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Why Walter Benjamin? A Brief Note on Two Operas

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Why write about Walter Benjamin's life? Why write in the form of the libretto for an opera? Or, what differentiates the poetic activity of writing a text for reading from that of writing a text for singing? What makes poets turn to opera, at specific historical moments, and choose specific topics for their reflections? Why do they experience an aesthetic, and more importantly, an ethical imperative to combine their words with music?

With Michael Heller's *Constellations of Waking*¹ and Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime*², the melancholy at work in both operas effectively undermines the Modernist claim for emotion-free impersonality, as both poets opt for the mode of direct interaction with an audience. However, the operas' respective modalities diverge, and yet they have one striking point in common: both librettos are based on the life of Walter Benjamin. The question here may have to be, then, whether or not either opera is faithful to Benjamin's Modernist legacy, especially as regards his valorizing of fragmentalism that might, logically at least, preclude literary, even musical, elements in an opera that elicit pathos. This problem (is it a repudiation of Modernism, of Benjamin, or of both?) becomes all the more interesting since Bernstein's and Heller's ways of unfolding diverge in ways worth our attention in thinking about not only the cultural moment of late Modernism but also the later moment of their creation. At the turn of the millennium, the two operas are crafted and then performed nearly simultaneously—by two poets who are inheritors of the Objectivist poetics, and who are Jewish, and whose respective poetries are seemingly unlike.

What they both sought is arguably, however, to bring out into the open poetry's and music's kinship, and to do that in keeping with Benjamin's memory, and relevance to the present of composition.

We are well aware of the ambiguities and ambivalences of the relationships between poetry and music, starting with the assertion of hierarchies that alternately and contradictorily rank music higher than poetry because music is not language-based, or poetry higher than music because poetry is language-based. Poetry and music seem to compete in the ongoing search for expression, better communication with the public, an efficient transmission of emotions and concepts. A primary moment in this articulation of poetry and music within the context of a normative project, which would define a hierarchy among the arts, is of course Hegelian, quickly reformulated and broadcast by Walter Pater's assertions according to which poetry should "aspire to the condition of music." Yet if one pays attention, for instance, to Pater's conclusions in *The Renaissance*, there might be the possibility of less dogma, less value-setting and above all less dual relationship between words and music. Such a relationship would take into account the audience as the recipient of discourses that can come in various forms of expression and above all in hybrid forms of expression that combine the potentialities of several media at once.

The postwar practices of the installation and of the happening, and the increasing stress put on performance, testify to this intense commitment to direct expression and interaction. A corollary of this strategic move towards a greater attention paid to reception is that it draws a link between art and life, and attempts to outline the meaningfulness and usefulness of art in life: from Novalis, Pater had already taken over the interrogation about the way we pass through life, unheeding most of the time and unaware of the

intensity of experience, and of the aesthetic quality, and philosophical dimension of each passing moment. In this respect, the more recent developments can be understood as a radicalization of these preoccupations rather than as a fundamental innovation. Pater writes that the service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?³

The intensity of the moment, the awareness of experience, and the more general issue of being present to one's own life motivate the resort to art, "for art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake, and we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among the children of this world, in art and song."⁴

The mention of "song" is symptomatic of the implicit hierarchy of the modes of expression that underpins Pater's reflections, and opens onto the idea that the alliance of music

and text results in the conditions of a higher type of life experience. In this perspective, Stéphane Mallarmé's legendary reaction to Claude Debussy's setting of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, to its music, does not only remind us of the poetic claim for the musicality of language (why set the poem to music when its words are in themselves a musical composition?) but also of the tendency of music to be aware of itself as a higher art possessing more power to impress than words: it signals the possibility for the competitive relationship between poetry and music to be turned into a cooperative relationship whereby both would gain.

More specifically, the operatic mode can thus be seen as a way of putting poetry on the stage, hence anticipating today's mixed media experiments of many poetic performances. It emerges as a way to address the public directly by turning a silent, invisible, and hypothetical readership into the actuality of an audience that would be physically present to collectively experience the work. This development ties in with the increasingly didactic intention of Modernism as the 20th century enters the post-WWI era. The combined reaction to the historical contingency at work in the unpredictable outbreak of war in August 1914, and to the unspeakable horrors of a long and deadly conflict, accounts for Ezra Pound's renunciation of the aestheticizing antiquities of his pre-war years, and his growing interest in the affairs of the world, economic and political. His 1919 opera, *Le Testament de Villon*, is not simply a piece of evidence in the narrative of Ezra Pound's interest in music, especially in the music of Igor Stravinsky or George Antheil, and his desire to assert his polymorphous genius by being a composer as well as a poet. Nor is it to be considered just as part of his more general interest in things European, ancient or medieval, which produced a whole corpus of translations from the Latin or the Provençal. Rather the composition of *Le Testament* resorts to a type of appropriation, not only of the musical modes

that Pound finds in George Antheil's music compositions or in Stravinsky's, but also of the very life of the French medieval poet, in ways that raise issues about the relevance of this life to the poet-cum-composer's present.

In the case of *Villon*, it seems, the very nature of the text put to music bears witness to Pound's preoccupations concerning the poet's place in the world, and the part to be played by poetry in the shaping of individual and collective destinies. Pound's *Villon* is a "testament," thereby reenacting an assessment of one's life, its significance, and its errors, with the aim of shaping the way future generations will perceive of one's life and will accordingly behave. The moral and didactic dimension of Villon's autobiographical project asserts the posture of the poet as guide ("psychopomp"), whereas Pound's creation of an opera on this poet's life aims to perform this intention in the fullest sense of the term: as a modern opera, in keeping with the contemporary experiments in musical composition, Pound's *Villon* stands for the artist's reevaluation of his actions once history has denied him the option of dandyish aloofness and ironic distance. Commitment is compulsory, and each life is in this respect exemplary. As Pound dabbles in opera, he in fact chooses a form and media that unwittingly converge with Bertolt Brecht's objectives in his collaboration with Kurt Weill: the opera becomes a social mode of expression, the combination of text and music contributing to the impact of a message to the masses, the theatrical dimension of operatic performance allowing for the audience's awareness.

The topics chosen for the opera are most often individual lives that become emblematic of

collective quandaries—the fact that Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thompson’s own opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, rethinks the lives, and the significance of the lives of [Ignace de Loyola and Therese of Avila is in this sense symptomatic. The choice of opera is indeed a strongly individualistic ideological choice, since it also addresses a question lying at the very foundation of the Modernist dynamic, namely the claim for impersonality, the rejection of nostalgia and the general diffidence (though impossible to dismiss) of emotion. Where Pound might have proclaimed in the Imagist manifesto that one is to erase any trace of the “I,” and that emotion should be banished from the poem to preserve and convey the integrity of direct sensation, he becomes later preoccupied with the “transmittibility of a conviction,”⁵ that brings back affect into the poet’s work with a vengeance. The aim is not only to generate aesthetic pleasure but also to persuade and win over the addressee’s opinion. The implications of Pound’s decision to put art in the service of ideology are extremely serious, as one is well aware, and undeniable; his resort to a large number of poetic modes to this effect is well documented, and opera is actually one of them.

But besides the very questionable contents of Pound’s project, there lies a seminal interrogation over the means of communication between a poet and his audience, the unavoidable part played by affect, and the consequently tantamount importance of formal decisions. The Poundian operatic experiment thus reverberates in the works of later poets whose own work leads them to reconsider the involved relationship between the poet and the public.

Here we should turn back to Bernstein and Heller. And the main question, then, in this regard,

may have to be whether or not either opera, apart from poetic-operatic forbears, is faithful to Benjamin's Modernism that might have been forced by its own premises, in part rejecting the narrativity of Romanticism, to reject voice and pathos. This problem becomes more interesting since Bernstein's and Heller's respective operatic practices diverge or simply manifest as if emerging out of two distinct sets of experiences, partaking of two distinct linguistic, musical and dramaturgical sensibilities. (What this might tell us about Jewish-American, avant-garde perspectives is a matter only to be dealt with in passing.) Arguably, the composition of operas around the figure of Walter Benjamin attests to a shared "radicality of critique" (Hannah Arendt's own words about Benjamin's brand of Marxism), which both poets practice—although in different ways according to whether one considers Michael Heller's work or Charles Bernstein's.

Both are New York poets, but their respective operas diverge in the way they draw the consequences of the Objectivist movement's poetic decisions. Indeed, the rift between the two originates, doubly, in the relationship they establish to the medium of their art (language) and the opposite positions they adopt in the debate over emotion in poetry. As one of the founding poets of the Language school of poetry, Charles Bernstein does indeed posit himself as a strong advocate of diffidence in front of referentiality, and against meaningfulness—insisting on the dangers of what he calls "absorption," another term to define identification and empathetic projection. The poem is not supposed to impose an interpretation on the reader, nor is it to transmit an explicit meaning: it is rather to evidence the way textual practice may undermine or enforce hegemonic modes that would otherwise remain unperceived. Bernstein works on disrupting the mechanisms of meaning production, so as to question the tactics of persuasion

whose power lies in their very conventionality.

Differently, as one of the last Objectivists in the line of George Oppen, Michael Heller's commitment (though not necessarily his ideas) is more explicitly conveyed through his poems, and not left almost entirely for the reader to work out for himself: where Bernstein's take on the life of Walter Benjamin seems to stress the aleatoric nature of fate, and the dismantling of causality under the pressure of an absurd war, moreover, Heller's reading redoubles the tragic dimension of Benjamin's demise, the struggle against overpowering forces, and the despair of the witness to the failure of rationality. Heller's text appropriates words from Benjamin's correspondence, whereas Bernstein's tries to establish echoes and parallels between Benjaminian statements and the statements of other major figures. Heller's Benjamin poem is constructed as the long monologue of the dead, forever the object of misunderstanding, and of an obstinate quest for sense and reason; Bernstein's enacts the conflation of competing voices in a virtual cacophony that irredeemably fails to attain stability and coherence. Thus both draw their capability, be it negative in Bernstein, or positive in Heller, from the aporia of remembrance as an epistemological tool.

Consequently, whereas *Shadowtime* will not shed light on the life of Walter Benjamin, thus making us experience the darkness of his time, and will endlessly postpone understanding, Heller's text will emerge as a response in itself to the radical incomprehension in front of the unspeakable crimes of humanity—as well as the enraging ironies of history (since Benjamin commits suicide when he thinks he won't be able to cross the border into Spain... and that border is reopened to refugees very shortly afterwards). In both cases, then, the fact that the poetic text is a libretto for an opera—either composed for a specific music (by Brian Ferneyhough in the case

of Bernstein) or composed along with a specific musical composition (by Ellen Fishman Johnson for Heller)—provides a supplement of information about the poet’s intention. Yet, where Ferneyhough’s music is often atonal, and difficult, intensifying the rejection of the reader by adding the rejection of the listener to it, Fishman Johnson’s music is charged with pathos, underlining the nostalgia and regret that inform the poem.

Actually, the resort to the operatic form forces the emotional response to the thematic dimension of the poem. The focus on the figure of Walter Benjamin, in the early years of the 21st century, works as a redirection of interpretation that revises the man’s historical standing to recontextualize it in the present—a present that existentially is emotional, full of the uncertainties and dogmatic attempts of millennial anxiety, as Heller writes that:

The audience was rapt,
each actor made a gesture,
turned their feelings
into lessons.⁶

Perhaps it is because our new millennium fails, to a large extent, to fulfill the expectations of renewal and enlightenment, to look more and more like an irrepressible “katabasis,”⁷ that these operas on Walter Benjamin in 2000 (Heller) and in 2004 (Bernstein) were inevitable. In her account of Walter Benjamin’s life,⁸ Hannah Arendt evokes his “bad luck,” and recalls the way Benjamin refers to the legend of the little hunchback in his article about Franz Kafka.⁹ According to that legend, clumsiness and bad luck are the signs of the failure of attention to the surrounding

world, but they are also the consequences of the annoying tricks being played by that invisible, impish little hunchback. According to the poem that so struck Benjamin in his childhood, the creature is the unwanted companion of a number of people.¹⁰ The little hunchback is the engineer of the unexpected events that make one drop something, stumble... or lose all bearings in the world to rush to a tragic and absurd death. “The person,” says Benjamin, “that the little hunchback is watching pays attention neither to himself nor to him. He is standing there in awe in front of a heap of rubble.”¹¹

Symptomatically it is retrospection, and the attempt to make sense of our lives, to discern a life’s potential for exemplariness and collective meaningfulness, which entail the parallel between legend and personal life. The two narratives merge to inscribe a kind of causality, however irrational and superstitious, that ironically justifies the irrational developments one faces in the present. Thanks to the acknowledgement of the hunchback’s so far ignored presence and activities, the present might be revised into a (para)logical moment. Arendt relates this mental process to Benjamin’s Marxian, as well as Goethian, interest in what she calls “the superstructure,”¹²: a network of correspondences between apparently unrelated objects, events, individuals, which, once explicit, reveals the hidden mechanisms of the world and gives reason to the unreasonable. The textualization of the fragmentary elements of acausal existence lends it causality through re-narrativization. In Bernstein’s project, the music reintroduces the aleatoric dimension; in Heller’s project, the music underlines the sadness of such artificial linearity.

Thus the operas remind us of the collective fate underpinning Benjamin’s personal interest in the very small things in the world, and his plan to seek and evidence the affinities

between discrepant artifacts: they proceed from a quest, a deadly quest one is tempted to say, for an archetypal phenomenon in which signification (*Bedeutung*) and things would coincide. So the respective music but librettos as well are strategically far apart, the one relentlessly atonal, the other equally relentlessly lyrical. The two together nonetheless invite comparison insofar as they enact possible readings into Benjamin, and evidence his work's usefulness and necessity. It is the Benjaminian (rather than Benjamin) that lives again for us only when we contemplate the two together. In both poets' operas it is the renunciation of, and even the rebellion against such belief in the superstructure that motivates the collecting and collaging of statements and citations, that in fact so resembles the original Benjaminian archive project. The diffidence to preconceived structures that cannot but yield preconceived perceptions and thoughts is thus to be found in the discrepant partition of Bernstein's text, as well as in the unsettling double structure of Heller's libretto which unfolds along two parallel, sometimes intersecting, synchronic columns.

As underlined by Hannah Arendt in her biographical essay on Benjamin, some lives follow a trajectory which connects moments according to a teleology that eludes the individual living through them, so that decisions are made unawares and at odds with logic, choices are taken that instead of countering disaster put one on its most direct path, and one's existence appears to one "as a pile of rubble," from which making sense is, to say the least, a challenge. Is it possible that awareness of the millennial turn awakened in all of us a new or renewed sense of the rubble of the twentieth-century, for all its momentous triumphs, as well as its utter depravity and tragedy? If the tragedy is beyond words, Benjamin might allow us to confront the paradox of

persistent expression—something Adorno’s post-Holocaust declarations about poetry excluded emphatically. In both Heller and Bernstein’s work, there is a shared sensibility after all, a common unsettledness, and an obstinacy of communication, calling attention to the defects inherent in our human condition. In a similar fashion to the Proust described by Benjamin, and in a similar fashion to the Benjamin described by Arendt, we are “utterly unable to change the life conditions which destroy [us].” [We will] die from “not knowing how to light a fire, or how to open a window.”¹³ The insistence on the vital nature of these simple gestures turns them into allegorical representations of our general, collective difficulty of dealing with events, texts and ideologies, sending us back to the contradictions and impossibilities that make us human.

¹ The work remains unpublished to this day, but has been performed, and excerpts can be watched on YouTube, such as the chorus in Act 5

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hfu2lyl4fkM> last accessed Sept. 29, 2014).

² Charles Bernstein & Brian Ferneyhough. *Shadowtime*. London, England NMC Recordings, 2006.

³ Walter Pater. *The Renaissance* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1986) 152.

⁴ Pater, 153.

⁵ Ezra Pound. *ABC of Reading* (London, England :Faber, 1934, 1991) 27.

⁶ Michael Heller. *Constellations of Waking*, Unpublished MS., 2013, 33.

⁷ Charles Bernstein, *Shadowtime*, Los Angeles, Green Integer, 2005, 78.

⁸ Hannah Arendt. *Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940* (Paris, France : Alia, 2011).

⁹ See “Franz Kafka” in Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres II* (Paris, France : Denoël, 1971) 445.

¹⁰ See *Une enfance berlinoise dans les années 1900*.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres*, I, 650-652.

¹² Arendt, 28.

¹³ Arendt, 18.