

No More Music? Beckett, Adorno and Culture after Auschwitz

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Abstract

The works of Samuel Beckett often feature authorial instructions to play Romantic music in them: a trio of Beethoven's, Schubert's *Lieder* and a Chopin waltz. Though much has been made of his love for Romantic music in his personal life, musical analysis of his works often revolves around American modernism and serialism, typically neglecting these Romantic influences. The importance of Romantic music in his works is an underappreciated topic, and one that has huge implications for Beckett's attempts to create a new type of culture after the Holocaust. This culture puts Beckett at odds with his friend and admirer, Theodor Adorno, who likewise saw the world as needing a new form of culture after Auschwitz, but who went about it in an entirely different way to Beckett. I argue that Beckett's use of Romantic music is a key way in which he creates a new, more optimistic post-Holocaust cultural identity in his works, one that differs completely to Adorno's more pessimistic, absolutist theory.

Keywords: Beckett, Adorno, music, the Holocaust, Romanticism

The complex relationship between music and Samuel Beckett's life and works has been much explored in the world of Beckett criticism. A passionate amateur pianist and

concertgoer who, in his life, adored the music of Beethoven, Haydn and Schubert; whose writings were profoundly affected by the serialism of Schoenberg and Webern and American minimalism, that inspired the music of Marcel Mihalovici, Philip Glass and Earl Kim.¹ Yet Beckett's creative debt to Romantic music is a key part of his works too, and this part is one typically neglected by his textual critics. The titles of his works clearly demonstrate a debt to Romantic musical forms: *Acts Without Words*, *Rough for Theatre* and *Ohio Impromptu*, but he also directly specifies the playing of Romantic music at key points in several of his works. This includes Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* in *All That Fall* (1957), Chopin's *Waltz No. 5 in Ab major* in *Embers* (1959), Beethoven's *Piano Trio No. 5* in *Ghost Trio* (1977) and Schubert's eponymous lied in *Nacht und Traume* (1984), as well as writing his own Romantically-inspired melody in the 'Addenda' to his 1953 novel *Watt*.

Any discussion of Beckett and his use of music must inevitably refer to Beckett's friend and admirer, the philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno, whose posthumously-published *magnum opus*, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), was dedicated to Beckett. Yet Adorno and Beckett are not as philosophically united as might be expected from their close personal connection. In Adorno's essay directly addressing Beckett's writing, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' (1958), emphasis needs to be placed very much on the 'trying'. Adorno read Beckett as a cultural theorist and philosopher who, like himself, was deeply sceptical of the past and its culture. 'Objectivity in Beckett obliterates the meaning that was culture, along with its rudiments'; 'What Beckett offers in the way of philosophy he himself also reduces to culture-trash'; 'In Beckett, history devours existentialism.'² It appears to be with this view of Beckett's textual philosophy as 'culture-trash' in mind that Daniel Albright, in his 'Series Editor's Foreword' to *Border Crossings*, wrote that 'the modernists did not (as Beckett did)

¹ ed. Bryden, M. (1998) *Beckett and Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, ad passim

² Adorno, T. (1982) 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', (Jones, M., trans.) *New German Critique*, No. 26, pp.119-150. (Originally published 1961)

delight in artistic failure'.³ This idea, that Beckett somehow “delighted” in the artistic and cultural failure of the mid-20th century, is a commonly held one. Adorno saw the Holocaust as the emblem of this ‘failure’, famously arguing that ‘Auschwitz declared irrefutably that culture has failed’.⁴ Adorno further ties Beckett to his claim in *Negative Dialectics*, that ‘all post-Auschwitz culture...is garbage’⁵, identifying ‘Beckett's trashcans [in *Endgame*]...[to be] the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz.’⁶ But this view of Beckett is one that is contradicted by his use of Romantic music, entirely refuting this interpretation of both the world he lives in and the place of his own works within it. To use Romantic music at all is a refutation of Adorno’s judgement of the ‘failure’ of pre-Auschwitz culture, and the specific pieces of music he uses encourages the reader to reconceptualise how we think about language, history and culture in itself.

Ghost Trio

Beckett’s most obvious debt to Romantic music can be found in his 1976 television play named for Beethoven’s Opus 70 No. 1 Piano Trio in D major, *Ghost Trio*, that shares content, form and structure as well as a name with Beethoven’s music. Beckett directs fragmented passages from the trio’s ‘Largo’ movement to be played at certain moments in the play, with bars specified to set moments in the script, but the music acts as a character in the play more than incidental music to it. ‘For the duration of the music, he freezes the time of the play’: this music-as-character exists outside the time and consciousness of the visible characters, present only to the audience.⁷ It is, in other words, a ghost. Music’s peculiar quality as a medium that is, to Beckett, ‘perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable’,

³ Albright, D. (1999) ‘Series Editor’s Foreword’, *Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. Oppenheim, J. New York: Garland Publishing, p. x.

⁴ Adorno, T. (1966) *Negative Dialectics* (Ashton, E., trans.) London: Routledge, p.366

⁵ Ibid, p.367

⁶ ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.143

⁷ Maier, M. and Scheffel, V. (2001) ‘Beethoven's Music in Samuel Beckett's "Ghost Trio"’, *Samuel Beckett Today*, Vol. 11, pp.267-278, p.274

makes it perfect to represent the intangible but still present figure of a ghost, symbolising both past and present simultaneously.⁸ Rather than ‘history devour[ing] existentialism’ as Adorno claimed, existentialism devours history (or, more accurately, devours the barrier between history and present life). Catherine Laws called this conception of music, as something able to represent the past when it was conceived and the present when it is played, ‘the betweenness of the music’⁹, and H. Porter Abbott called it ‘music’s capacity to take place “outside the categories of psychological time”’, quoting Stravinsky. It is a quality Beckett requires at many points throughout his works, and music is the medium he often returns to in order to find it.

The play, however, is just as much a ‘Trio’ in form as it is a ‘Ghost’ in content. Beckett specifies in this, a work for television, exactly where the three cameras must be placed, and precisely when each camera must be used. ‘Move slowly back to A via C and B (no stops)’; ‘move in from A to B’¹⁰: the interplay between these cameras appears almost contrapuntal, Beckett being well-known for his use of musical terms while directing his plays, even to the ‘crescendo creak of door opening’¹¹ in *Ghost Trio*. The choice of *three* cameras positions them as the three players in the trio, and the interaction between them as music of a different kind. This reflects the broader zeitgeist in an era where technology was being increasingly used in musicmaking, and music recording, a possibility explored in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958). The camera is as an object that can see everything; an object that cannot be seen, but whose presence is felt, by the watching audience, much like the music. It is itself a ghost in the play.

⁸ Beckett, S. (1930) *Proust*. London: Chatto & Windus.

⁹ Laws, C. (2010) ‘Beckett and Unheard Sound’, *Beckett and Nothing*, ed. Casselli, D. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.185

¹⁰ Beckett, S. (2006) ‘Ghost Trio’, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber, pp. 405-414, p. 409

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.412

Even *Ghost Trio*'s structure appears to relate to Beethoven's trio. With the exception of the non-canonical early play *Eleutheria*, it is the only Beckett play to be written in three acts: '(I) Pre-action'; '(II) Action'; and '(III) Re-action',¹² an uncommon structure for the late 20th century as two acts became much more common. By having the 'Action' in the second act, it seems to acknowledge the conventional three-act structure of the 19th and early 20th century with the climax in the middle of the play. However, with the third act being 'Re-action' rather than a resolution to the action, Beckett commits to repetition, and the lack of meaningful progress that inevitably comes with that: what Adorno calls 'the telos of the dynamic of the ever-same...disaster'.¹³ Beethoven's *Ghost Trio* likewise uses three movements, an 'Allegro vivace' in D major, the 'Largo' in D minor that gives the trio its ghostly quality, and a 'Presto' finale also in D major. Like Beckett's play, to have three movements in a late Classical trio was an unusual stylistic choice, but four, rather than two, was the more common number (usually including a minuet or scherzo and trio). Of Beethoven's twelve trios, only one other, the Op.11 'Gassenhauer' in Bb major, is also made up of only three movements. Whereas Beethoven's three-movement trio anticipates the Romantic future of chamber music, where three movements would become much more common, Beckett's three-act play seems to act as one of the last of the dying breed of three-act plays: a ghost of a bygone era.

Beckett's *Ghost Trio*, then, is both a 'Ghost' and a 'Trio', in content, form and structure. But why did Beckett choose to allude to the music of Beethoven specifically? Beethoven was, after all, a politically contentious figure in the years after the Second World War, having been so comprehensively appropriated by the Nazis as an example of the German musical *Übermensch*. *Fidelio* was played on the night of the Anschluss in Vienna;

¹² 'Ghost Trio', p.407

¹³ Adorno, T. (1999) *Aesthetic Theory*. London: The Athlone Press, p.224

the *Symphony No. 9* was played by the Berlin Philharmonic on the night of Hitler's 53rd birthday.¹⁴ The Nazis also forced Beethoven on Holocaust prisoners: the Auschwitz I "camp orchestra" often had Beethoven programmed, notably the *Symphony No. 5*.¹⁵ Beckett was disgusted to hear Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* played with 'an absence of mystery and a disintegration of formal structures?', by 'a recent convert to Nazism', William Furtwangler (who later conducted the Ninth for that birthday concert for Hitler).¹⁶ The Seventh was, to Beckett, one of those "great works of music" that offered the possibility of healing the world's divisions:

Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony? (Axel Kaun letter, 9th July 1937, pp.518-9)¹⁷

This view of Beethoven is one maintained by Adorno in the aftermath of the Holocaust, even when his music had been put to such depraved use. Adorno instructed the reader of 'A Critique of Radio Music' (1945) to 'take it for granted – I do – that Beethoven really is good music'.¹⁸ Beethoven lives, for Adorno, in a realm unattached to the political and social sphere; it is 'permeated with autonomy, that is, with the freedom of the subject that is coming to self-consciousness'.¹⁹ Beethoven's music, for Adorno, is capable of acting almost independently, 'with the freedom of the subject' – much like the music acting as a

¹⁴ Reucher, G. (2020) 'Beethoven as Nazi propaganda', *DW*. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/beethoven-as-nazi-propaganda/a-53262640>

¹⁵ Anon, (2015) 'The Mozart Question', *National Holocaust Museum*. Available at: <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/Blog/the-mozart-question>

¹⁶ Doran, S. (2014) 'Why music struck a chord with Beckett', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jul/31/why-music-struck-chord-beckett>

¹⁷ Beckett, S. (2009) *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (Fehsenfeld, M. and Overbeck, L., ed.) Vol. 1: 1929-1940, pp. 512-521.

¹⁸ Adorno, T. (2006) 'A Social Critique of Radio Music', *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* (Hullot-Kentnor, R., trans.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp.203-217.

¹⁹ *Aesthetic Theory*, p.222

ghostly character in Beckett's *Ghost Trio*. Beethoven represents one of the few examples of pre-Holocaust culture that cannot fail, able to act with autonomy from the context in which it is used, unlike almost any other.

Beckett's own view of Beethoven, however, does seem to have been changed by the Second World War and the Holocaust since the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun. There are twenty-three references to Beethoven in Beckett's letters before 1940, and just nine in the next fifty years of his correspondence, suggesting his passion waned considerably in the postwar era.²⁰ In Beckett's *Endgame*, Miller notes that 'even names like 'Bach' and 'Mozart' all signify...the same thing: death,'²¹ referring to Edith Wyschogrod's observation that 'the meaning of self, time, and language are all affected by mass death' after Hiroshima and Auschwitz.²² I think it is very possible to place Beethoven on Miller's list, though in relation to *Ghost Trio* rather than *Endgame*. Beckett uses Beethoven's music to signify the end of a dramatic era (that of the three act play) and the rise of technology (like cameras and recorded music) in drama, as well as death itself. Adorno's own final line in *Aesthetic Theory* poses the stark question:

But then what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering? (*Aesthetic Theory*, 261)

Beckett appears to be doing to Beethoven's music what Adorno didn't, perhaps couldn't: he kept 'the memory of accumulated suffering' attached to his *Ghost Trio* and Beethoven's cumulative legacy after the Second World War. Adorno may have believed 'all post-Auschwitz culture is garbage',²³ but he found it just as difficult to endorse pre-

²⁰ Beckett, S. (2009) *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume I-IV*, ed. Fehsenfeld, M. et al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²¹ Miller, T. (1994) 'Dismantling authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the 'postwar'', *Textual Practice*, Vol.8 No.1, pp.43-57

²² Wyschogrod, E. (1985) *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. ix. In Miller, p. 49.

²³ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 367

Auschwitz culture, that had ‘failed’ so horrifically, as proved by the Holocaust’s eradication of the sanctity of human life. The inclusion of Beethoven’s music at all in Beckett’s work is a political statement that beautiful music can transcend the terrible contexts into which it has been co-opted, but, equally, that it cannot remain completely ‘autonomous’ from it, nor shake off ‘the memory of accumulated suffering’ attached to it. Beckett, as ever in his works, does not give a clear answer to his own questions on the politics of music in a post-Holocaust society, but he certainly seems to refute Adorno’s absolutist verdict that ‘culture has failed’.²⁴

Watt

At the end of the ‘Addenda’ to his 1953 novel *Watt*, Beckett wrote the following:

Threne heard by Watt in ditch on way from station. The soprano sang:²⁵

Figure 1

Watt, p.223



²⁴ Ibid, p. 366

²⁵ Beckett, S. (2009) *Watt*. London: Faber and Faber, p.223

The threne is ‘a song of lamentation’,²⁶ a now-archaic medieval song form, but the melodic pattern of the song fits more closely Albright’s definition of it as a ‘psychotic passacaglia’.²⁷ The passacaglia is a Spanish dance consisting of variations over a static bass, very popular in the Baroque era, which fell out of fashion by the early 19th century with two notable exceptions: the finale to Brahms’ *Symphony No. 4* (1884), and Leopold Godowsky’s *Passacaglia in B minor* (1927). This latter work is Godowsky’s ‘heartfelt tribute to this precious and prolific genius,’²⁸ Franz Schubert, both Godowsky’s and Beckett’s favourite composer, based on a theme from the first movement of his unfinished *Symphony No. 8* in the same key as Beckett’s miniscule work. While it is not certain that Beckett had Godowsky’s work in mind when writing his own passacaglia, it is certainly an intriguing prospect, that would form a chain of musical influence and diminution from Schubert’s symphonic work to Godowsky’s titanic piano piece to Beckett’s monophonic threne. This chain of influence acts to cross the historical boundaries that Adorno did his best to set in stone: by bringing pre-Auschwitz, ‘failed’ culture into a piece of post-Auschwitz ‘culture-garbage’, Beckett questions just how ‘dead’ history and culture can ever really be. The threne does seem to act as a lament for the suffering of the present and the recent past, but as a medieval form it acts as a reminder in itself that history stretches back beyond the decade and into the century and the millennium.

Even the form of the passacaglia is a reminder of the comfort that can be found in the familiar. As a form that relies wholly on slight variations from the theme, over a repeated ground bass – Beckett’s passacaglia is little more than rhythmic and melodic displacement of a descending B minor scale, lacking the bass entirely – it offers a reminder that, while the

²⁶ Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Threne, n. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9686012170>

²⁷ Albright, D. (2003) *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.147

²⁸ Godowsky, L. (1927) ‘Preface’ to *Passacaglia for the Pianoforte*. New York: Carl Fischer, p. 1

form of something may have changed, the content beneath remains the same. In a larger passacaglia like Godowsky's, the original is always present beneath the chaos, obscured but not eliminated. Beckett emphasises the possibility of reconciliation with the rest of humanity through the melody of archaic music like his threne, as well, just as the form offers the possibility of reconciliation with the past. The melody finishes on what Albright refers to as a 'crackpot' A#, the leading note of the B minor scale that has been outlined disruptively throughout the threne.²⁹ By ending on an unresolved leading note, Beckett leaves the piece (and the novel as a whole) on an uncomfortable suspension: anyone who has grown up listening to music in Western harmony will recognise the scale to be unfinished. It is a small but powerful reminder that the conventional harmony of Romantics like Beethoven and Schubert can offer something that the serialism of Schoenberg and Webern cannot: a 'collective listening' experience in which any audience member can understand a scale to be unfinished.

Watt, however, is not a typical example of 'collective listening' in the same way as that in *Ghost Trio* or *Embers*, because the musical medium is visual rather than aural. The novel is, unlike the theatre, a fundamentally solitary medium: one reads a book alone, but watches a play together with the rest of an audience of strangers. Martin argues in her analysis of Adorno's philosophy that 'the basic premise upon which drama rests: human agency, individual motivation, the choice of one course of action over another, simply cannot be met' in a post-Holocaust era, but drama also has the unique quality of being able to bring humanity's strangers together, to feel the same emotions in the same way in a darkened theatre.³⁰ The novel-reading experience binds humanity together in the text itself, by likewise encouraging all readers to feel the same things, but the experience of reading a novel is not a

²⁹ *Beckett and Aesthetics*, p.147

³⁰ Martin, E. (2006) 'Re-reading Adorno: The 'after-Auschwitz' Aporia', *University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, No.2, pp.1-13, p.4

unitary one in the same way as playgoing. Whereas the A# in *Watt*'s passacaglia may sound 'crackpot' to any Western-educated *listener*, it only *reads* as 'crackpot' to those who understand musical harmony.

Adorno argues, however, that is entirely the point:

"Art, it's so aesthetic"; this is to be taken with deep seriousness as a memento of what has been repressed by its consumption. The quality at stake here reveals itself primarily in acts of reading, including the reading of musical scores...it is the conciliatory element of culture in art that characterises even its most violent protestation. (*Aesthetic Theory*, 294)

If the 'aesthetic' of art is something only revealed in its consumption, and is a quality 'repressed' by that same consumption; and if 'the quality at stake here reveals itself primarily in acts of reading', then it would be logical to assume that reading is what best reveals that quality. In contravention even of Adorno's own training as a musicologist, aural forms of artistic consumption like listening, and aural-visual forms like playgoing, would seem to be what represses the 'aesthetic' of art. Beckett directs the playing of music in many different forms in his works, but only in *Watt* is a passage of music directly written out onto the page, because to depict written music in drama is as impossible as depicting aural music in a novel. He provides an entirely different way of consuming art – his/Godowsky's/Schubert's threne/passacaglia – in *Watt* to the recorded music of *Ghost Trio* or the live performance in *Embers*. This music is intended, not to remind the consumer of the horrors of the past, but to offer them the comfort that can be found in history – and, in doing so, Beckett puts the 'aesthetic' back into 'art'.

Embers

Adorno described history in ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’ as having ‘itself dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history, the power of remembrance’.³¹ He viewed the post-Holocaust landscape as one where ‘the once-and-for-all of being has withered to the sharp point of history, which breaks’: we are already living, he seems to say, in a post-historical society.³² Even the declaration that ‘culture has failed’ suggests that history, so deeply tied as it is to notions of human culture, has failed along with it. Yet one of the greatest challenges of this view of history and culture is that, without history to learn from, and the reminder of those words chiselled in stone outside Treblinka, ‘Never Again’, humanity risks repeating the same mistakes of its forbears. Adorno viewed Beckett as ‘remov[ing] from existence what time, the historical tendency, attempts to quash in reality’,³³ but in *Embers* Beckett exactly realises the manifest dangers of humans quashing the ‘historical tendency’, through a minor domestic allegory.

In the play, a young girl named Addie plays ‘Chopin’s 5th Waltz in Ab major’, and ‘in first chord of bass, bar 5, she plays E instead of F’.³⁴ Her mistake is accompanied by ‘resounding blow of ruler on piano case’ and ‘violent’ shouts from her music master. She duly repeats the opening, and makes the same mistake again. It is a minor enough moment, of course. Beethoven’s supposed motto, ‘To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable’³⁵ is clearly not one held by the music master, not letting her move past this mistake that is in the musical context entirely insignificant. This moment is unique in being the only example of diegetic, performed music in Beckett’s drama, the act of musicmaking being one of community and celebration in the Irish cultural tradition for

³¹ ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.125

³² *Ibid*, p.125

³³ *Ibid*, p.124

³⁴ ‘Embers’, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 251-264, p. 258

³⁵ Widely quoted but not tied to a source

Beckett and his family.³⁶ The mistake Beckett warns against here might just as easily be the focus on ‘wrong notes’ over ‘passion’, than the wrong notes themselves.

But the wrong notes themselves are also vital in this piece. Beckett loved to play Chopin’s music for friends and family, and the choice of this specific piece of music, and even how he refers to it, is a hugely important one.³⁷ The more common Chopin Waltz in Ab major is the posthumously-published Op.69 No.1, but Beckett specifies the ‘Fifth Waltz’, the Op.42, more commonly referred to as the ‘Grande valse’ rather than by its key signature. By excluding the nickname of this waltz, unlike his explicit reference to ‘Largo of Beethoven’s Fifth Piano Trio (*The Ghost*)’, Beckett warns the director from treating this moment as a grandiose gesture, instead a regular waltz played by a spoilt young child.³⁸ He also emphasises the key signature of the music by referring to it in this way, and this, combined with Addie’s repeated mistake, is vital for Beckett’s allegory.

Figure 2

Chopin, Waltz Op.42 No.5



The ‘E instead of F’ that Addie plays is precluded by a trill on the note Eb, that clashes prominently with Addie’s E a major seventh below. The dissonance created here is a far more

³⁶ Beckett, W. (1998) ‘Music in the Works of Samuel Beckett’, *Beckett and Music*. pp. 181-2

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.181

³⁸ ‘Ghost Trio’, p.414

obvious example of ‘collective listening’ to the radio listener, as it is aural rather than written music, as is the case in *Watt*. Yet, true to Adorno’s claim that ‘the quality at stake here [the ‘aesthetic’ of art] reveals itself primarily in acts of reading’, the aesthetic quality of Chopin’s art is not fully revealed by this moment. Here, the ‘collective listening’ moment arises not from a deliberately ‘crackpot’ A#, but from a mistake, and it fully distorts the defining qualities of Chopin’s music, as Beckett refers to it: it is no longer in Ab major, nor a Waltz. The chord Addie plays, with ‘E instead of F’, alters from a major sixth outlining Db major (F + Db) to a minor sixth suggesting either the theoretical key of Db minor or C# minor through the enharmonic interval E + Db. Suddenly the chord becomes undefinable and unquantifiable, neither one thing nor the other, and it is certainly no longer in Ab major.

Weller argued that Adorno was ‘among the first in the post-Holocaust age to think the possibility...of a non-integrative reconciliation, a multiplicity in which alterity survives within a non-violent economy’: namely, that the indefinability Beckett creates in Addie’s mistake is an example of exactly the quality the post-Holocaust age needs for cultural reconciliation.³⁹ Yet in Beckett’s example, the identity of Chopin’s music, the key signature by which he refers to it, has been completely denatured in its ‘alterity’. Pre-Holocaust music like Chopin’s (who, as a Polish-born naturalised Frenchman, represented two of the countries to have suffered most from German occupation and the Holocaust during the Second World War) seems to only offer ‘the possibility of a non-integrative reconciliation’ when ‘otherness’ or alterity is forced upon it, rather than the two being mutually achievable.

Neither is the music, as Beckett portrays it, a waltz any more. As soon as she makes her mistake, there is ‘Resounding blow of ruler on piano case. ADDIE stops playing.’ The four bars preceding the chord she misplays consists solely of the Eb trill, which makes it

³⁹ Weller, S. (2006) *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p.3

impossible to judge the metre of the piece clearly by the time the first chord in the bass is reached on the last beat of the fifth bar. Because Addie stops playing as soon as she makes this mistake, the 3/4 metre that defines any waltz is never established from the trill and single chord the listener hears, and so it cannot be identified as a waltz, let alone one in Ab major. Beckett, then, uses this tiny, insignificant domestic scene to convey the dangers of repeating the same mistake again and again. Addie's mistake individually is musically insignificant, but the identity of the music itself is distorted irretrievably through her single wrong note: what harm might occur from the careless repetition of such a small mistake on a much larger scale?

The medium Beckett uses to portray this musical incident, the radio, is also a significant one, that cautions against the sort of social complacency that risks repeating historical events like the Holocaust. Adorno, in 'A Social Critique of Radio Music', warns that 'music under present radio auspices serves to keep listeners from criticising social realities; in short, it has a soporific effect on social consciousness'⁴⁰: it is a prime example of the dangers of the 'culture industry' first proposed by Adorno and his collaborator Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).⁴¹ He further warns that 'radio music offers...the function of creating smugness and self-satisfaction'⁴² in its listeners, deliberately designed to prevent them from questioning the social systems imposed upon them.

'Entertainment may have its uses, but a recognition of radio music as such would shatter the listener's artificially fostered belief that they are dealing with the greatest music.' ('A Social Critique of Radio Music', 217)

Radio music, for Adorno, is a valuable method of social suppression because it is 'entertainment' being passed off as 'great music', thereby making the masses believe that the

⁴⁰ 'A Social Critique of Radio Music', pp.209-10

⁴¹ Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso Books

⁴² 'A Social Critique of Radio Music', p.210

culture placed in front of them is the “greatest” that can be attained and therefore suppressing their real capabilities for more. Beckett emphasises that the music of *Embers* is not ‘the greatest music’ by incorporating a minor mistake that nonetheless disrupts and deforms the music that should be played, ‘shatter[ing] the listener’s artificially fostered belief’ without conceding the radio music to be purely ‘Entertainment’. *Embers* confronts a society convinced that the present they are witnessing is the ‘greatest’ that has ever been, because their ‘entertainment’ and ‘culture industry’ tells them that. A society that believed that Auschwitz was simply ‘an admittedly unpleasant but nonetheless temporary glitch in an otherwise progressive culture’ rather than (as Adorno felt), ‘part and parcel of the civilising process itself’,⁴³ is more vulnerable to forget the ‘Never Again’ mantra of the Holocaust, by assuming that, in this progressive modern society it could never happen again. Beckett uses the radio medium to emphasise the vital importance of this, by reminding the listener that even the smallest mistakes can have significant consequences. Weller interprets Adorno as finding in Beckett ‘the negative image’ of the post-Holocaust world, ‘the only possible image’ of a world living in Auschwitz’s shadow (however much radio music tries to dispel this view).⁴⁴ This ‘nihilistically positivistic present’⁴⁵ that Adorno (and Beckett) hopes for is one that will not forget Auschwitz, and therefore one that will never allow a repeat of it.

All That Fall and Nacht und Traume

All That Fall, a realist radio drama written at the beginning of Beckett’s career, and *Nacht und Traume*, an abstract play for the stage and the penultimate play he wrote, are evidently very different in form, content and style. However, both have one curious feature,

⁴³ Martin, ‘Re-reading Adorno’, p.6

⁴⁴ Weller, *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity*, p.3

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

the inclusion of Schubert *Lieder* to be played at certain moments in the play: *Death and the Maiden* in *All That Fall*, and the eponymous *Nacht und Traume*. Beckett's use of, and distaste for, language, is evident in many of his works, and much discussed in criticism of them, but to use *Lieder* as music for these two plays reflects a different way of viewing language as a whole. Even in the early Axel Kaun letter, Beckett's distaste for language is evident:

Or is literature alone to be left behind on that old, foul road long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically sacred contained within the unnature of the word that does not belong to the elements of the other arts? (Axel Kaun letter, 518)

Schubert's *Lieder* are, of course, much older than Beckett's views here. But it is highly suggestive of his later use of these songs, that he finds the 'old foul road abandoned by music and painting' to be characterised by 'the unnature of the word' not present in music as early as 1937. Beckett's subsequent uses of music in his work can all be seen as his protracted attempt to remove the 'unnature of the word' from literature, and therefore to remove literature from 'that old, foul road' altogether. The urgency to remove language from literature, and certain languages in particular, would become ever more pressing in the post-Holocaust era. German, as the language in which the bureaucracy of the Holocaust was conducted and the language forever tied to Nazism and its brutalities, became what Elaine Martin calls 'an impaired and misappropriated linguistic medium' in the postwar era.⁴⁶ This poses near-insurmountable challenges for the German writer of Holocaust literature, 'forced to express a horror of unimaginable magnitude' in a language 'completely incommensurate with its subject of representation.'⁴⁷ Poetry in particular was a medium that could not go on

⁴⁶ Martin, p. 1

⁴⁷ Martin, p. 1

being created in the same way in the aftermath of Auschwitz, as the most famous of Adorno's philosophical statements makes abundantly clear:

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. ('Cultural Criticism and Society')

The 'possibility' of art is something that Adorno finds endlessly fascinating. In *Aesthetic Theory* he argues that 'In all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content'.⁴⁸ I would argue, though, that the "impossibility" of writing poetry is more an impossibility of writing poetry as it was before Auschwitz, using language in the same way. Poetry written in the pre-Auschwitz way is "barbaric", and therefore barely qualifies as art, which is why it becomes a question of 'art that is still possible'. However, poetry written before Auschwitz appears exempt from Adorno's proscription of its 'barbarism', and, in the case of song, it is the music, not the words that exempt it. He argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that 'However much a song by Webern is more thoroughly constructed, the universality of language of Schubert's *Winterreise* secures for it an element of superiority'.⁴⁹ The 'universality of language' is, notably, Schubert the composer's, not Wilhelm Müller the lyricist's, for Adorno. It can be inferred, then, that that poetry written before Auschwitz, especially that set to music, is in some way exempt from Adorno's mantra on the 'barbarism' (if not the impossibility) of writing poetry at all – and it is this sort of poetry, set to this sort of music, that Beckett uses.

⁴⁸ *Aesthetic Theory*, p.250

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp.159-160

It is not a coincidence that both plays express the frailties and burdens of language in ways other than their music. *All That Fall*'s characters find language to be a dying medium just as Adorno does:

MR ROONEY: [...] Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language'

MRS ROONEY: [...] I often have that feeling. It is unbearably excruciating
[...]

MRS ROONEY: Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said'⁵⁰ (*All That Fall*, 194)

The play takes place in rural western Ireland, which would suggest that Gaelic, not English, is the Rooneys' first language, hence them 'struggling' with it and referring to Gaelic as 'our own poor dear', as an already-dead language. Beckett alludes to English as 'a dead language' alongside Gaelic: like German in the Holocaust, English is a language of oppression, destruction and death in Ireland, especially its western extremes that were hit hardest by the 1845-52 Potato Famine. Branigan identifies how, in *All That Fall*, 'language, which should draw humanity closer, succeeds in isolating our hero, Maddy Rooney'.⁵¹ Language obscures meaning, and therefore prohibits communication, in the play, precisely because it is written in 'a dead language', English. This is the irony Beckett explores here: the Rooneys complain they are 'struggling with a dead language' in English, that same supposedly 'dead' language. It is this paradox that is 'unbearably excruciating' to them, prolonging the language from being merely 'dead' to 'dead in time', able to torture its

⁵⁰ 'All That Fall', *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp.169-200, p.194

⁵¹ Branigan, K. (2008) *Radio Beckett: Musicality in the Radio Plays of Samuel Beckett*. Oxford: Peter Lang, p.86

speakers (and specifically the Irish upon whom the language has been imposed) for as long as possible. Beckett is already emphasising both the need for language to die, and the reliance of humanity on language that ensures it becomes irreplaceable, in *All That Fall*.

The choice of *Death and the Maiden* as the elegy for ‘dead language’ in the play also reflects the drawn-out nature of linguistic death. Weller’s analysis of the function of *Death and the Maiden* in the play notes that ‘This old woman...has had the leisure to play the music over and over again. She is not so much dying as reliving (and thus suspending) the experience of proximate death.’⁵² The *lied* is about keeping the inevitable demise away for as long as possible, but ends with the voice of Death all the same. The repetition of the song over and over again is, as Weller notes, a suspension of that inevitable death, just as English remains a dying but not a dead language as long as people like the Rooneys continue to use it, despite the ‘unbearably excruciating’ pain it causes. Beckett explores the idea in *All That Fall* that English is a language no longer capable of being used, a realisation that leads to his use of other languages, French and German, for his later plays, and his use of German lyrics for *Death and the Maiden* in *All That Fall*. Adorno interprets Schubert as imbuing a sense of ‘universality of language’ on the lyrics to which he sets his music; language is no longer tied to nationality or culture, but solely to the music. By incorporating a Schubert *Lied* into *All That Fall*, Beckett offers an alternative to ‘dead language’, be that English, French or German: any language, in the aftermath of Auschwitz, is as ‘barbaric’ as the poetry written in it. Martin suggests that ‘to cleanse a language after such abuse [as that of the Holocaust] was seen by Adorno as a nigh impossible task’.⁵³ Beckett, in *All That Fall*, seems to offer one solution.

⁵² Weller, *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity*, p.37

⁵³ Martin, p.8

Beckett's campaign against language continues further in *Nacht und Traume*.

Returning to his fascinating letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett writes that:

Only from time to time do I have the consolation, as now, of being allowed to violate a foreign language as involuntarily as, with knowledge and intention, I would like to do against my own language and – Deo Juvante – shall do. (Axel Kaun letter, 520)

The 'as now' refers to the fact that the letter to Kaun was written in German, the language that, alongside French, Beckett studied (and excelled at) at Trinity College Dublin in the 1920s. The idea that the simple act of writing in a foreign language somehow 'violates' it is one that would hold with Beckett's move towards writing in French and German later in his career, as the question of what really is 'my own language' and the constraints of what he could do in it became ever more pressing. It seems inevitable, then, that he would eventually write plays with no performed language at all: *Acts without Words I and II* in 1958-60, and later on, *Nacht und Traume* in 1982. Beckett admits in the Axel Kaun letter that 'as we cannot dismiss language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute.' If *All That Fall* represents the long decline of language, then *Nacht und Traume* surely represents its death.⁵⁴ It is important to know that the play was written for *Süddeutscher Rundfunk* in Germany, and therefore while it is not written *in* German, for it contains no dialogue, it is very much a German play. Beckett therefore comes up against the challenges of the 'impaired and misappropriated linguistic medium', German, much as native German writers do, and his response is to use a Schubert *Lied* just as he does in *All That Fall*. However, whereas *Death and the Maiden* is used to complement the fall of language, *Nacht und Traume* replaces it entirely. Beckett seems to suggest that the 'nigh impossible task' of cleansing German from its abuse by the Nazis is a fully impossible one. Instead he creates a

⁵⁴ Axel Kaun letter, p.518

dramatic space in which only the pre-Auschwitz word, the ‘universality of language’ that Schubert rendered in *Winterreise*, can be allowed to remain.

Yet language is the one thing that ties the self to humanity more broadly, and in removing language from *Nacht und Traume*, reality and the concept of the self becomes fragmented and irretrievably shattered. The ‘Dreamer’ of *Nacht und Traume* remains completely separate from ‘His dreamt self’ and ‘Dreamt hands R (right) and L (left)’,⁵⁵ tied together by the music but not by his own body. These three elements interact in the play with such complex metatheatricality (‘the dreamer here dreams of himself dreaming, comforted in his dream by hands that do not exist or do not comfort him in his waking hours’⁵⁶) that ownership of the body becomes divorced from ownership of the self. Schubert’s music again assists in the effect here, through what Lawley describes as ‘the ambiguous ghostly companionship which destroys as it cherishes, or which cherishes only in order to destroy’ found in the texts he chose to set to music.⁵⁷ Cherishing something – even life itself – now only comes with its destruction. Beckett seems to suggest that the destruction of language, ‘a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it’,⁵⁸ is a vitally necessary step for human and cultural recovery in the aftermath of Auschwitz. But, just as Adorno foresaw the post-Holocaust cultural recovery as one that destroyed conventional ideas of culture in the process, human recovery after Auschwitz for Beckett comes at the cost of destroying the human self.

In many ways, Adorno supports this interpretation of language. He warns in ‘Lyric Poetry and Society’ that ‘language should not be absolutized as the voice of Being as opposed

⁵⁵ ‘Nacht und Traume’, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp.463-466, p.465

⁵⁶ Ben-Zvi, L. (1986) *Samuel Beckett*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, p.206

⁵⁷ Lawley, P. (2001) ‘Beckett Listens to Schubert’, *Samuel Beckett Today*. Leiden: Brill. Vol. 11, pp.255-266, p.258

⁵⁸ Axel Kaun letter, p.518

to the lyric subject: it is possible, and vital, to have existence without language.⁵⁹ Yet Adorno is chiefly concerned with what he calls ‘the crisis of the individual’, the need to individualise humanity after the ultimate act of forced homogenization, the Holocaust, and he sees the first-person lyric poem as a key way to do this.⁶⁰ ‘The “I” whose voice is heard in the lyric is an “I” that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective, to objectivity’.⁶¹ Yet in Schubert’s *Nacht und Traume* there is no “I” whose voice can be heard, by contrast to the repeated first person of *Death and the Maiden*. Instead, there is only ‘they’, ‘the silent breasts of human beings’,⁶² and even that is excised in the play by Beckett’s instructions to play only the ‘Last 7 bars’.⁶³ Beckett may take Schubert’s music to represent the ‘universality of language’ that neither modern English nor modern German could provide, eliminating the post-Auschwitz word altogether, but he seems to suggest that such drastic action can only come with the elimination of the human self in its entirety. Such elimination of the self; the destruction of a person’s humanity so completely that their death is little more than ‘the production of a corpse’; is of course one of the enduring horrors of Auschwitz that has affected conceptions of culture ever since, a conception that arguably finds its conclusion in *Nacht und Traume*.⁶⁴ But the act of bearing witness to such atrocities, and the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of doing so, is something also expressed in Beckett’s use of *Lieder* in both *All That Fall* and *Nacht und Traume*.

Giorgio Agamben coined the term “Levi’s Paradox” in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which he summarised with the question, ‘how can the true witness be the one who

⁵⁹ Adorno, T. (1991) ‘Lyric Poetry and Society’, *Notes to Literature: Vol. 1*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.37-54, p.43

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.46

⁶¹ Ibid, p.41

⁶² Collin, M. (1813) *Nacht und Traume* (Wren, M., trans.). Available at: <https://www.schubertsong.uk/text/nacht-und-traume/>

⁶³ Beckett, ‘Nacht und Traume’, p.465

⁶⁴ Agamben, G. (1999) *Remnants of Auschwitz*. New York: Zone Press, p.81

by definition cannot bear witness?'.⁶⁵ He refers here to the figure of “the *Muselmann*”, who is ‘the non-human who obstinately appears as human; he is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman.’⁶⁶ The *Muselmann*, like the woman listening to *Death and the Maiden* in *All That Fall*, ‘is not so much dying as reliving (and thus suspending) the experience of proximate death’,⁶⁷ living so close to death that their humanity is brought into question. A story that Maddy Rooney tells her husband seems to live in the same spatial region between life and death as that of the *Muselmann*:

The only thing wrong with her as far as he could see was that she was dying. And she did in fact die, shortly after he had washed his hands of her [...] the trouble with her was she had never really been born. (*All That Fall*, 195-6)

If this girl ‘had never really been born’, then it must follow that she has been ‘the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman’; ‘the being whose life is not truly life’⁶⁸ throughout her life; she is in the act of dying from the moment she is born. Yet her death is a passive one, for no one can kill someone who has ‘never really been born’ and therefore someone who has always been ‘inhuman’. Unlike language, and, critically, unlike the *Muselmann*, no one killed her or contributed to her death. The story of the *Muselmann* is infinitely more horrific, for being one inflicted on human beings by another – in this case, on the Jews by the Nazis, whom, by the use of the term *Muselmann* (‘Muslim’), knew ‘with a kind of ferocious irony...that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews.’⁶⁹ ‘The fact is that there is apparently no language capable of describing the violence in the Lager, at least not without betraying the suffering of the victims, the drowned and the survivors, or banalising or

⁶⁵ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.82

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.82

⁶⁷ Branigan, *Radio Beckett*, p.37

⁶⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.81

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.45

embellishing their experiences.’⁷⁰ Beckett kills off language because it is completely impossible to express the horrors of Auschwitz through it: those who ‘had never really been born’ are the lucky ones, compared to those *Musselmanner* who are rendered inhuman long after their lives have begun.

Adorno even makes the case that there is no such thing as a ‘survivor’ of Auschwitz, nor even a survivor of the Holocaust. Himself a Jewish man who had escaped to America in the 1930s, his argument in *Negative Dialectics* is that anyone whom the Nazis desired to kill, regardless of whether they are a Holocaust survivor in the more widely held sense, lives in the same life-and-death limbo as the *Muselmann*, and therefore exists within Levi’s Paradox:

But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living - especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living... By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier. (*Negative Dialectics*, 367)

Yet there must be a way of expressing testimony, in a culture after language. The *Muselman* is the only ‘complete witness’ of the Holocaust’s horrors, but one wholly unable to bear witness of those horrors. Levi’s Paradox struggles precisely with this contradiction: to witness and to testify the Holocaust is to speak the unspeakable, an impossible task for those who have been rendered speechless by what they have witnessed. Beckett finds that, in a postwar landscape, only by eradicating language completely can the ‘unspeakable’ be given voice. As Adorno puts it, ‘the greatness of works of art, however, consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides’. Art, and lyric poetry in particular, is therefore

⁷⁰ de Oliveira, L. (2017) ‘The Limits of Literary Testimony: Understanding Levi’s Paradox’, *Arquivo Maaravi: Digital Journal of Jewish Studies*. Belo Horizonte: Federal University of Minas Gerais, pp.1-23, p.18

about giving voice to those who have none, those ‘complete witnesses’ who cannot bear witness; and as literature descends into the unspeakable, music becomes a non-verbal witness of its own.⁷¹ Beckett’s use of Beethoven and Chopin in *Ghost Trio* and *Embers* respectively is evidence of that. In *All That Fall* and *Nacht und Traume*, though, two plays that chronicle Beckett’s gradual euthanasia of language, the music becomes verbal, itself offering to become a witness. *Death and the Maiden* in the context of *All That Fall* is a depiction of the limbo between life and death also experienced by the *Muselmann*, itself a witness to the events of the play, present all day long (‘All day the same old record. All alone in that empty house.’⁷²). It also continues to raise Adorno’s question of ‘whether after Auschwitz you can go on living’, using what Branigan calls ‘the sonic dimension’s capacity to present incorporeal worlds’.⁷³ Music, a ‘sonic dimension’ like the radio play, also creates an ‘incorporeal world’ in which, according to Adorno, everyone lives after Auschwitz. That this music in particular speaks of a battle between ‘cruel Death’ and a ‘lovely, tender creature’,⁷⁴ asserting humanity in the face of its destruction, echoes the impossibility of truly bearing witness to the event that so horrifically ‘realized the unconditional triumph of death against life’.⁷⁵ By *Nacht und Traume*, Beckett has relieved the *Muselmann*, and all those caught in Levi’s Paradox, of the need to speak in order to bear witness. The music of *Nacht und Traume* is the only reality in the play; it is the lyrics, here, that ‘present incorporeal worlds’, because they are the only examples of language the audience has to cling to. The lyrics talk of the ephemerality of dreams and nighttime, that are themselves quintessentially Romantic symbols, representing worlds that are even more incorporeal for being completely untainted with the ‘barbarism’ of poetry post-Auschwitz. The dreams which Adorno envisaged all Holocaust survivors as being

⁷¹ ‘Lyric Poetry and Society’, p.73

⁷² ‘All That Fall’, p.197

⁷³ Branigan, *Radio Beckett*, p.88

⁷⁴ Collin, *Nacht und Traume*

⁷⁵ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.81

‘plagued’ by ‘as way of atonement’ are emphasised by Beckett not as the actuality of ‘his whole existence since’. Instead they are ‘incorporeal worlds’ in which the pressure of bearing witness no longer apply; the speakers longs for ‘beauteous dreams’ to ‘come back again!’,⁷⁶ rather than being embroiled in ‘the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier’. Beckett uses Schubert’s music, completely devoid of post-Auschwitz language, in *Nacht und Traume*, to relieve what de Oliviera calls the ‘witnesses [of the Holocaust]’s inability to distance themselves from the events they wanted to communicate’.⁷⁷ He posits the music as the witness to these crimes, not the *Muselmanner*, just as Beethoven’s music was, and remains, a witness to its own co-option by the Nazis, before being reclaimed by Beckett in *Ghost Trio*.

Agamben’s chapter on ‘The Muselmann’ in *Remnants of Auschwitz* suggests the following:

If we give the name “Levi’s paradox” to the statement that “the Muselmann is the complete witness,” then understanding Auschwitz — if such a thing is possible — will coincide with understanding the sense and nonsense of this paradox. (*Remnants of Auschwitz*, 82)

Beckett, like all humanity since, finds understanding Auschwitz to be entirely impossible, just as Agamben foresaw. But by placing the music of *All That Fall* and *Nacht und Traume* as witnesses themselves, and offering music as an alternative to the “unspeakableness” at the heart of Levi’s Paradox, Beckett at least begins to offer a way to understand how humanity can carry on living in the aftermath of Auschwitz.

⁷⁶ Collin, *Nacht und Traume*

⁷⁷ de Oliviera, ‘Understanding Levi’s Paradox’, p.2

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that all art, and all literature especially, written after 1945, struggles with the legacy of the Holocaust. When the forms and mediums of art and culture itself – language being only one example – are so irreparably changed, it is inevitable that all art will need to change as well. But Beckett’s own status as the last great modernist endowed an additional burden on his post-Holocaust art form. Albright’s claim that ‘the modernists did not (as Beckett did) delight in artistic failure’ would seem to place Beckett outside the modernist sphere, but, if we conclude (as this essay attempts to do) that his works instead tried to repair, not celebrate, the artistic failure signified by the Holocaust, then it is much easier to place him back among the modernists, though one whose modernism would always have the shadow of Auschwitz hanging over it. Modernism is an intellectual movement that became increasingly tied to fascism and genocide in the 1930s, with many of its most famous proponents – Yeats, Lawrence, Lewis, Wells – expressing the sort of eugenicist sentiments that were realised by the Holocaust.⁷⁸

If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace...I’d go out into the backstreets and main streets and bring them all in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile me a weary thanks. (D.H. Lawrence, 1908 letter to Blanche Jennings)⁷⁹

If Beckett were to claim any kinship to modernism, he was going to have to ‘make it new’ in a completely different way, to divorce his own art form from that of the High Modernists whose conception of culture intersected so directly with Hitler’s. His own dismantling of language, history and art itself can be seen as one way of doing this. To reconcile a humanity able to produce something like Auschwitz, with one able to go on living after it, is a monumental challenge that requires the testing of all those assumptions of

⁷⁸ Carey, J. (1992) *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. London: Faber and Faber, ad passim

⁷⁹ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p.12

what ‘culture’ means, and what that culture looks like. However, while Beckett certainly did not underestimate the challenge facing culture and literature in the aftermath of the Holocaust, his method of reconciliation is very different to Adorno’s. Adorno’s absolutist statements that ‘culture has failed’ before Auschwitz; that it is ‘garbage’ afterwards; and that Beckett offers ‘trashcans [as] the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz’ appear in direct contrast to Beckett’s own use of emblems of pre-Auschwitz culture: the music of Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin. Adorno warned in ‘Lyric Poetry and Society’ that ‘music has become a means instead of an end’, but Beckett puts those means to good use in resurrecting a culture after the Holocaust. He brings together the unique qualities offered by literature and music to create a new form of culture that encourages its consumer – the radio listener, the novel reader, the play goer – not to dismiss the past as a failure but to remember it for its successes as well as for the mistakes that led to its most catastrophic failure, that of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Beckett uses Romantic music as a way to find beauty in a world on the edge of apocalypse, and the forms, content and structures the Romantic composers employed became a key part of his works, in his attempt to create a more historically aware post-Auschwitz culture. This culture cannot make sense of the Holocaust: nothing can, but it certainly attempts to prevent it being repeated – and that is all that humanity can hope for.

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