axel Heyst’s life. Heyst may have “had a taste for silence which he had been able to gratify for years,” but this ability to inhabit the enchanted silence of the islands is quickly shattered when he returns to the mainland and finds himself involved with Lena, one of the musicians in Zangiacomo’s Ladies’ Orchestra. He stays as a visitor at Schomberg’s hotel and is drawn from his room when “Scraps of tunes more or less plaintive reached his ears. They pursued him even into his bedroom, which opened into an upstairs veranda” (74). The music here is granted an unusual amount of agency, even actively “pursuing” Heyst into his room. When he arrives downstairs, he observes a performance that he does not approve of but still cannot, strangely enough, manage to tear himself away from:

The uproar in that small, barn-like structure, built of imported pine boards, and raised clear of the ground, was simply stunning. An instrumental uproar, screaming, grunting,

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8 Similar objections have been made regarding Schopenhauer’s professed pessimism and attitude towards music. As Nietzsche remarked in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* V (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 106-7: “Die Schwierigkeit, den angeführten Satz zu begründen, mag freilich gross sein - bekanntlich ist es auch Schopenhauern damit nicht geglückt -: und wer einmal gründlich nachgeführt hat, wie abgeschmackt-falsch und sentimental dieser Satz ist, in einer Welt, deren Essenz Wille zur Macht ist -, der mag sich daran erinnern lassen, dass Schopenhauer, obschon Pessimist, eigentlich - die Flöte blies.... Täglich, nach Tisch: man lese hierüber seinen Biographen. Und beiläufig gefragt: ein Pessimist, ein Gott- und Welt-Verneiner, der vor der Moral Haltmacht, - der zur Moral Ja sagt und Flöte bläst, zur laede-neminem-Moral: wie? ist das eigentlich - ein Pessimist?” Translated by Walter Kaufmann as *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 99: “The difficulty of providing a rational foundation for the [moral] principle cited may indeed be great—as is well known, Schopenhauer did not succeed either—and whoever has once felt deeply how insipidly false and sentimental this principle is in a world whose essence is will to power, may allow himself to be reminded that Schopenhauer, though a pessimist, really—played the flute. Every day, after dinner: one should read his biography on that. And incidentally: a pessimist, one who denies God and the world but *comes to a stop* before morality—who affirms morality and plays the flute—the *laede neminem* [offend no one] morality—what? is that really—a pessimist?”
whining, sobbing, scraping, squeaking some kind of lively air; while a grand piano, operated upon by a bony, red-faced woman with bad-tempered nostrils, rained hard notes like hail through the tempest of fiddles. The small platform was filled with white muslin dresses and crimson sashes slanting from shoulders provided with bare arms, which sawed away without respite. Zangiacomo conducted. He wore a white mess-jacket, a black dress waistcoat, and white trousers. His longish, tousled hair and his great beard were purple-black. He was horrible. The heat was terrific. There were perhaps thirty people having drinks at several little tables. Heyst, quite overcome by the volume of noise, dropped into a chair. In the quick time of that music, in the varied, piercing clamour of the strings, in the movements of the bare arms, in the low dresses, the coarse faces, the stony eyes of the executants, there was a suggestion of brutality—something cruel, sensual and repulsive.

"This is awful!" Heyst murmured to himself.

But there is an unholy fascination in systematic noise. He did not flee from it incontinently, as one might have expected him to do. He remained, astonished at himself for remaining, since nothing could have been more repulsive to his tastes, more painful to his senses, and, so to speak, more contrary to his genius, than this rude exhibition of vigour. The Zangiacomo band was not making music; it was simply murdering silence with a vulgar, ferocious energy. One felt as if witnessing a deed of violence; and that impression was so strong that it seemed marvellous to see the people sitting so quietly on their chairs, drinking so calmly out of their glasses, and giving no signs of distress, anger, or fear. Heyst averted his gaze from the unnatural spectacle of their indifference (77).

Although Conrad does not specify exactly what Heyst is listening to, it is likely that the music performed in a bar by a “traveling ladies orchestra” was probably similar to the jazz and vaudeville music performed the United States and Great Britain in the early twentieth century by many all-female bands, including The Blue Belles, the Parisian Redheads, Lil-Hardin’s All-Girl Band, The Ingenues, and The Harlem Playgirls.⁹ Despite its growing popularity, jazz was vehemently criticized by many who condemned the sensuality of this “devil’s music.” As Anne Faulkner, the head of the Music Department of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs wrote in an article titled “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?”, “We have all been taught to believe

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that ‘music soothes the savage breast,’ but we have never stopped to consider that an entirely different type of music might invoke savage instincts.”

Such music would have seemed particularly offensive to someone of Heyst’s ascetic temperament. Despite his rational disagreements with the music, however, he is irresistibly drawn into the very music that he criticizes others for enjoying. The sheer emotional power of the music holds him arrested in place and has a strong effect on his susceptibility to female beauty. After the performance Heyst notices Lena and experiences an “awakened faculty of observation” which “had never before been captured by any feminine creature in that marked and exclusive fashion . . . . He looked at her anxiously, as no man ever looks at another man; and he positively forgot where he was. He had lost touch with his surroundings” (79). Then Heyst, who only moments before had been shocked by the “unnatural spectacle” of the audience’s reaction to the performance, walks over to Lena and begins a conversation, which is again dominated by the power of music:

As to the conversation, it had been perfectly insignificant because naturally they had nothing to say to each other . . . . But her voice! It seduced Heyst by its amazing quality. It was a voice fit to utter the most exquisite things, a voice which would have made silly chatter supportable and the roughest talk fascinating. Heyst drank in its charm as one listens to the tone of some instrument without heeding the tune (83).

The emphasis on the sensuous rather than the intellectual side of Heyst’s experience is particularly evident here, since it is acknowledged that even the “roughest talk” or “silly chatter” would have been welcome. The musical comparison at the end is also revealing, since it refers to the most superficial kind of listening. Heyst is not being drawn in by the ability that music has to heighten the content of Lena’s conversation but is instead preoccupied entirely with the surface of his experience. There is even the suggestion that his style of listening has led him entirely to

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misunderstand what she is saying. When he asks her if she sings in addition to performing her instrument, she is “obviously surprised by the irrelevant question; for they had not been discoursing of sweet sounds” and replies, “Never sang a note in my life . . . I don't remember that I ever had much reason to sing since I was little” (84).

From this point Heyst’s attempt to achieve autonomy by disengaging with the world ascetically has gone completely awry. Almost immediately after meeting her, Heyst makes plans with Lena so that she can elope to escape from the sexual harassment of Schomberg, the married owner of the establishment. The “musicality” of Lena’s voice enchants him and lures him back into the world. This plan ultimately proves tragic for both Heyst and Lena, when Schomberg’s spurned interest and vindictive personality lead him to send several desperados in pursuit of Heyst and Lena’s alleged “treasure.” This treasure does not actually exist, and Heyst and Lena die at the end of the novel, largely at the hands of Heyst’s almost preternatural inability to exercise any agency whatsoever. Thus, music can be understood in the novel to set in motion a series of events that lead from Heyst’s isolation on Samburan to his death and that of the woman he loves, an ending foreshadowed from the moment when Heyst heard the “scraps of tunes” through his window. As the narrator explains, “Perhaps [the silence of the islands] was the very spell which had enchanted Heyst in the early days. For him, however, that was broken. He was no longer enchanted, though he was still a captive of the islands. He had no intention to leave them ever. Where could he have gone, after all these years?” (74).

In his analysis of Victory and Lord Jim Joseph Martin argues that the novels “contain a number of elements which reveal an interesting dualism, namely that although Conrad has adopted some stylistic concepts of Aestheticism and his technique displays Aesthetic influence,
the fiction nevertheless represents a thematic rejection of Art for Art’s Sake.”¹¹ He argues that the novel is a parody and has the sense of an “absurdist play.” After all, “what milieu would be better suited for a thematic depreciation of Aestheticism, what better irony than using Art for Art’s Sake to demolish Art for Art’s Sake? What better demonstration that the essence of Art for Art’s Sake is self-waste?”¹² Although it does seem clear that Conrad is critiquing the superficiality and hyper-cultivation of self-proclaimed aesthetes, his artistic and intellectual agenda does not seem strictly limited to a criticism of a competing school of thought; novels like Victory and Lord Jim cannot be read merely as parodies of other writers who grant music an excessively high status. Elements of an aestheticist or musical style are also present, after all, in works that do not appear, at least principally, to be intended as criticisms of “Art for Art’s Sake.” One thinks, for example, of the “sinister resonance” of Heart of Darkness, a novel that has frequently been read as an indictment of an entire era of European life.

Conrad’s sympathetic description of Heyst in an Author’s Note to the novel also rules out any such parodic reading of Victory:

Heyst in his fine detachment had lost the habit of asserting himself. I don't mean the courage of self-assertion, either moral or physical, but the mere way of it, the trick of the thing, the readiness of mind and the turn of the hand that come without reflection and lead the man to excellence in life, in art, in crime, in virtue, and, for the matter of that, even in love. Thinking is the great enemy of perfection. The habit of profound reflection, I am compelled to say, is the most pernicious of all the habits formed by the civilized man. But I wouldn't be suspected even remotely of making fun of Axel Heyst. I have always liked him.¹³

Rather than indicating the presence of any moral or physical flaws, Conrad suggests that Heyst has lost his agency almost by accident and that he has simply lost “the trick of the thing” that

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¹³ Conrad, Victory, x-xi.
allows him to connect his thoughts with the outside world. His mind, the internal psychological
domain that makes Heyst who he is, has become separated from its physical embodiment.

The possibility of such a separation is suggested by the narrator of *Victory*, as well. When
Heyst first reemerges from Samburan to visit the mainland, he reflects on how

apparently Heyst was not a hermit by temperament. The sight of his land was not
invincibly odious to him. We must believe this, since for some reason or other he did
come out from his retreat for a while. Perhaps it was only to see whether there were any
letters for him at the Tesmans. I don't know. No one knows. But this reappearance shows
that his detachment from the world was not complete. And incompleteness of any sort
leads to trouble (73).

The language of “incompleteness” comes up again later in the novel, this time after Heyst has
kissed Lena for the first time:

He moved uneasily, a little disappointed by her attitude, but indulgent to it, and feeling,
in this moment of perfect quietness, that in holding her surrendered hand he had found a
closer communion than they had ever achieved before. But even then there still lingered
in him a sense of incompleteness not altogether overcome—which, it seemed, nothing
ever would overcome—the fatal imperfection of all the gifts of life, which makes of them
a delusion and a snare (170).

According to the narrator, Heyst gets into “trouble” because his pursuit of the transcendent was
not enough to overcome his interest in the material world. It is his “incompleteness” that leaves
him divided against himself and susceptible to the charms of music and the external world. We
have already seen how this tension between transcendence and physical materiality is a common
characteristic of both absolute music and human subjectivity. By attempting to be both material
and transcendent, absolute music and human subjectivity are fundamentally equivocal, and
Heyst’s failures in *Victory*, rather than reflecting new objections, are varieties of skepticism that
we have already encountered.
CONCLUSION

I have been less interested in this thesis with using Conrad’s work as a testing ground for the adequacy of particular analytic definitions of music, language, and subjectivity than with investigating the relationship between them. Chapter 1 began this process by focusing on a number of paradoxical aesthetic claims found in the Preface to Conrad’s novel The Nigger of the “Narcissus.” Instead of providing a closed interpretation that rendered all of Conrad’s claims fully consistent, it showed how many of the Preface’s paradoxes were the result of conflicts endemic to ideas about music, language, and subjectively that had gradually gained prominence in European thought over the course of the nineteenth century. According to a new aesthetic that had begun to emerge in the late eighteenth century, instead of being seen as a deficit, absolute music’s lack of conceptual content was interpreted instead as a sign of its ability to express metaphysical truths that transcended the limits of language. The Romantic emphasis on musical and subjective transcendence continued into the latter half of the nineteenth century, when an increasing emphasis on scientific positivism rendered the metaphysics that had underpinned large portions of the Romantic worldview implausible. By the end of the century, many Europeans like Conrad found themselves in the difficult position of reconciling their transcendent ideas about art and subjectivity with a positivist worldview that demanded a skeptical attitude towards anything that could not be expressed in the language of the empirical sciences.

With this understanding of the conceptual framework that Conrad inherited from the nineteenth century in place, Chapter 2 proceeded to an examination of how these issues were at work in the narrative style of Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness. It showed the transcendence of Romantic metaphysics was reconceptualized in secular terms as the subject’s immediate, pre-
reflective experience of the world that science describes in objective terms. Music’s temporality and lack of a linguistic basis had long been considered flaws in the art form, but they allowed it to become the perfect model for the depiction of this first-person experience. As Schumann recognized, it is exactly music’s temporality and lack of full conceptual determination that force listeners to insert themselves actively into the aesthetic experience, and it was on this basis that writers like Conrad turned to music as a model for literary form. Reframing the idea of transcendence in terms of the subject’s transcendence over the objects of experience helps to resolve some of the tension between scientific positivism and Romantic ideas about the value of art and human subjectivity, but it cannot, however, eliminate the ontic ambiguity identified in the discussion of absolute music in Chapter 1. The questions about what, if anything, “autonomous music” points to beyond itself reappear in Conrad’s work as literary-theoretical questions about the meaning of “voice” once Marlow has retreated from his position as an authoritative speaker in Heart of Darkness and left the text to speak “suggestively” for itself.

Finally, Chapter 3 turned to a discussion of Conrad’s portrayal of the relationship between music and subjectivity in Victory. If music is an immediate expression of human subjectivity, then withdrawing from the world into aesthetic experience might be expected to result in the achievement of perfect human autonomy. As the first two chapters demonstrated, however, the relationship between transcendence and materiality is highly conflicted in Conrad’s thought, and this tension appears in Victory in the duality of Heyst’s reaction to music. The ideal “music of the spheres” made it possible for Heyst to escape the world for years at a time, but the very same music was responsible for drawing him back into the world. Although some critics have read Victory as a parody of “Art-for-Art’s sake,” Conrad’s representation of subjectivity as irremediably “incomplete” and positioned between the transcendence symbolized by the ideal
“music of the spheres” on one hand and the brute physicality of Zangiacomo’s band on the other is far more complex.

The “skepticism” that has been frequently been attributed to Conrad can be seen as a result of the dependencies that exist between music, language, and subjectivity, none of which is fully adequate by itself. In becoming an expression of pure subjectivity, absolute music ceases to point to any specific object describable in language. (As Taylor asked, “Is there an object?”)

When language aspires to the “condition of music,” the subjective voice behind the narrative is forced into an ambiguous position on the very boundary of the text. Someone like Axel Heyst can seek subjective autonomy in musical experience, but only at the cost of forgoing what Conrad describes in the Preface to the *Nigger of the “Narcissus”* as the pragmatic concerns that “fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living.” Despite the central importance of all three concepts to Conrad’s work, none of them serves by itself as a single unequivocal foundation. Later Modernists would continue to struggle with these same aporias in their own ways, and rather than attempting to interpret Conrad’s work as an expression of a single coherent aesthetic or philosophical system, it is more useful to instead see that work as a particularly rich site for investigating the possible relationships between ideas about music, language, and subjectivity as they were understood at one particular historical moment in their historical trajectory.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Rorke was raised in Toms River, New Jersey. After receiving a Bachelor of Science in Physics and Bachelor of Arts in Music from Stanford University in 2011, he moved to Tallahassee, Florida and completed a Masters in saxophone performance from Florida State University in 2013. His academic research interests include the relationships between music, literature, and philosophy. He will begin a doctorate in systematic musicology at UCLA in the fall of 2015.