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Forging Creation:
Avant-Garde Collaborations Between the World Wars

by

Lauren Kozol

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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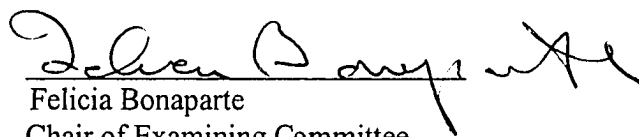
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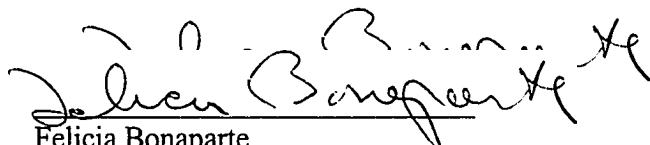
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Abstract

FORGING CREATION:
AVANT-GARDE COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

by

Lauren Kozol

Adviser: Professor Felicia Bonaparte

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of unprecedented individuality in the arts, but among composers, poets, and painters the drive to originality was accompanied by an equally powerful and opposite impulse to collaborate. In the past, the goal of collaborators was to create a seamless merger among the arts, one that concealed the separate genesis of the component parts. Between the wars, however, even when the artists's visions converged, they carefully constructed an aesthetics, not of unity but of incongruity. In this study, I examine collaborations created between the world wars; these works grow out of, react against, and further innovative ideas already established by the Ballet Russes. While the Ballet Russes brought the arts together around the hub of dance, my primary collaborators used language as a central unifying medium. Following the change of focus from movement to words, I begin with a post-war ballet, Darius Milhaud, Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Leger's *La Création du Monde*, and then turn to the literary-musical works, so clearly influenced by the dance spectacles of the time. The principal collaborative pairs I examine include Edith Sitwell and William Walton, Colette and Maurice Ravel, Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, and W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten. Although the relationship between text and score is primary in this study, I also discuss the work of set

designers (Fernand Leger and Florine Stettheimer) and choreographers (Jean Borlin, George Balanchine, and Fredrick Ashton), who play significant roles in the conception and creation of these collaborations.

In each of the pieces, composer and poet reinvent the relationship between words and music. After World War I, these innovators believed they were at the beginning of a new era and at the forefront of a new genre; and thus, they chose to rewrite beginnings. I have structured this study around the reinvention of three moments of origin: the creation of the world, the self, and the nation. In their works, the collaborators continually look to urban America for inspiration; not only do they incorporate the sounds of jazz and blues, but they mimic the brash disjunctions of a city like New York with their multivalent approach. In the final works, America becomes a metaphor for the process of creating afresh and for that tricky balance of juxtaposition and synthesis, so fundamental to avant-garde, multi-media collaboration.

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In one form or another, collaboration is always part of the process of creative production. Without the engaging conversation and provocative ideas of Pia Mukherji, Marianne Giordani, Phillip Lasser, Edmund Epstein, and Temuri Akhobadze, this dissertation would have taken a very different form. Many other dear friends and family also lent crucial intellectual and emotional support throughout, including Benita Mehta, Tony Sportiello, Jean Gallagher, Rick Stein, Robin Axelrad; Smita, Shom, Aparna and Alok Bhattacharya; Kenny, Eric, Lisa, Jake and Eva Kozol; and my two favorite felines, Musty and Grushenka.

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In Loving Memory of My Father

Abbreviations:

- ABABT* – *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas in Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*
ABT – *Auden and Britten in the Thirties* by Donald Mitchell
AtLG -- *Alice through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll
BC – *Blaise Cendrars* by Monique Cheddor
CC – *Cannibal Culture* by Deborah Root
CP – *Collected Poetry of William Butler Yeats*
CPPE – *Complete Poetry and Plays of T. S. Eliot*
CPES – *Collected Poetry of Edith Sitwell*
DH – *Dyer's Hand* by W. H. Auden
DW – *Dramatic Works of W. H. Auden* ed. Edward Mendelson
E – Libretto to *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* by Colette in *Ravel: L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges, Ma Mère l'Oye* by Roger Nichols, English trans. Felix Aprahamian
ES – *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* piano-vocal score
F – *The Frogs* by Aristophanes
FS – Libretto to *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Gertrude Stein
LE – *The Literary Essays Of Ezra Pound* by Ezra Pound
MUA – *Mother of Us All* score by Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein
MwW – *Music with Words* by Virgil Thomson
NwM -- *Notes without Music* by Darius Milhaud
NYT – *New York Times*
OD -- *Opera as Drama* – Joseph Kerman
OEMPB -- Mitchell, Donald. "The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of *Paul Bunyan*, Auden's and Britten's American opera" in W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*.
PaL – *Pyramids at the Louvre* by Glen Watkins
PB – *Paul Bunyan* libretto by W. H. Auden *PBM* – Playbill for Metropolitan Opera 2002 production of *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*
PBS – *Paul Bunyan* Score by Benjamin Britten
RR – *Ravel Remembered* by Roger Nichols
SLVT – *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson* by Virgil Thomson
SS – *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord
SW – *Selected Writing of Gertrude Stein*
TCO – *Taken Care Of* by Edith Sitwell
VT – *Virgil Thomson* by Virgil Thomson
WE – *Walton Edition of Façade* by Edith Sitwell and William Walton

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Introduction

For the quintessential artist of modern city life, Fernand Leger, the origin of the modern spectacle begins in the street where “Life passes at such a speed that everything becomes mobile. Its rhythm is so dynamic that the ‘slice of life’ seen from a café terrace is a spectacle. The most varied elements collide and clash.”¹ Between the First and Second World Wars, on the stage as in the city, image, sound, speech, and movement collided and clashed as never before. Modernism was a time of unprecedented individuality in the arts, but among composers, poets and painters the drive to originality was accompanied by an equally powerful and opposite impulse to collaborate. In their multi-media collaborations, avant-garde artists often fulfilled these two urges simultaneously. In the past, the goal of collaborators was to create a seamless merger among the arts, one that concealed the separate genesis of the component parts. Between the wars, artists constructed instead an aesthetics not of unity, but of incongruity. Even when their respective approaches converged, these collaborators created the illusion of friction among the component parts. In this study, my primary focus is on the relationship between words and music, although sets and choreography were often of equal importance on the twentieth century stage. I will examine works with music by Darius Milhaud, William Walton, Maurice Ravel, Virgil Thomson, and Benjamin Britten; text and scenarios by Blaise Cendrars, Edith Sitwell, Colette, Gertrude Stein, and W.H. Auden; and visuals by Fernand Leger, Frank Dobson, John Piper and Florine Stettheimer. In each of the collaborations,

¹ Fernand Leger, “The Invented Stage,” in *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henning Rischbieter (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1968) p. 97.

significant creators from different disciplines worked together to form a new artistic process and product as they negotiated between highly original, individual approaches and a group aesthetic.

According to Jean Cocteau, the artist who has been said to have “invented the twenties”:

[We] see developing in France, little by little, a theatrical genre which is not properly speaking ballet, which has no place in the opera, nor at the Opera-Comique, nor in any of the fashionable theatres. It is there, in this margin, that the future is being sketched....This new genre, more consonant with the modern spirit remains unexplored land, rich with possibility.

Revolution which flings doors wide open to explorers! The new generation will continue its experiments in which the fantastic, the dance, acrobatics, mime, drama, satire, music and the spoken word combine to produce a new form; they will present, with very small means, plays which the official artists will take for studio farces, and which nonetheless are the plastic expression and embodiment of poetry itself.²

These works were far more than entertainment; they caused scandals that shook the art worlds – that of music, painting, theater and literature. The post-World War I aesthetic grew out of, reacted against, and furthered innovative ideas already established by the Ballet Russes which flourished in Paris under the direction of Serge Diaghilev from 1909 - 1929. The Ballet Russes began an extraordinary new marriage between dance and the

² Cited in W. Anthony Sheppard, *Revealing Masks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) p. 2.

other arts. According to rehearsal director, Serge Grigoriev, “In the twenty years of its existence, Diaghilev’s ballets Russes accomplished more in the development of the art form than any single institution in history.”³ But, in fact, the influence of the Ballet Russes reached far beyond the domain of dance. According to Alexandre Benois, the set designer and founding member, part of the reason this company used dance as its primary form of expression was simply that Russian was not understood outside of Russia, while the language of movement was universal (Benois, 239). The Ballet Russes would eventually reconsider the medium of language as a central component of its aesthetic. Diaghilev, who had deliberately rejected the overblown, nineteenth century operatic tradition, included words in many of his ballets and eventually a new form of opera in his repertoire; *L’Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, discussed in Chapter III, was originally danced by Balanchine and the Ballet Russes in Monte Carlo.

This study examines the ways in which the innovations that began with the Ballet Russes came to inform the literary-musical spectacles of the twenties and beyond. In my first chapter, I discuss *La Création du Monde*, a dance piece that captures ethos of creative collaboration in the twenties. From there I move to works with a central verbal component. Most of these collaborations, however, pay homage, in one form or another, to dance. In *Façade*, Edith Sitwell creates a hornpipe, a tarantella, a tango and waltzes out of word rhythms, and later, English choreographer Frederick Ashton turned the entire work into a ballet. Similarly, *Four Saints in Three Acts* nods at *Parade* (1917), the infamous Ballet Russes production, created by Cocteau, Picasso, and Satie. Colette and

³ S. L. Grigoriev, *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909-1929* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1953) p. 26.

Ravel's *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* is itself as much a ballet as an opera, with each aria both sung and danced.

Throughout this study, I tell two stories of collaboration, one among the artists preparing their spectacles and the other among music, text and image. These narratives follow different trajectories; the first begins with a significant home or salon in a major city (Paris, London or New York), where the creators initially came together. These include Satie's Montparnasse Salon in Paris; 2 Carlyle Square, the home of Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell and the English center of avant-garde culture; Madame Marceaux's famous Friday night Salon; 27 Rue de Fleurus, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's famous Paris apartment; and 7 Middragh Street, in Brooklyn, where W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears and many other artists and performers lived. A quieter house in Amityville, Long Island also played a significant role in the creation of Britten and Auden's opera *Paul Bunyan*. Most of the artistic partnerships included camaraderie, friendship, and a certain depth of understanding, as well as articulated and unspoken friction among the collaborators.

Collaboration has always been part of the process of artistic making. It is so prevalent and natural that to distinguish between co-authorship and artistic influence is at times nearly impossible. Throughout time, there have always been midwives and real wives helping artists to engender their creations. In literature, we have only to think of Beaumont and Fletcher; Milton and his daughters; Eliot and Pound. Even when a work is conceived in solitude, the voices of other writers, past and present, co-mingle in the artist's head, guide and, for better or worse, assert their will at every turn. What the artist does as one man is then, in a sense, always already a collaborative effort. But in single

author works, one consciousness does the final task of sifting and sorting, cutting and pasting. In the early twentieth century, that singleness, with its accompanying responsibilities, was relinquished and a new set of responsibilities emerged -- to other people, to other media, and to alien ideas, rather than exclusively to one's own inner callings. On the stage, writers, composers, choreographers, and set-designers have worked together at least since the Renaissance. In opera, composers and librettists may very well have reached their zenith before the twentieth century with Mozart and Da Ponte, Verdi and Boito, Gilbert and Sullivan. Artists of the early twentieth century continued and expanded this tradition even as they broke from it. As a new genreless genre emerged, a questioning spirit came to the fore -- innovative, one might even say, kooky; playful and nonsensical, forever testing the limits of artistic possibility.

In 1913, after the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, Jacques Rivière attempted to explain the working methods of choreographer, composer and set designer:

Who is the author of *The Rite*? Nijinsky, Stravinsky Roerich?

This preliminary question that we cannot elude, however, does not make sense to us Westerners. For us everything is individual, a strong and characteristic work always carries the work of one mind. This is not the case for Russians. If it seems impossible for them to communicate with us, while they are among themselves, they have an extraordinary ability to feel and think the same thing at once. (Cited in Pasler, 54)

Rivière's intention here is to distinguish between Eastern (Russian) and Western working methods and to explain the "primitive" *Rite of Spring* to his "highly civilized" Parisian audience. His approach is familiar, and in the words of Rudyard Kipling might be

described as: "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." Only Rivière goes even further; he speaks of the Russians as if they were another species, one with whom the French may not be able to communicate, but an animal, nonetheless, with its own forms of primal, even pre-linguistic discourse, with the capacity "to feel and think the same thing at once." Rivière renders not only the creators of *The Rite*, but also their collaborative method at once exotic and primitive. He pits this technique against Western artistic individualism. But, the very moment he chose to make this claim, history picked out to erase it. And this erasure in the first half of the twentieth century may, in fact, owe something to the primitivist movement.

If we return to the dichotomy that Jacques Rivière adheres to in his review (in which the primitive east is equated with collaborative method, while the civilized West is associated with individualism) we find that, however problematic and ethnocentric this theory may be, it was adopted by Western artists as well as their critics. Modern, European innovators were celebrating even as they were misreading their Russian, Far-Eastern and African counterparts. They adopted their materials – Balinese gamelan or African mask—and they employed their approach, if indeed this was collaboration. In her article "Language Without words: The Symbiosis of Dance and the Visual Arts" (2002), Greta Berman states: "It may be only in the West that distinctions separate the arts—and even here, these are fast disappearing. In some cultures, separate words for subdivisions of the arts do not exist" (*JJ* 18).

Above all else, jazz informed musicians and poets working together. Jazz was, of course, neither primitive nor African, but patrons, audiences and even musicians relished the jungle they had created on Lenox Avenue. The very notion of jazz, fundamentally

improvisatory and collaborative, took on a mythic quality. Arising out of the struggles of oppressed people, it did not signify oppression. On the contrary, it connoted freedom - sensual, sexual, impromptu jaunts inspired by people of multiple races. But, above all else, jazz stood for subversion. It bridged not only racial but generational and class gaps; it encouraged the dissolution of boundaries, and it brought together elements of avant-garde and commercial culture. As Michael Zwerin states:

Red Mitchell, the bassist, says that there are two sides to our nature: we are both individuals and group animals. The world is divided into two major "isms." One says, "me-first," the other, "group first." We are told we must choose. But why? Why deny one side of our nature? Why can't we be both individual and group animals at the same time? . . . A jazz band is a perfect model to illustrate the two sides. You hear three notes from Zoot Sims and you know it's Zoot. At the same time, he's kicking the rhythm section. It equals more than the sum of four people. Jazz unites people, it can bring the world together.⁴

In one form or another, each of the works in this study pays homage to jazz, the collaborative art par excellence.

Before the twentieth century, artistic collaboration was entirely a male domain, but by the twenties, that was no longer the case. Three out of five of the works I examine here include at least one major female collaborator. Although Stein and Sitwell were known among literary circles, their texts were seldom read. By supplementing the avant-garde poetry with a more traditional sound by their male collaborators, these works

⁴ Michael Zwerin, *La Tristesse de Saint Louis: Jazz Under the Nazis* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1985) p. 53.

gained an audience as well as the richness of the music, but they also lost some of their radical edge. Aside from Florine Stettheimer, who designed the sets and costumes for *Four Saints*, the women I discuss function as librettists. Musical composition continued to be a male dominated occupation, although there were female composers of repute between the wars. In England, Ethyl Smyth wrote the libretto and music to six operas. And, in France, Germaine Taillefaire was named as part of *Les Six*, the famous Montparnasse composers (which included Darius Milhaud). Although her work is not discussed here, Taillefaire was also a significant collaborator. Along with *Les Six* (all but Louis Durey), Taillefaire wrote portions of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower*), a quasi-surrealistic ballet with Cocteau as scenario writer, choreographer, director, and Marc Chagall as set designer. She also composed and helped choreograph (along with Jean Borlin) the ballet *Le Marchand d'Oiseaux* (*The Bird Seller*), with scenario writer and costume designer Helene Perdiat and lead dancer Karina Ari. This work was known at its time as a feminist ballet, as all the major collaborators were women. Among many other projects, Taillefaire worked with Paul Valery on their *Cantate du Narcisse* (1936) and Eugene Ionesco's on their opera, *Le Maître*.

In the background of these "total theater" works is Richard Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For avant-garde collaborators, although his ideas were intriguing, his operas had failed to create an equality among the component parts. Many believed Wagner's music had stolen the glory at the expense of the other arts. In opposition to the colossal size of works like *The Ring Cycle*, these twentieth century artists strove to create less self-important pieces; their compositions would be compact, tailored to a fast-paced, modern lifestyle. Wagner's music-dramas also served to reinforce the cult of the solitary

artistic genius that had captivated the nineteenth century, a concept the new artists attempted to dismantle. Wagner was librettist, composer and mastermind behind the “temple” at Bayreuth, built to house his works. The improvised, unpretentious collaborations among jazz musicians offered the perfect antidote to Wagner’s over-control; on the avant-garde stage, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and jazz joined forces to create something entirely unexpected. Unlike their counterparts on the bandstand, these artists wrote everything down, and yet, at times, the composers seem to improvise on the page. When the pieces of the collaboration are put together, they also generate impromptu juxtapositions among the arts.

The second narrative examined in this study (of the collaboration among music, text and image) is reinvented with each new multi-media production. Cocteau’s intention was, as he says, to leave “the door wide open,” rather than to pin down this free-floating new form; nonetheless, certain artistic components remain consistent throughout, including the focus on an ensemble rather than star performers; an eclectic musical palate, including both parody and pastiche; a disintegration of the high/ low divide in the arts; a non-linear structure; an incorporation of American jazz and blues as well as Eastern sounds and techniques; a freewheeling, improvisatory feel; and an unpretentious size and approach.

Throughout the history of opera, the question of words and music has been asked in each successive era. In the classical era, in letter to the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, the operatic reformer Christophe Willibald Gluck wrote: “I sought to restrict music to its true function, namely to serve poetry by means of expression—and the situations which make up the plot—without interrupting the action or diminishing its

interest by useless or superfluous ornament.”⁵ Mozart, on the other hand, asserted that “in opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music.”⁶ When one listens to the works of Gluck or Mozart, the striking poetry of the score stands out. Even with a story as strong as the *Marriage of Figaro*, it is not Da Ponte’s words or Beaumarchais’ actions, but Mozart’s dramatization of character and plot that leaves the impression. As Wayne Koestenbaum states: “In the war between words and music, music always wins.”⁷ From the inception of opera until the World War I, Koestenbaum is correct, but within the avant-garde works examined here, there is a far greater equality between poetry and score, if not, a shift away from music in favor words.

Leger referred to the avant-garde collaborations as “spectacles” within the “theater of invention;” for him, this loosely included presentations that emphasized color, lights, sets, moving objects and other staging effects, as well as music, dance or lyrics. In the twenties, Europe was still healing from its most elaborate spectacle to date -- World War I. The works of the twenties became both an escape and a confrontation with the devastation of that theatrical nightmare. Both Jean Cocteau and Arthur Honegger separately describe the post-war period as “euphoric,” a time when young artists along with so many others believed they had won everlasting peace. But, the elation was also kept in check by the continued difficulties of life in the aftermath of war, and this, in turn, reinforced the need for spectacle. In 1924, Leger said, “No period has been so avid for

⁵ Cited in Spiegelman, Willard. “The Rake, the Don, the Floods: with W. H. Auden as Librettist,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 10(2), 1982: 171-187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷ Wayne Koestenbaum, “Opera Libretti of Chester Kallman and W. H. Auden,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 19 (2), 1994: 37.

spectacle as ours. The crowds who flock to the cinema or the theater are a constant phenomenon. . . . This avidity, this need for distraction at any price, must spring from a need to react against the harshness and pressure of modern life.”⁸ Although Leger speaks here about the audience’s “need for distraction,” he does not view these works as frivolous entertainment, but as essential to human survival. He continues: “To speak about the theatrical spectacle is to envisage the world in all its everyday visual manifestations. This has become one of the basic needs of existence. *It dominates the whole of current life.*”⁹

What are spectacles? Semantically, the answer is clear; they are both productions to be viewed and eyeglasses through which to view. The modernist collaborative spectacles became lenses through which to perceive afresh a highly charged political and aesthetic time framed, wire framed, by the rise and fall of fascism. Given the term “spectacle,” it is difficult, from our vantage point, not to think of Guy Debord’s seminal book *Society of the Spectacle* that emerged out of France’s struggles in 1968. In this work, Debord argues that we live in a society dominated and controlled by spectacle. This, he claims, began in the 1920s, probably to a large extent with the growth of the movie industry. Debord uses the word “spectacle” to refer most directly to mass media, that falsely constructed world that turns news into entertainment, that teaches us how to dress and what to value, so we forget our inner selves and unconsciously replace real life with an ersatz reality created by those in charge of the networks. As he says:

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a stream and

⁸ Fernand Leger, “The Invented Stage,” in *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henning Rischbieter (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1968) p. 97.

⁹ Ibid.

the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency towards the specialization of images of the world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.

(SS, paragraph #2)

Here Debord reverses the claims made by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). For Benjamin, the “aura” of the artwork, derived in large part from its authenticity and singularity, withered in a medium like film. The “aura” tied art to its original, ritual function. Through mechanical reproduction, the artwork was liberated from its aura, and thus, free to be politically progressive. Writing at a later vantage point, Debord points out that film and other forms of media turned out not to engage the viewer with reality, but rather to render the audience passive and to falsify existence.

Clearly, our society continues to be mediated by spectacles, and these, as Guy Debord argues, have become the “locus of illusion and false consciousness.” The media-based world did begin around the same time as the creative spectacles which Leger describes. And many of the collaborations of the time adapted the possibilities of film to the stage. But, the post-modern spectacles of television and commercial movies are far from the avant-garde, counter-culture presentations of this earlier time in approach, intent, effect and funding. For better or for worse, these works not only retain but heighten the power of the aura. The theater

spectacle, like film and television, is fundamentally a neutral tool to be used either to help or to hinder critical thought. In the avant-garde works between the wars, the very purpose of illusion was to pierce the armor of false-consciousness and get at truth. The modernists defined their experiments in direct opposition to nineteenth century ballet, opera and theater, which they regarded as far too frivolous and passive. The new works, by contrast, would have direct impact; in performance, they would demand the active participation of the viewer in the construction of meaning out of the juxtaposition of the parts.

The term “spectacle” privileges sight over the other senses. As a visual artist, Leger may have intended this on some level, even as he strived for an equal balance of the arts in his own productions. The term “music theater” is often used as an alternative to discuss these avant-garde presentations. Although the name was originally used to discuss a genre of musical-political works of the sixties and seventies, it is also useful to describe the boundary crossing works of this earlier time. In the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Andrew Clements describes music theater as “a kind of opera or opera production in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasized over purely musical factors.” Eric Salzman in the *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, defines it as follows: “A loosely applied term for theater works or events that involve some merging of arts, forms, techniques, means and electronic media, all directed at more than one of the senses and generally involving a kind of total surrounding.”

And, Paul Griffiths describes it as “the politicization of opera”¹⁰ (cited in Sheppard 35).

The avant-garde artists were at the beginning of a new genre and a new era; and as a result, they often chose to rewrite beginnings. The desire to return to an earlier time is a common trope in the literature of this period. As Perry Meisel says, “Modernism is, in all its historical manifestations, the recurrent desire to find origins or ground despite the impossibility of ever doing so for sure” (Meisel, 2). In the face of world wars, this impulse was coupled with another urge -- to find a realm beyond or apart from “the reach of culture.” This backward glance is often strangely coupled with Ezra Pound’s call to writers to “Make it new.” And so, we are left with Perry Meisel’s paradoxical question: “Can one be more advanced by being more primitive?” (Meisel, 4).

The allusive style of Eliot and the modern mythic method of Joyce clearly emerge out of these contradictory longings. Both writers steep their art in the legends of the tradition, and both work the parallels between the ancient myth and contemporary narrative. Opera has always claimed mythology as a part of its domain and source, from *Orfeo* to *The Ring Cycle* to *Ariadne of Naxos*. For the avant-garde collaborators, the old legends became composite, deliberately incorrect and anachronistic. As the cubist artist interrogated an object, destroyed and then reconstructed it through his own imagination, so these artists performed a similar process in their dramas. In this post-war period of reconstruction, the synthetic moment of origin, the multivalent glance at a past that never was, became a means to understand the present and peer at the future. Throughout time,

¹⁰ Griffith’s definition certainly applies to the work of Britten and Auden, and that of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht whose works emerge out of this same era and aesthetic. If politics in art has as much to do with approach as with subject matter, then this definition also applies to the other presented here. Gertrude Stein, for example, performs her revolution at the level of syntax and grammar, and by extension, encourages the reader to question society’s rules and conventions of society that we so often follow without reflection.

myths have always been reconstructed by successive narrators. But here, the retellings are self-consciously falsified. I have structured this study around three non-mimetic moments of origin: the creation of the world (*La Création du Monde*), the self (*Façade* and *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*), and the nation (*Four Saints in Three Acts*, *Mother of Us All*, and *Paul Bunyan*). In all of these works, the artists look to urban America for inspiration; not only do they incorporate the sounds of jazz and blues, but they mimic the brash disjunctions of a city like New York with their own multivalent approach. In the final works, America becomes a metaphor for the process of creating afresh, and for that tricky balance of juxtaposition and synthesis, so fundamental to avant-garde, multi-media collaboration.

When discussing one of his modern appropriations of *Oedipus Rex* (*La Machine Infernale*), Jean Cocteau says:

The pharaohs incorporated into the foundations of their temples pieces from earlier temples only the wrong way around. They sowed these seeds so that the temples might grow like plants. When a young Egyptologist explained this mysterious process of recycling to me, I realized, albeit somewhat belatedly, what I had done in *La Machine Infernale*. Essentially I had followed the rhythm of the Egyptian temple builders without knowing it. The reinterpretation of myths is essential if they are to survive. They are handed down from one writer, one generation to another like some stories that are transmitted orally. In the process, they are constantly embellished or they lose their meaning....Myth is like a key that opens even the most unsympathetic soul to writing. I have always preferred myth to history

because history consists of truths which in the end turn into lies, while myths consist of lies which finally turn into truths.¹¹

Cocteau presents himself here as part of a lineage of narrators, and by analogy, builders of temples. In a sense, Cocteau and other artists of his time simply rediscovered the transformative power of myths and the human need to revitalize them. But, Cocteau writes to a new and an ancient rhythm at once. Unlike the Egyptian practice, his recycling no longer contains a religious structure to buoy up the constructors' faith. While the Egyptian builders began with truth, Cocteau begins with lies. As he freshens up old stories, so Cocteau freshens up the very process of freshening up (although he does not make that claim in this citation). To the earlier versions of the myth, Cocteau added more than the customary narrative embellishments. He took old characters and placed them in the modern world; he reworked their appearance using advanced technological procedures: in his own words, he gave Antigone "a face lift." It is this form of myth, radically reworked and recontextualized, that we will see in the synthesized, deliberately inauthentic works (presided over by the spirit of Cocteau).

The collaborative method used between the wars resulted in an intensification of the already radical aesthetic practices of Modernism. Brian May points out that "Critics as different as Northrop Fry and Alan Wilde agree; both the dominant or 'characteristic form of modernism' as well as its 'mode of consciousness' remains famously revisable, redescrivable, complex and indeterminate" (May, 65). And according to Paul DeMan, modernism foregrounds the "absence at the heart of all experience, . . . the fundamental distance at the

¹¹ *Jean Cocteau: Autobiography of an Unknown*, prod. Antegor (Paris: L'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel J. C. Productions, Ministry of Culture, 1983) videocassette.

heart of all human experience” (cited in May, 64). For many, the fragmentation of the twentieth century had become the sign of a world in crisis, cut off from its roots and its true nature. This century traditionally marks the end of wholeness, wholesomeness, and integrity. For some, like T. S. Eliot, the absence of a clear center led to despair, but for others, it was cause for exultation. Like human experience, these collaborative works have no center. Even in Eliot’s fractured poetry or a cubist painting, the fragments are controlled by a single author who strategically places them on the canvas or the page. But, in these music theater presentations, no single consciousness governs the whole. Instead, meaning is created in the collision of multiple visions.

As artists from different disciplines worked together, they began to appropriate the aesthetic practices of one another. *Création du Monde*, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and *Paul Bunyan* all use a non-linear approach, borrowed from the visual arts. Rather than traditional narrative, they present landscapes and moving portraits on stage. In *Four Saints*, Gertrude Stein also applies musical techniques to create new methods by which words can unfold through time. While *Paul Bunyan* foregrounds the music of Auden’s words, Britten’s score illustrates with a precision usually found only in the verbal and visual arts. Since Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondence,” synesthesia and the blurring of the boundaries among the arts and the senses had become common practice, particularly among symbolist poets. But, the borrowing of aesthetic technique from one art form to another is itself an entirely innovative component of these avant-garde collaborations.

The proliferation of playful multi-media music theater works was primarily a phenomenon of the 1920s, and yet, the spirit continued into the thirties, forties (and beyond). Although completed in 1928, *Four Saints in Three Acts* did not have its premiere until 1934. One year later, its extended run on Broadway began. Over a decade later, in 1947, in *Mother of Us All*, Thomson and Stein add to the innovations of their first opera even as they adopt more traditional dramatic and musical approaches. Whether or not W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten were directly influenced by the collaborations of the twenties, they employ and transform the earlier aesthetic in *Paul Bunyan*. In the spirit of the collaborations of the twenties, *Paul Bunyan* reimagines the relationship between music and text in opera, and combines a youthful joie de vivre with an undercurrent of sorrow, grief and loneliness.

In this study, I tell only a portion of a story that crosses many artistic and national borders. These collaborations have a prehistory in Russia beginning as early as 1998, with the founding of both the Moscow Arts Theater by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich Dachenko and the famous avant-garde journal *The World of Art*, created by Diaghilev in close collaboration with significant artists - Leon Bakst and Dmitry Filosofov among others. The Moscow Arts Theater attempted experimental, atmospheric stagings of Anton Chekov's work and performed new symbolist dramas by playwrights such as Maurice Maeterlink. The stage designs frequently combined art nouveau with Russian folklore, as the Ballet Russes would later do in its dance spectacles. Diaghilev similarly exposed the latest innovations in the visual arts in his influential journal.

In 1905, the editorial staff went on to unofficially oversee a significant Portrait Exhibition and to informally direct a new theatrical endeavor out of which emerged the Russian Seasons in Paris, and finally the Ballet Russes (Benois 185-6). The works of Picasso, Matisse and other French modernists was exhibited in Russia long before the famous American debut at the New York Armory Show of 1913; this influence is visible in Russian stage design and painting from the first two decades of the twentieth century.

With its incubation in Russia and its birth in France, the avant-garde collaborative spirit spread in the 1920s not only to England and America, but also to Germany. After 1925, Stravinsky came to an annual chamber music festival launched by Paul Hindemith and Heinrich Burkard, under the patronage of the Prince of Furstenberg. At this festival, Milhaud began his friendships with Hindemith and Kurt Weill. Among the many collaborations in Germany that emerged out the French aesthetic, perhaps the most significant partnership was between Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. The epic theater they created together added a scathing political edge to an artistic approach that already demanded that the viewers finish the work on stage through the engagement of their own minds.

The proliferation of collaborations among major composers, poets and painters in the early twentieth century is unique in the history of the arts. Although the intensity of the output dissolves, the inspiration provided by this period does not end with World War II. Stravinsky and Auden's neoclassical opera, *The Rake's Progress* (1954), employs similar approaches and extends their reach. In the score, Stravinsky reconstructs classical forms from a parodic version

of a Baroque rage aria to eighteenth century secco recitative (with harpsichord accompaniment), to a nineteenth century Cavatina and Cabaletta, to twentieth century wrong note harmonies. Although Stravinsky's declamation is flawless throughout, Auden's words still strangely resist the music. Even with a far more subdued poetry than that used in *Paul Bunyan*, Auden was not willing to entirely subordinate his own gift to that of the composer's. In the 1960s, the beat generation would again re-imagine the relationship between music and words, with David Amram and Jack Kerouac's jazz poetry backed by musical improvisation.

From the 1970s on, the operas of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson also continued to use and reshape the aesthetic traits that first emerged in the 1920s: the non-linear approach, the appropriation of Eastern sounds and techniques, an innovative combination of words and music (particularly in *Einstein on the Beach*), and a simplified harmonic language. Glass pays direct homage to the earlier avant-garde spirit in a trilogy of operas based on original films and theatre works by Jean Cocteau, *Orphée*, *Les Enfants Terribles* and *La Belle et La Bête*. Glass's minimalist music can be seen as the next phase of the radically simplified, innovative yet tonal music of Erik Satie and Virgil Thomson. The three portrait operas of Glass, Robert Wilson and others, *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhnaten*, as Glass states, were deliberately written without narrative or explicit meaning so that the audience would complete the works. As Glass saw it, the viewers would achieve this by allowing their prior knowledge of Einstein, Gandhi, and Akhnaten, (or of science, politics and religion) to converge with their

experience of these symbolic figures as they appear in the opera. The options for multi-media presentation had increased considerably, and so Glass incorporates film, video, synthesizers, digital pianos and high tech lighting techniques as well as dance, stylized movement and an elaborate visual display on stage.

In ballet, Merce Cunningham and his collaborators, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and John Cage explored more extreme modes through which to create poetic friction among the arts. In their collaborations, chance governs the connection between music, movement and design. Martha Graham also continued the exploration of innovative juxtapositions in her dance pieces with sculptor Isamu Noguchi. In 1998, Joan Tower and Valentina Oumansky evoke the creative spirit of the Ballet Russes and Stravinsky's first collaboration with Alexander Benois in their ballet-video *Petroushkates*. This partly danced, partly skated work retells the story of *Petroushka*, the doll with a human heart, while including a periodically spliced in montage of skating girls. Tower's music glides along with a vigor and lyrical grace, and the winds and strings occasionally create parallel lines as if they were skating in pairs. Innovative arts collaborations are still used to express the struggles of our time. In February of 2002, at Avery Fischer Hall, the Julliard Dance Ensemble presented *Base Line* with choreography by Robert Battle, music by Victor Goines and sets and lighting by Clifton Taylor. The set for this work was a large metal sculpture used to intimidate and trap the dancers, as if they were caught in a collapsing building—a clear allusion to the horror of Sept. 11, 2001.

Through increased study and travel, and particularly through artistic partnerships among people of multiple races, the appropriation of African American and Eastern

techniques transformed into a collaborative exchange of cultural experience. To complete Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* of 1947, the young Langston Hughes was brought onto the project. At the time, he was treated as "hired help," employed to write specific song lyrics, paid far less than the "principal collaborators," and given no say in the shape of the larger project. And yet, this was an important step forwards. After careful study of the rajas in India, Philip Glass developed his own hypnotic approach to music. And, together with Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang, he created *The Voyage* (1992), an allegory that uses Christopher Columbus to tell the story of human exploration and the inevitable clashes between cultures when people first encounter "otherness." In *I was looking for the Ceiling and Then I saw the Sky* (1995), acclaimed Afro-American poet June Jordan teamed up with composer John Adams and director Peter Sellars to tell, in a self-proclaimed Brechtian fashion, the multi-media, multi-cultural story of racism, immigration, litigation and love on the streets of Los Angeles.

In the early twentieth century more than ever before, imaginative, multimedia collaborations were being forged. These art works were created by multiple artists soldering together disparate elements with great force. But, the works were also "forged" in another sense; through play, creativity and the governing consciousness of more than one artist, it is as if these collaborators have employed with inauthentic signatures. For the individual artist, there are both gains and losses in the process of collaboration. On the one hand, the solitary author can supplement her talents and perceptions with those of others; on the other, the integrity to an individual conception vanishes in the process. Rather than creating the illusion of unity as collaborators of the past strived to do, avant-garde artists between the wars found poetry and freedom in the juxtaposition of

contrasting visions in a single production. A fractured, modernist sensibility was expressed within each of the component parts as well as in the disjunctions among music, text and image. At their best, these collaborations allow the viewers, as Loren Eiseley says: “To see from an inverted angle... to be, by chance or intention, upon the border of two worlds. And sometimes, these two borders may shift or interpenetrate and one sees the miraculous” (Eiseley 29).

I
Blaise Cendrars, Darius Milhaud and Fernand Leger's
La Création du Monde:
Myth of the Modern Spectacle

In 1913, Stravinsky, Roerich and Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* shocked an entire generation into new vision. One decade later, in the same Theatre des Champs-Élysées, Fernand Leger teamed up with scenario writer Blaise Cendrars, composer Darius Milhaud, and choreographer Jean Borlin to create a new scandal for the times – *La Création du Monde*. Both ballets were forays into primitivism; *The Rite* turned to Bronze Age Russia, while *Création* looked to African and African-American sources for inspiration. Although it did not create a comparable scandal to its predecessor, *Création* successfully captured the ethos its own period, a time very different from that of Stravinsky's masterpiece. Leger, Cendrars and Milhaud's ballet is as much about turmoil in the modern city as chaos at the beginning of time. Throughout, the artists question what it means to be at once primitive and modern, French and culturally expansive, true to source material and highly imaginative. In *Création*, the dance features the collectivity of the ballet troupe, rather than the star performer. And yet, writer, composer and set designer also emphasize individuality, as they present their own original visions concurrently on the same stage. While the scenario dramatizes a composite African legend portraying the origin of the world, the eclectic pieces of the ballet also represent the genesis of the artwork itself. This tale, borrowed from another time and space, becomes both a ritual to rejuvenate the Parisian audience and a modern myth depicting the very process of avant-garde, multimedia collaboration.

While *The Rite* was danced by the Ballet Russes, *Création* was performed by the Ballet Suédois, the other foreign company of repute in Paris. Each troupe had its own reputation – the Russian ballet was considered “exotic” and frenzied, while the Swedish maintained a rationality akin to the French. *The Rite of Spring* is, of course, about fertility and mating rituals. And yet, we are reminded with each asymmetrical heartbeat in such sections as “The Dance of the Adolescents” that, “April is the cruelest month.” The work ends with the sacrifice of the virgin. Throughout, one can sense the death culture of a Europe on the verge of World War I in the scenario and the accompanying rhythms. Theodore Adorno perceives this connection, even if he unfairly twists it into an indictment of the composer. In *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, he asserts: “Not only does the work [*The Rite*] in the deed actually echo the noise of the up-coming war, but it further reveals its undisguised joy in the wild splendor of it all” (Adorno 76). There is clearly a dangerous frenzy in the music, one that would evoke a world of nervous, even violent energy, but to see this as a statement of Stravinsky’s personal euphoria at the thought of war is going too far. We should also bear in mind that the opening night “scandale” was caused as much or more by the erotic, clipped movements of Nijinsky as by the accompanying music.

La Création du Monde, on the other hand, is a post-war work, a myth of reconstruction forged out of a reconstructed African creation story. As Cocteau pointed out many years later regarding himself and *Les Six* (the Montparnasse composers that included Milhaud):

You know how it is with young people. Young people think when they’re passionately interested in something that they’ve been invaded like France

was by the Germans. They can only think of driving out the invaders. So, we were bound to revolt like all young people against what we like and we killed off our idols. We were bowled over by *The Rite of Spring*, so we were hostile to *The Rite*.¹

This rich expression of what Harold Bloom refers to as “the anxiety of influence,” perfectly describes the artists at work on *La Création du Monde*. From the outset, the collaborators defined their ballet in direct opposition to the early masterpiece, and in so doing, paid homage to it.

According to Darius Milhaud, *La Création du Monde* was the closest collaboration of his career (Rischbieter 98). He recounts how he, Leger and Cendrars would spend their evenings together at the bals-musette and other popular entertainment spots, absorbing the life on the streets and music hall culture, and preparing their ballet. In 1920, when the critic Henri Collet coined the term *Les Six français*, he was clearly alluding to the Russian Five of the nineteenth century,² and therefore, placing their work within the domain of musical nationalism. Although Les Six shared friendship rather than an artistic creed, their simplicity and clarity did offer a national alternative to the atmospheric style of French impressionism. Even the fascination with jazz, since the arrival of American troupes and their Afro-American bands in 1917, had become a part of “Paris chic.” “Primitivism” in the arts was also, at first, an entirely French phenomenon. In the very act of looking outside their own culture for inspiration,

¹ Jean Cocteau: *Autobiography of an Unknown*, prod. Antegor (Paris: L’Institut National de l’Audiovisuel J. C. Productions, Ministry of Culture, 1983) videocassette.

² Les Six français include composers Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc; the Russian five, Mili Balakirev, Alexander Borodin, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Cendrars, Leger and Milhaud simultaneously reconfirmed the latest forms of aesthetic nationalism.

For the scenario, Cendrars took many myths and rolled them into a single tale. He had already compiled a book of African legends (of questionable authenticity) into his *Anthologie Nègre* (1921). Cendrars did not go to Africa to collect them; instead he wrote down accounts from missionaries and explorers. In his retelling, the stories transform yet again. As Cendrars said in an interview with Andre Parinaud: “Truth is imaginary. You must not copy through a transfer paper nor write a confession. I have always made a point to commit myself in life in order to gather materials for my books. Then you can have some leeway, can’t you?”³ It is not clear that Cendrars was talking directly about his anthology in this citation, as he was also a novelist. But, according to Monique Chefdor, Cendrars found in the African folktales:

The raw instantaneous quality of life, the sense of magic, the intensity of feelings, the crude humor which would pervade some of his future writings.

There is such a confluence between the writer’s own storytelling style and his selection of African tales that it becomes difficult to draw the line between erudition and imagination. (*BC*, 74)

And so, we have a triple falsification – questionable sources, rewritten texts in the *Anthology*, and finally the fusion of multiple myths for the ballet scenario.

The collaboration begins with the chaos before creation. On the stage in darkness are three giant African deities – Nzame, Mebere, and Nkwa, and chaos which appears as a lumpy mass. The Gods murmur magic spells; a tree rises, a leaf falls and becomes an animal. An elephant hangs in mid-air, a tortoise, a crab, and monkeys are lowered from

rigging. As new creatures appear, the light increases. Male or female of each species rise from the center and evolve individually. They join in a circle that gradually moves around the three deities. The circle opens and, as the three deities begin to utter their spells, the lumpy mass seethes again. Finally, a human man and woman rise up and turn towards each other. Together they perform a dance of desire and then of mating, until they fall exhausted. N'Guils, the witches, wizards, sorcerers and fetishists, circle round. Little by little, the circle breaks into smaller groups that depart. The couple is left alone, united in a kiss that carries them away. Here, we experience a spring of fertility and gentle hope, so far from the primal sacrifice of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Stories of creation across cultures tend to resemble one another. And so, this myth has familiar elements dispersed among its "primitive" pieces. Immediately, we recognize its most striking difference from the Judeo-Christian creation stories. There is not one God, but three, a thinly veiled analogy for the three primary artistic collaborators –Leger, Cendrars and Milhaud. Mircea Eliade claims that, "The cosmogony [or creation myth] is the exemplary model for every creative situation: whatever man does is in some way a repetition of the pre-eminent "deed," the archetypal gesture of the creator God, the creation of the world" (Eliade, 56). We immediately feel the double time – its direct reference to the primordial, or sacred and its mirror image in profane time as the artists construct the work together. Implicit in the emphasis placed on the creation myth is the belief that the first manifestation of a thing is somehow significant, valid and authentic in a way that subsequent appearances are not. In the performance of this reworked African legend by three French men and a Swede (choreographer Jean Borlin), and danced by a Swedish company, the creators and performers deliberately highlight the inauthenticity of

¹ Qtd. in Monique Chefkor, *Blaise Cendrars* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1980) p. 15.

their retelling. The story of creation, however, still retains its power, not so much as a return but as a thrusting forward. By creating an alternative space without ever losing sight of the “terrible algebra” of France in the twenties, these artists find a space to build afresh.

Mircea Eliade, the eminent scholar of comparative mythologies speaks of the “close connection between the cosmogonic myth . . . and its remedy and the ritual of magical healing” (Eliade 58) among many groups including Native Americans and Tibetans.⁴ He goes on to discuss shamanic practices and medical ritual chants that begin by invoking the story of creation. It is this same practice that may have been the impetus for *La Création du Monde*. Milhaud, Cendrars and Leger hoped to heal a secular population not by repeating the myth of their own culture, but by drawing on one from another space and people, however dubious its African sources may have been. In *Cannibal Culture*, art historian Deborah Root claims:

It is through the question of authentic experience that a particular relation to the exotic is articulated, in which authenticity is available only outside of Western bourgeois society. During the colonial period, many Westerners believed that intense authentic experience had become impossible in European culture, and so turned to the exotic to find liberation from bourgeois constraints. (CC 175)

Primitivism as an artistic movement arose, in part, out of this need for authentic experience in a decadent culture. Africa and its myths were regarded as the space away that could cure, if anything could, the alienation and ennui of a post-war Europe. The effort to heal a nation can be construed as a political act, and yet, another politics was at

play in *La Création du Monde*, one perhaps overlooked by its creators. This, of course, is the brutal history of French colonialism which made African forms available to the West in the first place. These collaborators approach their spectacle with a naïveté, not uncommon among artists of the time. In *Création*, the West becomes both the subject engaged and the object created; and Africa remains simply a vehicle. This piece does not take a stance one way or another on the issue of Empire, and thus, its blind aestheticization of a political reality becomes subtly implicated in the imperialist project.

However problematic the appropriation of sacred culture may be, its purpose in the west was also a sacred one. Fernand Leger reminds the artistic creators of his time, to look to the church and adopt their methods to sway the congregation:

The catholic religion has also known how to make use of these methods to steer men according to its instruction.... It has pushed the art of the spectacle very far....The church understood long ago that man is drawn instinctively to the brilliant, luminous, colored object. It adopted music and song. If it has imposed itself on the world, that is because it has not neglected any of the visual or auditory means of its epoch.⁵

Leger and his collaborators attempted to re-capture the religious verve of ritualized experience for their weary, secular society.

As told by Cendrars, there is magic and whimsy in this myth. We don't expect an elephant to materialize in mid-air, nor the tortoise, crab and monkey to be lowered from above. Nor do we expect the witches, wizards, magicians and fetishists who appear as a set of secondary figures to help in the differentiation process, the necessary divisions that

⁴ Qtd. in Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) p.34.

are part of the movement from chaos to order. These wizards, in effect, continue the process of creation begun by the gods. In the analogy between the genesis of the world and the artwork, we can see these figures as the performing rather than creative artists, also essential to the completion of the whole. Coming from a Judeo-Christian framework, the audience expects the movement from chaos to form and darkness to light. The circle (in this piece that of the animals and the demi-gods) is familiar in Western tradition as it is in so many mythologies. According to Jung, cross-culturally the circle is one of the most powerful religious symbols (emblem of alpha and omega, the completed totality, the motion of nature through the seasons, the movement of clock time...). Joseph Campbell points out that “when a magician wants to work magic, he puts a circle around himself, and it is within this bounded circle that powers can be brought into play that are lost outside the circle” (Campbell 65). This is replicated exactly in the Cendrars scenario. In it, we also recognize the creation of Adam and Eve figures. We may not expect desire and mating before the kiss, but the movement from carnal to spiritual love does nothing to disrupt the Western bourgeois sense of progression. It also allows the work to end on a softer note with the kiss as a gentle symbol of unity. And again, we feel comfortable with the customary binary oppositions so prevalent in Western configurations of the world.

Although Leger was clear that the collaboration, like the myth itself, had three presiding deities, on stage he insisted that the performers work together as a single, unified whole. He did not want starring dancers to rise to the fore as so often happened in traditional ballet. As he states:

The individual [on the stage] must be made to disappear in order to

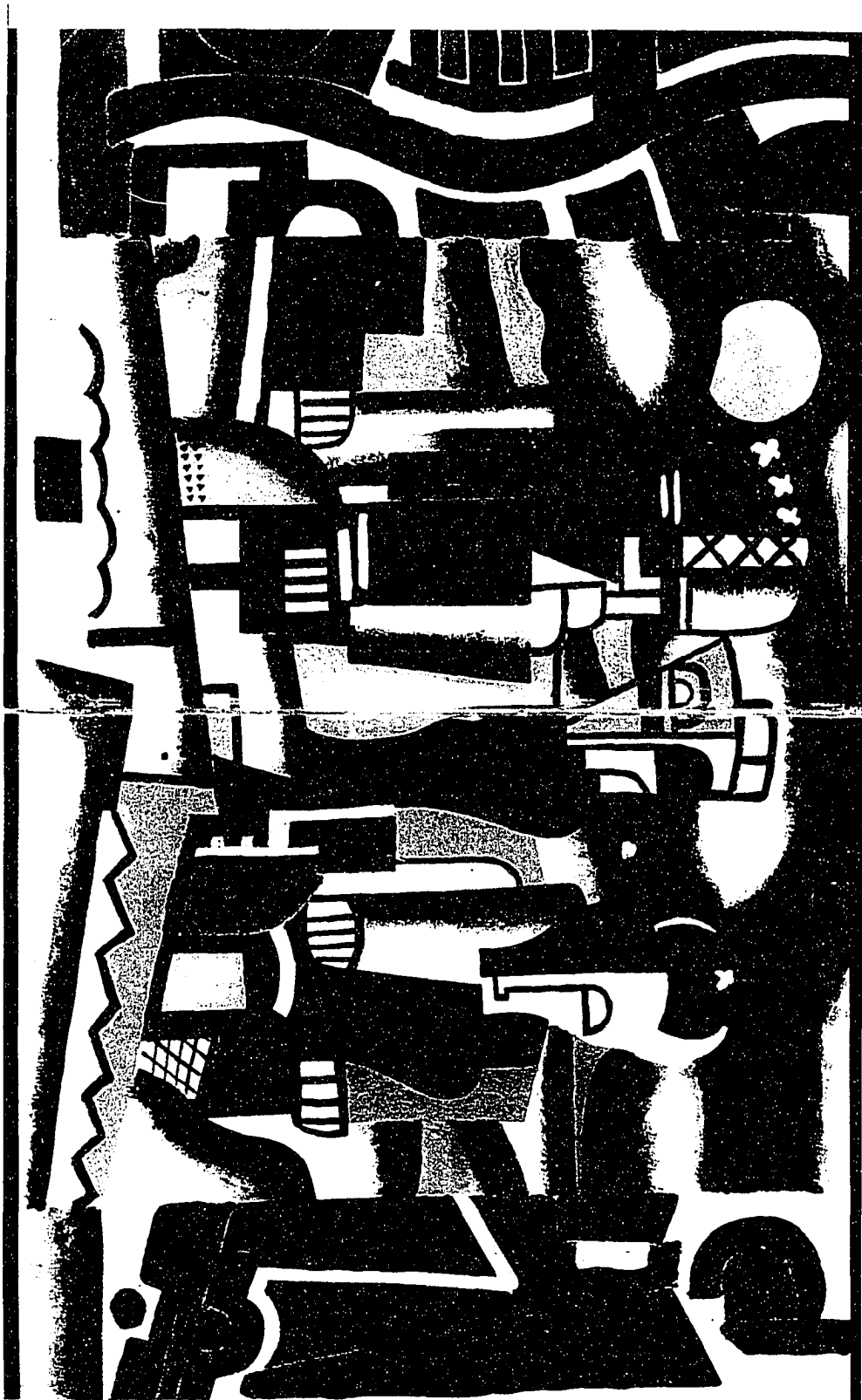
⁵ Fernand Leger, “The Invented Stage,” in *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henning

utilize the human material properly....Our present means are, of course, manifold, but only on condition, I repeat, that the royal individual is willing to become a means like everything else. The star, for all the talent he may have is often an obstacle to unity....Let them agree to become a part of the spectacle 'on equal terms.' (Rishbeiter, 97)

The three collaborators, like the dancers, also worked with a surprising and uncharacteristic equality among the three arts. And thus, three original approaches appear simultaneously without dissolving into a single vision.

Leger made sure that his visit to the beginning of time would not include anything natural, although current wisdom at the time dictated that, in the words of Ezra Pound, "A return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason" (*LE* 92). Instead, Leger's creation would be entirely mechanical, yet inspired. On the following page is the curtain Leger painted for *La Création du Monde*:

Example 1-1: Fernand Leger's Curtain for *La Création du Monde*:



This piece was done in watercolors and runs 39.5 by 61 cms in length and height. Here, we do not see the place of an imagined Africa, nor the space of a re-imagined, Leger-ified, factory France, but a synthetic zone where these two are superimposed. As is customary with Leger's human figures, the three gods are constructed with parts that fit together yet simultaneously remain detached, as if to emphasize that they were mechanically produced. Only here, the collage parts of the three bodies are placed so close to one another that they seem to work as a single large machine. Simplified shapes create a geometrical feel; we see repeating patterns of curves and angles below the three distinct heads, and this reinforces the sense that the machine is working as one distinct entity. The painting is primarily two dimensional, although Leger does use his own form of chiaroscuro on certain machine-body parts and in the clouds over head. The clouds are not light and billowy but heavy, as if they were large beanbags in the sky. While their shape and shading make them appear to sag, their color evokes steel and concrete; the thick black outlines reinforce their tremendous weight. While the shading does not create a fully effective three-dimensional space, it does give the effect of light on curved metal. The light is dulled, and the metallic quality is subtle but definitely there. In these rounded metallic pieces of the factory-three-god machine, we sense an earlier cubist (or tubist) Leger. Other body parts of the gods are created in subdued blocks of color -- reddish-brown, black, and ochre. In this factory world, through color, Leger quietly re-evokes the natural world, particularly the earth's clay at the beginning of time.

The features of the deities have been simplified: the eye and nose of one god, a single, linear gesture. The fingers of the three figures look almost like iron grates, black lines on a white background, or conversely white slates in a black foreground. This

simplified technique (associated with “primitivism”) ironically evokes the ultra-modern, urban factory. The three heads of the gods are distinct, and yet neither singular nor uncomplicated. One head appears in the shape of a bull, divided into two sides; one white, the other black. As if this were a yin and yang sign, a strip of white is visible on the black ear and a black line on the white forms eye and nose. How appropriate an evocation of yin and yang is in this context where opposites come together in a single totality or circle. Like the yin-yang quality of the bull’s head, the head of the god to the far left is also two sided, black and white with a line or outline of its opposite color on either part. In between the two halves of the head is a smokestack of sorts which reinforces the suggestion that this is indeed a factory. Out of the chimney arise not the huge ponderous clouds but three stars. Are these stars not a metaphor for the artistic inspiration that has arisen out of the mechanized landscape? And are Cendrars, Leger and Milhaud, like the gods, not three distinct heads, each divided within themselves, yet all working together as a single machine? This analogy for the process of artistic collaboration may strike us as highly formal; the mythic shudder barely detectable in the mechanized landscape.

Too much seems to be going on here to get any clear message about the African myth, the modern world, or the analogy between the two. According to Milhaud, Leger had used “primitive” art in hopes of creating African divinities who expressed power and darkness (although he feared that his sets and costumes were not terrifying enough). It is not uncommon for Western primitivists to imagine the space of “the other” as both fertile and dangerous. As Art Historian Deborah Root claims:

Notions of sublimity, violence or eroticism, all of which can fall under the

general rubric of exoticism, function as tropes that continue to structure our perceptions of cultural difference.... Because exoticism works by generating excitement, and delirium precisely from the relation to difference, qualities that in one context are negative – such as violence -- can with the proper distance produce delight, desire, and of course, the edge of danger and ambiguity that supplies an added frisson. (CC, 173)

This is as true of the primitivism of the twentieth century as it is of the exoticism that flourished in the nineteenth. The spectacle seems more “spectacular” when it carries this note of danger, of the unknown territory. These artists rejected the beautiful in favor of the sublime, and the latter they found in mysterious and dangerous depictions of other cultures, however inaccurate those formulations became. We hear this impulse in the brutality of *The Rite*; we sense it in Leger’s efforts to make his gods dark, and we hear intimations of it in the free-wheeling jazz climaxes of Milhaud’s score. Leger embraced technology and urbanism, regarding them as the foundation for a new beginning to civilization. And yet, the sinister inflection of this factory world puzzles the viewer.

Henning Rischbieter refers to collaborative works as “happenings,” a useful term as it implies not a statement, or even a finished separate piece, but an event. He says:

Artists, whether they are by origin or earlier specialization men of the theater or painters, musicians or writers, draw together by abandoning their particular métiers, by relinquishing their aim of creating objectivized works of art by setting subjective actions, demonstrations, happenings in the place of fixed objects. ...In the environment created by the montage of reality fragments, does man’s elemental interest in the acting of stories in spectacles

and exhibitions become the prisoner or the ruler? (Rischbieter 15)

This comment, for all its understanding of the ways in which artists from different disciplines come together, represents the thoughts of someone focused on the plastic and not the temporal arts; for, the composer never ends up with a fixed object. After his music is played, it disappears until reanimated once again by musicians. On the other hand, this citation illuminates the ways in which the spectacle adds the element of time to the work of the visual artist. In his final question, Rischbieter speaks of the “montage of reality fragments.” The word “montage,” accurately depicts what occurs in *La Création du Monde* and other pieces of the time that looked to the film for inspiration. *Relâche*, a work debuted by Swedish Ballet one year after *Création*, with music by Satie and sets by Francis Picabia, went so far as to include a cinematographic entr’acte by René Clair. Leger’s next spectacle *Ballet Mécanique*, with music by George Antheil, was first performed on stage and then made into a movie.

In *Création*, Leger also created a moving picture, but of a different sort. He flattened the visual space, not only in his sets, but also in the costumes and movement on stage. Leger’s intent was to join the human bodies with the décor to create a two dimensional moving canvas rather than a traditional work of dance. This also fulfilled his aim to favor the conception of the whole over the dances of individuals. The mobile sets, in effect, performed the action while the dancers became part of the scenery. Both blended into a single dynamic moving image. The human components were intended to vanish at times in the turning sets. Not a single human was visible on the stage between the lights, the machinery, and the costumes. Dancers complained that their job consisted of moving objects around the stage, leaving them little freedom for self-expression. And

yet, by being part of the décor and the force behind it, they found a different sort of freedom -- from the constrictions of a single human body, as the creators had from the restrictions a single approach to artistic creation. Leger found a true equality on the stage between the visuals and the dance (and these two arts, in turn, remained separate but equal to the music). In the staging, Leger first thought he would use skins to represent animals and plants filled with helium which would fly into the air like balloons at the moment of creation, but the sound of the gas drowned out the music, so he abandoned the idea. Instead, he drew his inspiration from animal costumes worn by African dancers during religious rites.⁶ The movement was to be heavy and slow to set a somber and ceremonial tone. The lights were kept in motion creating a discontinuous play between a well lit stage and darkness. This spectacle, like Leger's later work, was already a "ballet mécanique." Both this and his next work (entitled *Ballet Mécanique*) were perhaps spoofed a decade later by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936). In the film, Chaplin performs his own version of the mechanical ballet; he plays the role of a factory worker who has a nervous breakdown on the job, and then proceeds to dance gracefully around his workplace to strains of classical music, squirting oil in the faces of his managers in rhythm.⁷

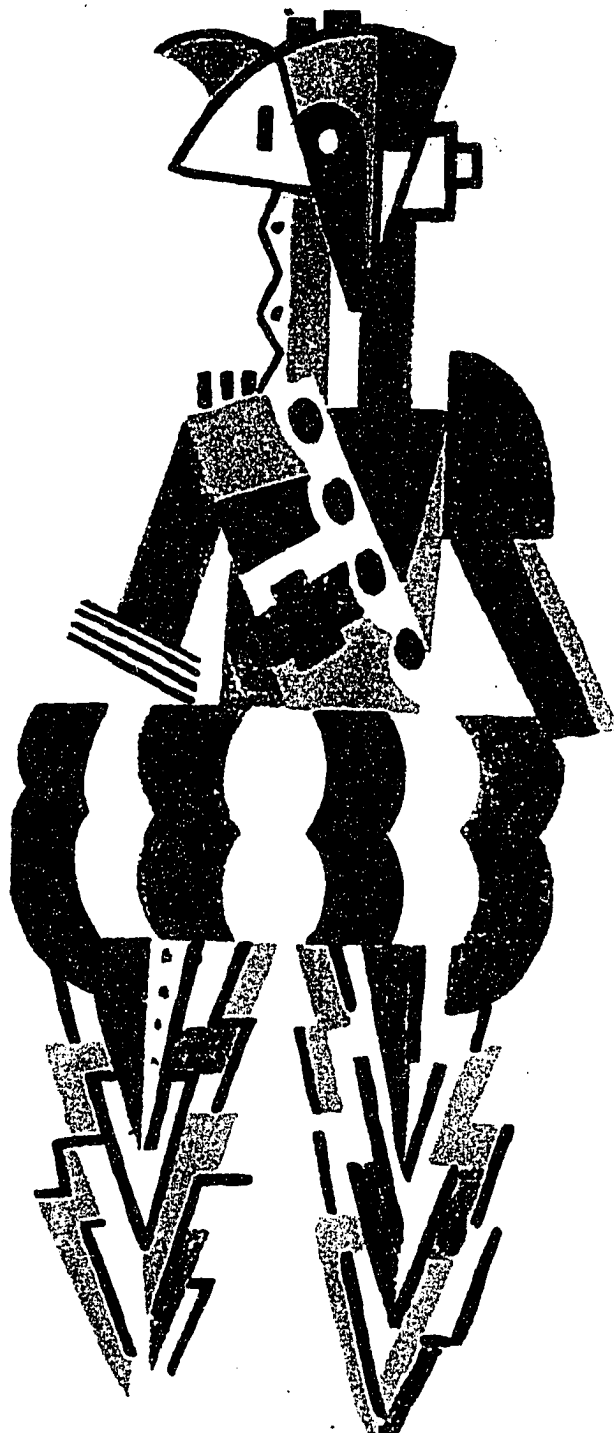
The following pictures are Leger's designs for costumes; they combine the artist's geometrically constructed whimsy with African patterns and inflections. The final picture

⁶ Darius Milhaud, "How *La Création du Monde* Came to be Written," in *Art and the Stage in The Twentieth Century*, ed. Henning Rischbieter (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1968) p. 98.

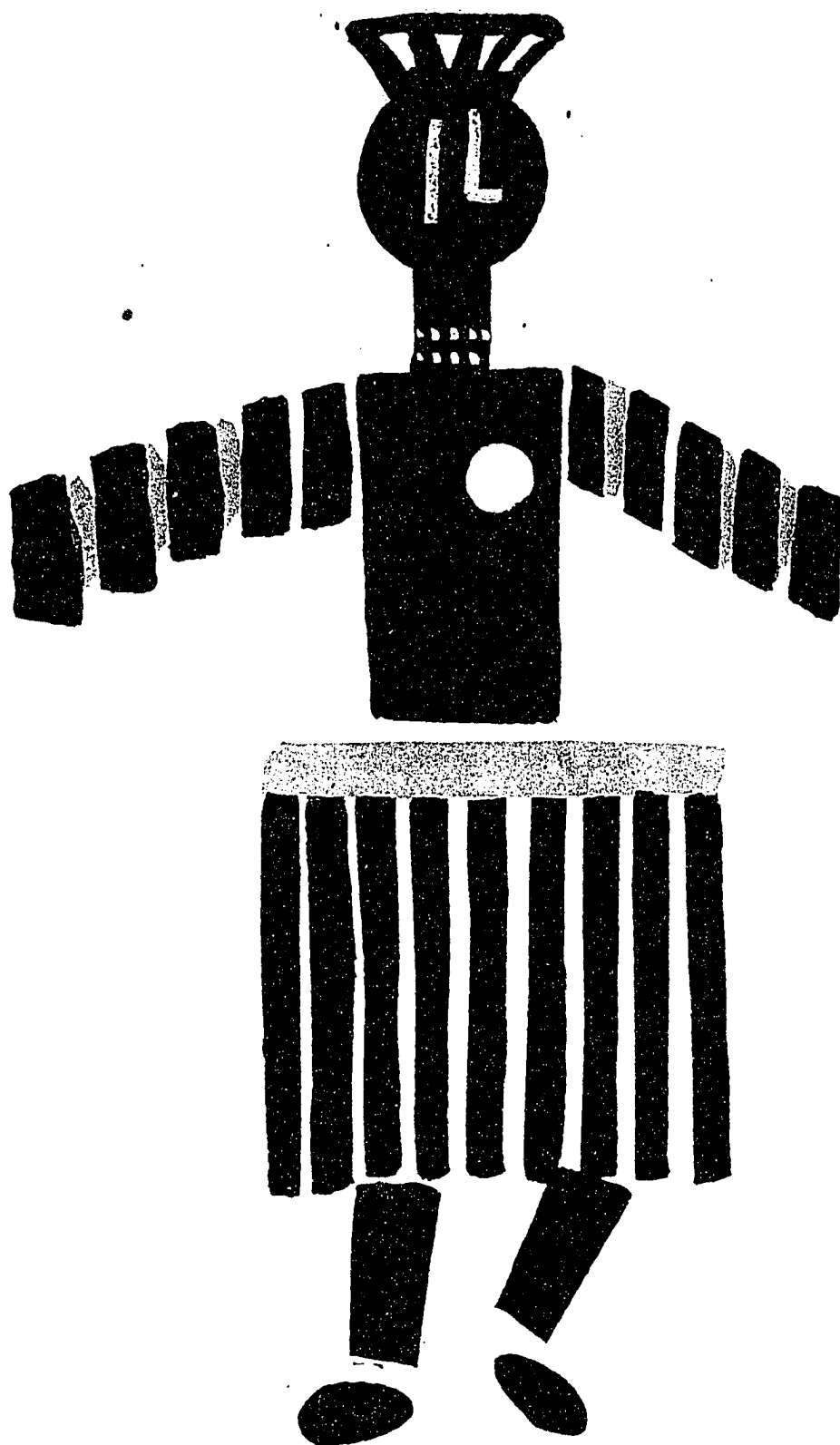
⁷ Charlie Chaplin, or "Charlot" as he was affectionately known in France, had a strong background in music and was undoubtedly familiar with these works. He was particularly friendly with Germaine Taillefaire, one of *Les Six*, whom he asked to write the score for his film *The Circus*. But instead, with her encouragement, Chaplin wrote the music himself. After leaving France, Taillefaire lived in Manhattan where Chaplin came to play piano duets and often stayed as a live-in guest.

is a reproduction of a photograph taken at the 1923 Paris premier of *La Création du Monde*:

Example 1-2: Costume for *La Création du Monde*:



Example 1-3: Costume for *La Création du Monde*:



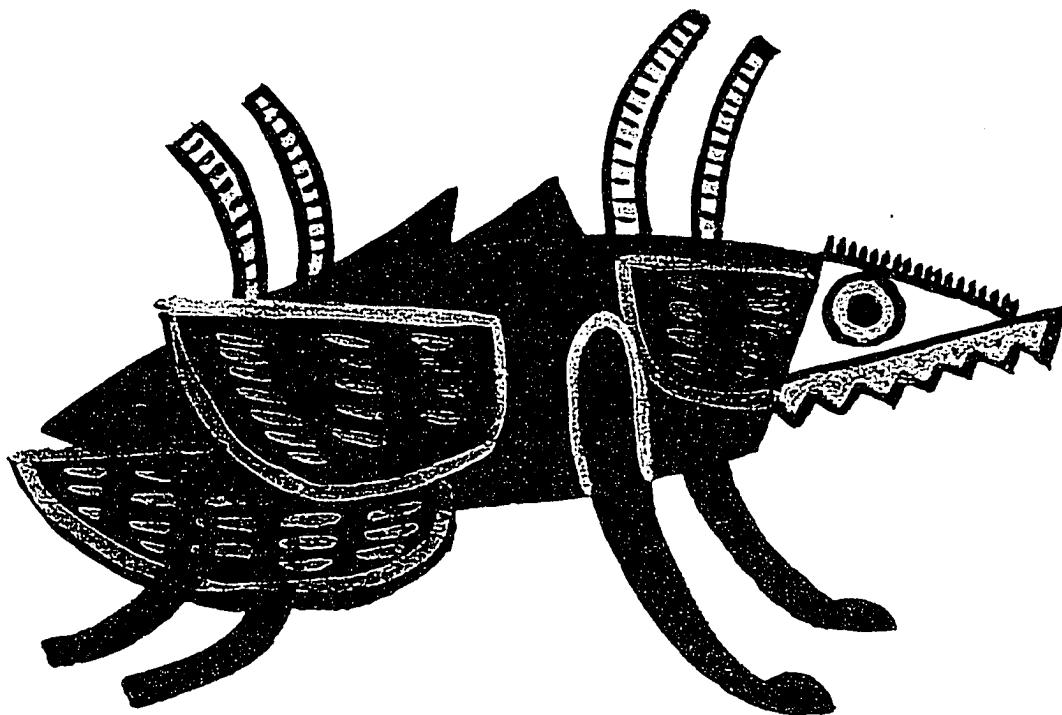
Example 1-4: Costume for *La Création du Monde*:



Example 1-5: Costume for *La Création du Monde*:



Example 1-6: Costume for *La Création du Monde*:



Example 1-7: Photograph of the 1923 Premier of *La Création du Monde*, Theatre des Champs-Élysées, Paris:



In the 1923 photo, we can clearly see the layering of the two dimensional space. The sets create multiple frames which again remind the audience that they are viewing a dynamic painting. In the foreground, one can sense the influence of primitivism in the costumes of the animals and the N'Guils (who moved around on stilts so as to appear larger than life). The Gods themselves in the middle ground, part African, part factory, stood several meters high. The landscape in the background is clearly Western and modern. The metallic clouds and geometric mountains evoke the sharp angularity of twentieth century architecture in cosmopolitan Europe. To the left, in black, we see the silhouette of what might be an urban, industrial landscape. Above all else, we see the spirit Leger himself, but here, we find his customary style extended by the influences of primitivism and the demands of the scenario, the stage, and the music.

In the photograph, we can also see the masks Leger employed to further the total stage effect and de-emphasize the artists on stage. Some of these masks (the second one in on the left, for example) simultaneously expose the profile and frontal view of the animal or person. The nose, mouth and chin are depicted in profile, and the frontal perspective is separated with a diagonal line dividing the head into two spaces, one light toned, the other dark. Masks have, of course, a dual function – they are at once a tool to disguise and reveal identity. While individual, facial expressions are hidden, masks depict more general categories of selfhood. In *Création*, masks identify man as man; woman as woman; and each beast as part of its respective species. According to William Sheppard, the mask can be seen as an “objective correlative for the modernist propensity to transform and transcend the human in the arts.”⁸ To write about the formation of the

⁸ W. Anthony Sheppard, *Revealing Masks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) p. 25.

world itself, one must, of course, transcend the human. And certainly in this work, the mask functions in this capacity. But, the mask also becomes an objective correlative for the paradox of art itself. According to Oscar Wilde, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.”⁹ These artists wear the mask of primordial Africa to examine their twentieth century, French selfhood. In *A Vision*, Yeats would later claim that we wear the mask of our opposite throughout our lives. In the end, however, as Lionel Trilling points out in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Yeats returns to the dark source of art which is his authentic self:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
 I must lie down where all the ladders start,
 In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. (*CP* 150)

Leger, Milhaud and Cendrars, have also returned to the beginning, the place of utter authenticity; and yet there is nothing authentic about it. It is not the story of their own origin, nor is it a space away in which to rediscover their true selves. This ballet is authentic to neither of the cultures out of which it arises, nor to the vision of a single consciousness. Everything is made in parts, as emphasized by the factory nature of the

⁹ Oscar Wilde, “The Truth of Masks” in *Intentions* (London: Unicorn Press, 1947) p. 180.

sets and the mechanical choreography; everything is made up of multiple minds, and yet, it all becomes one eclectic, moving picture.

The score to *La Création du Monde* was not the first setting of a creation story to music. As a neo-classicist, Darius Milhaud must have kept in mind Haydn's oratorio of 1799 which had also brought consolation, faith and hope to a war-torn Europe. Haydn's *Creation* premiered in the midst of the Napoleonic wars and immediately won over Berlin, London and Paris (where Napoleon himself went to hear it, narrowly escaping an assassination attempt en route). Haydn's work was also a collaboration with librettist Baron Gottfried van Swieten. This depiction, of course, draws on the Judeo-Christian story, and Haydn's music, like Milhaud's, moves from formlessness to light to the moment, as van Swieten put it, "when the morning stars sang together."¹⁰ (How far these words and their classical setting seem from Leger's three stars rising from the God-head chimney.) Similarly to Milhaud, Haydn also depicts the coming forth of the animals and the love of Adam and Eve. In the oratorio, the Biblical story is not altered but reinforced and glorified by the music. Milhaud's piece is clearly a good distance from his predecessor; in orchestration, he calls for seventeen instrumentalists as oppose to the four-hundred musicians Haydn had at the opening performance. In scope, Milhaud's piece runs seventeen minutes; Haydn's just under two hours. Birth and rebirth of a physical and spiritual nature pervade the two works, and both clearly attempt to heal a population – one with the distant, new space of an imagined primeval otherness, the other with the accepted tradition transformed into rich sonority.

¹⁰ Baron Gottfried van Swieten, *Die Schöpfung*, trans. Rosemary Hughes. music by Joseph Haydn (New York: EMI Classics, p1996) p. 3. Compact Disc Program Notes.

Milhaud also saw his ballet as a chance to experiment with jazz. As he says: “At last in *Création*, I had the opportunity I had been waiting for to use the elements of jazz to which I had devoted so much study. I adopted the same orchestra used in Harlem, seventeen solo instruments, and I made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling” (Rischbieter 98). Drawing on Milhaud’s memoirs, jazz critic Andre Hodeir points out that the composer had not been exposed to authentic jazz, either in London where he had seen Billy Arnold’s orchestra or even in Harlem. The use of strings, flute, clarinet, trombone, oboe, bassoon, piano, and sax along with a whole host of percussion (the orchestra he used in *La Création du Monde*) is typical, not of the Afro-American jazz band, “but of the theaters where operettas and musical revues were given.” Hodeir goes on, “The very composition of the orchestra shows that jazz had no more of a role there than it has today at the Folies-Bergère, even though good jazzmen often played in the pit (such as Louis Armstrong, for instance, at the Vendome Theatre in Chicago)” (Hodeir 248). Hodeir does go on to say that of the three principal classical composers who used jazz (Stravinsky and Ravel, being the other two), Milhaud was the most well-informed. He had recently spent two years in Brazil, working as Paul Claudel’s secretary. The rhythms and dances of that country, not too far from jazz, had a tremendous influence on his music of this period. After his return, he embarked on a meticulous study of jazz and blues (at least that to which he’d been exposed). In *La Création du Monde*, Milhaud’s genuine desire to be true to the forms and progressions of Afro-American music is evident.

Whether or not Milhaud wrote with an understanding of an authentic jazz idiom, he would hardly have been depicting the heart of primeval Africa. But, along with many

European, Americans, and even African-Americans, Milhaud believed he had heard the heart of Africa in the sounds of New York. As he says in his memoir *Notes without Music*:

Their primitive African heritage remains deeply anchored in the souls of American Negroes, and therein lies the source of their formidable sense of rhythm as well as their profoundly moving gift for a kind of melody that only people who have been long oppressed know how to utter. (*NwM* 65)

Milhaud's response here creates a dangerous fantasy of collective racial otherness, with his references to the African-American's musical gifts and their 'primitive' souls. But, Milhaud also attempts to find a common thread among those of African ancestry and others (particularly himself). He was keenly aware of his own Jewish heritage and the long oppression of his people. His father was a cantor and growing up, he was exposed to that musical tradition which, like jazz, was highly expressive and improvisatory. Milhaud would maintain an interest in liturgical music throughout his career. In his biography, when discussing the spirituals sung by African slaves, he specifically mentions "Go down Moses" in which the black community configures its own position in terms of the Jews in Egypt.

In the 1920s, the word "primitive" referred to cultures the West had configured as less advanced. In common usage, "primitive" also means "simple or crude" or "belonging to the beginning or earlier times." With these definitions in mind, we will find the "primitive" in *La Création du Monde* is not always associated with the African-American sound. The piece opens with a mournful, neoclassical prelude:

Example 1-8: mm. 1-18, Neoclassical Overture to *Création du Monde*:

OUVERTURE

Modéré 54 : d

PRIMA

mf (quittez)

fl-flat saxophone:

SECONDA

mf **strings**

and piano:

(quittez)

trumpets in thirds:

mp (quittez)

mp

The curtain has not yet risen, and in this period of pre-creation, we hear an undifferentiated diatonic wash. It is harmonically indistinct, meandering and unfocused. The overture's modal sound (Aeolian minor) evokes a tender past. The modes are also used in jazz, and jazz sonorities and rhythms will intrude soon enough. But, the mood in the opening nine bars is clearly one of classical nostalgia. In the piano and strings, we hear a wave of motion in thirds over which an E-flat saxophone quietly wails its forlorn melody. The sax, the jazz instrument par excellence, has been taken out of its usual context, and against the strings, does not yet evoke the world from which it came, but rather highlights this distant, pastoral landscape with an unexpected sonority. This is not so far from the opening of *The Rite of Spring*, with the haunting bassoon solo (also written in Aeolian minor) in the unusual upper range of the instrument. When the trumpets make their first gentle intrusion with a syncopated version of the first counter-melody in the strings, we hear a touch of the modern world, with its brassy quality. Like the strings, the trumpets play in thirds, but these parallel thirds (and later sixths) coupled with the syncopation seem part of a jazz, or more accurately a Latin arrangement, perhaps influenced by Milhaud's stay in Brazil. Brass has, of course, a long history in pastoral classical music, evoking, as it does, the call of the hunter. One could argue that, even in this prelude, despite the syncopated suggestion of jazz, the trumpet passages and the trumpet and trombone climax at measure 68 remain within a pastoral, classical idiom.

Example 1-9: mm. 68-73, The Brassy, Syncopated Climax of the Overture to *La Création du Monde*:

Trumpets: *ff*

Trombones:

Piano R. II.

Horns & Bassoon: *mf*

Piano L. II.

Cello & Bass: *ss*

Cédez *Mouv!* *mp*

Cédez *Mouv!* *mp*

The movement ends with a standard V7- i cadence that offers no relief, as Bach did with a picardy third in his Preludes. Although this is a stock ending for classical music, it is unexpected here. The pervasive Aeolian folk sound is replaced by a traditional minor cadence, with the C# leading tone prominently heard in the E-flat saxophone. Milhaud closes in the tonic minor, a dark choice with which to end a prelude to the beginning of the world. This stands in stark contrast to the final sounds of Haydn's overture in his *Creation* with the famous appearance of the light. From a pianissimo, C-

minor tonality, Haydn adjusts his E-flat to an E-natural, and with this startlingly simple solution, he drives out the darkness, and brings in the light on a fortissimo C-major chord.

Example 1-10: mm. 100-106, Conclusion to the Overture to *La Création du Monde*, final Cadence in D-Minor:

The musical score shows the final cadence in D-Minor, measures 100-106. The piano part is marked 'Très ral.' and ends with a 'D-minor chord'. The saxophone part has a 'Saxophone leading tone' and a 'Curtain comes up' annotation. The score ends with a 'p' dynamic marking.

If Milhaud indeed considers his work an analogy for artistic creation in the twenties and a piece of reconstruction after World War I, then his prelude may also serve as a period of mourning for the losses of another time prior to the frenetic, joyful business of building anew. The moment before the beginning of creation and of the ballet itself depicts a quiet, ordered chaos; the gentle swirling of materials (or throbbing of the lumpy mass we will see on the stage) is perhaps represented in the strings recurrent counter-melody.

When the curtain rises and the jazz fugue begins (II), we are no longer musically in the pastoral world of yore. The “primitive” (in the sense of ancient and distant) is depicted by the neoclassical rather than the Afro-American sound. With this jazz entrance, we have entered the fast-paced world of modernity -- brash, exciting, and metallic. The primitive and the modern have, in effect, been reversed in the music. Leger’s factory world is depicted in jazz (the “primitivist” elements of the score) while

the distant mythic space is caught primarily in the neoclassical sound. Neoclassicism, like primitivism, had a multidirectional glance, to the past and the future. Stravinsky says of his neoclassical ballet *Pulcinella* (which reworked the music of eighteenth century composer Pergolesi): “*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible. It was a backward look, of course – the first of many love affairs in that direction – but it was a look in the mirror too” (Stravinsky and Craft 35). In general, the neoclassical response to decadence was to return to the purity of highly ordered beauty, craft, and a mathematical selflessness -- civilization at its pinnacle as oppose to an unmediated, authentic, direct encounter with the naked self. For Milhaud, it was an opportunity to move away from the musical styles that had immediately preceded his own period, both the overblown quality of the late romantics and the hazy nuances of impressionism. It allowed him to return to cleanliness – and indeed *La Création du Monde* is small in scope, tight and tidy in construction.

As the fugue begins, the three gods appear and circle round each other on the stage. This process of artistic creation is depicted by Milhaud as a melding of the simple (blues) and the highly complex (fugue). Unlike the mournful, lyrical moment that precedes creation, this movement is all energy. The combination of the varied percussion instruments and the brass sets the tone. The fugue seems an appropriate medium to depict a creative collaboration. Distinct instruments are heard, each opening with the melody in a different sonority at a different moment. But, this fugue is made up of four rather than three distinct musical lines. (Has Milhaud kept in mind that choreographer Jean Borlin was indeed a fourth collaborator?) The subject enters first in the double bass and is then

passed to the trombone, saxophone and trumpet, all of which is backed by percussion and piano. Here, we are given the sonorities of an authentic Afro-American jazz band:

Example 1-11: *La Création du Monde*, Movement I, mm. 1-22: Milhaud's Blues-Fugue Used to Represent the Beginning of Creation:

Example 1-11: *La Création du Monde*, Movement I, mm. 1-22: Milhaud's Blues-Fugue Used to Represent the Beginning of Creation:

Double bass

Fugue Entrance #1: Subject

Timpani roll & Piano arpeggios

Subject 2: Entrance #2, Trombone

Countersubject 1:

St. Louis Blues Quotation

Subject: Entrance #3: Saxophone

Countersubject #1: Trombone

Countersubject #2: Double Bass

The image shows a musical score for a fugue. It consists of four staves, each representing a different instrument: Trumpet, Saxophone, Trombone, and Double Bass. The music is written in 4/4 time. The first staff, labeled 'Trumpet', begins with 'Subject Entrance #4:'. The second staff, labeled 'Saxophone', begins with 'Countersubject #1:'. The third staff, labeled 'Trombone', begins with 'Countersubject #2:'. The fourth staff, labeled 'Double Bass', begins with 'Countersubject #3:'. The music is a fugue, with each instrument entering with its own subject or countersubject. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4.

Milhaud keeps the baroque form carefully intact, even as the jazz feel remains most prominent in the listener's mind. Milhaud carefully studied the blues, and it has been agreed among critics, such as Andre Hodeir and Deborah Mawer, that Milhaud has been true to its form, both harmonically (with his suggestion of an interplay between the tonic and the subdominant) and melodically (with multiple blue notes, the blues scale, an improvised style, and the highlighting of familiar jazz riffs). Mawer also points out that the different voices of the fugue enter on the I, II, V and I, a significant choice, as this is the formula for the most basic jazz chord progression.¹¹ Early on in the music, Milhaud also quotes the acclaimed *Saint Louis Blues*.

To create a neoclassical fugue out of the blues is an extraordinary move. The fugue has been considered the most intricate and exacting form in Western classical music. (The Preludes and Fugues from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played by Glenn Gould, were sent off in the space shuttle of the 1980s to represent for extra-terrestrial life the highest achievement to which the earth's people had risen.) The blues, on the other

¹¹ Deborah Mawer, *Darius Milhaud Modality and Structure in the Music of the 1920s* (Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1997). p.157.

hand, is the simplest, most unmediated of African-American forms. It arose out of a “formless, semi-musical expression of raw emotion,”¹² a holler in the field, if you will. Unlike jazz, its direct message demanded a form that was harmonically and melodically simple. Although, we might keep in mind what Robert Palmer, a blues artist, said in a recent interview:

I find the whole idea of primitive blues is really a funny one. My feeling is that if you want to listen to something primitive, listen to Mozart. There’s almost no rhythmic variation in it. It’s just 1-2-3-4 forever. No cross rhythms, no polyrhythms to speak of. The way that music is interpreted all the tonal qualities of the instruments tend to be very clear, very pristine. There’s no kind of textural variety that you’d get in the blues in terms of roughening the texture out on certain words, no plying around with the pitch. There’s nothing like that in Mozart, so who’s primitive?¹³

Palmer aptly points out that the notion of ‘primitive’ depends on who defines the terms. Nonetheless, to combine this highly crafted technique with the most direct statement of basic human emotion, as Milhaud attempts to do here, is an extraordinary task. But he goes even further; he characterizes the very act of artistic creation at its opening moment in terms of an alliance between the extremes of “high” and “low” culture. In effect, Milhaud defines the task of the artist-god as a chiseling of intricate forms out of gut-wrenching emotion. In *Notes without Music*, he points out that: “syncopated music calls

¹² Qtd. in Bill Messenger, *Elements of Jazz: From Cakewalks to Fusion* (Springfield: The Teaching Company, 1995) videocassette.

¹³ Ibid.

for a rhythm as inexorably regular as that of Bach himself which has the same basis” (*NwM* 135). Not only was Milhaud bringing together the eclectic, he was searching for the fundamental points of commonality between these contrasting idioms.

Although Milhaud formally fused “high” and “low” aesthetic practice, in the process, he may have lost the very meaning of the blues. Often described as an “attitude rather than a style,” the blues must not just begin in the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart,” it must remain there. But, the raw emotion gets lost in the up-tempo feel and the slickness of Milhaud’s craft. As Andre Hodeir says, in *La Création du Monde*, Milhaud has a “faithfulness to letter, if not the spirit, of the blues” (Hodeir, 246). On the other hand, Milhaud does capture the chaos (and underlying order) of the modern city. Its intricate networks and dissonant sounds are well served by the jazz-classical combination, and to this, Milhaud adds an array of unexpected percussive sounds, including the piano’s opening thirty-second note arpeggios which he writes should be played “very rapidly and nervously.”¹⁴ Rather than creating a blues feel, he thrusts the listener into a sound world closer to the polyphony of Dixieland or Klezmer music.

The spirit of the blues, however, does emerge in the primary theme of the following movement:

¹⁴ This does not appear in Milhaud’s four hand piano version which I have used here for musical examples, but it opens this movement in the full score.

Example 1-12: Movement II, mm. 35-49, Bluesy Melody in Oboe, Derived from Fugue Subject of Movement I:

Oboe:

Mouv! $\text{♩} = 62$ *pp* *p très tendre*

Mouv! $\text{♩} = 62$ *pp* *p*

F7 C9 F7...

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system shows the Oboe part with a melody marked 'Mouv!' and a tempo of 62. The piano accompaniment is marked 'pp' and 'p très tendre'. The second system continues the Oboe melody and piano accompaniment, with a chord progression of F7, C9, and F7 indicated above the staff. The piano part includes various chords and melodic lines in both hands.

This melody is derived from the opening motive of the fugue subject, although it may sound to our ears as more derivative of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, his second Prelude for piano, or the opening phrase of Jerome Kern's "Dat Man of Mine" from *Show Boat* ("Now listen, Sistah,"...). But, *La Création du Monde* predated all three of these works. The oscillation between the F7 and C9 chords in the string and sax background sets the mood, over which the melody gently cries out its pain. As Milhaud scored the main melody of the opening neoclassical number for a jazz instrument (E-flat sax), so here he scores the blues melody for the oboe, a classical one. The jazz and classical traditions clearly merge throughout like the pastoral and urban landscape of the ballet.

This movement (entitled "Romance" in Milhaud's later rearrangement of *La Création du Monde* for piano quintet opus 81b) opens with a passage that has no jazz qualities about it, and yet, again it sounds far more primitive than the blues (above) which is its centerpiece:

Example 1-13: Movement II, mm. 1-8, Stravinsky-Style, Primitivist Sound:

II

Contrary motion in clarinets

The musical score is for Movement II, measures 1-8. It is in 5/4 time, marked 'pp' (pianissimo). The title 'Contrary motion in clarinets' is written above the staves. The score shows two staves for clarinets with complex, rhythmic patterns and a piano accompaniment with a steady, rhythmic pulse.

For this moment, the listener finds herself in a “primitivist” world akin to Stravinsky’s. The crude quality of the passage comes, in part, from the persistent polytonal drone in the background. The repeated square, half-notes are clearly juxtaposed to the slick syncopations of the fugue. This background is constructed out of two different timbres and registers to reinforce the dual tonality. The plodding, primal sound is then reinforced by the bass drum and tambourin. Violins and cellos create an open fifth (A-flat, E-flat) while the C and E of the horn and bassoon suggest C-major. Over that, the clarinets outline an A-minor chord, in contrary motion that seems to disregard the dissonances of the open seventh chord on which phrases one and three begin and end, and the hollow quality of the open fifths in phrase two. This primeval sound has nothing whatsoever to do with the slick jazz sections. On stage, we see again the central twitching mass of chaos, as the orchestra returns to the lonely pastoral music of the Prelude.

Out of the primitive clarinet motifs of section II, comes the charming, more forcefully syncopated neoclassical dance of the following movement in which each species rises from the chaos and dances his or her individual evolution:

Example 1-14: Mouvement III, mm. 1-8: Neoclassical Dance:

III
Vif $\text{♩} = 104$

mf

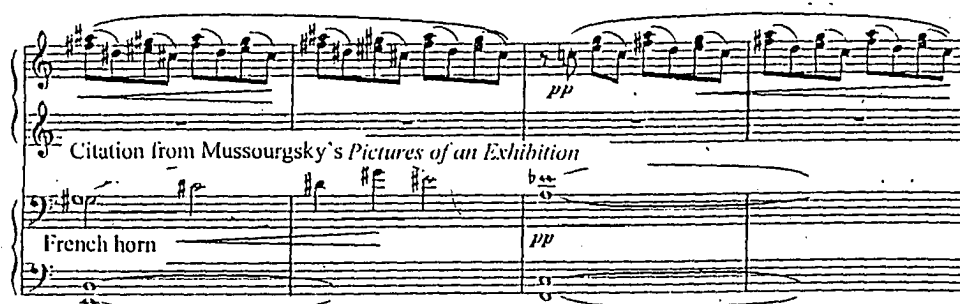
Vif $\text{♩} = 104$

mf (très ser.)



This dance is heralded by the trumpet's reference to the famous refrain from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This is unexpected in a neo-classical, jazz piece, but it functions as an appropriate reminder that *La Création du Monde* is an art exhibition of sorts; the birth of each creature and the appearance of each new costume and mask adds to the effect of the gallery as a whole:

Example 1-15: Movement II, mm. 87-92: Citation of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*:





In Movement Four which includes the dance of desire and the mating of the Adam and Eve figures, Milhaud again subverts expectation. The trombone and saxophone were associated with sexuality during the African and African-American art craze (*le tumulte noir*) in Paris and among those enamored of “Harlem-chic” in New York. And yet, Milhaud does not choose either of these instruments to depict desire or mating. Instead, we have an up-beat melody in the clarinet followed by a languorous, sensual neoclassical passage (with just a hint of jazz in the syncopations in the fourth measure). This melody later returns in the oboe and trumpets playing in octaves, before the frenzied climactic round dance of the N’Guils. This culmination is the most urban moment of the piece; the high F# against a high F in the flutes over multiple percussion instruments playing in polyrhythms, as well as the polyphony of trumpet and trombone melodies makes the listener feel as if she were stuck in a New York traffic jam.

Example 1-16: Movement IV, mm. 111-118, Minor Second Clashes Capturing the Cacophony of the Modern City:

Minor 2nd clash in flutes (an octave higher in the full score)

mp

Mouvt. 4, 108

mp

Throughout *La Création du Monde*, the melodies and riffs of each section return. This is most clear in the final section as the circle dance opens into small groups on the stage, and the couple is transported in their kiss. Here, we hear intimations of each of the

melodies from the previous sections. The Aeolian minor melody from the Prelude, however, is now presented in the major. Even in the final unity of the kiss, we hear only a partial resolution. Milhaud ends not with a simple tonic chord, but a D-major seventh (a jazz ending) in which the tension of the seventh degree has been highlighted by the saxophone's stepwise lead into the C# in the penultimate measure.

Example 1-17: Movement V, mm. 34-38, Final Cadence Includes Jazz Tension, Ending on a D-Major 7th:

The musical score for Example 1-17, Movement V, mm. 34-38, is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is for the piano (p) and the bottom staff is for the saxophone (sax). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The tempo markings are 'Rit.' and 'Très lent'. The dynamics are 'ppp'. The final cadence is marked 'Stepwise to C#' and 'DM7'.

Although the allure of jazz is associated with primitivism in this period, Milhaud's use of it does not coincide with the primeval sound he evokes in *Création*. Instead, the slick urban, industrial sounds have everything to do with African American forms while the evocations of the past occur in the neoclassical sections or those

reminiscent of the static harmonic technique of *The Rite of Spring*. One could argue that the use of the blues introduces the simple (or primitive) against the high sophistication of the classical fugue, but again, the up-tempo quality of this section undermines the earthy, rawness of the blues form. While Milhaud attempts to discover the “primitive” (or a certain crude simplicity) in the blues, Stravinsky found his “primitive” in harmonic technique – the replacement of developmental harmonies with the layering of ostinati. But, where Stravinsky succeeded in both creating a “primitive” sound and a new approach to harmony, Milhaud seems to have found the primitive, the pastoral and the sensual elsewhere. In *Création*, the highly-sophisticated, modern city is repeatedly evoked by the blues, the jazz riffs and the brass sonorities.

Oddly enough, the same term has been applied by anthropologists and literary critics to describe both the process of mythmaking and the approach of modern artists. Claude Lévi-Strauss explains: “We are asked to recognize that the mythmaker works much as does the maker of a collage or a fix-it person (*bricoleur*), using whatever happens to come along to create by organizing and structuring the bits and pieces into coherent wholes”(Lévi-Strauss 63). Baudelaire was the first to depict a transformation of the image of the artist from nineteenth century outcast, a wandering Jew of sorts, to the hip tourist, slummer, the *Flaneur*, as he calls him, at the forefront of every new, not-yet-fashionable trend, a collage maker and a dabbler in the *outré*. No longer on the outskirts of society, the artist is now a person at its center, a playful borrower who uses whatever fragments he can find to glue together in his work of art. He is, as Baudelaire says, “an ego athirst for the non-ego” (Baudelaire 395). In the field of music, Stravinsky can be seen as the consummate flaneur. A playful and irreverent scavenger, he borrows from the

folk music of Russia, ragtime and jazz, whatever is within his grasp to reinvent his own style. His goal is never authenticity, but a transformation into something wholly new and entirely his own. The distance and whimsy of Stravinsky's method stands in sharp contrast to Milhaud's serious, studied approach to jazz, and yet *Création* does feel like a collage, with the juxtaposition of incongruous elements. When a piece is constructed among multiple artists, it is not surprising that their styles may not entirely coordinate with one another. In previous eras, the composer's duty to suit the music to the scenario was as fundamental as the actor's obligation to suit "the word to the action, the action to the word." But in this new cut-and-paste aesthetic, music, dance and choreography did not have to work together. The clashing of different visions on the same stage served to reinforce an urban aesthetic; in the city, unexpected sounds and sights similarly create their own impromptu counterpoint.

In *Untwisting the Serpent*, Daniel Albright argues that all modernist works, and by extension, collaborative works from all time periods, can be divided into those in which the multiple arts are consonant with each other, and those in which they are dissonant. In multi-media works, the arts can meld, remain distinct, or deliberately oppose one another. But, in a work like *La Création du Monde*, clashing media meet with disruptions already imbedded within each separate art form. In Leger's sets, for example, we find a divided personality – at once Leger's style and the African influence; city and nature; ancient and modern. The collaborators then decided that Milhaud's music should be out of step with the choreography, a technique that would later reach its culmination in the Merce Cunningham - John Cage collaboration. For Cunningham and Cage, music and dance were entirely separate activities. As Cunningham says of his ballets of the 1950s,

such experiments proved that “blind collaborations do not engender catastrophes.”¹⁵

Cunningham and Cage brought collage to a new phase; they rendered the melding of the arts within a collaboration entirely unnecessary. These two artists can be said to define the post-modern spirit in the multi-media spectacle – the entirely de-centered or multi-centered artwork. But, it was *La Création du Monde*, along with *Parade* and *Four Saints in Three Acts* among other early examples of bricolage which sowed the seeds that would eventually flower (or wither) into a post-modern aesthetic.

La Création du Monde turned out not to be revolutionary; its narrative questioned neither the binaries of the Western tradition nor a progressive, linear, patriarchal evolution when, in fact, the process of creation is generally far more messy. And yet, the myth’s three collaborating Gods were unexpected and beyond the customary Western configuration. The sets, costumes, masks and choreography are delightful, though still caught in the extremes of an ancient-modern duality. The choreography was new, and did create a lineage, beginning with Leger’s next collaboration *Ballet Mécanique*. In this piece, Antheil’s cites Milhaud’s music to *Création*, but he goes much further with such unexpected city sounds as an airplane propeller used as an instrument and written into the score. The non-synchronicity of music and dance in *Création* was highly original, and it served to reinforce the separate quality of the arts on stage. While there is a clear separation between music and movement, and music and visuals, the sets, costumes and performers all merge in the ballet, as if the occurrences on stage were simply an extension of the art of painting. Milhaud’s music, although at times lovely and at others raucous, is not the stuff of scandal. Jazz had been around Europe for quite some time;

¹⁵ Merce Cunningham “Composing by Chance,” in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time*:

Debussy had already written his *Cakewalk*; Stravinsky, his *L'Histoire du Soldat*, and *Ragtime*; Ravel, his *Daphnis et Chloe*. Milhaud, in effect, poses the question, "How can one create a primitive sound?" And, the answer seems to be through non-progressive harmony, through unexpected sonorities, through a modal, neoclassical sound, but clearly not through either jazz or blues which immediately evoke the urban, industrial landscape.

As we examine this work, we are also left with question: "What happens when one wears the masks of other cultures? Can an artist be true to himself and simultaneously show respect for the culture from which he borrows?" The masks of Africa and the sounds of Afro-America are so much more than simple stage devices for the West. They have two separate histories, and the confusion between them is itself problematic. The African mask has been torn from its natural religious context. And its very arrival in France implies an entire history of colonization. Here it is used, like the Afro-American sound, to reveal the Western self and to open Europe to new possibilities for the imagination. At the same time, it masks a set of often ill-informed assumptions about other people and their culture. Deborah Root points out what is suspect in this enterprise:

In effect, an aestheticized taste for some societies far removed from where we actually are can become a way of never having to put the assumptions of our own culture into question or recognize what constitutes the line of demarcation between inside and outside, here and there. The Westerner remains in charge, and the outside remains inside, the aesthetic property of the avant-garde. Admiration of a foreign culture or a foreign aesthetic system can connote broadmindedness and at the same time flatter

Essays 1944-1992, ed. Richard Kostelanetz. (Chicago: A Capella Books, 1992) p. 45.

the aesthetic or political pretensions of the connoisseur. (CC, 21)

Root refers to this form of consumption -- of the spirit of others, of their past or history, or their religious icons and their art – as a form of cultural cannibalism. Clearly this is at play in *Création*, a work in which three Frenchmen construct their pseudo-African myth without any interrogation of the culture out of which the myths and masks arose, and without scrutinizing the imperial project that made their arrival in France possible. Root does have a sense, that this “disease,” as she calls it, manifests itself in aesthetics in the most complex and ambivalent ways (Root 19). From our vantage point, it is easy to criticize the naiveté of these creators. But at the time, few understood the political implications of artistic primitivism in the conquest of the “other.”

Musicologist Glen Watkins presents another possible approach to the role of the Western artist in colonization:

If one of imperialism’s basic goals was to set out quite consciously to modernize, develop, instruct and civilize the natives, it must also be countered that one of the Western artists primary concerns centered on an equally idealized desire to sensitize their own society to values inherent in the primitive. (*PaL* 365)

The implication here is that the attitude of the colonizer did not include aesthetic borrowing, but a conscious suppression of the culture of the subjugated people in an effort to guide them to a better path. The artist is also perhaps unrealistic in his goals. But his aspirations are not to suppress and control, but to take the positive values and teachings of the colonized and make his own culture more open and sensitive to them. In a work like *La Création du Monde*, however, the artists deliberately use otherness with its

edge of danger and darkness, and Africa, real or imagined, becomes necessary for the French to heal from disasters that took place in the mother country. There is little room in this configuration for the possibility of African subjectivity. The use of jazz, with its hybrid roots in both white and black culture and a history already situated in Western culture, is a more complex case. And yet, Milhaud's fusing of Afro-America with Africa is a troubling misconception of the "other," which suggests that black people carry within them their essential, "primitive," *negritude*.

In art there will always be what the Spanish composer, Manuel de Falla refers to as "truth without authenticity,"¹⁶ a phrase he came up with after hearing the uncanny Spanish inflections of Debussy's music. Indeed, these pieces were inauthentic, and yet, according to de Falla, Debussy caught something fundamental to the Spanish manner. Darius Milhaud has been accused of trying to 'one up' jazz with his complex use of polyrhythms which he learned in part from that form. Is this enriching or one-upping? Is it adding to the store of jazz possibilities or an unfeeling appropriation of culture for one's own ends? The exchange of artistic ideas went in both directions – certainly jazz musicians learned from the harmonic language of Debussy and Ravel who had already extended their chords beyond the seventh degree. And yet, when aesthetic borrowing becomes fetishistic, overlooks a history of oppression and robs others of their subjectivity, it becomes a dangerous tool, easily appropriated by colonizers for their own purposes. As Hal Foster says: "as an artistic coup founded on military conquest, primitivism camouflages this historical event, disguises the problem of imperialism in terms of art, affinity, dialogue, to the point . . . where the problem appears resolved" (Foster 95). Later artists, like the surrealists, perceived the dangerous connection between

colonization and the aestheticized “other,” and they responded by politicizing their art. In 1931, in opposition to the Exposition Coloniale in the Musée des Colonies, Louis Aragon and others organized their own anti-colonial exhibition.

Perhaps the most colorful mask used in *La Création du Monde* is that of myth itself. Joseph Campbell claimed that myths are the “masks of god.” But here, they become instead the mask of the West, a useful (though problematic) disguise, through which these artists could help their population towards emotional well-being after the ravages of war. However politically questionable this project was in terms of imperialism, it would later become threatening on an entirely new set of grounds. Hybrid cultural forms were dangerous to the Nazi’s project of racial purity. In Germany, and particularly in Berlin, the artistic collaborative culture, often associated with Expressionism, found its home in cafes (like the famous Café des Westens) and dance halls. There, as in Paris, Jews and non-Jews, rich and poor, established and fledgling met and collaborated freely with one another. Multi-media staged works grew up along similar grounds to those created in France. Conventional theater was rejected in favor of a cohesive aesthetic vision that employed a diversity of artistic media and methods. And, as in France, the artistic impulse to stretch beyond national boundaries led many to imagine other cultures in their art and some to travel. In the teens, Paul Klee and Auguste Macke went to Tunisia for inspiration, and Emile Nolde traveled to New Guinea.

But, National Socialism would eventually wipe out what still remained of the café culture (literary hotspots like the Romanisches Café) and its patrons were dispersed around the globe, from poet and visual artist Else Lasker-Schuler who fled to Jerusalem to Herwarth Walden whose life ended in a prison in Saratow during a Stalinist purge in

¹⁶ Qtd. in Glen Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) p. 72.

1941, to Abraham Stenzel who died in London. Walter Benjamin, who wrote parts of his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German Mourning Play) in the Prinzess Café, would eventually commit suicide in a Spanish border town that he believed the Nazi's were about to invade in 1940. The Nazis were well aware that the dangers of café culture, the "primitivist" allure, and artistic collaborations extended beyond borders of Germany. In 1938, the "Degenerate Music Exhibition," a Nazi-sponsored exhibition to mock and outlaw works that were not acceptable under the Third Reich, was held in Dusseldorf. Jazz and all jazz influenced compositions found their new home in this Nazi display. Even works that may strike us as racist today, like *Four Saints in Three Acts* or *Johnny Auf Spielt* (Ernst Krenek's German opera about a black man) were placed alongside pieces by Stravinsky and Kurt Weill; all of it was denounced under the Nazi catch-phrase, "Nigger-Jew jazz." Among the German people, the appeal of jazz was strong; it did not lend itself to easy suppression as did other works in the exhibition (like the atonal compositions of Arnold Schoenberg). Among its other dangers, as Michael Kater points out, the syncopated rhythms of jazz did not create a steady marching beat, and therefore, the music did not "lend itself to the transmission of propaganda messages: neither martial nor volkisch, jazz sounded alien." Kater also points out that the Nazi's were threatened by that which was individualistic, and therefore, in their minds, trivial when compared with the "racial communal, lofty objectives of the Nazi rulers."¹⁷

The avant-garde spectacles that arose during the twenties were in every way anathema to the Nazi project. In the thirties and forties, the term "collaboration" had

¹⁷ Michael Kater, "Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich," *American Historical Review* 94: 1 (February 1989): 18.

other connotations; especially in places like Vichy, France. How far this political collaboration was from the artistic ones which, rather than joining, seemed to conspire against the enemy. These artists crossed cultural boundaries as they forged outrageous and original new works. In fascist terminology, these “trivial,” “individualistic” works “flew in the face of the collectivist ideals of the Nazi Party.” The avant-garde collaborations demanded that their viewers use their own minds to create sense and coherence out of the juxtaposition of the parts on stage. Their freedom and novelty, based on the principles of improvisation, and the independent thought they encouraged, threatened a system intent on stealing the free will of its people and manipulating them for its own purposes. The approach to myth and aesthetic production, exemplified by Leger, Cendrars and Milhaud in *La Création du Monde* runs the risk of misrepresenting or even overlooking the culture, politics, and people who provided the inspiration (in this case, African and Afro-Americans). And yet, collaborations of this sort also help to ward off the terrible threat of authenticity, of purity and ultimately of Nazism.

II

Double Vision, Multiple Façades and the Origin of the Self: The Artistic Partnership of Edith Sitwell and William Walton

“Words against music – which conquers your heart?” This question, posed to the Countess, in Richard Strauss and Clemens Krauss’ *Capriccio* (1942) has been asked, in one form or another, by artists, critics, and lovers throughout history. The Countess simply responds: “Must I decide? I prefer just to listen.... Perhaps I’ll choose neither, for choosing either means I must lose one” (*Capriccio*, 47). Set in the classical period when Cristophe Willibald Gluck’s operatic reforms emphasized a need for the integration of music and poetry, *Capriccio* has become an allegory for the process of literary and musical collaboration in all time periods. The narrative follows two young suitors, a musician (Flamand) and a poet (Olivier), who have both fallen in love with the same Countess. In the end, the Countess cannot choose between musician and poet; instead, she engenders a marriage between the arts, and Flamand and Olivier, once rivals, go on to write an opera together. While Olivier initially feels the loss of his singular vision when Flamand sets his love sonnet to music, he must learn that the shared goals between poet and musician take precedence. In Strauss and Krauss’s opera, artistic collaboration is presented as a male-male occupation with the woman functioning as inspiration and prize. But, when the work was written, this paradigm was already obsolete. By the twenties, women had become creators in the process of musical-poetic collaborations. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Edith Sitwell and William Walton’s *Façade* helped to reconstruct the relationship between Olivier and Flamand through the illusive narration of a young girl.

Modernists deliberately sacrificed integrity of vision to new, aesthetic possibilities, but this left creators and viewers longing for an earlier, more authentic time. Art had become a reminder of, rather than an escape from, the fractured, mechanized jumble of twentieth century life. But, if a society could be cleansed of its decadence and violence through a return to the inception of time as it was in *La Création du Monde*, it would seem to follow that individuals could purify themselves through a glance at their own personal beginnings. Artists who looked to the future also glanced back at their more natural, childhood self. But that genuine self, like an untouched Africa, was nowhere to be found. And so, these innovators were left to either confront actual children who turned out to be as inauthentic and brutal as adults or construct their own youthful personae out of artificial materials.

The impulse to return to an earlier stage of selfhood was prompted, in part, by a conservative nostalgia for authenticity. And, while these artists were foiled in their search for the genuine, what they found instead served them well. Like the avant-garde creator, the child exulted in play, experimentation and discovery. And so, their search led these artists away from mimesis and back to their own imaginations. The return to childhood, may also be, as Mark Edmundson has suggested, a “major mode of resistance to oppressive social forms” (105). In the collaborations of the twentieth century, youth was often depicted as a form of incorrigible naughtiness and “no saying” to expected bourgeois practice.

Among musical collaborations *without* text, *Parade*, the Satie-Cocteau-Picasso-Massine cubist spectacle, danced by the Ballet Russes, set the tone for ‘innocent’

childlike works with the power to *épater les bourgeois*.¹ This ballet was an invitation to others to reconnect with a childlike simplicity, to revel in parody, and to freely employ eclectic sources and disparate approaches. Along with the traditional orchestra, Satie wrote in sound effects. We hear sirens, pistol shots, a typewriter, a steamboat whistle, and “squishy puddle” noises (realized by striking cymbals with sponge-tipped sticks). One can just imagine an impish youngster gleefully banging or making “squishy puddle” sounds to deliberately disrupt the ballet. In *Parade*, as in *La Création du Monde*, the African-American musical influence is palpable. But while *Création* elevated the low-brow with its blues-turned-four-part-fugue and its sophisticated poly-rhythms, *Parade* deflated the high with its “Ragtime du Paquebot” and its imitation of current vaudeville stars on the concert stage. This irreverence was very much in the spirit of the Dada movement. Tristan Tzara, one of its guiding poets, said of Erik Satie’s work: “musical non-music, irony of don’t give a damnism, the crazy kid on the miracle ladder of the Dada movement” (Gilmore 239). High art was no longer authentically sophisticated; in *Parade*, it became instead an imitation of low culture.²

Finding their inspiration from *Parade*³ and the Dada movement, Edith Sitwell and William Walton apply its principles to their music-text collaboration. In her work on poets, Sitwell cites Jean Cocteau’s line about *Parade* twice, that it is “the poetry of childhood overtaken by the technician” (*Notebook* 15, *Some Notes*, xvii) And, in *A Poet’s Notebook*, clearly thinking of her own work in these terms, she includes a comment in

¹ Cocteau did prepare a text for this work but it was never used in performance.

² See appendix p.1-2 to view Picasso’s painting on the curtain and his original costume for the Chinese Conjuror.

³ With Sitwell’s sensitivity toward word sounds, it would have been impossible for her to overlook the proximity of sound in the words *Parade* (the French pronunciation) and *Façade*. This may have been simply a coincidence, but fortuitous it was.

response: “Works of this order, in poetry, are frequently of an extreme difficulty” (16). In *Façade* (1923), female poet and male composer are entirely attuned to one another’s work, and yet at the same time, they follow separate muses, creating a piece that is layered rather than singular in aesthetic vision. The impetus for Sitwell’s text was her pain as a child, unaccepted for her gender, her appearance, her extraordinary mind, and her eccentricities. Early on, this suffering gave her acute insight into the dangers of conformity and the corruptions of society. We get only a glimpse of the little girl’s personal story; Sitwell focuses instead on the shock and confusion of the child as she glances outward. *Façade* is fundamentally a young girl’s story, told in a manner so artificial that it distances us from both her voice and her pain. We cannot help but be disturbed by the text; it is deliberately inscrutable, nonsensical, and contrived, and it critiques conformist society by disrupting normal linguistic behavior. Sitwell refuses to use language as a window onto her subject matter; instead, through language, we experience the child’s fear, confusion and horror at adult behavior. The verses capture the music of the very culture they critique, but they do so in the wrong medium; the rhythms of popular song forms have been strangely crystallized into words. Through the text’s sounds and stresses, we experience the madness of over-control and the child’s attempt to escape from it.

During the twenties and before, primitivism inspired a renewed interest in the child. As early as 1896, James Sully related children’s artistic development to the growth of “primitive” people. Following this lead, the painter Paul Klee claimed:

One can find the primal origins of art most easily in ethnographic collections or at home in the nursery. Don’t laugh reader! Children

can do it and there is wisdom in the fact that they can too. The more helpless they are, the more instructive their examples, and already at an early stage, one has to save them from corruption. The art works of psychotics are a parallel phenomena and consequently neither childlike behavior nor craziness is a derogatory word here, but rather a precise description of what is meant. All of that has to be taken seriously, more seriously than all the art museums, if we want reform today. (Hofmann 12-13)

While examining African masks, Picasso, along with Klee, Miró, Matisse, and Kandinsky also studied and emulated the works of children. And Dubuffet did the same with those of the insane. These artists worked under the premise that both youth and madness were somehow closer to our authentic selves than adult rationality. In literature, we see this fascination with the youthful viewpoint in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the childlike sensibility of the mentally impaired in the opening section of *The Sound and Fury*. In musical performance during this time, there are a plethora of works written both about and for children -- Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and *For the Love of Three Oranges*, Poulenc's *Babar Suite*, Stravinsky and Ramuz's *L'histoire du Soldat*, Colette and Ravel's *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, to name a few.

The notion that "the child is father to the man," was, of course, not at all new. In the Romantic period, along with William Wordsworth's poetry, the social and educational criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggests that the natural inclinations of children were the product of a native goodness and not of an original sin. During that

time, Schiller summed up the Romantic view of the child as “a lively representation of the ideal,” an image constructed by adults “from the limitation of our condition.”⁴

In an oblique way, twentieth-century psychology furthered this Romantic legacy. Beginning from an empiricist rather than a transcendental base, psychoanalysis shared the Romantic’s notion that renewal could be brought about by regression. In *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Henry Ellenberger refers to psychoanalysis as the “unmasking trend, . . . the systematic search for deception and self-deception and the uncovering of underlying truth.”⁵ The patient tries to remove the corruptions and delusions imposed by society and return to the genuine childhood self.

Unlike *La Création du Monde* and *Parade*, *Façade* was not collaborative from its inception. It began simply as Sitwell’s poems, some of which had already appeared in newspapers, periodicals, or in *Wheels*, the annual anthology of modern poetry which she edited from 1916 to 1921. Others had already been republished in separate volumes – *Twentieth Century Harlequinade* (1916), *Clowns Houses* (1918) and *The Wooden Pegasus* (1920). When the collaboration was first suggested to William Walton by Osbert Sitwell, Edith’s older brother, the young musician examined the poems and declined. It wasn’t until the Sitwells suggested that they would ask composer Constant Lambert that Walton changed his mind. Walton was nineteen years old and Sitwell was thirty-five in late November and December 1921 when the collaboration began. Although Walton was never a “fervent lover of poetry,” as Sacheverell Sitwell (Edith’s younger brother) points out, he “was attuned to them [the *Façade* poems], and had, when directed to them an instinctive understanding.” After failing his examinations at Oxford, Walton went to

⁴ Cited in Richard Flynn, “Infant Sight, Romanticism, Childhood, and Post-Modern Poetry,” in Bernice E. Cullinan, *Literature and the Child* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1989) 51.

⁵ Cited in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 141.

London to live with Sacheverell and Osbert where he stayed for ten years (through the 1920s), and their home together in Carlyle Square became one of the great centers of the avant-garde.

For the Sitwells, Walton was “their elected brother,” and so, *Facade* became a family affair, rather than just the collaboration of two. The idea for the performance piece originated with the brothers, as did suggestions for staging. Although both the Sitwell poems and the Walton score can and do exist on their own, the collaboration has a richness and meaning far beyond that of its separate components. As documented by Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell, musician and poet spent long sessions together going over the words and possibilities for the music. Sitwell began by tapping out the poems, while Walton notated their musical rhythms and tempos. As Edith recounts: “William Walton and I were in closer collaboration than is usual when poems are set to music, because he was then sharing a house with my two brothers.” (*Taken Care of* 139).

In her poetry, Sitwell attempts to expand the possibilities of literary technique, and she did this by moving into the domain of the other arts – music, dance, and painting. With her unprecedented use of rhythm, she manages to reinvent the relationship between Olivier (words) and Flamand (music) before Walton was ever involved. Deeply moved by the Ballet Russes, Sitwell created her own ballet out of words. The rhythms of the poems are based on popular dance forms – a hornpipe, a tango-pasodoble, a tarantella, a country dance, a polka, a waltz, and a fox-trot. She is said to have written them to the sound of street musicians playing under her window. In her prose, Sitwell continually stresses the technical component of the poems:

My experiments in *Façade* consist of inquiries into the effect on

rhythm and on speed of the use of rhymes, assonances, and dissonances, placed at the beginning and in the middle of lines as well as at the end, and in the most elaborate patterns. I experimented, too, with the effect upon speed of the use of equivalent syllables – a system that produces great variation (*CPES* xiv).

This characterization is at once useful and unfortunate. By referring to the poems as “abstract,” she encourages the listener to focus less on meaning. But, the sense is as crucial as to the poems as the sounds which transform, but do not annihilate, meaning.

It is generally accepted that the images in *Façade* were drawn from Sitwell’s childhood and early adult life (*Walton Edition* xii). In the poems, we find ourselves at the seaside and in the nursery, allusions that can be traced to the people Sitwell knew in her youth, and the two houses in which she grew up – Renishaw in Derbyshire, and Wood End, the Sitwells’s seaside resort in Scarborough. In *Façade*, Sitwell never uses a first person narration; instead, we are given innumerable hints of the child’s governing viewpoint. In “Mariner Man,” a voice addresses the old seaman as a child would marveling at his age, “What are you staring at, mariner man,/ Wrinkled as sea-sand and old as the sea?” to which he responds, ending the poem with “But what can that matter/ To you, my girl? (And what can that matter to me?)” (*Walton Edition* 212). In “Small Talk I,”⁶ the young girl refers to herself directly as a recalcitrant youngster: “Miss Sitwell, cross and white as chalk/ Was indisposed for the small talk” (221). The stuff of childhood populates *Façade* from beginning to end – with Madame Mouse, a “Lullaby for Jumbo” (presumably an elephant), and a white owl. (In her biography, Sitwell writes

⁶ This poem is left out of the final version of *Façade, an Entertainment*, and *Façade II*, but Walton set it to music in the initial group of poems. It is now included under the heading “Four Additional Numbers.”

of a significant childhood friendship with a beloved baby owl.) We also enter the internal sphere of young Sitwell's mind, overflowing with commedia dell'arte characters, myths, nursery rhymes, storybooks, ditties, and nonsense.

This approach, however original, does not disrupt the romantic conception of the child; in the poems, the youth, in her innocence, unmasks the corruption of society, even if she doesn't understand exactly what it is she sees. But here, the narrator's language is about as true to childhood as Milhaud, Cendrars, and Leger's ballet was to primordial Africa. Sitwell's exultation in sound, rhyme, and rhythms has a Dr. Seuss quality about it. Her use of a youthful narrative voice, however inauthentic itself, not only exposes the inauthenticity of the adult world, but allows her audience to rediscover the childhood delight in the materiality of language and in experimentation. Many numbers begin as if they were nursery rhymes (even in this strange atmosphere of difficult images and grown-up scandals). *The Polka*, for example, opens:

“Tra la la la la la la la

La!

See me dance the polka”

Said Mr. Wagg like a bear,

“With my top hat

And my whiskers that

(Tra la la la) trap the fair.” (*WE*, 215)

Other poems exult in the visceral pleasures of rhyme, assonance, and consonance as well as danceable rhythms. These common techniques are used with an uncommon intensity in *Façade*. “Valse” begins “Daisy and Lily/ Lazy and silly,” words and sounds that return

in variation at the opening of “Popular Song:” “Lily O’Grady / Silly and Shady, / Longing to be a lazy lady” (*WE*, 216). In her autobiography, *Taken Care Of*, Sitwell emphasizes the lighter components of *Façade*, beginning with the chapter title, “The Audience is Meant to Laugh.”

The return to a childhood voice allows Sitwell to see her words and her world afresh. She often mingles one sense with another, after the fashion of the symbolist poets. But here, it is as if the child has not yet distinguished between the senses, and so she describes a flashing light as if it were simultaneously imitating the sounds of a donkey and the visual effect of a zebra: “The hard and braying light/ is zebra’d black and white.” In a more mournful moment, the appearance of the rain changes texture and then turns into sound:

Each dull blunt wooden stalactite
Of rain creaks, hardened by the light

Sounding like an overtone

From a lonely world unknown.⁷

The reader can almost hear the mysterious vibrations of another place in the repetition of the “o” sound in the words “overtone” “lonely,” and “unknown.” Sitwell’s linguistic virtuosity, her ultra-sophisticated use of allusion, and her enormous vocabulary render this child most unnatural. It is hard to imagine any real youth speaking or writing in the language of *Façade* (with the possible exception of young Edith herself).

Sitwell and Walton both intuitively understand the concept of the vaccine – the remedy involves injecting a little of the disease. And so, inauthenticity is not only the

⁷ This is from “Aubade” which was not used in the final version of *Façade, An Entertainment* but was later incorporated in *Façade 2: A Further Entertainment* (*WE*, 219).

subject of this scathing critique, but also the artists's working method. In looking back to the child, the emotional place of authenticity and purity, Sitwell finds intense pain and confusion. And then, she recreates this childhood space through her own positive use of inauthenticity; the façade of the child is used to expose the façade of a troubled adult world. The work opens with "The Hornpipe":

Sailors come
 To the drum
 Out of Babylon;

 Hobby-horses
 Foam, the dumb
 Sky rhinoceros-glum (*WE*, 212)

Whether at the seaside or in the nursery, we glance at this scene through the lens of youth. Like a hobby horse, the waves move back and forth. And above, the darkening, cloud filled sky perhaps appears as huge, heavy, and grey as a glum rhinoceros. Already, in this opening, Sitwell has attuned us to rhythm, with her short, accent filled lines, and the sharp rhymes on single-syllable words –“come,” “drum,” “dumb,” “glum.” Here she also sets up images that will return or transform throughout *Façade* – (the “rhinoceros-glum” sky, for example, will turn “hippopotamus-glum” by “Sir Beelzebub,” the final poem in the work). In her opening, Sitwell also prepares us for the mélange of real and mythic space. With the evocation of “Babylon,” the original corrupt city of Western tradition (associated with its whore), we know that all is not well, even in this playful, quasi-nonsensical romp. Between the six short lines that open the poem and the five ending lines that mirror them rhythmically, everything passes so quickly before the ears

of the listener (and the eyes of the child) that we haven't the time to entirely absorb the meaning. Sitwell refers to recent English history – Victoria and Prince Albert; and myth – Glaucis, Venus, and Sir Bacchus. The deluge of sights, sounds, names, and impressions is emphasized by the speed of the lines inherent in the poetry and then reinforced and clarified by Walton's transcription of the verbal rhythms and his tempo markings. Sitwell carefully studied linguistic pacing throughout her poetic career. In *A Poet's Notebook*, she shares her insights on the effects of assonance, dissonance, rhyme, and meter on line speed:

For is it really to be supposed that two words of one syllable each, equal in speed one word of two syllables? The two-syllabled words, if unweighted by heavy consonants, move far more quickly. The system, therefore, of equivalent syllables gives variation. (*Notebook* 28, reprinted from Sitwell, *Alexander Pope*)

In "Hornpipe," the dance rhythm (marked most clearly by the three stressed syllables at the end of each line for three lines, followed by a fourth enjambed line) breaks the speed and adds to the rhythmic pleasure. Even without the music, one can hear the hand slapping and floor stomping of the sailors dance:

Lady Venus on the settee of the horsehair sea!
Where Lord Tennyson in laurels wrote a Gloria free,
In a borealic iceberg came Victoria; she
Knew Prince Albert's tall memorial took the colours of the floreal
And the borealic iceberg; floating on they see. . . .(*WE* 212)

Sitwell's images each make sense, from poet Laureate Lord Tennyson's writing of *Gloriana* to the Prince Albert memorial erected in 1871 in Kensington after his untimely death. But, it is as if they are simply dots in a pointilist painting; when one stands back, they blend and create a picture that is incomprehensible if one looks only at the details.

After listening to "The Hornpipe," the audience may feel a bit like Lewis Carroll's Alice after she enters the Looking-Glass World and reads "The Jabberwocky":

"It seems very pretty," she said, "but, it's *rather* hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.)

"Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know exactly what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*: that's clear at any rate." (Carroll 270)

Here, we might change Alice's final line to "*somebody* did *something* scandalous: that's clear at any rate:"

New-arisen Madam Venus for whose sake from far

Came the fat and zebra'd emperor from Zanzibar⁸

Where like golden bouquets lay far Asia, Africa, Cathay,

All laid before that shady lady by the fibroid Shah.... (WE, 212)

This passage, with its "emperor" and his "shady lady," is followed by the mention of Sir Bacchus, and finally, Queen Victoria's shock. The speed and apparent focus on sound as oppose to sense serve both to conceal and reveal the scandal. Throughout *Façade*, the child either speaks nonsense or speeds up the pace each times she views adult misconduct.

⁸ The Emperor of Zanzibar must have been Barghash bin Said, who came to England to ratify an anti-slavery treaty with Queen Victoria.

In this number, Walton's music transports us to what might be the world of the HMS Pinafore. We find ourselves in the middle of a patter song, except the lines are more difficult to understand than those of any captain or modern, major general. Walton begins the number by mimicking (or approximating) the later rhythms of the poem on a solo snare drum -- foregrounding the rhythmic use of the voice even before it has entered. The entire group (piccolo, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, percussion, and cello) then joins in, approaching a jig-like rhythm and a crude melodic line. The music is folk-like, simple and naive, even to the point of banality, introducing Walton's satirical tone.

Example 2-1, mm 2-6 *Hornpipe*, folklike opening:

♩ = 100

PICCOLO

CLARINET (B $\flat$)

ALTO SAXOPHONE (E $\flat$)

TRUMPET (C)

PERCUSSION

VOICE

VOLONCELLO

VOLONCELLO A

VOLONCELLO B

s.d. - Snare Drum

2 against 3

Seil-ore

Settings up the voice rhythm to come. They are approximated here.

pizz.

f

pizz.

f

pizz.

f

The image shows a musical score for a scene from 'The Waste Land'. The score is written for a large ensemble, including Piccolo (Picc.), Clarinet in B-flat (Clar. (Bb)), Saxophone in E-flat (Sax. (Eb)), Trumpet in C (Trpt. (C)), Cello, and Double Bass (A. B.). The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex, fast-paced melody with many sixteenth notes. The lyrics are written below the Cello and Double Bass staves, starting with 'come To the drum Out of the by-lane, Hob-by-hors-es Foam, the dumb Sky thi-no-ces-as glum Watched the'.

Before *Façade* was a collaboration, Sitwell had already applied her theories on linguistic speed to regulate the pace of passages; to increase the tempo, she used multisyllabic words and avoided heavy consonants in lines like “Prince Albert’s tall memorial took the colours of the floreal.” But the velocity of the scandalous passages is perceptible only to the most trained ear. With the sixteenth-note rhythmic notation in the score, this feature is clarified and highlighted.

In “Tango-Pasodoble,” the young narrator again uses speed to cover up the suspicious business she observes. The poem opens with a clear narrative line against South American syncopations and polyrhythms, which further the tango feel.

When

Don

Pasquito arrived at the seaside

Where the donkey’s hide tide

Brayed, he

Saw the banditto Jo in a black cape

Whose slack shape waved like the sea –

At this point, as the scandal begins, the youthful narrator's words approach nonsense. In the score, Walton writes in "Doppio movimento" or double time:

Thetis wrote a treatise noting wheat
 is silver like the sea;
 the lovely cheat is sweet as foam;
 Erotis notices that she
 Will
 Steal
 The
 Wheat-king's luggage, like Babel
 Before the League of Nations grew
 So Jo put the luggage and the label
 In the pocket of Flo the Kangaroo,
 Through trees like rich hotels that bode
 Of dreamless ease fled she,
 Carrying the load and goading the road
 Through the marine scene to the sea.
 "Don Pasquito, the road is eloping
 With your luggage,
 Though heavy and large
 You must follow and leave your moping
 Bride to my guidance and charge." (*WE* 213)

Beneath the fast-paced caper with its mythic characters and references, we can just about make out that Jo has run off with Don Pasquito's wife and luggage. By verse two of the 'sordid' tale, after the four quarter note words "she will steal the," Walton adds to the tension and frenetic feeling with a lively oom-pah rhythm in the bass. By the time Pasquito is informed, we have a full-fledged Dixieland jazz sound that captures the confusion of the narrator, or of Don Pasquito, or of both. For the rest of the poem, Walton returns to the original tempo and the opening tango feel, with the addition of castanets to further the Spanish flavor and a new melody in the flute part. Don Pasquito does retrieve his wife, but the tango he danced at the beginning is not entirely the same. It continues to entice, even if he has become painfully aware of the gossip that surrounds him:

Don Pasquito

Hid where the leaves drip with

Sweet...

But a word stung him like a

Mosquito...

For what they hear, they repeat! (*WE*, 214)

It is hard when reading this poem not to think of Sitwell's own mother who, as Edith explains in her autobiography, ran away from her husband a few days after her marriage. The reluctant bride, however, was sent back by her parents to endure her loveless marriage and to live a thoroughly unhappy adult life.

Example 2-2, mm 37-43 *Tango-Pasodoble*, end of double time section and beginning of a tempo:

The musical score is for a full orchestra and includes vocal parts. The instruments listed are Flute (Fl.), Clarinet in Bb (Clar. (Bb)), Saxophone in Eb (Sax. (Eb)), Trumpet in C (Trpt. (C)), Cymbal (Cym.), Snare Drum (S.D.), and Cello (Cello). The vocal parts are labeled A and B. The score includes the following annotations:

- End of "Doppio Movimento" Section Dixieland jazz sound** (boxed)
- Original tango feel:** (boxed)
- 5** (boxed)
- (♩ = ♩) a tempo primo**
- Oom-pah rhythms:** (boxed)
- mp** (mezzo-piano)
- mf** (mezzo-forte)
- ff** (fortissimo)
- mol - ing** (mollifying)
- Bride to my guid - ance and chancel' When Don Pas -**

It can be argued that even if the child were not narrating the events here, the use of double time would be appropriate. The rapidity with which this is related also mirrors the fast-talking gossips who surreptitiously repeat what they hear. Both interpretations are valid and useful. In the context of the whole, however, it seems likely that this is another moment in which the adult world is refracted through the vision of the young girl. The imaginative, childlike references, "the wheat-king" and "Flo the Kangaroo," are far more

likely to be part of the vision of creative, little Edith than the local gossips. To understand the hurried description as an enactment of the child's nervous bewilderment when confronted with adult misbehavior and lovelessness within marriage (possibly that of her own parents) also lends a poignancy to the poem.

According to Julia Kristeva, within all linguistic systems, there are two components, the semiotic which expresses objective meaning and the symbolic, or the rhythmic, illogical component in language. In poetry, she claims, sense is generated from the commingling of these two and the way each reshapes the other.⁹ In "Hornpipe" and "Tango-Pasodoble," the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic is particularly foregrounded. The literal meaning of the words, when one has untangled them, present societal scandals depicted through childlike imagery; but the rhythmic emphasis and speed changes within the lines expose the young narrator's confused and nervous reaction to these events. We are never told of her distress, rather we experience it as she does in the moment when she witnesses a situation that has gone awry. Sitwell takes full advantage of what Kristeva calls the "dynamic and unrepresentable" component of language to transform logical sense into sense experience. It is not so much the scandals themselves, which seem rather minor to a twenty-first century audience, that disturb us, but the intrusive use of language to display the emotion of the child. Through the symbolic, we hear of the scandal; through the semiotic, we experience the emotions of a child who cannot find the words to articulate her distress. The split between the semiotic and the symbolic and the ways in which the two intertwine to generate new

⁹ Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 89-136.

meaning is rendered apparent through Walton and Sitwell's musical notation of textual rhythms and tempos.

Throughout *Facade*, the child raconteur exposes her consternation not only with narrative speed, but also with nonsense. In *Long Steel Grass*, we are told of a shady "Spanish jade." At the end of the piece, Sitwell gives us the following scenario:

Il Capitaneo:
 Swaggart braggadocio
 Sword and moustachio – He
 Is green as a cassada
 And his hair is an armada
 To the jade, "Come kiss me harder."
 He called across the battlements as she
 Heard our voices thin and shrill
 As steely grasses' thrill,
 Or the sound of the onycha
 When the phoca has the pica
 In the palace of the Queen Chinee. (*WE* 213)

In the last three lines, the meaningless words mask what happens after the hard kiss, presumably some sort of sexual act between the jade and the captain. In spite of her enormous vocabulary, she hasn't the words to express what she has seen. The adult reader can, of course, guess the events that have transpired when the narrator compares this encounter with another event, presumably witnessed as well -- "the sound of the onycha/ When the phoca has the pica/ in the palace of the Queen Chinee." Here again,

logical sense (the symbolic) is, in effect, overtaken by the semiotic (pure sound) to enact the emotion, leaving the reader to guess at the sense.

The poem is backed musically by counterpoint and polyrhythms, but on the line “Heard our voices thin and shrill,” Walton affirms the words by thinning out the music into a single melodic line against the voice part passed from flute to clarinet to sax and then back to flute. This allows the nonsense words to be heard very clearly, if not entirely understood. When the gibberish begins, “sotto voce” is written in the recitation part. It is only appropriate to articulate such acts in hushed tones (even when using nonsense syllables to do so).

Example 2-3, mm 48-56 *Long Steel Grass*, musical highlighting of nonsense language cover-up:

Rich texture

Single melodic line passed among instruments

Thinning texture on word "thin"

Hushed tones

called across the land - the mountains are shrill Heard our voices thin and shrill As the steel grasses' shrill, Or the

(sotto voce)

Helps with the clarity of the recitation
in this nonsense line. ↗

Fl.

B. Clar. (Bb)

Sax. (Eb)

Trpt. (C)

Cello

A

B

ppp

mp

Allegretto

pho - ca has the pi - ca in the pa - lace of the Queen Chs - nee!

When Lewis Carroll's Alice comes across the nonsense of "The Jabberwocky," she also finds a translator in the form of Humpty-Dumpty. He will take the first line, "Twas brillig and the slithy toves" and explain each word: "Brillig means four o'clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin broiling," he begins, and then goes on to unpack the portmanteau word, "slithy," meaning "lithe and slimy" and so on (Carroll, 224). Nonsense is explained and therefore turned into sense. In the end, we find out that both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World are part of two elaborate dreams from which Alice will eventually awaken. In *Façade*, on the other hand, one cannot entirely explain the gibberish, nor can the young Sitwell simply wake up from the nonsense world that surrounds her; all that is left to her is to use one form of nonsense to expose another.

In *Taken Care Of*, Sitwell discusses the two spaces of her childhood; one consists of her lovely garden and her imagination where she remained "untouched by brutish outer life" (32), but in the other, she was subjected to a "stultifying middle class suffocation, on the chance that I would become 'just like everybody else'" (33-34). Aside from being internally different from other children, Sitwell was not a conventionally

pretty child. Already in disgrace with her parents for being female, her unattractive form was too much for them to bear. In her prose, Sitwell recounts how they dealt with her difference:

My parents noticed that I stooped slightly, owing to curvature of the spine, and that my very thin ankles were weak....I was trundled off to an orthopedic manufacturer and incarcerated in a sort of Bastille of steel. This imprisonment began under my arms, preventing me from resting them on my sides. My legs were also imprisoned down to my ankles, and at night-time these, and the soles of my feet, were locked up in an excruciating contraption. Even my nose did not escape this gentleman's efficiency, and a band of elastic surrounded my forehead, from which two pieces of steel (regulated by a lock-and-key system) descended on each side of the organ in question...turning my nose very firmly to the opposite way which Nature had intended, and blocking one nostril, so that breathing was difficult. This *latter* adornment, however, was only worn during my long hours in the schoolroom, as it was thought that it might arouse some speculation – even, perhaps, indignation – in passers-by if worn in the outer world. (TCO 35)

Sitwell's behavior was also deemed unacceptable, and she was often removed from the room for having said something inappropriate in front of guests. In "En Famille," Sitwell gives us the two worlds of her childhood, and Walton makes them palpable in the music. Sitwell also depicts her father, Sir George, who she refers to as "Sir Joshua Jebb." By all accounts, Sir George was one of the last of the oppressive, Victorian eccentrics.¹⁰

¹⁰ Osbert, Edith and Sacheverell's accounts in their respective autobiographies.

As “En Famille” opens, Walton forgoes his customary irony and places the listener in a beautiful, pastoral setting. Before the poem begins, we hear birds singing in the flutes against the rich slow sounds of the cello. The poem begins in a 6/8 rather than the 2/4 feel indicated from the outset by the flutes. Already this rhythmic doubleness suggests a contrast between the natural splendor and the situation of the people who meander through it. The poem begins:

In the early springtime after their tea,
Through the young fields of the springing Bohea,
Jemima, Jocasta, Dinah and Deb
Walked with their father
Sir Joshua Jebb— (*WE* 212)

Example 2-4, mm 1-13, *En Famille*, pastoral opening:

Twittering bird sounds in flute (especially with long trills)

J. = 76

FLUTE 2

VOICE

VIOLONCELLO

VIOLONCELLO A

VIOLONCELLO B

Fl. *When the voice enters, we can feel the in the over - ly spring - time, of - the dark sun, Through the young fields of the*

Cello *8 time p signature against the 2/4 in the Flutes*

A. Cello

The hell of life with father soon takes over in both music and text. Against ominous shimmerings in clarinet and percussion, Walton writes a fast ostinato in the cello featuring the tritone, or the “diabolus in musica” beginning with the line: “We should now stand in the street of Hell/ Watching siesta shutters that fell” (*WE*, 212).

Example 2-5, mm 46-52, *En Famille*, the hellish nation:

Fl. *a tempo Tritones*

Clar. Bb *a tempo Tritones*

Alto Sax. Eb *a tempo Tritones*

Trpt. C *a tempo Tritones*

Perc. *Cym. Wire Brushes / Ominous sound*

Voice *bold-ly in-vok-ing the nan - ti - cal Blast - We should now stand in the street of Hell*

Cello *a tempo Tritones*

Tritones

Fl.

Clar. B $\flat$

Alto Sax. E $\flat$

Trpt. C

Perc.

Voice

Cello

Watch-ing si - ver - ta shut-ters that fell With a noise like ain - ber.

TRITONES

Muted

mp

ppp

p

Sir Joshua Jebb then goes on to discuss the flaws of an elusive “she:”

She gets down from the table without saying “Please,”

Forgets her prayers and to cross her T’s,

In short, her scandalous reputation

Has shocked the whole of the Hellish nation; (*WE*, 212)

How much like young Edith’s peccadillos these crimes sound! The poem ends with the summarizing couplet: “For Hell is just as properly proper/ As Greenwich, or as Bath, or Joppa!” (*WE* 212).

In her 1954 introduction to the *Collected Poems*, entitled “Some Notes on My Poetry,” Sitwell says:

The poems in *Façade* are abstract poems – that is, they are patterns in sound. They are, too, in many cases, virtuoso exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty, in

the same sense as that in which certain studies by Liszt are studies in
transcendental technique in music. (*CPES* xvi)

In each of the Transcendental Etudes, Franz Liszt expanded a yet untapped component of piano technique. The poems, like Liszt's etudes, make tremendous demands on the performer. In her descriptions of the *Façade* poems, Sitwell consistently emphasizes sound, I believe, to encourage the reader to examine the leap into transcendence she attempted in the linguistic dance rhythms and texture. But, as in Liszt's etudes, the lyrical and imaginative content is as formidable as the technique. According to Russell Oberlin,¹¹ who first recited the work with Hermione Gingold under Walton's baton in 1964 for the Promenade Concerts at Prince Albert Hall, if one did not have an advanced musical training, the poems are nearly impossible to recite in rhythm.

Many years later, Adrienne Rich would write her own poem entitled "Transcendental Etude" (1977), and although she may not have known that Sitwell drew inspiration from the same piano works, her piece can help elucidate Sitwell's earlier linguistic etude. Rich writes:

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
Make of our lives a study,
As if learning natural history or music, that we should begin
With the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying
The Hard ones, practicing till strength and accuracy became one with the
daring to leap into transcendence, take

¹¹ Russell Keys Oberlin, the world famous counter tenor, retired from singing at 36, and became a Professor of Music at Hunter College. He is also known in Europe and America for his professional recitations. Oberlin said this to me in an interview I conducted with him in January 2002.

The chance of breaking down in the wild arpeggio

Or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.

--And in fact we can't live like that: we take on

Everything at once before we've even begun

To read or mark time, we're forced to begin

In the midst of the hardest movement

The one already sounding as we are born.... (Rich 73)

If anyone understood and enacted this idea in poetry, it was Sitwell. In *Façade*, she depicts the entire landscape of pious and corrupt Victorian England thrown before the child's eyes all at once. Flung into this impossibly difficult "movement," the child has not yet learned how "to mark time" as those around her do. How will she cope? Through language and sound, she finds a way to make as much sense of this world as she can.

Adrienne Rich's "Trancendental Etude" continues:

And we're not performers, like Liszt, competing

against the world for speed and brilliance....

No one who survives to speak new language, has avoided this;

The cutting away of an old force that held her

Rooted to an old ground, the pitch of utter loneliness

Where she herself and all creation

Seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry

To which no echo comes or can ever come. (Rich 74-75)

Here Rich speaks of the loneliness of creating a woman's writing, or of "writing the female body" as feminists of the seventies called their experiments with a female

language. Sitwell similarly experiments with such a language. But while Rich and the feminists of the seventies searched for a voice to more authentically express their experience, Sitwell found her means of communication through extreme artifice. Her approach reenacts rather than narrates the conventions of a society and the child's response to it. The rhythmic dance speech mimics the sounds and artificiality of the conformist society Sitwell critiques. Imbedded within the text, behind the façade, lies Sitwell's story of growing up female, unwanted, and unconventional in a world too narrow to accommodate her. Throughout, she exhibits the same daring, and suffers the isolation of which Adrienne Rich speaks (even as she worked alongside Walton and her brothers).

Throughout the score of *Façade*, Walton adopts a light, satirical tone. Each of the music hall numbers mimics the sounds of a different popular style -- an Argentinean tango, a Parisian waltz, an Austrian landler, and American jazz throughout. The persistent mention of ethnicity in Sitwell's text can be disturbing; nevertheless, it provided Walton with an opportunity to adopt different ethnic sounds which add considerably to the musical variety of the work. The focus of Sitwell's poems, content-wise, is her early years in the eighteen-nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century; Walton's music, on the other hand, fits comfortably in the nineteen-twenties, with its interest in the music hall entertainment, jazz, dance, and the exotic. What begins as a critique of Victorian and Edwardian society becomes, through the music, an appraisal of the present moment as well. Stylistically, Sitwell's poetry also evokes the twenties in its free-wheeling experimentation and its fascination with dance. But while Sitwell calls forth the avant-garde twenties, Walton suggests conformist culture. Sitwell's approach to language

is so disturbing and original that the listener immediately senses a scathing critique, even without fully understanding its content. Walton's music, on the other hand, filters the scandals of society and the radical new use of language through the seductive sounds of popular music. The score is itself a façade; ironic and charming, but not particularly adventurous. In context, this difference between music and words is not a clash at all, but a clarification of meaning. Through the collaboration, we hear the popular music of the day and the voice that, although it may repeat the appropriate rhythms, will never fit in.

In *Façade*, text and score always remain distinct and somewhat separate from each other, in part because the words are recited against the musical background rather than sung. This approach to language and text collaboration took its lead from earlier experimental works by Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), the highly serious song-cycle that shocked and transformed the music world in 1912, Schoenberg used *sprechstimme*, “a form of dramatic declamation between singing and speaking, in which the speaker uses lilt and rhythm but not precise pitches.”¹² In isolated moments throughout *Façade*, Walton indicates slides in voice pitch similar to Schoenberg's “*sprechstimme*.” Walton eventually narrowed the work down to twenty-one poems which he placed into seven groups of three. In parody of and homage to the earlier masterpiece, Walton deliberately mimicked and reversed the structure of *Pierrot Lunaire*, which had used 21 poems broken into three groups of seven.¹³ Sitwell and Walton also looked to Stravinsky and Ramuz's *Histoire du Soldat* (1917), in which a reciter narrates a Faustian story against the music. In the score, as in *Façade*, some of the language is notated in

¹² American Heritage Dictionary.

¹³ This move was suggested by Constance Lambert for a 1942 performance at Aeolian Hall in which he recited under Walton's baton. The first half of the concert was devoted to a rare British performance of *Pierrot Lunaire* (Walton Edition x).

rhythm. Sitwell and Walton acknowledge the influence of this piece on *Façade*, and yet, their use of linguistic dances in exact, notated rhythms throughout is entirely new.

Both Sitwell and Walton maintain a certain distance from their subject matter. Sitwell's virtuosity and artificiality become a shield, distancing both the viewer and herself from the pain and passion inherent in her subject matter. Walton's cool objectivity finds its expression in his neo-classical style and his use of parody. In "Something Lies Beneath the Scene," Walton opens with a wake-up call in the form of a distorted version of "Reveille" played, of course, on trumpet. The parodic quality is reinforced by the percussive punctuation between phrases of a cymbal hit with a stick and a wood block. This "wake up call," is just that; for even in the title of this number, we understand that the main theme (society's façade) will be foregrounded.¹⁴

Example 2-6, mm 1-4, "Something Lies Beyond the Scene," "Reveille," in trumpet:

15 SOMETHING LIES BEYOND THE SCENE

FLUTE

CLARINET B $\flat$

Alto
SAXOPHON E $\flat$

TRUMPET C

PERCUSSION

VOICE

VIOLONCELLO

Reveille in trumpet

Cym. with stick

Block

Cym.

Percussion commentary reinforces the parody

pizz.

ff

¹⁴This echoes an earlier use of the Reveille wake up call which opened "Long Steel Grass."

The music announces but never touches what lies beneath; that task is left entirely to the poetry.

Walton's attunement to Sitwell's words is absolute, whether or not he understands the intensity of Edith's critique or shares the same goals for the work. His ironic humor adds tremendously to the whole. It shifts the focus, softens the pain, and reinforces society's outer shell, which is as enticing as it is dangerous. In "Valse," Walton imitates both the urbane, parodic Ravelian waltz and the original, Viennese, dances of Johann Strauss. (Walton parodies both the original and its parody.) As the poetry speaks of the world of fashion, so the musical evocation of Paris and Vienna are highly appropriate. The piece opens with two society girls discussing the latest styles:

Daisy and Lily
 Lazy and silly,
 Walk by the shore of the wan grassy sea, --...
 They roam and determine
 What fashions have been and what fashions will be.
 What tartan leaves born,
 What crinolines worn,
 By Queen Thetis,
 Pelisses
 Of tarlatine blue. (*WE*, 216)

This opening is backed by Walton's distant Parisian waltz with its cool flute melody and an intricate cello ostinato with added glissandi (another nod to Ravel). Walton also uses cross-rhythms among the different voices that reinforce the sense of urban sophistication.

Example 2-7, mm 1-12, "Valse," Parisian waltz:

FLUTE

CLARINET A

SAXOPHONE B $\flat$

TRUMPET C

PERCUSSION

VOICE

VIOLONCELLO

FL.

Clar. A

Sax. B $\flat$

Trpt. C

Perc.

Voice

Cello

cool flute melody

2 against 3

Displaced accents

on the film

Le - zy and Lil - ly

Walk by the shore of the sea grass - y sea,

Dai - sy and Li - ly,

Walton's ironic touch makes us aware that this is not a society to be taken too seriously, even if it has been penetrated by the mythic. Queen Thetis (the daughter of Nereus and mother of Achilles) has become one of these fashionably dressed, high-profile women.

In the second half of the poem, Walton begins his Viennese Waltz. Here the slick, distant flute melody is replaced by the warmer alto saxophone line and backed by a more straightforward bass line. In the counter melody and the punctuating comments of the clarinet and flute, however, Walton furthers the parody.

Example 2-8, mm. 67-72 “Valse,” Viennese style waltz:

Fl. [3] Tempo

Cl. in A

Alto Sax. Solo - warm alto sax line

Trump. in C

Perc.

Voice Louise and Char-lot-tine (Bo-re-as' daughters) And the nymphs of deep wa-ters, The

Cello pizz. [3] Tempo

Parodic commentary in flute/clarinet

Rim

Straight forward bass line

As the poem continues, we are introduced to many more classical allusions. And we are left to wonder whether the narrator has clothed the fashion world in mythic names, or the fashions of today have, indeed, become the apparel of the mythic characters:

Louise and Charlottine¹⁵

(Boreas' daughters¹⁶)

¹⁵ Louise and Charlottine refer to two ballet dancers who are named three lines later as “nymph Taglioni,” and “Grisi the ondine.” Maire Louise Taglioni (1803-1884) had become a legendary figure, rated as the best ballerina of her time. After her success in *La Sylphide*, her Victorian costume, designed by Eugene Lamy, is said to have changed the ballet forever. Carlotta Grisi (1819-1899) was most famous for creating the role of Giselle. She also became a favorite at her majesty’s theater in London.

And the nymphs of deep waters,
 The nymph Taglioni, Grisi the ondine
 Wear plaided Victoria and thin Clementine
 Like the crinolined waterfalls;
 Wood-nymphs wear bonnets, shawls,
 Elegant parasols
 Floating are seen.
 The Amazons wear balzrine of jonquille
 Beside the blond lace of of a deep-falling rill;...(WE, 216)

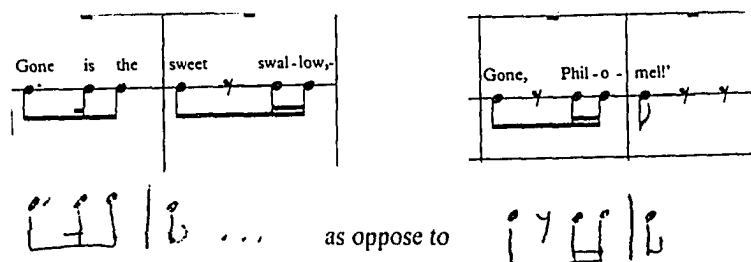
Whether we are in the space of the real or the legendary, one thing is clear – the purity and beauty of romanticism are lost forever. The poem ends: “Gone is the sweet swallow, --/ Gone, Philomel” (WE 217). In this line, Sitwell refers to two poems in which a Romantic sensibility is still viable. The first Swinburne’s “Itylus,” in which he calls out, “Sister, my sister, O fleet, sweet swallow” the second is, of course, Keat’s “Ode to a Nightengale.” In back of these lines, Walton astutely breaks the irony. They are spoken without accompaniment, although immediately after, Walton again lightens the tone with a frivolous final phrase. The rhythmic notation of these lines suggests a difference between Swinburne’s and Keats’ respective birds, as if this were a double, not a single loss. The opening of each suggest the same scansion, the only difference being the addition of “swallow” (- /) in the first:

/ ~ ~ / ~ /
 Gone is the sweet swallow!
 / ~ ~ /
 Gone Philomel.

¹⁶ Boreas was the purple-winged god of the north-east wind. His breath was said to bring on the chill if winter, and thus he was also regarded as the god of winter, snow and ice. He had two daughters who are named Kleopatra and Khione.

And yet, in the score, they are not expressed as rhythmic equivalents:

Example 2-9, mm. 179-180, 183-184 “Valse,” subtle rhythmic transformation:



This difference subtly enhances the meaning in a manner only possible when language is given the rhythmic exactitude of musical notation.

The selection following “Valse” takes us out of the fashionable venues of Paris and Vienna and into the mountains; we are given another waltz, but this time it is a rustic Austrian Landler,¹⁷ entitled “Jodelling Song”. Sitwell begins:

We bear velvet cream.

Green and babyish

Small leaves seem; each stream

Horses tails that swish.

And the chimes remind

Us of sweet birds singing

Like the jangling bells

On rose trees ringing

¹⁷ A Landler is a category of Austrian folk dances. It is done in a slow waltz time.

Man must say farewells

To parents now,

And to William Tell

And to Mrs. Cow. (*WE* 217)

In these verses, Sitwell presents the difficult moment in the child's life when she must give up her story-book sense of the world. The childish quality of what the (now adolescent) girl must leave behind and the sing-song nature of the dimeter and the rhyme scheme undercut the emotion. Walton follows suit with a highly sentimental tune that he undermines with his witty, musical commentary in secondary voices. He opens with an unaccompanied melody on the alto sax, as if it were coming from a lone musician on a mountaintop. He then word paints in the most mocking fashion; we hear cow bells and twittering, birdlike flutes. In anticipation of the word "William Tell," Walton writes in strains from Rossini's overture, with the opening theme in the flute and the famous "Lone Ranger"¹⁸ motive superimposed in the muted trumpet and then in the sax. It is true, Walton indulges in a bit of schmaltz as he moves his tender melody into the minor key against words expressing the waiter Ganymede's "heart of ice." But he quickly returns to the ironic tone, and over the words "lovers true" and "sweet birds," we hear the mocking end of a yodel in the flutes.

¹⁸ The Lone Ranger was, of course, not yet a character when this was written. I simply use it here as a shorthand to identify the music for the reader.

Example 2-10, mm. 5- Rh. #1, mm. 5 "Jodelling Song," Walton's *William Tell* parody:

End of yodels

Fl.

Clar. Bb

Alto Sax. Eb

Trpt. C

Perc.

Voice

Cello

ba-by-lah Small leaves seem; each stream Hor-see! all that swish, And the chimes re-mind Us of

Cowbell imitation

William Tell Overture—

Fl.

Clar. Bb

Alto Sax. Eb

Trpt. C

Perc.

Voice

Cello

sweet birds singing, Like the jang-ling bells On rose trees ringing. Man must say fare well To

"Lone Ranger" theme from William Tell

Superimposition of key William Tell themes- blatant parody

Fl.

Clar. Bb

Alto Sax. Eb

Trpt. C

Perc.

Voice

Cello

pre-ents now, And to William Tell, And Mrs. Cow. Man must say fare-wells To

Ironical distortion of "Lone Ranger" theme in trumpet (with mute)

*Cymbal struck with the triangle itself, not the triangle stick

Sitwell's verses also maintain a humorous distance as the birds try to entice the growing girl back to her old beliefs:

And the sweet bird begs
 And tries to cozen
 Them: "Buy angels' eggs
 Sold by the dozen." (*WE* 217)

And yet a tragedy is also unfolding before her; the waiter apparently betrays his loyal lover and she commits suicide:

And the mountain streams
 Like cowbells sound—
 Tirra lira, drowned
 In the waiter's dreams

 Who has gone beyond
 The forest waves,
 While his true and fond
 Ones seek their graves. (*WE*, 217)

The youthful narrator's innocent sense of how people treat one another perhaps also drowns. After this painful ending, Walton closes the sentimental melody in the flute and clarinet and then returns to the lone ranger theme which is played twice, first in F in the alto sax, and then in a distorted fashion in E in the trumpet. From the key of E, we expect to end in A, but instead, Walton switches back to a final cadence in F, yet another technique to undermine the sentimentality.

Example 2-11, mm. 45-50 “Jodelling Song,” Walton’s ironic distortion:

The musical score for Example 2-11, mm. 45-50, "Jodelling Song," shows Walton's ironic distortion. The score includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet in Bb (Clar. Bb), Alto Saxophone in Bb (Alto Sax. Bb), Trumpet in C (Trump. C), Percussion (Perc.), Voice, and Cello. The music features a "Lone Ranger" theme in the Clarinet and Alto Saxophone. A box labeled "Irony distortion in muted trumpet" points to the Trumpet staff. Handwritten notes below the score indicate a cadence in two different keys: F, E (We expect A), and F.

Cadence in two different keys undercuts the sentimentality

Façade is above all about masks. The child’s mode of expression, however artificial, is used to expose society’s underbelly. Throughout the work, there are many disguises – the use of mythological names to cover the identity of characters; the increase of speed and the employment of nonsense words to hide scandals. Above all, Walton’s dance hall music provides a palatable surface for actions that are disturbing and verses that are audacious and difficult. But there are also isolated moments in *Façade* when Walton lets go of his clever satire in favor of genuine beauty and melancholy; in “By the Lake,” we see a momentary escape from the cover-up that constitutes the lives of two estranged lovers. This is one of the few instances in *Façade* when the child narrator is not detectable. In the course of the poem, we learn that the woman has married someone else,

presumably for money. (The husband is referred to here as “Midas.”) The piece opens with two voices – the clarinet and the cello that, in effect, announce the lovers. The cello part slides from the G# to an E harmonic as if wailing. The melody is written in an extremely high and unnatural register for the instrument. The conflict between the initial G# and the high G-natural two measures later perhaps suggests the clash in the man’s internal feelings. The clarinet begins with a downward minor second, one of the most pained intervals in music, and the piece is set in the mournful natural minor. Later, the two people are depicted by the piccolo and cello, the lowest and highest voices in the group. The contrast in range emphasizes the distance between these two, and the inflexibility of their simultaneous, separate melodies suggests that they may not be listening to or responding to each other at all.

Example 2-12, mm. 1-11 “By the Lake,” two estranged voices -- cello and piccolo:

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-11 of "By the Lake". The score includes staves for Piccolo, Clarinet Bb, Alto Saxophone Eb, Trumpet C, Percussion, Voice, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked $\text{♩} = 54$. A box labeled "Minor second" points to the first measure of the Clarinet Bb staff. A box labeled "Wailing of cello" points to the first measure of the Violoncello staff, with a handwritten note below it: "E harmonic, G# - conflict - G". Another box labeled "E-harmonic" points to the second measure of the Violoncello staff, with a handwritten note below it: "G# - conflict - G". A large box on the right side of the score contains the text: "Two voices like the two people in the poem. Distance between these estranged lovers emphasized by the contrast in sonority and range." The score is in 4/4 time and features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mp* and *pp*.

The image shows a musical score for Walton's 'Cold-Hearted December'. The score is written for a full orchestra and a vocal soloist. The instruments listed on the left are: Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon in Bb, Trumpet in C, Trombone, Violin, Voice, and Cello. The vocal line is in the center, with lyrics written below it. The lyrics are: 'across the flat and the pass - tel snow Two peo - ple go... And do you re - member when'. The score is in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). There are first and second endings marked with '1' in boxes at the end of the vocal line and the cello line.

Walton also beautifully represents two time periods – the “cold-hearted December” of the present and a happier one before. The poem begins:

Across the thick and the pastel snow

Two people go...

“And do you remember

When last we wandered this shore?”

...Ah, no!

For it is cold-hearted December. (*WE*, 215)

The piece is in 2/4. But, for one measure, Walton changes to 3/4, as if to suggest that, for a single moment, they have returned to different time.

Example 2-13, mm 16-19 “By the Lake,” time shift:

The musical score for Example 2-13, measures 16-19 of "By the Lake," illustrates a time shift. The score is written for Flute, Clarinet, Alto Saxophone, Trombone, Voice, and Cello. A bracket above measures 16-18 indicates a "Measure in 3/4 shift to another time." A box above measure 19 indicates "Return to present on the word 'Dead'". The music is in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: "...com-ber! Dead, the house that like an old ear hangs on the".

When the text begins again on the word “dead,” the music, like the alienated couple, has returned to the 2/4 of the present.

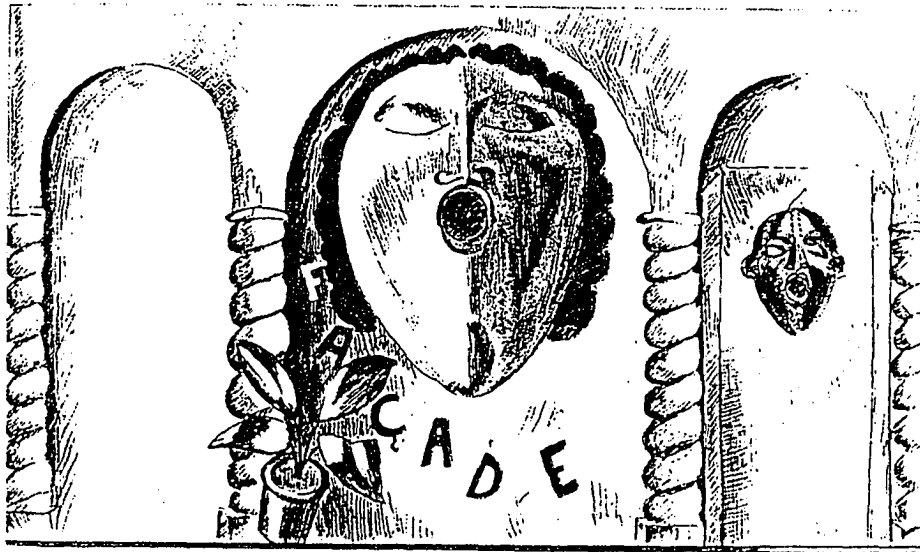
To the many figurative masks within *Façade*, Sitwell and Walton add literal ones in performance. Sacheverell suggested that the poems should be recited through a sengerphone, a megaphone-like instrument.¹⁹ According to Osbert, the sengerphone was made of compressed cotton, so there is no metallic tone at all. As a result, it “beautifies rather than distorts the timbre of the human voice” (*WE* xii). Edith believed it necessary for her voice to be heard over the instruments in this pre-microphone era. Sitwell also created distance by minimizing the expression in her voice as she read. After the first performance, Osbert commented that she narrated with “sharply defined and clearly accentuated rhythm, producing an effect somewhere between a Greek chorus and

¹⁹ The sengerphone was invented by the Swiss singer Alexander Senger to amplify the voice of the bass singing off stage in the role of Fafner in Wagner’s *Siegfried*.

the reading of a tenancy agreement” (*WE* xii). Sitwell wished to minimize individual expression. As she remarked, she hoped “to deprive the work of any personal quality (apart from the personality inherent in the poems and music” (*WE* vi). From the recording made of the 1949 performance of *Façade* at the Museum of Modern Art, one can hear Edith’s effort to disguise emotion by emphasizing rhythm over inflection. But, her natural sensitivity towards the humor and horror of her own subject matter, as well as towards the sound of words is also audible; genuine feeling is conveyed, even through the veil sonorous detachment.

To this, Sitwell and Walton also added visual masks. Osbert suggested that all the performers present *Façade* from behind a curtain which was designed by the sculptor Frank Dobson:

Example 2-14: Frank Dobson’s original *Façade* curtain created for the first public performance given at Aeolian Hall, London, June 12, 1923:



The large female mask head at the center was painted red on the right side and white on the left, and behind its large mouth, Edith's sengerphone was placed. From behind the mouth of the smaller (black) mask under the left arch, Osbert acted as master of ceremonies. These painted faces vaguely resemble African masks, so popular at the time, and perhaps suggest that *Façade* too lies on the cutting edge of avant-garde production. In all, the Sitwells would commission three curtains for performances of *Façade*, one of which was designed by the Italian futurist Gino Severini, the other by the English artist John Piper.²⁰ The scrim also allowed the shy Edith to remain unseen as she recited. In a recent interview I conducted with Russell Oberlin,²¹ he discussed a performance in which Edith and Constant Lambert recited together. During the recitation, from behind the curtain, Lambert, the consummate musician, tapped the difficult rhythms out on Edith's leg to keep her in time. The performance was impeccable, but it left her with a souvenir set of black and blue marks.²²

Together Walton and Sitwell explore the detrimental cover-up of Victorian society in their own flamboyant charade. It is no surprise that, as Osbert says, the debut created "a first class scandal in literature and music: the mask on the curtain was characterized as a meaningless, crudely-painted moon face," the music as "collected from the works of the 'most eccentric of ultra-moderns' while the words were dismissed as drivel" (Osbert Sitwell 192). And yet, the music is delightfully melodic and eminently

²⁰ The Severini curtain doesn't survive. Go to the appendix page 3 to see John Piper's scrim.

²¹ This interview was conducted in January, 2002.

²² According to Oberlin, William Walton related this story on a train trip he took with the composer before the 1964 performance of *Façade* at Albert Hall, in which Oberlin and Hermione Gingold recited and Walton conducted.

safe. Walton uses all the techniques of the time; each piece is carefully attuned to the words and elegantly crafted. Walton would later rework these into enchanting orchestral suites without the poems. In the instrumental versions, we get the façade emptied of the social critique. Of course, they retain their gentle satire and joyful parody, but the brutality and suffering (which Sitwell herself hid under layers of artificiality) are no longer detectable. *Façade* not only survives in these forms, but also as a ballet, performed both with and without the words. Given *Façade*'s music and word dances, it is no surprise that the ballet was a success. It was choreographer Frederick Ashton's first big hit, exciting laughter and evoking beauty and sorrow. But in the ballet, far more than in the Sitwell-Walton collaboration, the façade is emphasized and the exposure of corruption obscured. We do get a sleazy Don Pasquito, but that seems more a response to the tango as a dance than anything expressed in Sitwell's poem. In the Ashton piece, there is a great emphasis on the nineteen-twenties, its dance and costume styles and its sources of amusement. The vocal part, when it is included at all, becomes almost another orchestral instrument, making sounds that are pleasing and funny; their sense and sorrow are all but entirely covered over. When Sitwell uses the techniques of dance and music in language, she is doing something highly innovative. There is a tremendous difference between the expansion of language into the domain of dance, and the conversion of these radical words back into their original media.

While Sitwell exposes the pain of a child coming to consciousness, she never questions the little girl's innate innocence. The young narrator unmask the society's artificiality even if she is herself entirely artificial. In *Façade*, we get intimations of Wordsworth's child who comes "trailing clouds of glory...from God who is our home."

Below her cool detachment, we sense Sitwell's nostalgia for an earlier time ("Gone is the sweet swallow, / Gone Philomel,") and the residue of a Romantic view of childhood. Sitwell expresses her romantic vision more directly in her prose: "The mind of the child resembles that of the artist in as much as nothing appears to it as finite; infinity alone exists. Life therefore seems enormously more important than it does to the grown-up person who is not an artist" (*Children's Tales* 18-19). Aside from narrating her own treatment under a repressive father ("En Famille"), the girl also witnesses the anguish of women in loveless marriages ("Tango-Pasodoble," "By the Lake"). And, she sees a man's faithlessness lead to a woman's suicide in "Jodelling Song." While Sitwell is aware of the plight of women, she also understands their superficiality and the venom of their gossip ("Tango-Pasodoble").

Together Sitwell and Walton create a child whose language is inflected with a sophisticated vocabulary and the rhythms of the surrounding adult world. She is a synthesis of the child and the adult, the nursery and the music hall. This technique distances the audience from the horror. The faux-child functions as a reminder of innocence, capable of revealing while attempting to conceal the scandals she observes. Sitwell enacts the moments of the girl's discovery by increasing the speed of delivery and by using nonsense words to articulate her astonishment. In the introduction to her book *Children's Tales from the Ballet Russes*, Sitwell describes a ballet whose story she also retells in terms of a child narrator: "there is no fierce movement of life against a fairy tale, that knowledge has turned to tragedy – only life as seen by the eye of a child – life as rounded, cool and clear as the cheek of an apple." This view of childhood is far more tempered in her collaboration; the child in *Façade* glimpses the world's apple-hue as she

gains an incipient understanding of its rotting core.

In *La Création du Monde* (written one year after *Façade*'s public debut), there is an apparent distinction between the avant-garde, twentieth-century European artist and his subject matter, primeval Africa. The interpenetration of the artists's imaginations and the object of representation is evident, and yet, in the end Africa is all but subsumed by the creative approaches of the collaborators. In *Façade*, however, the boundaries between adult Sitwell, the writer, and young Sitwell, the object of representation, are not so clearly defined; after all, this is a relationship between different incarnations of the self. Sitwell's artifice in her autobiographical poetry is clearly in keeping with the tenor of the times. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, first in the painting, and then in the other arts, the reign of mimesis had come to an end. As William Carlos Williams, who had himself been deeply influenced by cubism, explains:

Poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it – it affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality . . . exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, is creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but – as birds wings beat the solid air without which none could fly, so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight.²³

Sitwell's choice to present her story as a dance rather than as a mirror up to nature may have been a psychological necessity. Perhaps, she needed to keep herself at a distance from the terrible alienation of her childhood. As the product of London, the society of facades, Sitwell may also have had trouble critiquing directly. She was, after all, well

²³ Qtd. in David A. Fedo, *William Carlos Williams: A Poet of the American Theater* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983) p. 59.

taught to maintain decorum and to present criticism, if she must, in a veiled or ironic fashion.

Unlike the collaborators of *La Création du Monde*, Walton did not have an equal claim to the “object of representation,” if indeed that object was the child narrator. In the music, Walton sets the society observed rather than the emotions of the observer. But, through the linguistic rhythms and tempos he notated, we detect the narrator’s responses. The music further assures that respectability is maintained; pain and outrage are blanketed with an ever-pleasant veneer of sound. And yet, the stresses of the lines continue to disturb. Rhythm, in effect, overtakes sense, but for the attentive listener, meaning is still expressed, only in a visceral fashion. If we do not see Sitwell’s pain directly, we feel it through the semiotic rather than the symbolic components of the verse.

Walton’s score comments on each situation at hand. It refracts Sitwell’s insight into an earlier time through the dances of the adult world of the twenties, and it elucidates the joy and melancholy inherent in the poems. In the transformation to a collaboration, the gain was tremendous, and although Walton’s music is not particularly innovative, the collaboration that emerged between music and text was indeed radical. And yet, highlighting the façade, Walton’s music allows the listener to evade the meaning of the words and overlook (to some extent) their innovative, disquieting quality. Walton tips the balance away from the young girl’s horrifying pain, shifting the emphasis to the lighter, parodic nature of the critique.

In response to a decadent, fractured world, many artists of the time looked back to childhood. But, the purity and authenticity they sought eluded them. There is, however, still something of value to be salvaged from the return to childhood. The youthful

speaker's vivid imagination allows for fresh vision and experimentation. This capacity renders the simple dichotomy between genuine and fake useless; for, it exposes that the most natural of all instincts is play, the youthful activity that allows us to be inauthentic or more than what we are. *Façade* is, in effect, a "synthetic" production in both senses of the word. Together, the collaborators have created a child who is most un-childlike, a constructed, artificial voice that has imbibed the adult rhythms of the day. *Façade*'s creators have also synthesized disparate aesthetic visions and different dance forms to create a text that is about deep sorrow and frivolous fun, and above all, the way in which one can cover up the other. Sitwell and Walton's unprecedented approach to musical and poetic collaboration in this work defies classification; instead, *Façade* hovers over categories, never willing to drop into a single one. Is the work an oratorio or a high class English rap tune? Is the music the incident or is the music incidental?

In the twenties, the avant-garde, multi-media spectacle is defined, in part, by eclectic approaches used side by side or simultaneously without merging into homogeneity. In *Façade*, the styles of the creators are, to some extent, super-imposed on one another. Strauss and Krauss' Olivier and Flamand must serve the same Countess, or inspiration, in order to create a successful marriage between words and music. When collaborators are free to follow different muses, they can retain a certain authenticity to their individual aesthetic approach, even if the total effect appears to be inauthentic or lacking in integrity. Whether or not there are multiple approaches, composers of the time were still highly attuned to the words as words. Walton continues to employ traditional techniques for musical setting. He is careful to allow difficult lines to be heard over the instruments; he word paints with remarkable accuracy and strives for an emotional

correspondence among story, speech and sound, even if his vision of the whole was more light-hearted than that of Sitwell.

Moving outside the male-male creator, female muse paradigm is significant, but the specifics of that transformation within a single work often remain nebulous. In *Façade*, we can, however, detect two different, gendered angles on the same material. Walton does not focus on the (essentially female) suffering of the individual produced by conformist society, but on the conformity itself. He pulls off this conventionality even within a diversity of styles. And yet, over the whole is thrown the white wash of frivolity and popular dance. In this context, he still leaves enough space for the ironic comment, the parodic imitation, and a touch of sorrow. Even with the musical background, Sitwell's words remain intact, and her linguistic approach and sense expose the cacophony at the heart of this melodious scene. Music and words never entirely meld, although they are attuned to one another; instead of a traditional marriage of music and text (in which two bodies become one flesh), they form, in effect, a modern partnership in which each remains distinct but the two work together. In D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Birkin describes love as a "strange conjunction....—Not meeting and mingling; ...--but an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings: as the stars balance each other" (139). Lawrence's astronomy may not accord with the universe or even with love, but it does with artistic collaboration. Like the two stars, the words and the music may be able to stand on their own, but together they orbit around each other and create an entirely new system.

III

Colette and Maurice Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*: Sounding the Half-Heard Suggestions of the Text

Three years after *Façade*, Colette and Maurice Ravel's *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* (*The Bewitched Child*)¹ premiered in France. This enchanted work was one of the first operas to adopt the avant-garde approaches to collaborative work introduced through dance. Michel Fokine (choreography) and Leon Bakst (sets and costumes) and Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloe* had already been performed by the Ballet Russes, and Diaghilev's troupe would go on to dance *L'Enfant* with choreography by George Balanchine. In an ideal production of this one-act opera, there is, if not an equality among the arts, a heightened importance of dance and décor. At the Monte Carlo premier and the subsequent run in Paris at the Opéra-Comique, although the movement was as essential as the singing, the décor did not reach the heights expected of the Ballet Russes productions. Although the opera was an immediate success, text, score, and choreography, in effect, call out for imaginative visuals, and ever since, significant artists have attempted to supply the missing component. Throughout the work, Ravel's parody and pastiche echoed the ethos of his time, but the relationship between score and text returned an older tradition, albeit with a difference. Unlike in other avant-garde spectacles, music and words flow together as if Ravel and Colette were of one mind on all aesthetic decisions. While maintaining this traditional illusion, librettist and composer highlight different components of the story, and the two separate their respective arts at climactic moments. Together, they create a work that almost imperceptibly topples

¹ In English the title, has also been translated as: *The Dreams of a Naughty Boy*, *The Child and the Sorceries*, or as Virgil Thomson suggested, *Childhood Hallucinations*.

operatic conventions.

In *The Banquet Years*, Roger Shattuck sums up the Modern aesthetic revolution as follows: “The twentieth century has addressed itself to arts of juxtaposition as opposed to earlier arts of transition” (Shattuck 285). In “arts of transition,” the task of the creator is to move from point A to point B through time and, at places of juncture, to clearly articulate the relation among the parts Shattuck goes on: “It means one event, one sensation, one thing at a time, and is the effective result of the great renaissance disciplines” (Shattuck 286). But, as the borders between the disciplines dissolved, so did an aesthetics of transition. In many ways, Colette and Ravel reincorporate this aesthetic. While the content of *L'Enfant* is untraditional and very much of its own period, the story follows a conventional narrative line. A picaresque tale of sorts, it leads to a climax in which the protagonist experiences internal change, perceptible to the audience in an unprecedented act on his part. But, the piece is also a visual depiction of the landscape of a child’s mind. Given the plot structure, Ravel’s applied an “aesthetics of transition” to allow the story to grow through time, as well as one of juxtaposition in his eclectic score.

In a conventional operatic paradigm, it is the composer who works as the principal dramatist, fleshing out the characters and the skeleton of a story provided by the libretto. And, in a traditional fashion, Ravel takes on this role. Unlike the libretti of Sitwell, Stein and Auden, Colette’s text did not focus on language, but on plot. The words are simple (yet poetic) and the story is lightly sketched; it cannot stand on its own, as the component parts of other avant-garde collaborations between the wars can. Instead, it calls out to the music for completion. It is the score that breathes life into text. But, as Ravel elaborates through the music, so his musical story keeps a certain distance from

Colette's literary one, and perhaps transforms the conflict at the heart of the tale. In this work, as in *Façade*, the glance of the child becomes a vehicle to expose the adult world. But, unlike the artificiality of Sitwell's narrative voice, this young protagonist speaks, sees and feels as a genuine child might. Throughout the opera, we explore his rich and varied emotions as they are, not as they should be.

Colette originally submitted her text to Jacques Rouché, the Director of the Paris Opera, and he suggested several composers, and when Ravel's name came up, Colette made her choice. Ten years before, they had met at the salon of Madame Marceaux – where illustrious musicians came every Friday night, including Debussy and Ravel's teachers, Gabriel Fauré and André Messager. Ravel was not her "elected brother," like Walton was to Sitwell; nor did Ravel and Colette go to night clubs together to help them reimagine their own work like Milhaud, Leger and Cendrars. Their work together occurred primarily in a set of letters, and in Colette's vivid stage directions which serve as another form of letter writing from the librettist to the composer. Colette did not hear the entire score until the premier in Monte Carlo on March 21, 1925.

The bulk of their labor on the project was completed, in fact, during two different time periods. Between the composition of the text (1916) and that of the music (1920 – 24), the private and public worlds of these artists changed – World War I ended, *Parade* had its infamous premier, Ravel's beloved mother died, and an entirely new aesthetic and political decade began. When Colette sent the original libretto to Ravel in 1916, he was away serving in the war. In 1917, she put another copy in the mail, and he immediately agreed to the project. Although Ravel did not write any of the music for three years, he sent letters to Colette to reassure her that he was thinking about the work. It was not until

1924, after Ravel was given a contract to complete the opera for the up-coming premier, that most of his composing was done. Like Sitwell, Colette looked back to childhood to comprehend a violent age. But, by the time Ravel wrote the score, the need to understand the causes of war had lost its urgency, although its repercussions were still felt deeply in France. And so, for Ravel, the brutality of the story lies not so much in the destructive impulse of the child, but in the far more subtle violence that has already been done to him. Each of the narrative and thematic suggestions that Ravel highlights in the music are already visible in Colette's text, but the thrust of the story seems to change. Through the music and the interaction between music and text, Ravel narrates a story, not so much of war as of childhood.

Like the other collaborators of the twenties, Ravel looked to American culture for inspiration. By 1924, this fascination may have had as much to do with Broadway and the Tin Pan Alley composers as it did with ragtime and blues. In his autobiographical sketch dictated in 1928, Ravel said of *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*:

The emphasis is on melody allied to a subject I chose to treat in the spirit of American musical comedy. Mme Colette's libretto allowed this freedom in treating the magical story. The vocal line is the important thing. Even though the orchestra does not reject virtuosity, it is nonetheless of secondary importance. (*ES*, 12)

According to Roger Nichols, when Ravel spoke of the "spirit of the American musical comedy," he meant that the piece would be broken into musical numbers in which the individual content of each number was more significant than "homogeneity of style or of musical material" (*ES* 12). This eclecticism was, of course, as much a part of avant-garde

Parisian theater as it was of Broadway.

Throughout the opera, Ravel employs styles from different times and places. We have evocations of music from the medieval period (the princess's arabesque with solo flute) to the present (the dance of the wedgewood pot and the china cup); from Asia (the opening pentatonic sequence) to America (the Ragtime) and perhaps even to the middle East (the pastourelle of the of the shepherds on the wallpaper). And, we have a mix of high and low art – from the final fugue of the animals (“Il est bon, l’enfant”) and a coloratura aria (the fire’s song) to the sounds of jazz and vaudeville. Although many numbers are clearly parodic, Ravel also has moments of direct emotion, like the touching Puccini-style song the boy sings to the Princess “Toi, le coeur de la rose.” This opera was the first “serious” work in France to ignore the final *e-muets* as is done in popular song.² The prosy quality of Colette’s text effectively lent itself to this “low culture” singing practice. But, little in the libretto suggested the hodgepodge of styles that Ravel employed, although the episodic narrative certainly allowed room for it. Within this modern aesthetics of multiplicity, Ravel finds the coherence necessary for the natural unfolding of Colette’s tale.

Like other avant-garde collaborations, *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* transcended normal genres. Of *L'Enfant*, Ned Rorem asks, if it is, “a ballet with words? A danced opera? A vocal tableau? A visual cantata?” (Rorem 22). Colette suggests this transcendence of ordinary genre categories from the start, when she gave the piece its initial title, *Ballet for My Daughter*. In a letter, Ravel asked Colette to change the name as he had no daughter, but the ballet-opera mélange remained intact. Dance has always been

² Ned Rorem suggests this in his article “Parisian Thoroughfare” (March 2002) Metropolitan Opera Playbill, (22).

a part of opera, particularly in France. But, unlike the established French tradition, this work does not have a ballet sequence; it is a dance piece throughout, and the movement is as significant as the singing. In the premier production, the dancers pantomimed the primary roles while the singers doubled the parts and sang from either side of the stage. Although the opera is often performed today with one performer singing and dancing each role, for the 1981 Metropolitan Opera performance (revived in 2002), director Max Charruyer chose to return to the original approach.

L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges recounts the story of a young boy who, when faced with his homework and the demands of adults, rebels in a joyous rage by destroying everything in his room, from a teapot and cup to a grandfather clock to his fairy tales books. He then pulls the cat's tail and maims his pet squirrel. When he is done, the damaged objects and the cats magically grow large, come to life, and threaten to punish the fearful and lonely child. The boy then moves imaginatively into his beloved garden where trees and animals alike mourn the prior destruction the boy has wreaked on them. The animals ban together against the naughty child until they see him dress the wound of a hurt squirrel. With this gesture, they realize that the child is also suffering and they do their best to help heal *his* wounds by calling out to his mother. As the opera opens, the boy's self-expression is uncontrolled; throughout, we see his innate violence (as well as natural goodness). Along with the household items, the boy's own guilt and fear of retribution also grow larger than life.

Among directors, and perhaps among librettist and composer as well, there is confusion as to whether this story is intended for children or simply about one. On the one hand, it includes talking animals; on the other, it depicts the cruelty of a child

towards those animals. The music is charming, but subtle and sophisticated, and numbers like the cat duet are clearly sexual and perhaps terrifying to a child viewer. If Colette did intend this work for her daughter, as her original title suggests, then like E. T. A. Hoffmann's story on which Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* was based, the content was to be disturbing and dark as well as enchanting. According to Roland-Manuel:

This familiar cautionary tale for children gave Ravel an ideal chance to rediscover the world of enchantment, to move and be moved in a world free from the tyranny of human passion, to act in a play which revolutionizes emotional values as easily as the laws of perspective; where teapots are the size of men; where cats talk of love and squirrels of redemption; and where, in revenge, the race of Adam has as its sole representative a cruel and barbarous child. (*Maurice Ravel* 92)

This work indeed transforms adult "laws of perspective" by presenting the world through the vision of a child. For the boy, wisdom does come from "cats who talk of love and squirrels of redemption." And so, while there is an undeniable cruelty in the child, he also teaches the viewer to listen to the wisdom of the garden. The mistake Roland-Manuel makes in this citation is to assume that the work is necessarily intended for children; it can as easily be read as a "cautionary tale" for adults.

For Colette, the text had everything to do with the destruction that surrounded her in 1916. The child's cruelty towards animals is daring subject matter for its time, but not all that different from the violence men were inflicting on each other every day. And, the household items and the animals of the garden, like grown men, respond by waging war against the boy. As stage director Charruyer points out, "The theme of war emerges in the

eruption of violence among a whole bevy of animals after the child in the opera has staged his mischievous rebellion and begun to dream” (Baker 30). Discussing the 1981 production at the Metropolitan Opera House, Charruyer discusses the ideas of producer John Dexter: “It was an important part of Dexter’s conception to play up the menace and reality of this fantasized war in a child’s mind....At the end, when the child stops to help the wounded squirrel, there is healing and peace. The wheel has gone full circle” (Baker 31).

At the end of Colette’s enigmatic story we are left to wonder, “Why does the boy act out in the first place?” Does he really want “to be naughty out of sheer boredom,” as Felix Aprahamian claims (“Synopsis” 15)? Does Colette feel for the boy or is her primary concern not the child at all, but the more generalized need among people to develop empathy and forgiveness? Already the boy has in him the punitive messages of parental figures. In his hallucinatory dream, he watches household objects grow large (or become, in effect, adults) and then scold and threaten him. The reproaches that emerge in the boy’s dream must have come from events and interactions in waking life. At the beginning of the opera, we witness one such example, as the mother confines the naughty boy to his room and offers him tea without sugar and dry bread for his meal. In the child’s mind, there is little sense of proportion; his misdeeds are magnified as is the retaliation of those he has wronged. In the music, Ravel softens the boy’s destructive outburst and exposes his own partiality towards both the child and the animals, rather than to the items in the room that mouth the intimidating words of adults. Ravel does not simply present the story, rather he interprets it, subtly shifting blame from the naughty boy to the parental figures.

After the boy's destructive eruption, we are introduced to the frightened child's hallucinatory world with a baroque sarabande and the odd sounds of the lutheal. Like Satie in *Parade*, Ravel would expand his orchestra to incorporate unexpected sounds. He did this as early as 1907 in his first opera, *L'Heure Espagnole* where he reproduced the ticking and chiming of clocks by removing the reed from a sassurophone and blowing it like a trumpet. In *L'Enfant*, Ravel used two newly available instruments -- the swannee or slide whistle and the lutheal.³ The lutheal is a lute-like prepared piano also evocative of the harpsichord, harp, and cimbalon; an instrument that suggests both an earlier time and an alternative space. It is danced by an aristocratic armchair and a pompous bergère (an easy chair) who refuse to let the naughty boy sit in them. The lutheal's mocking grace notes and odd dissonances lend a grotesque quality to this ironic dance. Could these two chairs (sung by a man and woman) be the child's dream version of his parents uniting to punish him?

³ Davies, Hugh. "Maurice Ravel and the Lutheal" in *Experimental Musical Instruments*. Vol. 4, issue 2, August, 1998. 11-14.

**Example 3-1, Rehearsal #17, mm 1-6, Sarabande of the Armchair and the Begere,
The Alternative Space created by the Lutheal:**

(While they are dancing)
(Pendant qu'ils dansent)

THE ARMCHAIR
LE FAUTEUIL

LA BERGERE, with a courtesy
LA BERGERE, avec une révérence. *mp*

Excessive politeness *mp*

Lutheal:

Grotesque embellishments

Parody of 18th century dance:

Vo - tre ser - vi - teur humble, Bergè - re.
I am your hum - ble ser - vant, Bergè - re.

Vo - tre ser -
I am your

Odd leaps in vocal line

- van - te, Fauteuil.
handmaid, Armchair.

Nous voi - là donc débarras.
Now we're a - bout to rid our -

As the eerie enchantment of the room is introduced with the lutheal, so the natural music of the garden invites us in with the sound of the slide whistle.

Perhaps the most significant role of the composer in traditional opera was to

round out and deepen the characters. As Joseph Kerman says, “Music gives life to a character which is, in all probability, the most frequently cited of opera resources. That music turns the pasteboard characters outlined by a libretto’s words and plot into “real” people is a doctrine of faith among opera lovers” (*OD* 225). In *L’Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, there is only one significant character throughout the entire story, the child himself, and even he has no name. Like other avant-garde collaborations, this opera is an ensemble piece. (We think back to Fernand Leger’s insistence that his ballet troupe work as one dynamic whole, rather than having star dancers come to the fore in *La Création du Monde*). Although the mother’s spirit pervades the entire opera, she remains a shadowy figure, part of the fabric of the work and the orchestration rather than seen or heard much in her own person. In the stage directions, her first appearance is described as follows:

The door opens. Enter Mother, or, rather, what the very low ceiling and the scale of all the scenery, with the exaggerated dimensions of all the objects making the smallness of the Child more striking, allow to be seen of her, i.e. a skirt, the lower part of a silk apron, a chain from which a pair of scissors hangs and a hand. This hand is raised, with a questioning forefinger. (*E* 15)

Here the mother is reduced to parts – a skirt, a pair of scissors and a scolding finger. Benjamin Ivry suggests that the scissors dangling from the mother’s waist may evoke Scissors Man from *Struwwelpeter* who cut off the thumbs of naughty boys (Ivry 129).

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that Ravel “allowed himself to be trapped by a libretto that is intellectually low and morally indefensible . . . a libretto in which the author odiously staged her own apotheosis as castrating Mother . . . with the child, whom she calls Baby, even though he is of school age.” (Ivry 129). Given Colette’s

original title (*Ballet for My Daughter*), it's not unreasonable to regard the author as the mother figure. Perhaps Colette *did* cast herself in that role, but not un-judgmentally as Lévi-Strauss suggests when he calls the text "intellectually low and morally indefensible." Throughout, the mother is both the voice of corrective punishment and of consolation, but in neither role is she a clear-cut figure, and Ravel takes his cue both from the curious stage directions and the mother's own words. Perhaps there is a difference in identification between librettist and composer – the female writer associating herself with the mother; the male composer, with the boy protagonist. But, even if the identifications fall so neatly, both Colette and Ravel remain critical of the mother figure and sympathetic to the child, despite his inexcusable cruelty.

Ravel introduces the naïve magical, fairytale space of childhood, before we see its ugly underbelly. In the overture, he does not give us the themes of the opera as we might expect, but an atmospheric, frictionless background that oddly continues even after the curtain rises. The opening sound calls forth an exotic land with its pentatonic meanderings in parallel fourths and fifths played by two oboes. This sound evokes a place far away in space (the Orient) or in time with a sound that is described by H. H. Stuckenschmidt as a kind of "medieval organum" (211). The mysterious space-time zone is reinforced by the fluctuations in beats per measure. The time signature changes every bar for the first thirty-seven. Below the oboes, a quiet counter-melody appears in the double bass and then the boy comes in. As if to underscore his naughtiness, Ravel has him enter below the instruments. The detached notes and the stubborn insistence on a single "E" to which he keeps returning, reinforce the boy's willful refusal to do his homework.

Example 3-2, Rehearsal #1, mm 1-12, Fairytale Atmosphere and first Entrance of the Naughty Boy (Beginning As the Curtain Opens):

Changing meters reinforces the alternative space/time zone of childhood

Oboes: pentatonic
Parallel fifths and fourths

pp un peu en dehors.

Contra-bassoon (harmonics) melody-first counterpoint

THE CHILD
L'ENFANT

p

J'ai pas envie de faire ma pa - ge,
I do not want to learn my les - son,

Little by little, the child works himself up to higher pitches, more forceful articulation and more vindictive behavior in which he would like to engage:

I don't want to do my lessons,

I want to go out for a walk.

I want to eat up all the cakes

I want to pull the cat's tail,

And to cut off the squirrel's

I want to scold everyone,

I want to make mama repent.⁴

The culminating cruelty is the child's desire to hurt his mother. And so, already the audience is left to wonder why the boy feels as he does. The mother's opening music, which returns throughout the opera, is a warm, impressionist sequence of two note phrases in falling fourths⁵ in the upper voices (flute and first clarinet) against a rising fourth in the bass and second clarinets. The mother's tenderness, however, also contains within it unresolved, musical tension.

According to Roger Nichols, throughout the opera, the audience understands "instinctively that mother is the only true, ultimate consolation" (Nichols 12). And indeed, the warmth of her music surrounds the listener in a giant embrace. Ravel may have been paying homage to his own mother for whom he felt great tenderness and over whose death he was still grieving as he worked on the opera. But, the mother's role in the music is not as simple as Nichols suggests. The operas final two chords, when the child calls out "Maman" for the last time, do imply an authentic V-I cadence with the bass line falling decisively from D to G. But instead of the V chord, we hear only its extension -- the seven, nine and thirteen. Continuing the dissonance, the final I chord is not a triad but

⁴ My translation.

⁵ This is characteristic of the Ravelian sound.

a major seventh. These two chords are, at once, tense and tender, and ultimately inconclusive:

Example 3-3, Rehearsal #154, mm 1-4; The Unresolved Tension in Child's Final Cry for "Maman":

THE CHILD, holding out his arms.
L'ENFANT, tendant les bras.

CURTAIN
RIDEAU

p Ma - man!
Ma - ma!

S. *p* Il est si doux.
He is so kind.

C. *p* Il est si doux.
He is so kind.

T. *p* Il est si doux.
He is so kind.

B. *p* Unis Il est si doux.
He is so kind.

p *pp*

V - I
(D implied by w/ tension
the tension of IM7
7, 9, 13 in triad)

Has the boy been reconciled to his better self, and therefore returned to the protection and comfort of his mother? Or does he simply have nowhere else to turn but to the very source of the problem?

Perhaps the boy's original desire to punish his mother stems from her example. But, all the power is on her side, and the boy understands that inequality and his own lack of freedom. Like children in general, the protagonist is told what to do and disciplined if he does not follow; in his imagination, perhaps his only recourse is naughty rebellion and

destructive violence towards little creatures weaker than himself. When he smashes the items in the room, he calls out, “Hourah! Hourah! Hourah! No more lessons! No more homework! I am free, free, naughty and free!” (*E*, 43). But the boy must learn that this is not real independence or power. It is through his understanding of his own helplessness and the restraints of the adult world that the boy comes to understand the animal’s frustration and pain when he, in turn, maims and cages them. As the boy becomes attuned to the feelings of the animals in the garden, he tries to explain to the squirrel why he locked him up: “The cage, it was to see better how nimble you were, your four tiny paws, your fine eyes . . .” And to this, the squirrel responds sarcastically: “Yes, it was for my fine eyes! Do you know what they reflected, my fine eyes? The free sky, the free wind, and my free brothers, jumping as if winged . . . Look then at what they reflected, my fine eyes all glistening with tears.” (*E*, 135). Against this confession which overtly condemns the boy (while implicitly indicting the mother -- for she has similarly caged the boy in his room until dinner time), Colette writes the following stage directions:

While he speaks, the garden is peopled with jumping squirrels. Their games and caresses, suspended in the air, do not disturb those of the frogs below. Two dragonflies embrace separate, and then reunite. A couple of oleander hawkmoths imitate them. Other groups cling to each other and separate. The garden, palpitating with wings, glowing red with squirrels, is a paradise of tenderness and animal joy. (*E* 31)

Ned Rorem asks of Colette, “Who was this most literate of librettists since Hofmannsthal? Why, her very stage directions could be chanted!” (Rorem 20). In fact, the most poetic lines in the libretto are stage directions. Why would Colette write bother

to make the lines the audience do not hear so elegant? The answer is simple – they do hear the stage directions, not in language, but in the music. In her evocative stage directions, she reflects the beauty of the music-to-be; her poetry underscores the need for a poetry in sound. Ravel, of course, picked up the cue and created one of the most striking moments of contrast in the opera. The squirrel's sarcastic response: "Yes, you wished to see my eyes," sung without accompaniment and followed by two sharp eighth-note pizzicati major seventh chords is juxtaposed to a rich orchestral scoring with its comforting pedal tones in the strings. The garden, the domain of freedom from cages and locked bedrooms, is depicted with impressionistic, legato, triads with an added sixth, stacked in fourths. The contrast between the arid sarcasm and the sweetness of the garden is also marked by the change from the asymmetric 5/4 time to the comfortable regularity of 4/4.

Example 3-4, Rehearsal #131, mm 6-14, Contrast Between The Squirrel's Sarcastic Comment and the Warm Beauty of the Garden that His Eyes Reflect:

The musical score for Rehearsal #131, mm 6-14, is presented in three systems. The first system (mm 6-8) is in 5/4 time and features the squirrel's sarcastic comment. The second system (mm 9-11) is in 4/4 time and features the garden's warm beauty. The third system (mm 12-14) is in 4/4 time and features the garden's warm beauty.

Annotations:

- Dry unaccompanied sarcasm of the squirrel:** This annotation is placed above the squirrel's vocal line in the first system.
- Moment of great contrast Rich sonorities evoke the garden:** This annotation is placed above the garden's vocal line in the second system.
- yeux... THE SQUIRREL sarcastically eyes... L'ÉCUREUIL sarcastique:** This annotation is placed above the squirrel's vocal line in the first system.
- While he speaks, the garden becomes full of Pendant qu'il parle, le jardin se peuple:** This annotation is placed above the garden's vocal line in the second system.
- Oui, c'e - tait pour mes beaux yeux! Yes, you wished to see my eyes!:** This annotation is placed below the squirrel's vocal line in the first system.
- Sais - tu Do you:** This annotation is placed below the garden's vocal line in the second system.
- M7/M7:** This annotation is placed below the piano accompaniment in the second system.
- Pizz. in strings:** This annotation is placed below the piano accompaniment in the second system.
- Triads with added 6 Stacked in 4ths and 5ths:** This annotation is placed below the piano accompaniment in the third system.

leaping squirrels. Their play, their caresses, as they are suspended in the air, do not disturb those of the frogs below. A couple of d'écureuils bondissants. Leurs jeux, leurs caresses, suspendus en l'air, n'inquiètent pas ceux des Rainettes,

ce qu'ils re - flé - taient, mes beaux yeux? / know what they re - flect, my fine eyes?

espressivo

From the boy's opening destructive outburst, we know immediately that Ravel has taken the child's part. In the music, as the youth demolishes the household objects, we hear the smashing to pieces of the cup and teapot in a bi-tonal, double forte downward run backed by staccato chords in the piano part. The music is onomatopoeic – it sounds like the broken bits of china as they fall to the ground, and yet there is no roughness; the run is neither dissonant nor offensive. In the music, the child's outburst is not depicted as terribly odious until the boy hurts the squirrel and the cat; then, we hear pained, high-pitched animal screams in the flutes. (Both Ravel and Colette were inveterate animal lovers.)

Example 3-5, Rehearsal #9, mm 1-12, The Child's Destructive Outburst – Musically Devoid of Dissonance Except When the Violence is Directed Towards the Animals:

With the back of his hand he sweeps off the teapot and the cup which break into a thousand pieces.
Balaie d'un revers de main la theière et la tasse, en mille morceaux.

Bitonality

Piano

ff Loud and fast, but not dissonant

Onomatopoeic smashing of teapot and cup

Powerful dynamic contrast **Grace notes depicting naughtiness**

agitato
p sub. f p

flute screech of the animals

The Child jumps down from the window and pulls the tail of the cat who spits and hides himself under an armchair.
L'Enfant saute à bas de la fenêtre et tire la queue du chat, qui jure et se cache sous un fauteuil.

orchestra

When the mother first refers to the boy as “méchant” (meaning ‘wicked,’ and ‘bad,’ as well as the softer English translation, ‘naughty’) the perfect falling fourth that has defined her sound becomes an augmented fourth or a tritone; the warmth associated with the falling fourth has now been replaced by the most dissonant of musical intervals or the “diabolus in musica,” as it was known.

Example 3-6, Rehearsal #5, mm. 1, The Mother’s Falling Fourth Enlarges into a Tritone:

Allegro
The second hand places on the table a plate of lunch.
La seconde main dépose sur la table le plateau du goûter.
severely
sévère

Falling tritone

Ma. $\text{♩} = 152$ Voi-ci le goû-ter d'un mé-chant en-fant:
Allegro Then here is some lunch for a naughty child:.

When he is alone, the child then picks up both her word and her interval. He says: "I love no one! I am very wicked ('méchant')!" and Ravel again ends both sentences with the tritone.

Example 3-7, Rehearsal #8, mm 1-4, The Boy Repeats the Word "Méchant" on the Interval of a Tritone:

The enlarging of the falling fourth into a falling tritone anticipates the frightening growth of the household items and the augmentation of boy's psychological fears. Through his imagination, the boy's space expands as well, and so, while locked in his room, he also miraculously finds himself in the garden. In the music, an augmented sound reigns throughout. When the boy swings on the large clock's copper balance in a slow, triple forte, the clock chimes out augmented triads.

Example 3-8, Rehearsal #14, mm 1-4, The Clock Chimes to An Augmented Triad:

Alternating tick-tocks

$\frac{G \text{ Aug}}{E7 \text{ (omitted 3)}}$
 $\frac{DbM7\#5}{Eb}$
 $\frac{G \text{ Aug}}{E7 \text{ (omitted 3)}}$
 $\frac{DbM7\#5}{Eb}$

And again, we get a sequence of augmented triads after the fire chases the frightened child around the room.

Example 3-9, Rehearsal #49, mm 1-4, Augmented Sounds After the Fire Aria:

then falls asleep enrolled in her long arms and veils. J'ai p
 puis s'endort, roulé dans les longs bras et les longs voiles. I'm a - f
 The moment he ce the window panes ar

le F.

Ah!

pp p

Chromatic movement downward of augmented triads

Throughout the opera, the enlarged and personified household items become, in effect, emissaries of the adult world. In addition, many actual grown-ups appear in the boy's fantasy -- the little old man, the shepherds and shepherdesses, and the princess.⁶ But, apart from the mother, the adult voices are constructed out of the child's imagination. The parental messages have already invaded the boy's psyche and frighten him half to death. In Freudian terms, the boy's super-ego looms large, and the overgrown household appliances magnify its power. The internal control that adults wield over the

⁶ Although the princess speaks as an adult, frightening the boy as she explains how he has ruined her life and his own, she comes out of the boy's own fairy landscape, and therefore, Ravel portrays her with great affection, exemplified by the authentic Ravelian sound he reserves for the world of children and animals. Her aria is one of the most Ravel-esque moments in the work.

minds of the young boy becomes the most horrifying element of the opera, far more disturbing than the child's innate aggression. In his magical world, along with the damaged goods and the cats, the child's sense of his own destructive power grows far beyond its ordinary size. The shepherd and shepherdess from the wallpaper he has torn address him in a punitive tone -- "ungrateful child," (*E* 45). The fire that darts out and pursues the child, flickering and spreading in a virtuosic coloratura. She also warns the boy: "Beware! I warm the good! Beware! I burn the bad. Beware. Beware. Ah! Beware!" (41).

To the child, one of the most menacing figures is the Little Old Man,⁷ or as the boy calls him, "Arithmetic" himself. His song includes crazy mathematical word problems, all answered in an incorrect and insane fashion, and the numbers, sung by a children's chorus, respond. (In the boy's dream, the teacher has become his subject matter, and the students have transformed into his tools). The music is sparse here, opening with a solo piano accompaniment in quarter notes, and later enriched and punctuated with chords on the harp and string pizzicati. On top of the simple, traditional French folk-song background, the melody reminds us that we are still in the twentieth and that we are listening to Ravel; over and over, we hear his characteristic falling fourths. Minor seconds in the orchestra, coupled with impish grace notes, render the jumble of mathematical problems even more ridiculous.

⁷ "Le Petit Vieillard" in the French.

Example 3-10, Rehearsal #76, mm 1-10, Arithmetic and his Numbers's Satiric Song:

The image shows a musical score for two parts. The top part is titled 'THE LITTLE OLD MAN' and 'LE PETIT VIEILLARD'. It features a melody with lyrics in French and English. The lyrics are: 'U - ne pa - y - san - ne, zan - ne, zan - ne, zan - ne, por - te tous ses... / One old vil - lage peas - ant, peas - ant, peas - ant, car - ries all her...'. The bottom part is titled 'THE NUMBERS' and 'LES CHIFFRES'. It features a melody with lyrics in French and English. The lyrics are: 'Un marchand d'é - tof - fe, Tof - fe, tof - fe, tof - fe, a ven - du six... / Once a hab - er - dash - er, dash - er, dash - er, sold a piece of...'. There are annotations on the score: 'Sound of a peasant tune or child's song' pointing to the top melody, 'Children's chorus' pointing to the bottom melody, and 'Impish grace notes' pointing to specific notes in the bottom melody.

THE LITTLE OLD MAN
LE PETIT VIEILLARD

p

U - ne pa - y - san - ne, zan - ne, zan - ne, zan - ne, por - te tous ses...
One old vil - lage peas - ant, peas - ant, peas - ant, car - ries all her...

p

THE NUMBERS
LES CHIFFRES

Un marchand d'é - tof - fe, Tof - fe, tof - fe, tof - fe, a ven - du six...
Once a hab - er - dash - er, dash - er, dash - er, sold a piece of...

Children's chorus

Impish grace notes

Sound of a peasant tune or child's song

Later, the effect of the musical repetition coupled with an *accelerando* is dizzying for the boy (and the audience). The numbers rise in a pattern of chromatic triads to a climactic triple *forte*, and the boy falls in a terrified, *prestissimo* faint. As the numbers close in on the boy, they cease their singing, and simply chant in rhythm. The number frenzy in this scene, like the later banning together of the animals, becomes part of the war waged against the boy. School itself, and math class, in particular, are clearly part of the

restrictive world, against which the boy revolts. After all, the opera opens with the child refusing to do his homework.

Example 3-11, Rehearsal #91, mm 5-12, Arithmetic Satiric Song; The Rising Up of the Numbers Against the Boy and his Subsequent Swoon:

Chanting without pitch in voice

Vingt-cinq! Trent-sept!
Fif-ty! Six-teen!

Child faints
Prestissimo
The Child becomes giddy and falls full length on the ground.
L'Enfant tombe, étourdi, tout de son long.

five and eight, five and eight, five and eight, five and eight, Ah!
Cinq et sept, cinq et sept, cinq et sept, cinq et sept, Ah!

quat, quatre et quat, quatre et quat, quatre et quat, quatre et quat, qua...!
four, four and four, four and four, four and four, four and four, fa...!

Chromatic triads rising in pattern

Rising whole tone sequence

Climax is loud but not dissonant

8

Colette and Ravel's Little Old Man lies within a long line of oppressive schoolmasters, from Dickens' aptly named Mr. Chokemchild,⁸ to Ionesco's Professor in *La Leçon* who literally beats his student to death.⁹ In the opera, the schoolmaster and his subject (arithmetic) have merged, and frightening as this figure is for the boy, for the audience, his attack takes place at the accelerated rate of parody.

The dichotomy between the fear the boy experiences and the playful effect of those who terrorize him, does not render the boy's feelings any less real for the audience. The exaggerated terror of the child is also visible in an earlier episode with another imposing male figure – the grandfather clock. The child has swung on the pendulum and

⁸ Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

⁹ This piece chronologically fits between these two as well. Dickens was written in 1854, and Ionesco's *La Leçon* in 1950.

broken it off. In response, the clock chases the boy around the room, chiming incessantly, and then accuses him: “Perhaps no one would ever have died.../If I’d been able to go on striking the hours,/ One and all exactly alike!” (E 37). The child fears that his behavior has magically brought death into the house. Along with the objects in the room, his sense of his own destructive power has grown out-of-proportion. But, in the music Ravel indicates that the boy has not really altered time. While the pace of the clock’s song is quick, the rhythms he sings are steady, accented, on the beat and very regular. Ravel could have used unpredictable time signatures or accents. He might have also employed *accelerando* as he does in the Arithmetic scene to demonstrate that time is out of control. But instead, Ravel “drums up” emotion with the tympani tremolo and forte singing. The clock’s music highlights the contrast between the boy’s fears and the far less worrisome reality of the situation.

Example 3-12, Rehearsal #21, mm 1-4, The Grandfather Clock’s Steady Rhythms Contradict his Claim that the Boy has Altered Time in the House:

Allegro vivo

Plus de l'Enfant!
No more of the Child!

plus de l'Enfant!
No more of the Child!

THE BENCH, THE COUCH, THE STOOL, THE WICKER CHAIR
LE RANG, LE CANAPÉ, LE POUF, LA CHAISE DE PAILLE

Plus de l'Enfant!
No more of the Child!

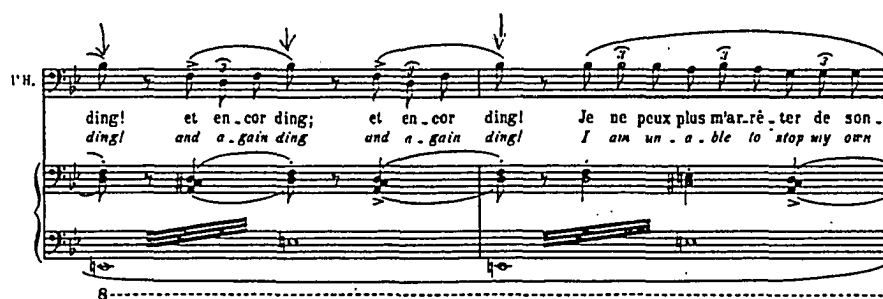
U' HORLOGE COMTOISE THE COMTOISE CLOCK

Accented on-the-beat chiming of the clock

Ding, ding, ding, ding, Et en.cord ding, ding,
Ding, ding, ding, ding, And a.gain ding, ding,

Allegro vivo. ♩ = 168

E-tremelo in tympani



If the child's sense of his negative power is distended, so alternatively is his sense of impotence. In his interaction with his beloved fairy princess, she suggests that he has not only destroyed the lives of others but also his own. The princess says to him:

But you've torn up the book.

What's going to happen to me?

Who knows if the evil enchanter

Isn't going to put me to sleep forever,

Or dissolve me into cloud?

Tell me, aren't you sorry never to know

The fate of your first love?... (E 47)

The child tries to offer her aid: "If only I had a sword! Ah! Into my arms! Come, I'll be able to defend you!" but the Princess responds and is then swallowed up by the floor that opens beneath her:

Alas my weak little friend,

What can you do for me?

Can one know the length of a dream?

My dream was so long, so long,

That perhaps, at its end,

You might have been the Prince with the rosy crest. (*E* 49)

Critics have complained that Ravel's music was artificial, to which he responded: "Does it not occur to these people that I may be artificial by nature?" (cited in *E* 14). But, in this work, artificiality is associated with the world of adults, while children and animals are depicted with much greater accuracy and authenticity. This is just one way in which Ravel expresses his affection for the Lilliputian world over the over-grown and overblown domain of adults. The boy moves through sounds and songs that mimic an eclectic array of adult entertainments. As in *Faade*, an assortment of dance tunes are featured; the courtly eighteenth-century style dance of the two chairs, the teapot's ragtime, and the foxtrot of the Chinese cup. When Ravel decided to incorporate a ragtime, he wrote to Colette: "What would you say to the cup and black Wedgwood teapot singing a ragtime? I confess I'm bowled over by the idea of having a ragtime sung by two negroes at the Paris Opera....Perhaps you'll counter this by saying you don't know American Negro slang? As I don't know a word of English, I'd do the same as you and fudge my way through" (Orenstein 230).¹⁰ One can sense more than a touch of Satie in Ravel's desire to subvert the expectations of the opera going audience and his playful lack of concern over details, like accuracy in the languages used. In the final version, the English is clearly "fudged," but one is left to wonder if, indeed, Colette was following Ravel's instructions or spoofing French people of the twenties who, enamoured by Afro-American entertainment, attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to speak in English and mimic black culture. The piece opens with the teapot asking: "How's your mug?" to which the cup responds: "Rotten." The teapot goes on: "Black and costaud,/ black and chic, jolly

¹⁰ In the final version, the Chinese cup replaced the black, Wedgewood one proposed here.

fellow/ I punch, Sir, I punch your nose./ I knock you out, stupid chose!..." (E 89). This piece is, in a sense, faithful to its American musical source (if not the language) with its ragged rhythms in the vocal melody and stride bass in the piano part. But, throughout, we hear parody from the opening grace notes in the trombone and contrabassoon dialogue at the bottom of their range to the clashing minor seconds in the flutes and horns in the rests between vocal phrases. The satirical quality transports the listener to a vaudeville act in Paris, not a saloon in Saint Louis.

Example 3-13, Rehearsal #28, mm 1-5; Rehearsal #29, mm 5-7; Satirical Ragtime of the Wedgewood Pot:

Two low, nasal voices are heard, near the floor.
On entend deux voix nasillardes au ras du sol.

THE TEAPOT (black Wedgewood)
LA THEIERE (Wedgewood noir)

THE CUP (Chinese)
LA TASSE (chinoise)

Mimicking of jazz blue note
Allegro non troppo. ♩ = 126

How's your mug? Rotten!

Trombone
Contra-bassoon

Parodic register (ridiculously low)

percussion

(Teapot) raunchy, parodic, vaudeville sound

Ragged rhythm

Blue note slide

I punch your no-se,

Blue notes in brass

Clarinet & oboe
Percussion on comment satirically

Stride bass in piano

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled 'Satirical Ragtime of the Wedgewood Pot'. It features two vocal parts: 'THE TEAPOT (black Wedgewood) / LA THEIERE (Wedgewood noir)' and 'THE CUP (Chinese) / LA TASSE (chinoise)'. The tempo is marked 'Allegro non troppo. ♩ = 126'. The score includes instrumental parts for Trombone, Contra-bassoon, Clarinet & oboe, Percussion, and Piano. Various annotations highlight specific musical features: 'Mimicking of jazz blue note', 'Parodic register (ridiculously low)', 'Ragged rhythm', 'Blue note slide', 'Blue notes in brass', and 'Stride bass in piano'. The lyrics include 'How's your mug? Rotten!' and 'I punch your no-se,'.

The ragtime soon slides into the faux-Asian dance of the China cup. Here, even more so than in the gibberish-English of the last section, the Eastern language is faked. Written out in nonsense syllables, there are a few words that evoke Asia – “Mah-jong,” and “hara-kiri,” and the name of a well-known music hall performer, “Sessue Hayakawa.” But, Colette makes it clear that this is not an Asian language, but French mimicry: “Ca-oh-ra,” is really just “Ca aura” which leads to the final line “Ca-oh-ra toujours l’air chinoa.” (In French, ‘It will always have the Chinese air.’) The music to this piece is deliberately banal, and both authors might be accused of racism, but again, the parody is not of China but of Paris nightlife. The fairytale, parallel fifths that open the opera give a more direct and elegant Asian flavor, and while they return here in the celeste, they remain in the background. These two vaudeville acts are eventually superimposed in a distorted, bitonal passage. Throughout this number, Ravel clearly pokes fun at society in the flapper era; in the score, he employs a sliding trombone, a woodblock and a cheese grater.

Example 3-14, Rehearsal #33, mm 1-5; Superimposition of the Ragtime and the Dance of the Chinese Cup:

1a T.

chi - no - a.

8

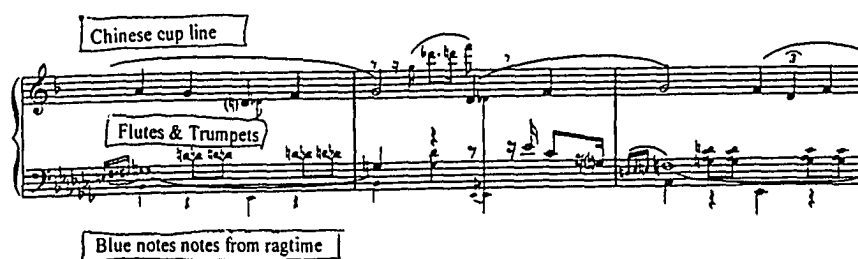
marcato Chinese cup melody

f. espressivo Trombone

Horn

ragtime line

Bitonality and distortion in scoring reinforces the parody



This piece was not the first to use of nonsense syllable to represent foreign languages. In Poulenc's "Rapsodie Nègre" (1917), he also spoofs the primitivist craze in Paris by writing a gibberish section that mimics an African language, a text he attributes the text to a "Makoko Kangourou."

While Ravel encouraged Colette to fake the Afro-American slang, he carefully studied the animal sounds featured in the opera. According to Roger Nichols:

The village mayor, out after poachers perhaps, was surprised to meet the composer striding through the forest of Rambouillet at 3:00 one summer morning.

Ravel explained that he was working: 'At this hour, you hear things you never hear in the daytime.' (Nichols 35)

The tranquil beauty and striking authenticity of the garden sounds are audible when the boy first enters the garden. The mood is set by the warm, hollow sound of pedal tones in the strings in open fifths, on top of which Ravel presents various musical insects and birds in the slide whistle and piccolo parts.

Example 3-15, Rehearsal #100, mm 1-6; The Warmth and Authenticity of Ravel's Garden:

The musical score is for a piano and features a slide whistle. The tempo is Andante (♩=60). The music is in 3/4 time and features hollow, open fifths in the strings. The score includes a piccolo mimicking birds and musical insect sounds.

The animals are then depicted in a set of five waltzes (the lamentation of the dragonfly, the round-dance of the bats, the dance of the frogs, and the squirrel's hymn to freedom). This choice is just another indication of Ravel's fondness for the natural world. He reserved his favorite dance form for this occasion. We have only to think of his *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* of 1911 and his choreographed poem *La Valse* of 1920. As Christine Prost points out, Ravel had an intense sympathy for the waltz in which the "admirable rhythms" seemed to him to express a profound *joie de vivre*. (Prost 62).

In Ravel's depiction, the cats have dual status, as members of both the adult world and the animal kingdom. They belong both to the space of the enclosed room and the garden, and their menacing duet is strategically placed right before the boy will leave one world and enter the other. Like the other objects in the room, the cats grow large and threatening. They menace, not with words, but with their frightening miaos. They are, however, also part of the natural world, and thus, Ravel pays homage to them, mimicking their miaos with a keen accuracy he reserves for the child and the garden creatures. Before Ravel scored the cat duet, he wrote to Colette to ask her if she would mind if he changed the syllables she had used to depict their sounds to make them more authentically feline. Colette recounts this episode in a piece written on Ravel in 1939: "The only thing he seemed to be worried about was the miaowing duet between the two cats, and he asked me most seriously if I would mind his changing 'mouao' to 'mouain' – or perhaps it was the other way around" (Nichols 29).

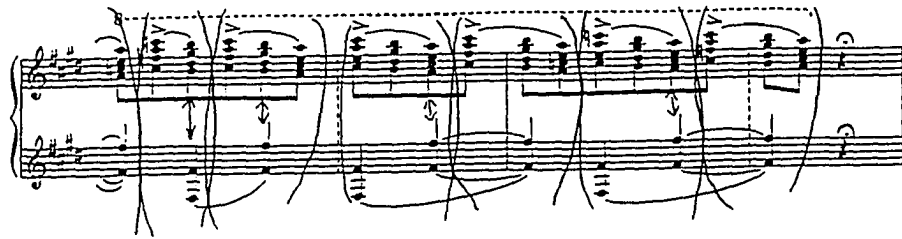
Before the cats sing, Ravel foreshadows the entry into the enchanted otherworld of the garden. Two solo lines weave together -- the boy's recitative and the bass part with its strange glissandi, slides that are perhaps echoed in the opening of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Whether or not Britten had Ravel in mind, the two composers use this same technique (beginning in the low strings) to create the natural and supernatural atmosphere of their fairy forest and garden. Ravel's two felines (clearly in heat) pick up these glissandi in their duet, and slide up and down together on provocative miaos that might be mistaken for *sprechstimme*. This number was virulently criticized by

the Parisian audience for its decadent and sexual innuendo.¹¹ The melody is backed by rich augmented orchestral intervals, so important to the haunted landscape featured throughout. The piece culminates with the cats terrifying, double forte, vocal rising and falling. In the orchestra, the unearthly feeling is reinforced by the rhythmic emphasis that does not fall on the downbeat and bass notes that do not coincide with the treble accents. The percussion rolls and quick scalar passages in the bass and brass echo the glissandi of the cats, rendering this passage full of impassioned sound, even if it is devoid of conventional melody.

Example 3-16, Rehearsal #98, mm 9-14; Feline Glissandi:

The musical score for Example 3-16, Rehearsal #98, mm 9-14; Feline Glissandi, is presented in three systems. The first system includes vocal staves for Soprano (Soprano Chorus) and Alto (Alto Chorus) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal staves have lyrics in French: "Me in hon bin hon hé - bin hon hé in - hon Hé hin hon hé hin hé bin hon. Aug. 5th" and "- bin hon, Me in hé - in hon hin hé in, Me in - é - in - bin hin - houn -". The piano accompaniment features "Aug. triads" and "poco" markings. The second system continues the vocal staves with lyrics: "Houin houin hon houin houin hon, houin houin hon houin hon hin..." and "- hon, houin houin hon, houin houin hon houin hon hin...". The piano accompaniment includes "Tritone" markings and "Accents and phrasing" annotations. The third system shows the piano accompaniment with "Unexpected placement of bass notes given phrasing and accents".

¹¹ Technically the cats do not use "sprechstimme" as they slide up and down to precise pitches. But, their duet suggests Schoenberg's technique which emerged as a classical imitation of the seedy cabaret scene in Berlin with its connotations of urban decay and dangerous sensuality.



In a recollection written about Ravel, his close friend, the violinist Helene Jourdan-Morhange, recounts:

His house was governed by a family of Siamese cats....One, two then three Siamese cats used to come prowling among the pages of manuscript, leaving their five-fold muddy footprints as an emblem of friendship. Ravel could discern beyond their reserve and their pretended indifference, a faithful devotion which, perhaps, he likened to the noble, impenetrable pride of the Basques.

Only he could have written the cat's duet in *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* with such accurate onomatopoeia. One day we were singing this duet when the cat family, in some distress, walked into the room. I must add that Ravel's cat imitations were exceptionally good! (RR 129)

Why try so hard to make the child's inner world and the animal sounds authentic, and then simultaneously revel in the artificiality of primitivism? Ravel makes a distinction between the two worlds of the opera, and he displays an extra reverence for the animal kingdom and an abundance of sympathy for the child. But, he also exults in music hall styles of the twenties. His entire life, he was attuned to children, nature and animals, but at the same time, he delighted in artifice and the false knickknacks of Asia. Again,

Jourdan-Morhange recounts:

Ravel was a child: a child when he was pleased with a new suit and could show off his gloves in the latest fashion; a child when he shouted at the top of his voice to one of his friends who had come to meet his boat in New York, ‘You must see the stunning ties I’ve brought!’....

Ravel was very fond of his garden. He used to wax enthusiastic speaking about the soil, nature and animals....His love of things Japanese corresponded to his taste for what was precious and perfect. There was even a tiny room in the house full of assorted Japanese objects; and he was delighted by his friends’ astonishment when he proudly announced: ‘All this....is fake!’ (*RR* 126-9)

Colette seems to have understood Ravel’s dual approach -- his pleasure in artifice and entertainment from different venues, as well as his need to express something elemental and true. After all, Colette was herself a music hall star, a consummate performer, as well as a novelist who grappled continually in both her writing and her life with the complexities of the mother-child relationship.

As is customary in opera, there are alternating moments of action and contemplation. But here, the functions of recitative (generally used to further the action) and aria (reserved for moments of contemplation) have been reversed. The solo numbers, duets and choruses sung by the household items in the room and the animals in the garden further the story’s plot line. Each is clearly followed by a passage in which the child reflects. These transitional phrases can be seen as a form of recitative, as they connect the songs, yet remain less tuneful. The boy’s reflections on the individual pastiches, presented in his own version of recitative, become the glue that holds together

Ravel's forays into different styles. They are among the most honest and direct passages in both the words and the music. Often they are spoken with little or no accompaniment which, in this opera, highlights their significance. After the china cup comes alive, the boy cries out softly, "Oh! My lovely china cup!" Ravel also uses this moment to re-introduce the fairytale landscape that opened the opera in parallel fifths, only this time rather than two oboes, we hear the parallel motion on the celeste. Ravel carefully paces the passage, giving the listener and the child time both to reflect and anticipate. We three hear chimes (one per bar) in the piano and harp and then an entire measure rest. This is repeated three times, allowing us to catch *our* breath before the fire flickers *its* threatening flames, in its breathless coloratura. The stage directions during the chimes are as follows: "The sun has gone down, its horizontal rays turn red. The child shivers with fear and loneliness; he approaches the fire which sputters a burning spark in his face" (E 41). In other moments of reflection, the young protagonist directly expresses his fear and extreme isolation. After the animals in the garden sing, he says: "They've forgotten me... I'm alone" (E 69). These significant words are given on a single note, an E-flat backed by a sustained A-flat chord. And then, once again, he calls out to "Maman," with the falling fourth:

Example 3-17, Rehearsal #135, mm 1-3; The Boy's Mournful Recitative Almost Without Music:

Molto lento

Single note realization

Ils s'aiment... Ils m'oublient... Je suis seul... Maman!..
They love... they for. get me... I'm a . lone... Ma. ma!..

Molto lento

[A $\flat$]

sans faire vibrer

Falling fourth associated with "Maman"

It is also conventional in opera for heightened emotion to be accompanied by fuller melodic and orchestral material, but in *L'Enfant*, the points of culmination tend to be musically sparse. Colette and Ravel explore the continuum from song to speech to the shared space beyond both arts -- silence. When words and music separate, Ravel is often following Colette's descriptive stage directions. And thus, they do so by consensus, in a stylized and deliberate fashion to emphasize significant moments. Early on, the boy's triumphant "Hurrah" after his destructive fit is not sung but spoken in rhythm without accompaniment. Likewise, when Arithmetic and his numbers accelerate their taunting against the rising chromatic chords in the piano, they stop singing and begin to chant addition problems in rhythm. Mob chants can be frightening, and indeed they are to the boy who swoons after he is, in effect, attacked by his homework. At climactic points, Ravel eliminates the orchestra entirely. After the squirrel has explained what it is like to be caged by the boy, he sings without accompaniment: "Brainless one! You will share my fate!" But, of course, the boy has already shared the squirrel's fate, being locked in his room and his own guilty fantasy.

Following Colette's instructions, Ravel presents the child's internal transformation in an almost religious silence. The stage directions read: "profound silence, stupor among the animals" (*E* 71) and Ravel gives us two measures of rests after the boy has tied up the squirrel's wounded paw. Then, "amidst the deep silence," in a phrase that is almost a single note without musical background, what Carolyn Abbate refers to as "sprechgesang, the plaintive and supple declamation almost without timbre" (Abbate 229),¹² one animal announces that the child has dressed the wound. Against a *pianissimo* line of rising quarter notes in the bass and contrabassoon lines, others begin to

¹² Abbate also points out the climactic silence in her analysis.

repeat the revelation. Little by little, the animals recognize that the boy is also wounded and suffering. Their revelation, almost like the child's silent transformation, begins almost without music:

Example 3-18, Rehearsal #149, mm 5-12; The Boy's Silent Transformation and the Stupefied *Sprechgesang* of the Animals:

Moment of silence and transformation

Lunga

Lento

S. *AN? ANIMAL, amidst the deep silence.*
UNE BÊTE, parmi le profond silence.

C. *Il a pansé la plaie...*
See, he has dressed the wound...

T. *Il a pansé la plaie...*
See, he has dressed the wound...

B. *Il a pansé la plaie...*
See, he has dressed the wound...

Lento $\text{♩} = 50$

Double bass

This scene should not be sung: the musical notation is put in only as a guide to the declamation which should be plaintive, flexible, nearly without tone quality, even in the f.

The silent epiphany lies in stark contrast to the richly orchestrated moment when the animals move from understanding to action and call out for “Maman.” Repeating the word, however, is not enough, the animals must also find the music of the mother. And so, they search for the correct interval, trying out seconds, thirds, and tritones, before the interval of the falling fourth is intoned in the orchestra.

The musical culmination of the opera occurs in its final number, when all the animals reintegrate their voices and accept the boy back into their world. The piece begins as a neobaroque, acapella fugue. Turning points are marked by the separation of words and music, but in the final climax, the two arts come back together. The fugue is

the perfect medium for reintegration, as the voices each enter with the same subject at different moments and combine together to enrich the counterpoint. Ravel writes a three-part fugue, with an obbligato line in the alto part.

Example 3-19, Rehearsal #150, mm -1-4; Opening of the Animal's Fugue:

The musical score is for the opening of the Animal's Fugue, marked 'Andante' with a tempo of 56 beats per minute. It features four vocal parts (Soprano, Contralto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment. The score includes labels for 'Opening of the fugue:', 'Fugue entry #1:', 'Fugue entry #2:', and 'Countersubject #1:'. The lyrics are in French and English: 'Il est bon, l'Enfant, il est sage, bien sage, bon, l'Enfant, il est sage, bien sage.'

The piece transports the listener backwards in time, as it moves from its fugal opening into a renaissance madrigal. Clarinet and bassoons begin to accompany the vocal number, and the bass clarinet and horns reenter two measures later, but they soon disappear, allowing for the polyphony to continue acapella. Finally, as the subject of the vocal fugue begins again in the bass line, the orchestra reenters as well. Ravel carries us back in time to the beginning of the opera as he superimposes the music from the opening fairytale space (created by two oboes in parallel fifths) on this new landscape of understanding, empathy and reconciliation.

Example 3-20, Rehearsal #152, mm 7-15; The Fugue of Forgiveness and the Return of the Opening Oboe Motif:

Doux Kind *et And*

S. - ge, il est doux, he is kind, *pp*

C. - ge, si doux, so kind, *pp*

T. *pp*

B. *pp* Il est bon, l'Enfant, il est sage, bien He is good, the Child, he is wise, so

Fugue subject doubled in viola

Oboes & violins *Original overture music*

Fugue subject in viola

Acapella section ends

Fugue in stretto! *subject entry 3*

S. sa - ge, He is wise, *pp* Il est bon, l'Enfant, il est sage. He is good, the Child, he is wise.

C. *pp* Il est bon, l'Enfant, il est sage. He is good, the Child, he is wise.

T. *pp* Il est bon, l'Enfant, il est sage, Il est sage. He is good, the Child, he is wise, he is wise.

B. *pp* sa sage, Il est sage. he is wise.

Entry 4

sa sage.

The opera has come full circle, only the boy is now a little wiser. After bathing in this rich hymn of forgiveness, and a condensed stretto return of the fugue (this time, a four-part fugue), the child gives his final, ambiguous, and perhaps desperate, cry for “Maman” and runs into her arms.

With the Ballet Russes, the essential and variable components of the multi-media spectacle transformed. In the past, sets and costumes like performers and musicians would change with each successive staging. But, in the twenties, these elements became defining aspects of the creation itself. Over time, original sets and costumes do not stay intact like the libretto or score. And so, these collaborative works which dissolved the notion of a single creative origin, in effect, created a new originary moment in their initial production. Only the first run, with the visuals designed by an original collaborator, is authentic to the conception of the work. Without Leger’s sets and costumes and even the original choreography, *La Création du Monde* is an entirely different experience. A later performance may evoke the original, but it has become something else. As Daniel Albright says:

The great Modernist collaborations all survive in fragments. Diaghilev’s ballets are mostly concert scores, sketches for backdrops, reconstructions of dimly remembered choreography, stills of Nijinsky, and fading gaudy costumes worn only by mannequins. Even where a great deal of information remains, as with *The Rite of Spring*, the project is enclosed in a certain glamour of the unrecoverable. (Albright 185)

As Colette and Ravel did not have a third collaborator creating the sets, the visuals became open to many authentic interpretations. The opera could only be enhanced by the

addition of imaginative sets and costumes to complement the magic of the story and the rich musical illustration. While the deterioration of sets and costumes over time leaves the viewer to imagine or remember, it also gives designers of the future the chance to collaborate with artists across generations or even centuries. Like the solo performer of a concerto who has the opportunity to move beyond the role of interpreter and, in effect, participate in the composing process as he writes his own cadenza, so the set designer for a new production of a modernist, avant-garde spectacle also participates in the fundamental conception of the work.

In the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner attempted to synthesize all the arts, and while his poetry and music were strong, the sets and costumes were not of equal power. This failure transformed into an exciting challenge for set designers who attempted to match the force and grace of Wagner's contributions with their own on the same stage. On a smaller scale, *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* calls out to visual artists for completion, and many talented and famous ones have taken up the challenge. David Hockney, one of the key figures in launching the Pop Art movement of the 1960s, created the sets and costumes at the Metropolitan Opera for the 1981 production;¹³ and illustrator Maurice Sendak, "the Picasso of Children's books," as he has been called, designed them for the 1990 production at New York City Opera (revived in 1999). In my estimation, the most successful sets for *L'Enfant* were done for the 1950 production at the Opéra-Comique in Paris by Michel Terrasse. Not only does Terrasse capture the delicate magic of the story, but his work also retains the spirit of the 1920s. Like Picasso's and Leger's, Terrasse's sets are also paintings in themselves. While we see the boy on the stage, we also see him on the back drop. Both action and design tell the story simultaneously, each

¹³ See appendix to view David Hockney's *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges* sets.

with a different individual touch. The grandson of the opéra-bouffe composer, Claude Terrasse, and the grand-nephew of the famous post-impressionist painter, Pierre Bonnard,¹⁴ Michel Terrasse was, in many ways, the ideal person for the job. He was surrounded by modern art from an early age. And, he was only twenty at the time he did the sets, close enough to his own childhood to capture its wonder and horror.

In the curtain below and the following three backdrops for *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, Terrasse depicts scenes in the utmost detail. These works appear as if they were illustrations for a children's book rather than designs for a production, but again, this boundary crossing seems appropriate when working with an opera that dates from the twenties. On the curtain, each of the animals in the production is featured, a cat, a dragonfly, a squirrel and numerous frogs. A fence encloses the area, suggesting perhaps that, even in the garden, there are cage-like structures, circumscribing the child and the animals. But, above all else, Terrasse captures the whimsy and the rich colors of the child's fantasy.

¹⁴ The work of Pierre Bonnard influenced such Russian innovative stage designers as Natalia Goncharova who, along with Larionov designed the sets for the Ballet Russes production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le Coq d'or*. She went on to do the sets for *Les Noces* (1923) and *The Firebird* (1926).

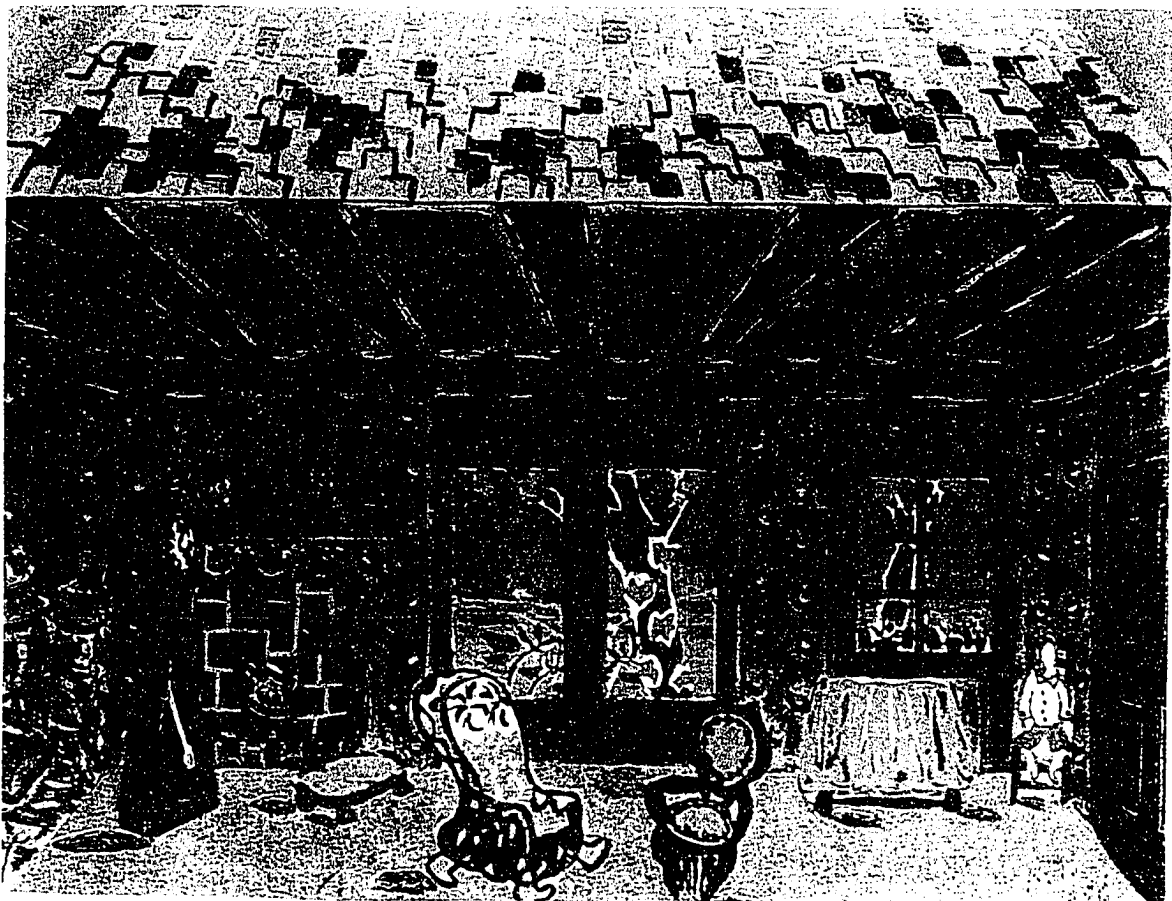
Example 3-21, Terrasse Curtain for 1950 Production of *L'Enfant* at the Opéra-Comique:



If the details of the garden are depicted on the curtain, so those of the room find there way into the opening backdrop. We see the child sitting in the right hand corner. (Is this yet another punishment imagined by Terrasse?) Here, the magical abilities of the armchair are suggested by the moving feet, and the begère is tilted as if accepting the dance. Grandfather clock, fireplace and kettle are all depicted in the backdrop as well as on the stage, highlighting, in still form, what will happen in this scene. In the stage directions, Colette describes the opening set as a “low-ceilinged room in a country house, opening on to the garden” (E 34). Here the ceiling does feel low and the room feels both enclosed and yet enlarged by the garden outside whose patterns and colors are not so

different from the rich myriad of designs inside. (The purple wallpaper seems to be covered with falling green leaves.) Inviting patterns which enclose and gardens just outside the window are also motifs throughout the work of Terrasse's grand uncle, Pierre Bonnard. Here they reinforce the boy's lack of freedom as well as the magical, expansive landscape of childhood. The lack of realism (in such details as the shadows created on the floor by the objects) prepare us for the boy's hallucinatory dream/nightmare.

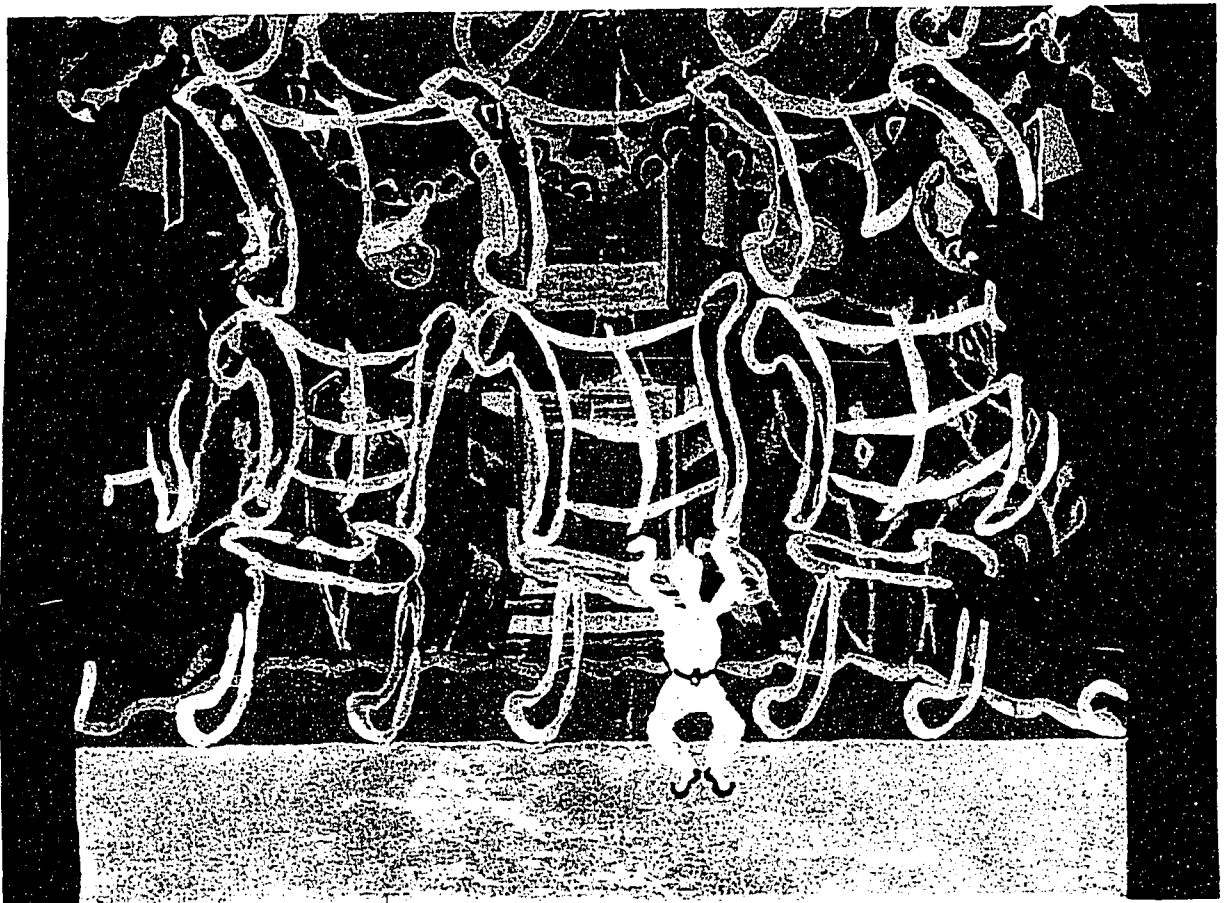
Example 3-22, Terrasse Opening Backdrop, Patterns that Invite and Enclose:



The next set Terrasse mysteriously labeled “the Chinese screen.” This appears nowhere in the text but seems an appropriate addition. Is this dancing figure in front of

the faux-Asian screen the boy or the Chinese cup? Perhaps the costumes on the stage will clarify or perhaps this is left to the imagination of the viewer. On the flat surface of this backdrop, there are many layers: furthest back, the colorful design; then a layer of gray patterns; and in the foreground, the pink stage on which the figure appears in a stylized pose. In front is the black exterior on which menacing gargoyle-esque lions peer out. Clearly, Terrasse moves beyond the suggestions of the music and words, but emotionally, he has taken his cue from them. An Asian sound permeates the score from the opening parallelism of the oboes to its return in the final bars. We immediately sense the danger in the Chinese scrim as if it too were imagined from the boy's frightened perspective.

Example 3-23, "Chinese Screen" Terrasse Backdrop for *L'Enfant*:



The final backdrop below again depicts the rich green, blues and purples of the garden, a few of the animals in the background, and the boy in the foreground, still somewhat hampered in his freedom by Terrasse's addition of the fence. In *L'Opéra de Paris* from 1950, Leon Werth opens an article on Michel Terrasse as follows: "There were two miracles, the miracle of Colette and the miracle of Ravel. What was need was a third."¹⁵ Twenty-five years after its debut, Terrasse became the third miracle of *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*.

Example 3-24, Terrasse's Backdrop for the Garden in *L'Enfant*:



¹⁵ My translation. The original reads: "Il y avait deux miracles, le miracle Colette et le miracle Ravel. Il en fallait un troisième" (Werth 52).

In Ravel and Colette's charmed collaboration, childhood is depicted with both whimsy and emotional realism. As composer and librettist return to childhood, they find the violence of adult society mirrored back at them. But, Ravel softens the boy's destruction. Rather than exploiting all possible sonorities to maximize the child's outburst, he uses the less combative approach of increasing the volume (sometimes to triple fortes) to heighten emotion. When the boy smashes the household items, the music is *onomatopoetic, but devoid of the sharp edge of dissonance*. Ravel also demonstrates his partiality for the natural and the childhood domain over the punitive and artificial emissaries of the adult world. He reserves the "Ravelian" sound, free of parody, for the boy's recitative and his aria. Ravel depicts the animals with an authenticity he does not bother to bestow on the over-grown, parental figures. His choices interpret Colette's text; they highlight the painful lack of freedom that is, unfortunately, a part of childhood, rather than the boy's initial violence. By pointing the listener away from his cruelty of the child, Ravel emphasizes the less overt but perhaps even more virulent brutality of the text -- that which the adult world has already wreaked on the mind of the child. The boy must have heard the reproaches and threats of the adults so frequently that he can imagine the parental response of each of the items he has destroyed, and their reproofs incite fear, loneliness and guilt in this boy of six or seven. The unresolved tension of the mother's warm chords again reinforces an ambivalent approach to that all-important figure in the boy's life. She is clearly the source of comfort, and yet, she is also, no doubt, a primary source of his over-developed super-ego.

The suggestions in Colette's text that Ravel chose to highlight have been overlooked by critics and stage directors alike. At both The MET and New York City

Opera, the piece has catered to children, softening Ravel's most daring passages (like the frightening cats's sexuality) and presenting the mother on stage, not as a skirt with scissors, but as a person, unambiguously tender and forgiving. Certainly Colette's text is about war but, as Ravel points out in the music, the first struggle in the child's life is waged against the mother who is an oppressor as well as a nurturer. The child's greatest asset, his imagination, can also be a dangerous tool. On the one hand, it widens his space so that he can move effortlessly from his locked room to the beloved freedom of the garden. On the other, it enlarges his sense of guilt, helplessness and destructive power. Ravel beautifully captures the enlarged world of the child's mind with the augmentation of intervals, the fourth in particular, and triads. Through his imagination, he also re-invents his own behavior and develops the capacity to leap inside the hearts of the animals he has hurt and attune his feelings and actions to theirs.

The text and score are as richly imaginative as the child's mind. Both artists create an enchantment that is at once delightful and dark. Ravel's musical interpretation of the text is unexpected and very much his own. The conglomeration of eclectic musical styles, so essential to the score, is not implied in the libretto. And yet, his ideas work to clarify and deepen what Colette has already suggested in her text. Likewise, in the fashion of the twenties, Michel Terrasse later added his Chinese screen as backdrop, a fanciful touch, but one that in no way clashes with the spirit of the work. Throughout, Ravel maintains the motion of the narrative and keeps the coherence of the work through the repeating leitmotif of the mother and the central interval of the falling fourth, which transforms its size (becoming a tritone) but maintains its power throughout. He also returns at the end to the opening texture of the oboes, but against the fugue of

forgiveness, the oboe motif comes to sound and mean something different. In “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from our exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time!
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree
 Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half-heard in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea. (*CPPE*, 269)

The analogy between arriving “where we started” in life and revisiting the opening material at the end of a piece of music is already suggested in these lines from the final movement of *The Four Quartets*. As the child’s dream comes to a close, he returns to the space of the waking world, but with a wisdom he did not possess before his frightening adventure began. In the process of collaboration, the artists go on a similar journey, but they do so together. Ravel returned to Colette’s text again and again for eight years. As he composed, he discovered in the story what Eliot called “the voice of the hidden waterfall,” and in the completed score, he delicately sounded the “half-heard” suggestions of the libretto. Thinking back over the opera in 1939, Colette wrote:

The score of *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* is now famous. How can I describe my emotion when, for the first time, I heard the little drum accompanying the shepherd’s procession? The moonlight in the garden, the flight of the dragonflies

and bats... 'Isn't it fun?' Ravel would say. But I could feel a knot of tears
tightening in my throat. (*R* 58)

That "knot of tears" was perhaps a response to the pain explored in the story and the music, as well as an emotional testament to the beauty and power of Ravel's astonishingly faithful transformation of her work.

IV
The Making and Remaking of Americans:
Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*
and the Construction of Incongruity

On April 21, 1934, after the initial run of *Four Saints in Three Acts* at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, composer Virgil Thomson wrote to Gertrude Stein, his librettist:

Dear Gertrude

The opera is now closed for the summer and everybody has had a lovely time about it and I must say that in every way it was very, very beautiful and of course there were some who didn't like the music and some who didn't like the words and even some who didn't like the decors or the choreography but there wasn't anybody who didn't see that the ensemble was a new kind of collaboration and that it was unique and powerful and I wish you could have seen the faces of the people as they watched and listened....

Always devotedly and loyally yours,

[Virgil Thomson]¹

With libretto and score finished in 1928, *Four Saints in Three Acts* became both the self-conscious culmination of a decade of avant-garde multi-media productions and, as Thomson says, an entirely "new kind of collaboration." If the stage productions of Paris and London in the twenties glanced through the lens of America to create their blues, jazz, and ragtime interludes, so Thomson and Stein looked through Parisian spectacles to construct an all-American extravaganza. Like *Parade*, *Four Saints* subverted audience

¹ Virgil Thomson, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, ed., Tim Page and Venessa Weeks Page (New York: Summit Books, 1988) p. 54.

expectation, but with a joyful exuberance all its own. For this and *Mother of Us All*, their second collaboration, Thomson and Stein turned to the past and, out of it, they created operas that undermine aesthetic tradition and write history in their own image. Composer and poet re-imagined modernist methods of juxtaposition and simultaneity as well as traditional narrative and musical procedures. They also re-constructed the relationship among the arts --musical, visual and literary – using the technical methods of one domain to inform the aesthetic possibilities of the others.

Before meeting Stein, Thomson spent a good deal of his time studying and emulating her aesthetic. During his Harvard years, he talks of his addiction to *Tender Buttons* and *Geography and Plays*, the only Stein published and available at the time (*VT*, 140). In 1925, Thomson left for France, with hopes of studying with Nadia Boulanger, as young American composers did to gain craft and the necessary European validation to further their careers. But, his education at 27 Rue de Fleurus, Stein's Paris apartment/salon, seemed to him far more fruitful. As Thomson tells the story, George Antheil, the American composer and well-known bad boy of music, was "sent for" by Stein, and he took Thomson along "for intellectual protection." Between Stein and Thomson, there was immediate rapport; as Thomson put it, they got on "like Harvard men." And, Stein made it clear that she expected further visits (*VT* 89).

Before working together on the operas, Thomson set smaller works of Stein -- "Susie Asado," "Preciosilla" and *Capital Capitals*. He saw in these pieces the opportunity to rethink the challenges of textual setting. As he says:

My hope in putting Gertrude Stein to music had been to break, crack open and solve for all time anything still waiting to be solved which was almost

everything about English musical declamation. . . . My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way, were manna. With meanings already abstracted or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no temptation toward tonal illustration, say, of birdie babbling by the brook or heavy heavy hangs my heart. You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed an accompaniment equally functional. I had no sooner put to music after this recipe one short Stein text than I knew I had opened a door.

(*SLVT* 68- 69)

The English language, as Thomson points out, was for composers, still largely uncharted territory. Since Purcell, there had been very few English language operas, and almost nothing that was uniquely American. Of course, Stein's English is not at all customary, but this helped Thomson to focus on its semiotic components (sound and rhythm) and to move away from traditional techniques of tone and word painting. In *Four Saints*, Stein sets up numerous games, and Thomson takes every opportunity to participate in them. There are, however, no characters to be fleshed out or heart-wrenching events to be supported emotionally in the music. Even the setting of *Four Saints*, Avila Spain in the sixteenth century, seemed arbitrary, given the text; Stein left open the question of where the opera was really situated.

Daniel Albright argues that *Four Saints* takes place in heaven. This he gleans from the religious theme, and a scenario, created by Maurice Grosser, in which he explicitly places the final scene in Heaven. But most of all, Albright finds heaven in the absolute consonance of the music. Thomson clearly created a music of being, rather than

becoming. And yet, the text, for all its non-progressivity, is not about absolute consonance or a heavenly state of arrival, but rather the chaos that precedes artistic creation. The text and the music use sounds that are entirely earthly, and specifically American. Does heaven consist of nursery rhymes and American band music? Do people there sing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”² or question how they will go about preparing opera libretti? *Four Saints* is set, not in heaven, but in the landscape of Gertrude Stein’s own mind (a domain which she regarded as entirely American).³ Throughout her career, Stein tried to establish American (as opposed to English) speech rhythms in her writing, focusing largely on monosyllabic words. She was passionate about the United States as a place of “the new” and she spoke as if she and this land, which she chose not to inhabit for most of her life, were intimately involved with each other on a daily basis: “Yes, I am married, I mean I am married to America, it is so beautiful.” (Hugh English 258).

In *Paris, France*, Stein claims that her life abroad gave her a chance to look in from a necessary distance on her own American self. Although Stein had a certain affinity for Spain, and Avila in particular, the Spanish reference point in the opera seems more than anything else, to highlight the absence of things Spanish from the language, score and scenery, and therefore, to further emphasize the American quality of the spectacle. What Stein and Thomson do surreptitiously in *Four Saints*, they often repeat overtly in *Mother of Us All*. When refracted through the imagination of its creators, the story of St. Teresa becomes as American as that of Susan B. Anthony (the subject of their second collaboration). In 1936, a year after *Four Saints* premiered on Broadway, Stein

² One of the few direct allusions in the music and words is the opening line of “My Country ‘Tis of thee.”

³ Jeyse Norman makes a similar assertion in *Prepare for Saints: The Making of a Modern Opera*, directed, co-produced and written by Steven Watson and broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio.

published *The Geographical History of American or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* whose title and content suggest the connection she so often drew between interior and exterior geography. The work is an extended mediation on grammar, the symbolic figure of America, and the effect of these two on personal identity.

While the language of Stein's medieval, Spanish saints derives from simple, nonsensical American speech, the music reflects not sixteenth century Catholic, but contemporary Southern Baptist church hymns. Words and text may appear incompatible with the ostensible subject matter, but they are both in accord with the opera's true focus – the annihilation of mimesis in art and the construction of an entirely fresh American idiom in language and music. Stein's words are, like her native country, governed democratically. As she says:

Cezanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously... You see I tried to convey the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole. It was the first time in any language that anyone had used that idea of composition in literature.

(Cited in Ryan 24-25)

Stein goes on to explain that through the mechanics of the sentence she tried to eliminate an unnecessary hierarchy among the parts of the sentence. As she puts it, "I was trying to get this evenness of everybody having the vote and that is the reason I am impatient with punctuation" (*SW* 103). In *Four Saints*, not only does each syllable "have the right to vote,"⁴ but the larger sections of the text also have an unexpected equality about them. As

⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum says this in *Prepare for Saints: The Making of a Modern Opera*, directed, co-produced and written by Steven Watson and broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio.

Stein does not use a traditional plot that rises to a climax, all the scenes share relatively equal significance. Certain characters have more prominent roles than others, but they all remain somewhat undifferentiated, as they work together to create the singular voice and consciousness of Gertrude Stein at work on her opera.

This radical democratization of language is matched by Thomson's music which does away with dissonance through diatonic saturation in the melodic line and a radically reduced harmonic language. Thomson focuses almost entirely on the most fundamental relationship in all of Western music -- that of the tonic and the dominant. He does not use proper modulations, and so there is no hierarchy established among the different keys. The simple tension-resolution (V-I) harmony which Thomson maintains throughout the work undermines ordinary musical progression. While Stein employs simple child-like words and nonsense that no real child would ever speak or write, Thomson returns to the basics of harmony in music with a technique entirely different from anything that came before him. When trying to analyze the work, John Cage joked, "There are 111 tonic-dominants, 178 scale passages, 632 sequences, 38 references to nursery tunes. . ."

(Hoover and Cage 157). Thomson's style, his in-your-face simplicity and the intensity of his consonance, becomes one of the many twentieth century methods to disrupt the ordinary uses of the tonal system, as different in its own innocuous way as the innovative techniques of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg. In *Le Coq et L'Arlequin* (1918), Jean Cocteau remarked: "What, in our age is the greatest audacity – simplicity" (Cocteau 20). Following Satie, Thomson would attempt his own American version of this "audacity." The non-hierarchical nature of the music and text of *Four Saints*, however, is not matched by an equality among the arts featured on stage. At all times, the text

dominates, and the music, along with the spectacle and the dance, acts as its servant.

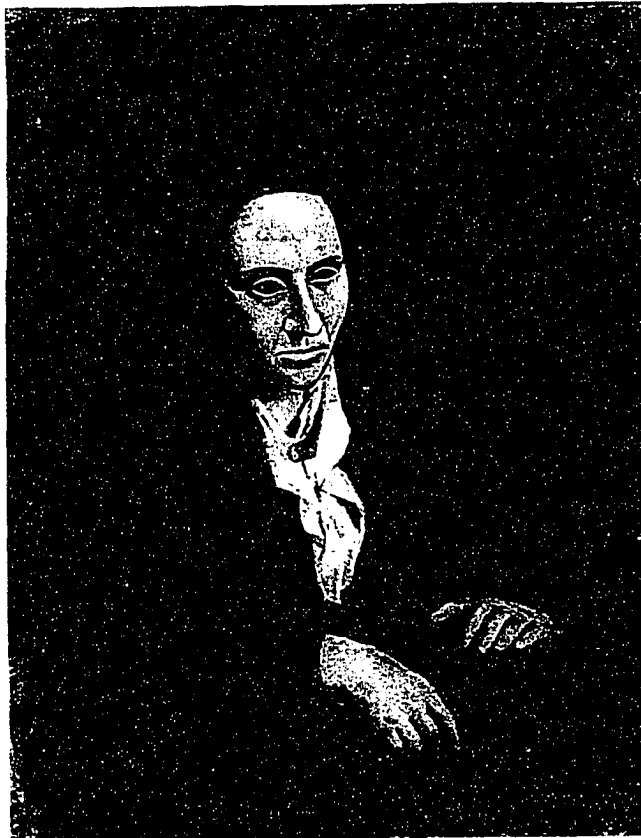
Thomson was willing, even eager, to take on this secondary role when working with his older collaborator and mentor.

Stein's innovative use of language came, in part, by transferring techniques from the visual arts into language, and following her, Thomson reconstructed these principles in music. Throughout her career, Stein wrote linguistic still life paintings,⁵ portraits and landscapes. In one of Stein's famous anecdotes, recounted in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she discusses Picasso's portrait of her. In Alice's voice, Stein writes: "After a little while I murmured to Picasso that I liked his portrait of Gertrude Stein. Yes, he said, every body says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will, he said" (*SW* 124). His prediction, of course, has come true; today, the public associates Stein with the face and figure in Picasso's painting (see Figure 4-1). Following Picasso, Stein began to create her own portraits of people in words. To make the leap from the visual arts (which do not move through time) to the literary (which do) required a whole new technique. And indeed, Stein created word-scapes rather than traditional poetry or prose. The following is an excerpt from *her* portrait of Picasso: "Something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning, a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning" (*SW*, 334). Stein's repetition and variations on a single phrase creates a quality of stasis. But, in these lines, she also captures the slow, circular struggle of the artist as he works through the visions and revisions of the creative process. In the case of a strong artist like Picasso, this can lead to solidity, clarity and charm. Stein's portrait ends with Picasso's conflicted nature:

⁵ See *Tender Buttons* for her still life paintings.

“He was working, he was not ever completely working. . . . He was one who was working. He was one having something coming out of him something having meaning. He was not ever completely working” (*SW*, 335). In outward appearance, Stein’s portrait of Picasso, like Picasso’s of Stein does not immediately evoke its model. Neither artist was trying to capture the face, but the “bottom natures” of their subjects. In the end, it is hard to say whose essential character is captured in either work -- the artist creating or the artist being created.

Figure 4-1: Picasso’s Portrait of Gertrude Stein (1906):



Following Stein following Picasso, Virgil Thomson would attempt a similar technique in music.⁶ Like the artist but unlike Stein, Thomson wrote his musical portraits

⁶ Anthony Tommasini points out that Thomson was aware that he was not the first composer to create musical portraits. Earlier composers including Couperin, Schumann, Rubenstein and Elgar had also created them. And yet, through his connection with Gertrude Stein and the practice of “disciplined spontaneity,” Thomson seems to compose his in a different spirit to serve a different function.

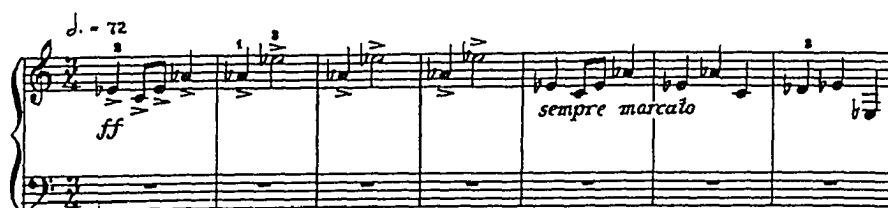
with the sitter in front of him. But, even this departure from Stein's approach allowed him to further emulate her as it helped him to adopt what he termed her "discipline of spontaneity." To achieve this he would "sketch" his musical portrait in one session with the model, and then "let it refrigerate over night" before making small edits. Thomson developed this technique along side his work on the opera; the method he used to create the landscape of *Four Saints* was quite similar. As he explains: "With the text on my piano's music rack, I would sing and play, improvising melody to fit the words and harmony for underpinning them with shape. I did this every day, wrote down nothing. When the first act would improvise itself every day in the same way, I knew it was set" (Quoted in Albright, 241). Over many years, Thomson painted musical portraits of Picasso, Stein, Toklas, and most of the other key players in the creation of *Four Saints in Three Acts*. On September 2nd, 1928, he wrote to Stein, "My portraiture trick is developing nicely and seems to be quite new. That is, for music, because the idea of it comes obviously out of you" (*SLVT* 200). Thomson would continue this practice throughout his life.

In Thomson's portrait of Picasso, like Stein's, he captures the conflicted nature of the artist. Even in the title, "Bugles and Birds: A Portrait of Pablo Picasso" there is a suggestion of two contrasting sides of the man's nature. In the opening measures, we hear the firm marshal sounds of the bugle mimicked in double forte, accented fifths and thirds. Picasso's gentler side appears later in a softer, swifter and more lyrical, bird-like arpeggiation⁷ (see examples 4-2 and 4-3). There is also a clash in the simultaneous repeated patterns of the right and left hand. The layering of non-progressive ostinati

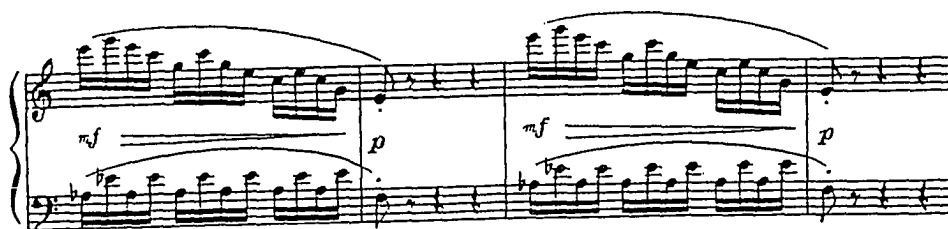
⁷ When Thomson scored this for chamber group in 1944, he differentiated these more clearly by opening with the brass as bugles, and using flutes to depict the birdlike passages.

echoes the technique and sound of Erik Satie (see example 4-4).⁸ Although Thomson insisted that his portrait represented the man and not his work, we can't help but be reminded of *Parade*, the Picasso-Satie-Cocteau "succès de scandale," and even of Picasso's own technique of synthetic cubism in which he juxtaposed materials – a newspaper, cloth, and paint -- on a single canvas. In the end of the piece, there is an echo of earlier musical patterns, lending a faint arc-like shape to the work. But, on the whole, Thomson's approach is static, like visual portraits or Stein's linguistic ones.

Example 4-2: "Bugles and Birds: A Portrait of Pablo Picasso" mm. 1-7; Opening Accented Bugle Sounds:



Example 4-3: "Bugles and Birds: A Portrait of Pablo Picasso" mm. 67-70; Softer, Swifter, More lyrical, Bird-like Arpeggiations:



⁸ Much of Thomson's music was influenced by Erik Satie, but this technique of layered ostinati (originally derived from Stravinsky's music, but without its rhythmic drive) is not typical of Thomson's work.

Example 4-4: “Bugles and Birds: A Portrait of Picasso,” mm 77-87; Satie-like, Bitonal Ostinati patterns, that Move from One to the Next Non-Progressively:

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef).
 System 1: The right hand plays a melodic line with triplets and sixteenth notes, marked *pp leg.*. The left hand plays a bitonal ostinato pattern. A bracket below the left hand is labeled "Bitonal ostinato #1".
 System 2: The right hand continues with a similar melodic line, marked *f*. The left hand plays a different bitonal ostinato pattern, marked *sfz*. A bracket below the left hand is labeled "Ostinato #2".
 System 3: The right hand plays a melodic line marked *pp sub. leg.*. The left hand plays a variation of the first bitonal ostinato pattern, marked *sfz*. A bracket below the left hand is labeled "Variation on bitonal ostinato #1".

By borrowing procedures from the visual arts and using them to re-imagine literary and musical technique, Stein and Thomson question the borders of their respective domains and the interrelationships with other arts. Thomson had not one, but two careers, as musician and writer. He became the music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* and eventually wrote his own memoirs and a numerous books on music. His

natural attunement to language was essential in his work with Stein. As a man of two crafts, he resembled Jean Cocteau, the spirit behind the multi-media collaborations of the twenties, who was as much a visual artist as a poet. Cocteau also dabbled in music, with a regular gig on Friday nights playing drums at the Parisian hotspot, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*. Having talents in more than one artistic domain undoubtedly aided Cocteau and Thomson as they embraced and reveled in the interaction of multiple arts in their collaborations.

In many ways, the Stein and Thomson's work together mirrors that of Sitwell and Walton. In both cases, a linguistically challenging female writer paired up with a more accessible male musician, and as a result, created for herself a listening public. In both cases, the women were considerably older than their artistic partners; Stein was twenty-two years older than Thomson. As a result of working with these formidable literary experimenters, the young men also found their own listening public. Six months before *Four Saints*, when *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was published, Stein had reached a large audience for the first time. But even in that work, Stein's words were only heard when mediated through the consciousness of a collaborator. In *The Autobiography*, the collaboration was of a different sort -- she simply adopted the straightforward speaking voice of her lifetime companion, Alice B. Toklas. Those who knew Alice felt that Stein had appropriated her style with impressive accuracy. *Four Saints* and *The Autobiography*, would remain the most popular works of Stein's career, and in both cases, her own voice was made palatable and accessible only through the inflections of another. While William Walton had been reluctant to set Edith Sitwell's difficult poetry, Thomson was eager to collaborate with Stein, but she was apprehensive at first. Michael Hoffman attributes this to her naturally individualistic temperament. In the end, it was her

radical originality and an unwillingness to compromise her aesthetic that made *Four Saints* so strikingly innovative.

Thomson and Stein began their work on *Four Saints* by looking for a mythological subject matter. As Greece and Scandinavia had already been used in opera, they settled on history as a form of mythology. Stein's first thought was to write about George Washington, but Thomson did not want to use an eighteenth century theme, so they settled on saints' lives. In this initial stage, there was an even back and forth; Thomson came up with the idea of saints, and Stein proposed making them Spanish and focusing on St. Teresa and Ignatius Loyola (even though the two historical individuals had never met). Just below the "saintly" surface another mythology was at play. As Thomson says:

The theme we chose was of my suggesting; it was the working artist's working life, which is to say, the life we were both living. It was also my idea that good things come in pairs....This dualistic view made it possible without going in for sex unduly, to have both male and female leads with second leads and choruses surrounding them....I thought we should follow overtly, however, the format of classical Italian opera, which carries on the commerce of the play in dry recitative, extending the emotional moments into arias and set-pieces. And since the eighteenth-century *opera seria*, or basic Italian opera, required a serious-mythological subject with a tragic ending, we agreed to follow that convention also. (Cited in Bowers 215)

Stein did give Thomson a libretto about the artist's working life, only that "narrative" would have to be uncovered beneath words that seem to convey other things or nothing at all.

In the libretto, Stein seems to have entirely disregarded Thomson's plea for "the format of classical Italian opera" or a tragic ending. Instead, her text undermines classical conventions whenever possible. When Thomson received her work, it looked nothing like a libretto. There were simply words on a page with *no ostensible characters to speak* them. Stein had also not clearly delineated between text and directional markings in her libretto. Getting the joke and furthering it, Thomson set everything to music including scene numbers and the cast list. This adds tremendously to the haphazard humor of the entire work. It also helps to disrupt, and therefore expose the artistic conventions we take for granted when we enter a theater.

Like Ravel in his work with Colette, so Thomson became a literary critic of sorts, although his challenge was to decipher Stein's meaning rather than to breathe life into its thematic suggestions. Stein's work demanded that Thomson take on many roles beyond those of composer. First, he had to transform her finished text into a usable libretto. In effect, Thomson became a collaborator-in-words as well as notes. He did not alter a line or the placement of a sentence; he simply added characters and chose which of Stein's words each would say and sing. The characters helped to break up Stein's text, and therefore, to clarify and limit its endless proliferation of meaning. But, as the words do not use ordinary syntax or logic, Thomson would also be limited by them. To a large extent, the task of the music in this context is to make the language audible and enjoyable for an audience. Other collaborators of the twenties carefully negotiate between their

individual visions and the group aesthetic. At times, they collaborate closely, and at others they do not. But, in Stein and Thomson's work, the two primary artists create the illusion of incongruity out of a single shared vision. There are clear disjunctions in the content of the libretto, but between composer and poet there is an absolute merger of aesthetic vision, and this happens, in large part, because Thomson created his musical identity in part by following Stein. Wayne Koestenbaum asserts: "Virgil Thomson knew that she [Gertrude Stein] was a genius, that she needed a wide birth."⁹ By reveling in what she produced and filling in missing items when necessary, Thomson left her the room to create a libretto completely unlike any other, before or since. If we return to the paradigm for opera of an earlier period as set up in Strauss's *Capriccio* (and discussed in Chapter two), Stein and Thomson are not so different from Flamand (composer) and Olivier (poet); they too follow one muse. But, their shared aesthetic involved the construction of an arbitrariness among the components of the work, and it is this that makes the work appear to be in stark opposition to the older paradigm.

More than any other opera, *Four Saints* was constructed in layers. First Stein wrote the text; then Thomson added characters, put Stein's words into their mouths, and composed the score. When libretto and music were complete, he invited a third collaborator, Maurice Grosser, to superimpose a scenario on the actionless text. In a customary fashion, Florine Stettheimer then created the sets and costumes, and Fredrick Ashton choreographed the work. Finally, an amateur, all black cast was chosen to perform this work, completely devoid of African-American sounds. This was the composer's idea, but one he made clear was a feature of a particular production and not

⁹ Wayne Kostenbaum says this in *Prepare for Saints: The Making of a Modern Opera*, directed, co-produced and written by Steven Watson and broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio.

essential for later stagings. (In *Porgy and Bess*, which came out on Broadway a few months after *Four Saints*, George Gershwin insisted that his all black cast was a binding condition for future productions.)

Thomson allowed himself considerable latitude as he turned Stein's text into a singable libretto. He brought in two characters whose names had not been mentioned in the text, Commère and Compère, to function as master of ceremonies. Following this idea, Stein would write in her own masters of ceremonies in *Mother of Us All*, and aptly name them Gertrude S. and Virgil T. In *Four Saints*, Thomson also decided for musical reasons (or so he claimed) to divide Saint Teresa into two characters, represented by two singers dressed exactly alike. This has the effect of lending Stein's figurative (and sometimes nonsensical lines) a literal meaning: "Saint Teresa with Saint Teresa," or "Saint Teresa once and once," or "St. Teresa half in and half out of doors." (FS 15, 18, 21). If Stein's lines imply that St. Teresa has a division in self, Thomson's choice depicts this visually. His two St. Teresas also furthers Stein's greater goal of destroying the illusion of mimesis on stage. This decision may have also been part of a private joke with Stein. If the first St. Teresa is Gertrude Stein, then perhaps the second is Alice Toklas. At one point, St. Teresa II asks St. Teresa I, "Can two saints be one." The audience is left to wonder whether these two saints are halves of a single being or life partners. In reference to Thomson's two St. Teresas, Maurice Grosser says in his introduction to the scenario, "Miss Stein found it thoroughly acceptable" (*Four Saints* 9).

Before writing this opera, Stein had already transformed the structure and meaning of drama in over sixty plays (Bowers 210). These works deliberately violated the two most fundamental elements of drama as far as Aristotle was concerned; they

contained neither a plot nor distinguishable characters. Like the libretto, they were not written in dialogue, making their realization in the theater only possible with the intervention of a Thomson or a Grosser, or the two of them, to impose characters, speaking parts, and action. It is not surprising that Stein's dramatic works were not staged and, even now, are rarely performed. Maurice Grosser makes it clear that suggestions were given to him by both composer and poet, although the scenario was largely his own invention. No story was imposed on Stein's deliberately static work, rather tableaux were created for various scenes. To some extent, Grosser's impositions rein in Stein's freewheeling libretto. Working from the already reworked text, Grosser names four principal saints – Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Ignatius Loyola, and their respective confidants, Saint Settlement and Saint Chavez, as the four saints of the title. Perhaps, this is too literal a reading of a text; Stein's reference to four saints was chosen for the very purpose of dashing audience expectation when two full choruses of saints arrive on stage. Then again, perhaps the text was to have and not have four saints at the same time, in which case, Grosser's choice is a good one.

The scenario includes such activities as a Sunday school pageant, a photography session, a garden party, a military drill and a procession of saints in heaven. The tableaux are eminently forgettable as they amount to nothing in terms of plot growth. There are, however, touches that stand out along the way like the scene in which St. Teresa II painting of flowers on a giant Easter egg. Could the egg signify a new beginning, the beginning of American opera perhaps? In Act I, St. Teresa II holds a dove in her hand as she is photographed with St. Settlement. The dove is, of course, the image in sixteenth century painting of the Holy Ghost. This bird eventually transmutes into Stein's

democratic, deflated vision of the divine spirit in Act IV – “Pigeons on the grass, alas.” Grosser is aware that when such incongruities are thrown together, the mind of the viewer finds connections and meanings. As he says: “One should not try to interpret the words of this opera too literally, nor should one fall into the opposite error of thinking that they mean nothing at all” (*FS* 7). Even without memorable plot movement, the opera was a grand spectacle when it appeared first at the Wadsworth Athenaeum and then on Broadway. Stein once said, “Martyrs do things. A really good saint does nothing” (Douglass 8). Stein’s first opera is about saints, so nothing happens; the second, about martyrs, and therefore, even with Stein’s non-progressive approach, history ambles forward.¹⁰

In *Four Saints*, the personalities of the characters and their individual lines (generally essential and non-negotiable aspects of a staged work) become external variables. Once the score was written these elements became fixed, but the specific saints and their specific lines continue to feel arbitrary and interchangeable. The action (another non-negotiable in standard works) had also become inessential, imposed from outside the text. Only the words and the score which became their conduit are essential to the opera.. Stein knew this, and thus accorded her collaborators maximum freedom in working out the ‘inessentials,’ continually praising their choices, as if she had adopted a carefree, “anything goes” attitude about her work which she, in fact, took very seriously.

A large part of the appeal of the initial production was the elaborate set design and the stylized movements of the characters. Thomson once drew a lineage from the early seventeenth century English masque with its opulent display to *Four Saints*. The dance and designs on stage were absolutely necessary, but the details of either could

¹⁰ Susan B. Anthony refers to herself as a martyr in *Mother of Us All*.

transform from production to production without endangering the work's core. The all-black cast also caught the attention of the public, but as mentioned before, it too was optional. In a letter to Stein dated February 1st, 1938, Thomson underscores the importance of freedom in production. He writes:

A negro troupe belonging to the Federal Theater wants to produce *Four Saints* in Philadelphia for two weeks. It is the idea of a new and different production that mostly tempts me about the whole idea. Because sooner or later that must be done. Otherwise the work is frozen. Like Satie's *Mercure*, which had such a fancy production by Massine and Picasso in 1923 that nobody dared do it since. (SLVT 120-1)

On one level, Stein's text controlled the entire extravaganza and demanded to be served by the music as well as each of the other component parts. On another, Stein relinquished control more than any librettist, past or future. This work has often been referred to as "cubism on stage." But, the two dimensional canvases of Picasso and Braques were still arranged by the vision of a single artist. The only unifying consciousness in avant-garde collaborations is the mind of the viewer. Here, more than ever, the audience is asked to participate in the construction of meaning, to piece together the parts in order to find coherence and sense. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom talks about imaginative reading (or misreading) as a necessary tool for the strong writer to carve out creative space for himself. *Four Saints* demands that every member of the audience also become an artist of sorts. The input of this final collaborator will vary, but it is, nonetheless, absolutely essential to the construction of meaning in the opera.

The feeling of incongruity in *Four Saints* is created out of the arbitrariness of speakers and action, the oddities of linguistic usage in the text, and the reliance on the viewer to help create sense. In all works of art, there is an implicit contract made between the author and the viewer, and *Four Saints*, as well as *Parade*, *La Création du Monde* and even *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, violate that unspoken agreement. When the public went to the ballet or the opera at a reputable theater, they expected classical music, not jazz, ragtime, and vaudeville acts. Likewise, at an opera, they could assume there would be a plot and music that rises and falls, and makes logical sense. Given the title, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the audience members get more, not less, than they bargained for; instead of three acts, there are given four, and instead of four saints, they get well over thirty. In the final act, Stein pokes fun at her deliberate debunking of the title: "How many acts are there in it. Acts are there in it. Supposing a wheel had been added to three wheels how many acts how many acts are there in it" (*FS* 52). We can hear the wheels of her analogy turning in the repetitions of the line. But, for the artist, "How many acts are there in it?" is a very real question. To Stein the building of the text was the "artist's working life" (and Thomson's suggested subject). The formation of the opera in the minds of its creators is the central theme of the work.

Throughout, Stein captures the persistent need of the artist to examine her own work alternatively through a telescopic and a microscopic lens. Stein perpetually returns to the larger choices the author must make, and yet, she shows us language up close, in excruciating detail. As a writer, Stein concerns herself with the nuances of the sound, look and feel of specific words. As if answering the larger artistic questions, such as "What will Act II be about?" the Compère and Chorus I and II end act one, by stating

“This makes Saint Ignatius Act Two” (*FS* 31). Along with real saints from history, Stein refers to two others, Saint Settlement and Saint Plan, who Thomson turns into characters in the drama. Their names are yet another clue to the fundamental subject of the work. Among many artistic concerns, these collaborators must decide where characters are to be situated. And so we have passages such as:

Chorus I: Saint Teresa seated and not surrounded. There are a great many persons and places near together. Saint Teresa not seated.

St. Teresa: There are a great many persons and places near together.

Compère: Saint Teresa not seated at once. (*FS* 32)

Meta-textual comments demonstrate the sense of humor the creators maintained about their work. At one point, St. Stephen says, “They make this an act one” (*FS* 26). If one were to replace the final period with a question mark and an exclamation point, this might be the gripe of an audience member. Similarly, we hear this interchange:

St. Plan: Ask Saint Teresa how much of it is finished.

St. Settlement, St. Teresa II, St. Chavez and St. Plan: How much of it is finished.

St. Teresa II: Ask how much of it is finished.

St. Chavez: Ask how much of it is finished.

St. Teresa II: Ask how much of it is finished. (*FS* 40)

These questions, which never get answered, could refer either to the construction or to the enactment of the opera. The dramatic insistence in the repetition of the ‘question’ could alternatively suggest the viewer grumbling about its interminable quality or authorial anxiety about completing it. In other moments, we get not only the creation and

performance of the opera all at once, but also the rehearsals; at once point, for example, Compère's: "Repeat first act" (*FS* 31).

The multiple, simultaneous time zones in this opera reinforce its status as a landscape painting rather than a traditional dramatic piece. While Stein superimposes the time of artistic creation, rehearsal, and production of the opera, Thomson reinforces this in the music by incorporating warm up exercises into the vocal lines. And so, we are left to ask, "Are the characters singing or are they preparing to sing?" In the following example, St. Teresa I begins an exercise first on an E-major triad. Then she transposes it up to F Major and then to F#. In the score, Thomson suggests that St. Teresa II finish off each transposition, adding a final echo, with an extra octave in the descent, if the singer is capable of producing the low notes.

Example 4-5: Rh. # 48+2 - #49+4; Thomson's Inclusion Vocal Warm Up Exercises in the Opera:

The musical score for Example 4-5 consists of three staves. The top staff is for St. T. I, the middle for St. T. II, and the bottom for piano accompaniment. The lyrics for St. T. I are "Ver- y man - y go our as they they do." and for St. T. II are "And make him prom - i - nent." The piano accompaniment features an E-Major Arpeggio. The score includes tempo markings: *rit.* (ritardando) and *a tempo* (return to original tempo). The piano part also includes a *mf* (mezzo-forte) marking and a *a tempo* marking. A box labeled "E-Major Arpeggio" points to the piano accompaniment, and another box labeled "St. Teresa II adding the extra octave" points to the end of the St. T. II line.

The image shows a musical score for two vocal parts, St. T. I and St. T. II, and a piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes the lyrics: "Could a ne - gro be be with a beard" for St. T. I and "to see and to be." for St. T. II. The piano part features an "F-Major Arpeggio" and a "St. Teresa II" marking. The second system includes the lyrics: "Nev - er to have seen a Ne - gro with it there" for St. T. I and "and with it so." for St. T. II. The piano part features an "F# Major Arpeggio" and a "St. Teresa II" marking. Both systems include tempo markings: "rit." (ritardando) and "a tempo".

In this work, Stein and Thomson also conflate the time and space of sixteenth century Spain and twentieth century America. The past and present exist simultaneously in the mind, and so, if the viewer has indeed entered Stein's psyche, then movement between the two is only natural. As the creators are twentieth century Americans, their imagined Baroque Spain comes to sound more like the heartland of the United States.

In *The Mother of Us All*, Stein and Thomson continue to conflate time and to superimpose the historical and the imaginary. Many of the characters in the second opera are familiar – Susan B. Anthony, Daniel Webster, Ulysses S. Grant, Lillian Russell (the early twentieth century lyric soprano), and of course, Gertrude S. and Virgil T. In the drama, John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) woos Gertrude Stein's friend, the twentieth century author Constance Fletcher as if they were contemporaries.¹¹ In the piano score, the following directions are given to accommodate the time span and historical characters of numerous different generations on the same stage: "The scenery should suggest

¹¹ Constance Fletcher is primarily known as the author of *Kismet*.

America in the nineteenth century without too much precision as to decade. The costumes should sharply exemplify regions, decades and social circumstances" (*MUA* 13). In *Four Saints*, Ignatius Loyola and St. Teresa have real-life precedents (although the character of neither resembles its historical prototype).¹² St. Chavez, St. Settlement and St. Plan, on the other hand, were created and brought to life entirely by the artists. Likewise, in *The Mother of Us All*, along with the figures from American history, we have fictional characters – Joe the Loiterer and Indiana Elliot. A third, Angel More, remains unreal in both the domain of history and invention. We are told that she is the former sweetheart of Daniel Webster, now dead, and described in the cast list as “part angel, part ghost and part ingénue” (*MUA* 13). The combination of historical and imaginary characters later become popular in post-modern literature and drama (in the works of E. L. Doctorow, Philip Roth, or Tony Kushner), but Stein anticipates this phenomenon nearly forty years earlier. In *Four Saints* (and perhaps *Mother of Us All* as well), as oppose to later novels and drama, this technique emphasizes that, on the deepest level, the work is set inside the artists’s minds, a domain where facts and fictions co-exist and converge.

Words are the building blocks with which the author will construct, and so she scrutinizes them throughout, not as windows on to the world outside, but as materials or playthings in themselves. In lines which have freed themselves from the fetters of rational sense, like “chose in justice in join in joining,” (*FS* 56). Stein focuses on how words separate or come together. “In justice,” if joined together, becomes “injustice,” as “in join” in the mind’s ear becomes “enjoy” or “in joining,” “enjoying.” Stein gives us the clue here in the word, “join.” Throughout the opera, words transmute into one another

¹² Supposedly St. Ignatius of Loyola was quite dictatorial, while St. Teresa was known for her ardent and sensual passion for Christ. Bernini’s statue of St. Teresa depicts her in the midst of a religious vision as if she were experiencing orgasm.

based on their sound. Stein connects her religious and linguistic themes through such transformations as “annoy/ anoint” or “across/ a cross” (*FS* 56). We also have visual juxtapositions like “wedded and weeded.” (Stein switches the double “d” to the double “e,” making a connection between two concepts that might otherwise seem arbitrary.)

Thomson understood Stein’s playful linguistic metamorphoses, and he presents them with clarity in his score. By breaking up Stein’s lines and giving them to different saints, Thomson limits the potential meanings of Stein’s text, but at the same time, he maximizes the humor and gives the audience a drop of lucidity in the midst of this chaotic opera. One example of word transformation, as worked into parts by Thomson, reads as follows:

Chorus I: As said saints.

Commère: And to annoy.

Chorus I: anoint.

Commère: Choice. (*FS*, 10).

As presented by Thomson, the saints say something which is misunderstood by the Commère as “annoy,” and the chorus corrects her misapprehension with the word “anoint.” Thomson highlights the correction by setting “annoy” and “anoint” with identical rhythms and similar leaps up a fourth. The Commère’s final, “choice” makes this interchange more complex. Again we find ourselves back in Stein’s head where words mean many things at once. As I see it, the word “choice” refers to the artist’s, as she selects the words she will use.

Example 4-6: Rh # 9+6 -#9+8; Thomson Musical Clarification of Stein's Word Transformation:

Comm. *pp* And not an-oy. Choice. *f*

Chor. I An-noint. *f* F.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Comm. (Communion) voice, the middle for the Chor. I (Chorus I) voice, and the bottom for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The Comm. part has two phrases: 'And not an-oy.' and 'Choice.' The Chor. I part has one phrase: 'An-noint.' The piano accompaniment provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines.

Similarly Thomson highlights Stein word play in “Across across a cross.” Thomson sets “across” as a movement upward, and “a cross,” as a minor third down. He also carefully follows the natural rhythms and accents of the words; “across,” is presented with a quick, eighth-note first-syllable, while “a cross” is set as two notes of equal value.

Example 4-7: Rh. # 191-4 - #191-1; Thomson's Careful Setting of Stein's Word Play:

Compère *mp liberamente*

A -cross a-cross a cross

p *colla voce*

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Compère voice, and the bottom for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The Compère part has the lyrics 'A -cross a-cross a cross'. The piano accompaniment features chords and moving lines, with the instruction 'colla voce' indicating a vocal-like style.

When Paul Cezanne painted, he often left part of the canvas exposed as if to remind the viewer of the process of creation and the materials with which he worked.

Stein does this as well, in words rather than paint. At one point, St. Ignatius says, “Once in a while and where and where around around is a sound and around is a sound and around is a sound and around” (*FS* 63). There is clearly a pleasure in going around and around in this sentence. But, the relationship between “around” and “sound” is more than just the rhyme; Stein insists here that the “around” is not just a directional word with symbolic sense, but a sound. In 1911, in his influential *General Course in Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (the word) and the signified (its symbolic value). Saussure asserted, however, that once a system of signs was established, then the words function in accordance with fixed rules of syntax. Throughout *Four Saints*, Stein discovers, delights in, and destroys Saussure’s linguistic principles. While she embraces the random link between signifier and signified, her language renders the relationship between the sign and syntax equally arbitrary.

Stein’s *Procession of Saints*, begins as an exercise in Saussurean linguistics, but the random quality of similar signifiers eventually gives way to a solid, sober meaning:¹³

Commère: in let in wet

Compère: in wed in dead

Commère: in dead wed led

Compère: in led wed dead

Commère: in said led wed dead wed dead said led led said wed dead wed dead
led

Compère: in led in wed (*FS*, 42)

¹³ This was, in fact, Stein’s original intention for this passage, not something added by Thomson or Grosser.

Here, Stein enacts the arbitrariness of the sign; the words “let” and “wet;” or “wet” and “wed” transform into one another through the transformation of a single letter. They are not ostensibly strung together to create symbolic sense. Through sound, “dead” and “said” also get thrown into the litany. But, eventually Stein’s letter replacements come to take on significance. The saints in this somber procession may be chanting about the life of ordinary women (that is, those who do not become saints or artists). The average female is, in Stein’s view, “led,” then “wed,” and then “dead.” (Or perhaps, as the listener hears the line, so the woman experiences these essentials in different orders.) Stein’s linguistic variations enact lives that alternate among the three activities of following, fulfilling the exigencies of marriage, and watching the things around one die.

Everything in Stein’s language and her personal life eschewed this funereal, female march. In the opera, she prepares for this meditation when St. Teresa I and II pose the question: “Can women have wishes.” No answer is given, instead Compere immediately announces: “Scene Two” (*FS* 25). Thomson sets the “Wed dead led” procession appropriately in e-minor. The voice parts move around in circles like the prose, but in the bass part, Thomson captures the slow forward motion of the marching saints. At the rate of one chord every two bars, the bass moves down an e-minor scale, past the octave to a tenth, against an organ-like e-minor chord in the orchestra, sustained for twenty-one bars.

Again, the linguistic and musical riffs in *Mother of Us All* may help clarify the more hermetic ones featured in the earlier opera. In the second collaboration, Gertrude S. and Virgil T. speak in unison of Susan B. Anthony. In a key line, they say: “After a while there was education....Susan began to follow, she began to follow herself.” Like

the brave suffragette, Stein had a dogged ability to “follow herself.” (*MUA* 9) She refused to be “led, wed, dead,” but instead, devoted her life to re-imagining relationships among words and between individuals. Susan B. later asserts (for both herself and Stein): “I speak as loudly as I can. I even speak louder. I even speak louder than I can.” (*MUA* 9). In the second libretto, typical women’s lives are also characterized again by three, one-syllable words. Angel More sings: “Darn and wash and patch, darn and wash and patch, darn and wash and patch, darn and wash and patch” (*MUA* 13).

In creating a text as inscrutable as *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Stein understood that the human mind will find ways to generate meaning, and so lines that ostensibly have little sense lie in wait to be reconstructed by the creative listener. Stein once said on the radio: “If you enjoy the lines, you understand them, and if you don’t why do you care anyway?”¹⁴ For all her intuitive understanding of Saussure, Stein does not create a philosophical tract on language, but an exultation in it. As the opera opens, one may be tempted to claim, as Wyndham Lewis did, that Stein’s words were not Cocteau’s “poetry of the child overtaken by the technician,” but rather “the poetry of childhood overtaken by the imbecile” (Lewis 46). But, in fact, there is both method and meaning in Stein’s madness. Stein’s work is a constant reminder that language is the plaything of people; we created the laws by which it functions, and thus, we have the right to modify or re-imagine those rules. Stein understands the principle that Humpty Dumpty tries to teach Lewis Carroll’s Alice after she goes through the looking glass:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

¹⁴ Perry Miller Adato, dir., *When this you see, remember me* (New York: Meridian Video, 1995).

“The question is,” said Alice,” whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to master – that’s all.”
(Carroll 230).

Stein lets neither language nor tradition become master, instead she reinvents the traditions by which words unfold on the page, and the way they come to generate meaning. *Four Saints in Three Acts* opens: “To know to know to love her so. Four saints prepare for saints. It makes it well fish. Four saints it makes it well fish. Four saints prepare for saints it makes it well well fish it makes it well fish four saints” (FS 18). While the audience may not laugh uproariously at these lines, they do have a tendency to giggle. Stein gleefully debunks the rules of pronouns and antecedents. After hearing a line like “It makes it well fish,” the listener wonders “*what* makes *what* well fish?” before arriving at the more obvious question, “what does ‘well fish’ even mean?” Perhaps it is a spin off the word “selfish” or perhaps it is Friday night and the saints are preparing a tasty fish fry. Stein’s humor is also generated through the use of puns, especially a confusion between homophones. The effect she creates on the page has a clarity missing on the stage; when we read the text, we know whether Stein is using the number “four” or the preposition “for” in a line like “Four saints prepare for saints,” or alternatively which to/two is employed when she writes, “Remain to narrate to prepare two saints for saints” (FS 19). In a modern performance, this work can be greatly enhanced by the use of super- or sub-titles, but if they had been available to Thomson at the time, we might not have a score that so perfectly and pleurably captures the sounds and rhythms of the text.

Stein's language works on different levels simultaneously; at once, she writes about the activities of the saints and those of the writer. When St. Settlement states: "Two saints prepare for saints it two saints prepare for saints in prepare for saints," he is perhaps referring to Thomson and Stein as if they were the two saints preparing to write about the others. Stein may also refer to herself when she writes: "St. Teresa half in and half out of doors" (*FS* 23). At once she is working in the text creating the saints saints and outside it thinking about the *structure of the libretto*. Like St. Teresa and Stein, the text is also "half in and half out of doors," that is, two things at once, a play between different literary genres. Is Stein preparing a narrative or a drama? St. Stephen says in the Prologue: "A narrative of prepare for saints in narrative prepare for saints" (*FS* 18). It is not clear whether this is a narrative *of* "prepare for saints," or Stein is writing a narrative beforehand *in* which is she will prepare for the drama. Later, the chorus clarifies: "A narrative to plan an opera." But, the work becomes neither a narrative nor a drama by conventional standards. In foregrounding the issue of genre in the opening "discussion," the audience is notified of the many literary forms the opera will undermine. In *Mother of Us All*, rather than highlighting literary conventions through their absence, Stein uses too many at once. The characters speak for themselves (in dramatic form) and the masters of ceremony (Virgil T. and Gertrude S.) tell us that they have spoken (in narrative style). The opera begins:

Susan B. Anthony: Yes I was,

Gertrude S.: said Susan

Anne: You mean you are,

Virgil T.: Said Anne. . . . (*MUA* 9)

In *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Stein banishes conventional dramatic and linguistic movement. And thus, she must find other ways for language to move through time. This she does largely through verbal games. One such amusement for both Thomson and Stein involves numbers. The opera opens with a waltz time, that is, three beats to a measure, in the orchestra. On the fourth measure, Thomson switches to a four beat measure, but despite the time change, the waltz feel continues. The measure is in four and the feel is three, like the ‘four saints in three acts’ of the title. While the rhythm and the bar-lines may not match up, the language and music do. As in much of Stein’s writing, the construction of sentences is ‘additive,’ that is, she creates phrases and then builds on them. So, the line “It makes it well fish,” soon becomes, “it makes it well well fish.” The addition of the second “well,” was indeed *well* understood by the composer, and to show off Stein’s method, he simply added a beat to the measure to accommodate the extra word. And thus, the waltz that began in three and quickly moved to four is, for the measure with the extra “well,” in five. To reinforce the similarity between “it makes it well fish,” and “it makes it well well fish,” Thomson uses the same melody placed up a third (with the extra note for the extra word).

Example 4-8: *Four Saints in Three Acts*, mm. 1-13; Off-Kilter Waltz in Four:

Waltz time Allegro maestoso (♩ = 120) Off-kilter waltz in 4

Chor. I To know toknow to love her so. Four

Accomp. Snare drum *cresc. molto* *ff* *sostenuto* *simile*

Curtain I Allegro maestoso (♩ = 120)

Tonic-Dominant juxtaposition: I 2 3 $\bar{V}^7$ 2 3 I 2 3 $\bar{V}^7$ 2 3 I 2

Chor. I saints pre-pare for saints. It makes it well fish. Four saints it makes it well fish. Four

3 $\bar{V}^7$ 2 3

Chor. I saints pre-pare for saints it makes it well well fish it makes it well fish pre-pare for

1 A beat added to accommodate the extra "well"

1

m.s.

Although Thomson uses a variety of different genres -- parlor songs, folk dances, street music, and marches – the opening music sets the tone for the entire opera. The oom-pah feel and American folk-like melody with diatonic harmony is up-beat and simple, creating a false naiveté that matches the uncomplicated, almost entirely monosyllable words of the text. The contrast between Stein's apparent simplicity and the difficult ambiguities of meaning is signaled as well by the off-kilter sound of the waltz in four. Thomson may have been thinking of the opening when he wrote the following:

What gave this work so special a vitality? The origin of that lay in its words, of course, the music having been created in their image. Music, however, contains an energy long since lost to language, an excitement created by the contest of two rhythmic patterns, one of lengths, one of stresses. A pattern made up of lengths alone is static, and the stuttering of mere stresses is hypnotic. But together, and contrasted, they create tension and release; this is the energy that makes music sail, take flight get off the ground. By applying it to the text of Gertrude Stein, I had produced a pacing that is implied in the text, if you wish, but that could never be produced without measured extensions. Speech lacks music's forward thrust. (*VT*, 66)

Overall, however, Thomson's score seems to respect Stein's circularity and repetition; his approach to harmony minimizes the forward momentum. Early in the opera, the following "dialogue" occurs:

St. Plan: Why should ev'ry one be at home.

Compère (spoken): In idle acts.

Altos (Chorus I): Why should evr'y one be at home.

Compère (spoken): In idle acts. (*Four Saints*, 10).

If the Compère is answering a question posed to him, then everyone should be at home engaged in idle acts. But, he may also be finishing a question begun by St. Plan and the Chorus: “Why should every one be at home in idle acts?” In this case, he is perhaps suggesting that not everyone is at home (or comfortable) with idle acts i.e. with this opera in which idle actions on stage are divided into four idle acts. Thomson has the Compère’s line, “in idle acts” spoken rather than sung for greater emphasis.

In the melodic line as well as the orchestral background, Thomson makes the language as clear as possible by setting one syllable per note and by highlighting word repetitions with musical ones. If Stein reiterates, then Thomson repeats or just slightly varies the motive he uses to set them. In the opening of the opera (Example 4-7), the initial “To know” is sung to a rising fourth (C-F) followed by a second “to know” to a rising fifth (A-E). Likewise, in the line “Four saints prepare for saints,” -- “four saints,” is a falling major second (D-C) as is “for saints” (A-G). In his book *Music with Words* (1989), Thomson discusses methods for composers and performers to set and sing English words. In it, he asserts:

There has to be in the marriage of words and music a basic compatibility in which the text’s exact shape and purpose dominate the union, or seem to. I say seem to, because actually a large part of music’s contribution lies in the emotional timings, the urgencies about continuity, the whole pacing and moving-forwardness of the composition that only music can provide. (*MwW* 1)

In *Four Saints*, Thomson lets the words take precedence; there are no coloratura arias, virtuoso passages in the orchestra or elaborate finales. Most of the opera is, in fact, chanted rather than sung with simple orchestral chords that mimic the sound of an organ.

Thomson devised his own method to maximize clarity in setting poetry. He breaks the lines into word groups which, he asserts, permit no change of accentuation, and whose “run-through” cannot be interrupted (*MwW* 21). From the opening of *Four Saints*, we can hear that Thomson has grouped the words as follows:

To know to know to love her so. Four saints prepare for saints.
 It makes it well fish. Four saints it makes it well fish.

Thomson states that his choices are not the only possible ones, but that they are correct. The attention that he lavishes on Stein’s text, her sense, her games, and the ways that words break into groups lends validity to her project. Against the music, each word sounds as if it belongs and as if no other could take its place. The music, in effect, gives Stein’s language the right to be taken seriously.

Thomson also constructs emotional realities behind the words which imbues the text with meaning and authority. In an aria for voice and solo flute, for example, Thomson turns Stein’s repetitions into a religious hymn.

St. Teresa I: There can be no peace on earth with calm with calm.

There can be no peace on earth with calm with calm.

There can be no peace on earth with calm with calm and with whom
 whose with calm and with whom whose when they well they well they
 call it there made message especial and come. (*FS* 27)

Stein's exact repetition here is perfectly natural as part of a song. The first line (the antecedent in the musical phrase) is sung twice. The third repetition of the line rises and spins out into its moving consequent. The song is backed by pizzicato string chords and a flute which lovingly supports the melody in parallel thirds below the voice in the warm lower register of the instrument. One might experience religious comfort during this piece, which does speak of "peace on earth" and "calm," but only to assert that there isn't any. The soothing spirituality of the tune, in this case, belies the message which, if there is one at all, does not inspire religious awe. In the final line, St. Teresa may even scoff at religious faith. Isn't St. Teresa/ Stein suggesting, rather critically, that people ("they") assume there is a special message made just for them ("there made message especial") of the coming of the lord ("and come")? There is, of course, a good deal of humor in setting these ostensibly ridiculous words to such earnest music. The sober tone of the song encourages us to take Stein's language seriously, and then perhaps to take it too seriously. At once, this song evokes a solemn tenderness and becomes part of Stein and Thomson's elaborate joke.

Within the framework of a harmonic language that is almost non-existent, Thomson exposes his craft through moments of melodic and rhythmic subtlety. In the most famous number from *Four Saints and Three Acts*, the everyday vision of the Holy Ghost, he gives the music a certain lift as if a pigeon were flying off the grass. Thomson achieves this with his careful use of rests at the center of each measure in the orchestra part. The musical background is a simple oom-pah in 3/2, only the second bass note of each measure has been replaced by a rest. This not only adds an airy quality, it also pushes the listener forward to the downbeat of the following measure where we finally

get the bass note we expect on the second beat. Thomson gives the melody a folksy American quality with a slight gospel feel. Rather than the usual I-V pattern in the bass, he uses a repeating I-IV, suggestive of the plagal or “amen” cadence at the end of church hymns. The image of the Holy Ghost is no longer depicted as the traditional dove, but as “pigeons on the grass, alas.” Since Whitman, the image of grass has been associated with American democracy. It grows everywhere, and its unassuming elegance is part of every man’s natural poetry. Pigeons are the ornithological equivalent of grass – every man’s bird, and one that, unlike the dove, is not at all aristocratic in bearing or rare in appearance. In this contemporary, democratic version of a divine vision, there is a touch of poetry (in the rhyme “grass,” and “alas”), as well as a trace of melancholy and a taste of something bygone. (The mournful word “alas” is a bit archaic.) Some critics have suggested that “alas” is Stein’s cryptic call to “Alice.” The “alas” may also imply a touch of unhappiness over having pesky pigeons (who eat seeds and leave droppings) on one’s lawn.

Example 4-9: Rh #146 mm. 1-8; Vision of the Holy Ghost:

Un poco meno mosso (♩ = 66)
St. Ignatius *Impeccable rhythmic text setting*

Pi-geons on the grass a-las. Short long-er grass short long-er long-er

Men's Chorus
Tenors *pp*
Pi-geons on the grass a-las.

Basses *pp*
Pi-geons on the grass a-las.

146

Un poco meno mosso (♩ = 66)
p simile

oom -pah rest IV I rest IV I rest IV



When Thomson sent her the music to “Susie Asado,” Stein wrote back to him: “I like its looks immensely and want to frame it and Miss Toklas who knows more than looks says the things in it please her a lot and when can I know a little other than its looks but I am completely satisfied with its looks” (VT 90). Whether or not Stein could read notes, her linguistic techniques and organizing principles are similar to those used by composers. Stein’s primary method for moving language through time, repetition and variation, is itself a musical method. Stein also incorporates larger leitmotifs throughout the text. The repeating motifs take different forms – the pigeon, for example, flutters in and out until it becomes the center of attention on the grass as a Holy Ghost figure. Phrases also recur at different moments in different contexts. “Three saints when this you see” (FS 19) from Act I becomes Stein’s famous plea for immortality at the end, “When this you see, remember me.” Thomson does not treat this phrase as a musical “leitmotif” although he does recognize its importance. In its first appearance in the “Prologue” to *Four Saints*, it is set to music entirely different from its three subsequent returns.

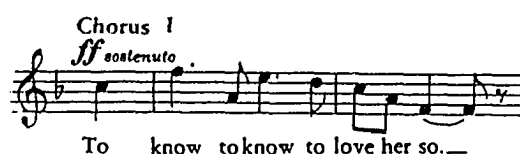
Thomson does, however, recognize that this line is significant, and so, in two of its late manifestations (first sung by St. Teresa II in Act III, and by full chorus in Act IV) he sets it, as Victor Fell Yellin points out, first to a minor key version and then as an exact repetition of the opera's opening music "To know to know, to love her so." (See Example 4-12). Thomson saw that the two lines were written in iambic tetrameter, and therefore could be set to the same music and the words would retain their clarity. Like the musical "leitmotifs" in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* that move from one opera to the next, this phrase returns in *The Mother of Us All* in the voice of Susan B. Anthony. Again Thomson set it to a different tune; after all, this is a linguistic not a musical leitmotif.

Example 4-10: Thomson's Setting of Stein's Linguistic Leitmotif "When This You see remember me": A) *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Rh #183+2 - # 183+5; St. Teresa II's version of the opening music in the minor version of "To know to know..." in comparison with B) the opera's opening line C) *Mother of Us All*, mm. 7; Susan B. Anthony's rendition to different music:

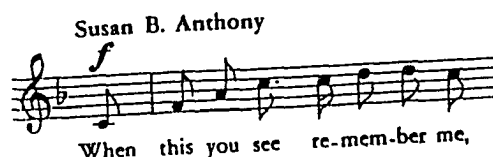
A.



B.



C.



Stein's linguistic technique bears a closer resemblance to Stravinsky's cut and paste methods in *The Rite of Spring*. Like Stravinsky, Stein takes little motives made of words and uses them as cells. The cells expand and contract as they repeat, so that it is hard to discern where the word motifs begin or end. These building blocks are akin to those in Stravinsky's repeating folk tune fragments.¹⁵ Take, for example, the following lines from *Four Saints in Three Acts*:

Four Saints two at a time have to have to have to have to.

Have to have have to have to

Two saints four at a time a time.

Have to have to at a time. Four Saints have to have to have at a time.

(FS 20)

In these lines, we may consider "have to" a repeating motive, a cell, or what Thomson calls a "word-group." But, the cell could as easily be "have to have" which, as a unit, also makes logical sense. At times, Stein may mean, "have to have," and at others, just "have to." This would seem correct as the first line ends with a period after "have to," but the second line begins with "Have to have" repeated twice. The final "to" on the end of line two, however, renders it impossible to know which word-group Stein is using. Language has become a visual and auditory game that presents alternative patterns depending on the angle from which one looks. In the following line from Stravinsky's *Dance of the Adolescents* (Example 4-13), the melody seems straightforward, until it is played a second time. Then, the listener becomes unsure of what constitutes the tune's beginning and its end. Does the melody really open with the grace note that first appears

¹⁵ These cells have been analyzed at length by music theorists particularly in the "Danse Sacrale." See Morton 1997, Tauskin 1980, Boulez 1968 or Watkins 1988.

at its end and then reappears as its beginning in the following measure? Perhaps the motive begins with the fourth beat A-flat, making the first measure of the opening version ornamental rather than fundamental. Instead of having a clear start and finish, we have fragments added and subtracted from a tune that goes round in circles as Gertrude Stein's phrases do.

Example 4-11: Rh. # 27 – 28+4; Stravinsky's "Dance of the Adolescents" from *The Rites of Spring*, Melodic Cut and Paste Technique:

The image displays two staves of musical notation for measures 27 and 28 of Stravinsky's "Dance of the Adolescents" from *The Rites of Spring*. The score is for Flute (Fl.), Flute in C (Fl. c-a. (G)), and Clarinet in B (Cl. (B)). Measure 27 features a solo flute line with a melodic cut and paste technique, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. Measure 28 continues the melodic cut and paste technique, marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic.

When setting Stein to music, Thomson had to make choices, and so, he reined in the ambiguous groupings of the words. In the “have to have...” section, for example, Thomson sets the word-group consistently as “have to”. When a second “have” is thrown in after the “have to,” it is presented on its own, as in the following measure:

Example 4-12: Rehearsal #10-1, m. 1; Thomson’s Word Groups:

Comm. *f* *s* *s* *s*

Have to have have to have to.

Chor. I *f* *T*

Stein probably did not learn this cut-and-paste method from Stravinsky. It was among the aesthetic techniques of the time, used in painting as well. But as both music and language unfold through time, the similarity between the techniques of Stein and Stravinsky is striking.

One advantage that music has always had over language is the ability to for multiple voices or musical lines to sound at once. In traditional opera, different characters can express different stories or versions of the same story simultaneously. This technique is particularly well displayed in the trios, quartets, and even sextets of Verdi and Mozart, the characters sing together, but maintain their distinct personalities and emotional reactions in the music. Words alone do not have this capacity. If more than one person speaks at a time, nothing is understood. Writers have approximated this musical simultaneity through double entendres, puns and allusions. Using these techniques, they can say multiple things at the same time. Stein extends the possibilities for multi-vocal language through the general ambiguity of the text. She has found procedures to make

her text mean many things at once depending on how one groups the words or how the reader creatively makes sense out of them. Stein also extends this capacity of words by superimposing shifting planes on which her drama takes place. By preparing and enacting the opera simultaneously, the lines, in effect, work double time. In an effort to freshen up words and clear them of the baggage they accumulated over centuries of use, Stein does not generally use literary allusions. But, from time to time, she will refer to a prior text or citation, usually to reverse the original. In the beginning of *Mother of Us All*, Susan B. and an imaginary character named Indiana Elliot discuss names. Indiana is not fond of her own, but she also does not want to change it when she gets married. An unidentified chorus member then asks: "What's in a name?" and Susan B. responds: "Everything." In this short question and answer, three planes of meaning coexist simultaneously. Stein is playing with Shakespeare's famous speech "What's in a name?" speech in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Juliet poses the question, she also implies the answer, "Nothing" or at least, "nothing fundamental to the signified object." When Susan B. reverses Juliet's response, she is discussing marriage, and the loss of identity signified by the woman's change of address. But concurrently, Stein is presenting her own linguistic technique which concentrates on the materiality of language, and uses signifiers (or names) rather than the symbolic value of words as the primary generator of substance and sense.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin transported the term "polyphonic" from music to literary criticism, but his use of the word is quite different from my sense here, and antithetical to Stein's multi-vocal approach in *Four Saints*. His argument, formulated in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, claims that Dostoevsky peopled his narratives with characters whose perspectives and words did not accord with

his own. As a result, throughout the text we hear many voices as we do in musical counterpoint. But, in the novel, as oppose to music, we do not hear these voices simultaneously; plots and counterplots may weave together, and characters may be juxtaposed in quick succession, but the words flow in a single stream. In Bakhtin's sense of the word, *Four Saints* is not polyphonic; the text may have "very many saints" in it, but they all dissolve into the voice of the writer, and together create a portrait of her psyche. Stein's shifting planes of meaning and her ambiguities, on the other hand, suggest multiple ideas at the same time. She creates a different kind of polyphony, one in which, as in music, divergent thoughts are sounded simultaneously.

In *The Autobiography*, at one point, the narrator (Toklas/ Stein) claims: "Gertrude Stein achieves a symmetry which has a close analogy to the symmetry of the musical fugue of Bach" (*AABT* 47). Stein may not have known exactly what the symmetry of a Bach fugue entailed, and yet, in this assertion, she makes it clear that her seemingly arbitrary texts have a careful (and possibly mathematical) structure about them. In *Four Saints*, there are subtle architectural designs. Although she has done away with a formal plot, she ends the work with the suggestion that a transformation has occurred. The opera depicts the writer's preparation and the multiplicity of possible choices she faces. But, by the final line, Stein has arrived at the solidity of a definite artistic decision. The opera ends:

Compère: Last act.g

Full Chorus and Principals (shouted): Which is a fact! (*FS*, 48)

As the final curtain falls, Stein is paradoxically ready to begin writing her libretto.

To a large extent, *Four Saints* is organized around Stein's number games. In the first act, there is a movement from subtle word play with numbers to blatant counting exercises. We begin with Stein's number/preposition puns -- "two" and "to;" "four" and "for." Later, we have the evocation of counting and adding:

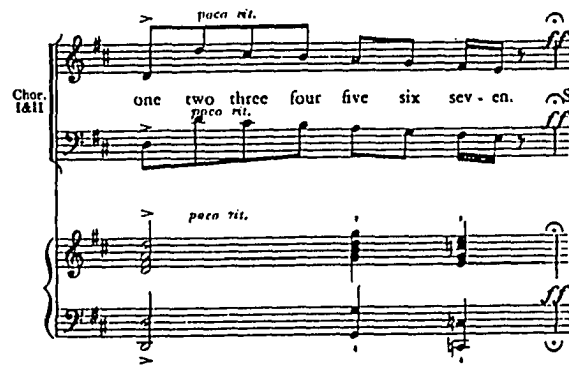
St. Stephen: A saint is one to be for two when three and you make five and two and cover. (*FS* 18)

St. Stephen's "one to be for" is sonorously close to "one, two, three, four." And of course, we have the addition of "two when three" to make "five." Finally, during what might be regarded as the finale to the first act, music and words rise heroically to a full-fledged counting song: "One two three four five six seven all good children go to heaven some are good and some are bad one two three four five six seven." Thomson sets this climactic count with vivacious energy and humor. The numbers are set to a descending D-major scale, but on the second descent, due to the words in between, he comes up one note short. The "one," which begins the count, is sounded the second time on the low rather than the high D, and again, on the third count, Thomson finds himself one note short. Instead of a final D to polish off the scale, we are left with only a rest.

Example 4-13: Rh. #82+4 – 82+8; Thomson's Counting 'Finale' to Act 1:

Chor. 1&II

all good chil - dren go to heav - en some are good and some are bad



With its infinite variations of sound, Stein's language has its own pleasurable music which, above all else, Thomson enjoyed and highlighted by his generally unobtrusive approach to the setting. When it came to production, however, Thomson was in charge. He hired Maurice Grosser, Florine Stettheimer and Frederick Ashton to complete the work with scenario, sets and costumes, and dance. Thomson also chose the singers and rehearsed with them at the piano. Stein was in France during the American preparations and for the entire initial run in Hartford Connecticut. She had offered Picasso's services for the set design, but Thomson did not accept, as he wanted everyone associated with the opera, except Stein, to be approximately his own age (Albright 358). Stein became, in effect, the towering absent presence of the production; two decades older than the others involved, her spirit would guide them in their respective directions. Thomson imagined the entire performance as a ritual. In the music, he used two separate choruses to create a ceremonial, antiphonal effect. (*MwW* 110). Likewise, in the staging, he imagined an elaborate "religious" spectacle.

The costumes and sets of Florine Stettheimer capture the effect Thomson sought, and enhance the vision of both composer and librettist. Her designs were Baroque, but sixteenth century Spain was appropriately presented through the eyes of a twentieth century American sensibility. The stage became a cellophane dream, full of kitchy ornaments that were at best pseudo-Spanish. In a letter dated Dec. 6th, 1933, Thomson wrote to Stein,

Miss Stettheimer's sets are a beauty incredible, with trees made of feathers and a sea-wall at Barcelona made out of shells and for the procession a baldachino of black chiffon and branches of black ostrich plumes just like a Spanish funeral. St. Teresa comes to the picnic in the second act on a cart drawn by a real donkey and brings her tent with her and sets it up and sits in the doorway of it. It is made of white gauze with gold fringe and has a most elegant shape.¹⁶

On stage was a great cyclorama made of cellophane and a double arch created out of "balls of compressed cellophane." The display was elaborate, and Fredrick Ashton had the saints move and dance in a highly stylized fashion. After his work on *Façade*, he was well prepared for the challenges of setting dances to music with avant-garde literary material.

Thomson's choice of the all-black cast came to him while spending an evening in a Harlem nightclub. He claims that he was interested in the clarity of their enunciation. The assumption that all black people will sing with the same precision is, from our twenty-first century perspective, distasteful. His other assumptions about black people are equally unpleasant and stereotypical – their unquestioning approach to Stein's text, their wholesome, joyful and unabashed expression of religious faith. Clearly, Thomson chose

¹⁶ See Examples 4-14 – 4-19, photographs of the 1935 Broadway production, at the end of the chapter.

the cast in order to create a visual as well as an auditory effect. He wanted the bodies to look sculpted and dark against the white gauze costumes that Stettheimer designed. The black cast also added to the illusion of haphazard freedom that Thomson hoped the opera would exude. 'Harlem chic' was all the rage at the time, and so, even though the music does not evoke the rich culture of its renaissance, this was one way of "keeping up with the times." However objectionable the motivations for using the all black cast may have been, those involved (and later black singers) benefited tremendously from this opportunity. Steven Watson interviewed cast members, and they all talked about the experience and Thomson with great fondness. He had rehearsed these amateur singers in the basement of St. Phillips church in Harlem, and soon they were singing on a Broadway stage, and not in the customary black roles. Until this opera, there were almost no black singers with professional operatic experience.

It has generally been assumed that twentieth century opera is a conservative genre and that the avant-garde in music occurred in other forms of classical music – the symphony, chamber works, song cycles and solo compositions. But, a piece like *Four Saints* suggests that the place of the avant-garde had simply switched from the music to the text or to the relationship among the different components of the work. The utter simplicity of Thomson's score is itself highly original, especially in an age of increasing technical complexity. But, the extraordinary novelty of the opera lies above all else in Stein's language and the ways each of the other components enhances it. Only the words and music are essential, and it is the bond between the two that holds together all the components of this "haphazard" opera. Never before had the action and the characters been inconsequential variables in a staged work. Thomson's music was constructed

entirely to serve Stein's text and to make it available and enjoyable for an audience. He carefully set every linguistic rhythm, noted every pun, and exuberantly sounded each textual game. The extension of linguistic sound and sense in the music lend Stein's words a certain clout, as if every syllable of this seemingly arbitrary nonsense was deliberately chosen and strategically placed. While Thomson let Stein take the lead, in his mission to further her purpose, he managed every other element of composition and production. He filled in her omissions, and he found other key players (scenario writer, set designer, and choreographer) whose original styles would further the quirky freedom of the work and simultaneously extend Stein's American vision. *Four Saints in Three Acts* was extraordinarily successful, becoming the longest running hit to play on Broadway. In 1935, Bergdoff Goodman and Elizabeth Arden called their Easter collection "Four Suits in Three Acts," and when Stein flew in from a message in lights circled the *New York Times* building in Times Square, reading: "Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York. Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York . . ." (Douglas 121).

In both *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927) and *Mother of Us All* (1945), Stein and Thomson redefine America for the stage in speech, scenario and sound. While the music these collaborators construct out of words and notes does not realistically present the American language or its harmonies, it does capture the vocabulary and inflections of the "new world." The history Stein and Thomson report is a jumble of fictions and conflation of time. Until *Four Saints*, America's music was jazz. This opera began a shift in the American sound as represented in classical music; after Thomson, America was defined, not just by slick city styles, but by sounds from the plains and the small towns. In the thirties, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and even Thomson himself would

capture America in a more mimetic fashion. But, in *Four Saints* (and *Mother of Us All*, to a lesser extent) the reverberations of the United States are inflected with a Satie-style parody and a Dada-esque resistance to traditional concert music. Thomson's perpetual V-I anti-harmony and the insistent consonance in *Four Saints* is a form of Satie's furniture music. But, the anger of the Dada movement and the pervading melancholy of *Parade* were replaced by Thomson's bright-eyed enthusiasm. Stein similarly established an exuberant American literary voice, one that remains new even today. And, far more directly than Thomson, Stein spawned the next generation of American writers who would explore the simplicity and clarity of their own native sound -- artists such as Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway. Like the American musicians of the thirties and beyond, these writers would try for the realism that Stein (and Thomson in *Four Saints*) reject. This collaboration, which created a yet unheard American sound in opera, simultaneously brought the European, non-mimetic techniques to new heights.

America became for Stein as much a symbol as a place. In *Brewsie and Willie* (1946),¹⁷ written shortly after she finished the libretto for *Mother of Us All*, GIs and their girl friends question the essence of the American spirit as World War II comes to a close:

Well, said Brewsie, what is it we got that nobody else has got. The atomic bomb, said Jo. Not so got, said Jimmie, they all say not so got. All right then not the atomic bomb, said Jo, tell us Brewsie what we got that nobody else has got. Well, said Brewsie, I think we still got it, we like to pioneer. How can you pioneer when there aint no wilderness any more....can anybody pioneer where you live. Yes they can if they got any guts and dont expect it to be easy....Now listen to me, said Janet, I think he is right about that pioneer thing, you got to break down what

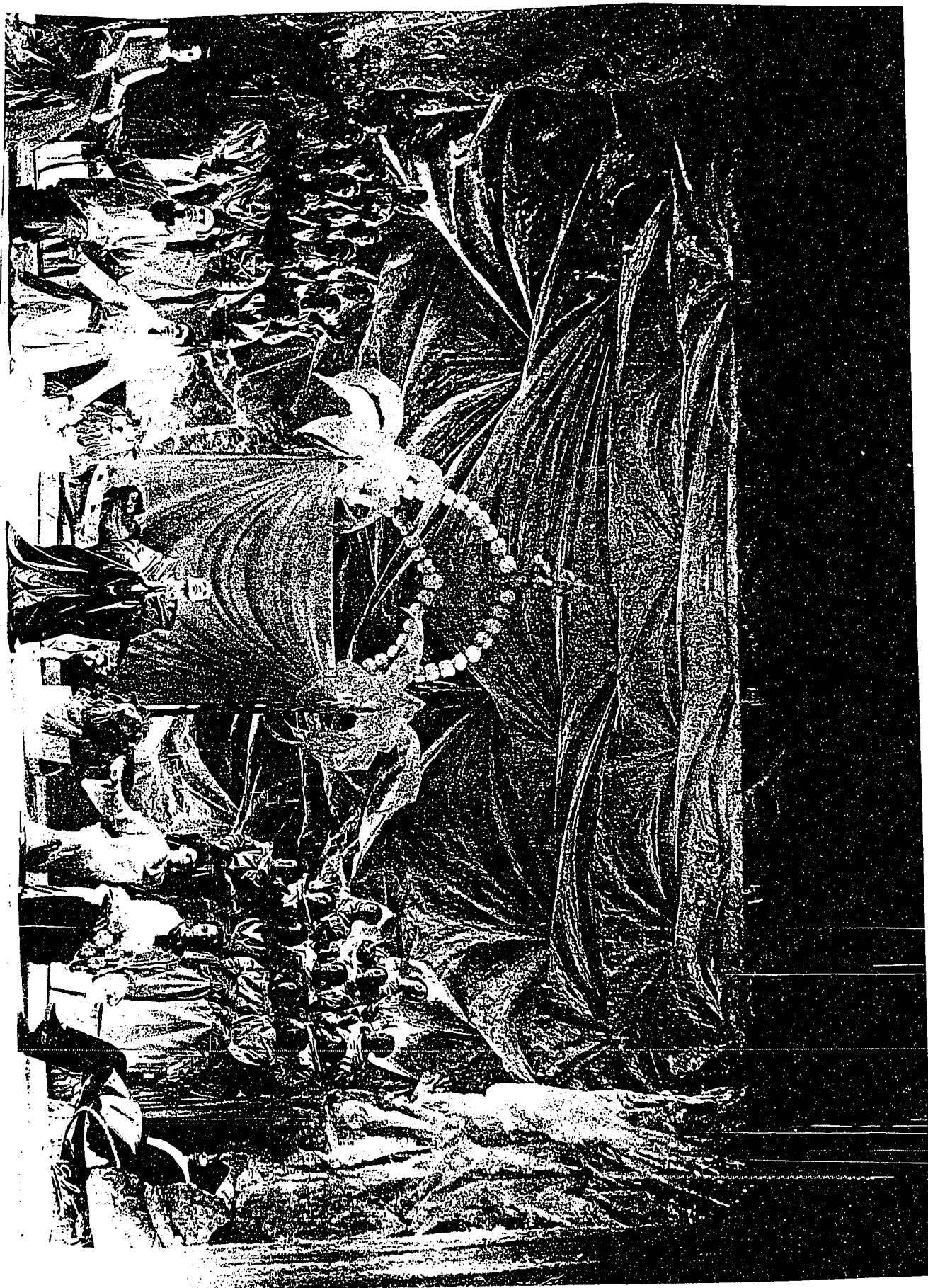
¹⁷ This was also the final year of Stein's life.

has been built up, that's pioneering...do you want us to drop our atomic bombs on ourselves, is that what you want, so we can go out and pioneer, is that the idea.

Well yes kind of, said Janet. I get you, said Willie. And you get me Willie (154).

So soon after the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the metaphor of the A-bomb may seem callous, and yet it underscores the powerful destruction and renewal that Janet (and Stein) expect from Americans. Stein spent her career dropping atomic bombs on literary conventions, but only as a first step in clearing away the dead wood of the English language, so that she and others could rebuild afresh. Stein's pioneering, like America's, also included territorial expansion (only without the political charge). Her narrative encroaches on the domain of drama, and opera extends beyond its accepted borders. Stein also let the arts invade one another, creating visual landscapes out of words, and using musical techniques to generate literary texts. A rugged individualist, Stein's pioneering also included an extension of consciousness right outside of her own skin and into the minds and hearts of others. Collaboration became yet another way to explore and expand beyond the limitations of her own voice (in *The Autobiography*) and her own art form (in the operas). Stein's vision expresses its humor and originality not only in the text of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, but also in the music and the spectacle. With the added expertise of her highly original yet admiring collaborators, Thomson, Grosser, Stettheimer, and Ashton, the public was finally eager to listen to and enjoy Stein's words and the landscape of her extraordinary mind.

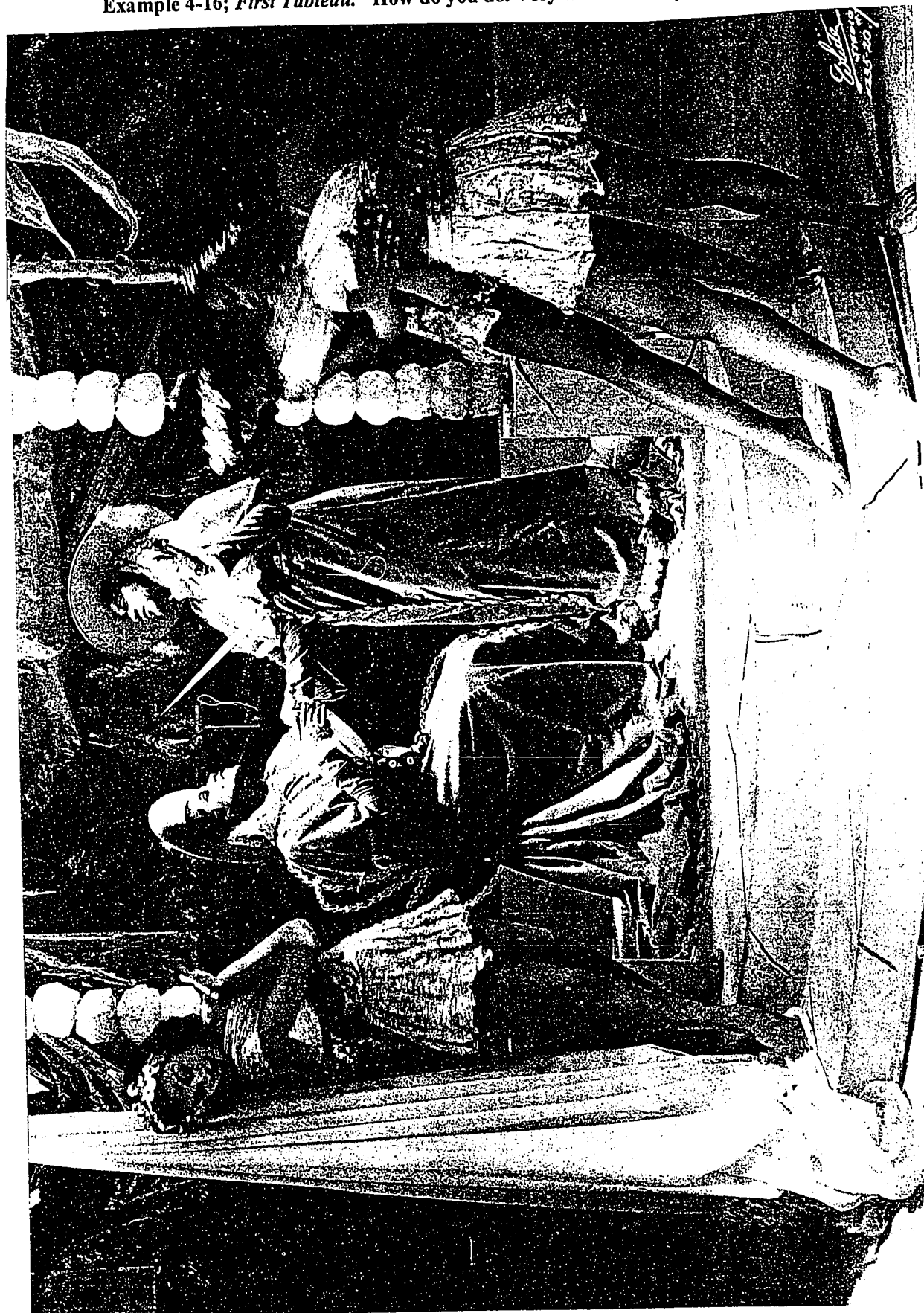
Example 4-14: Act I: *Prologue* – “To know to know to love her so”



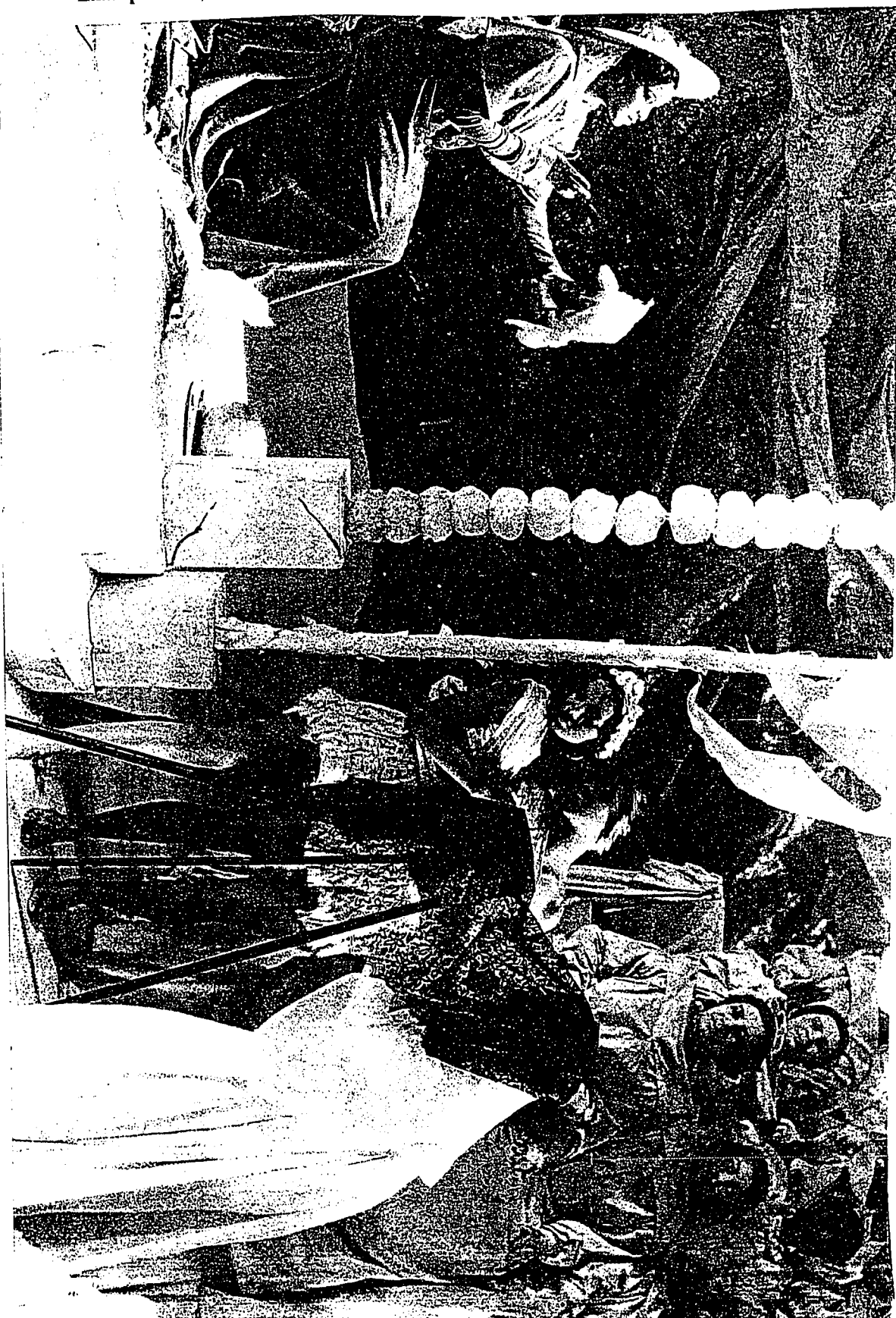
Example 4-15; Act I. *First Tableau*. "Saint Teresa half in and half out of doors"



Example 4-16; *First Tableau*. "How do you do. Very well I thank you."



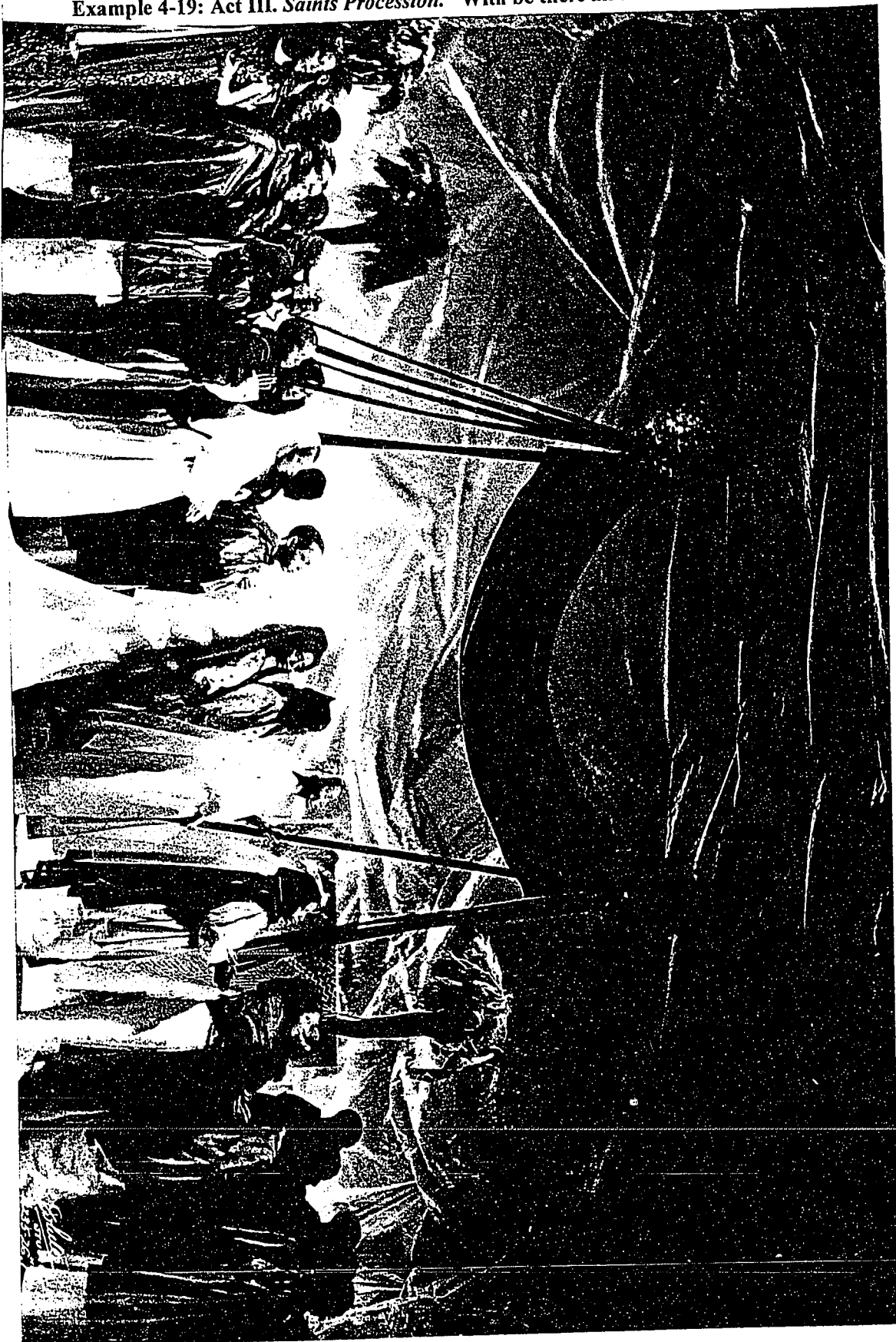
Example 4-17; *Second Tableau*. "Saint Teresa could be photographed"



Example 4-18: Act II. *Love Scene*. "It is easy to measure a settlement."



Example 4-19: Act III. *Saints Procession*. "With be there all there all their time."



V
**Rebirth of a Nation:
 Poetic License and Sound Sense in
 Benjamin Britten and W. H. Auden's *Paul Bunyan***

On May 5, 1941, at Columbia University's Brander Hall, Benjamin Britten and W. H. Auden's first opera *Paul Bunyan* premiered. It ran for one week, was panned by the critics, removed from Britten's repertoire, and relegated to a bottom drawer in his dresser. Twenty-three years later, in an unfinished tribute to Britten for his fiftieth birthday, W. H. Auden took the complete blame for the opera's "failure": "I knew nothing whatever about opera or what is required of a librettist. In consequence, some very lovely music of Britten's went down the drain, and I must now belatedly make apologies to my old friend, while wishing him a very happy birthday" (*OEMPB* 147-148). Ten years later, in an effort to compose again after a crippling stroke, Britten uncovered and revised the work. Unfortunately, Auden was no longer alive. Two years later, in 1976, the BBC subsequently broadcast a radio performance, and the Aldeburgh festival staged a full scale production. After listening to *Paul Bunyan* again, Britten remarked: "I simply hadn't remembered that it was such a strong piece" (*OEMPB* 148). Had he lived just a few years longer, Auden might also have had this opportunity to revisit the work and to discover that, while *Paul Bunyan* may not have functioned according to traditional operatic conventions, it was a piece of great whimsy and beauty, containing some of the most elegant English words written for the opera stage. If we examine this opera as an outgrowth of avant-garde aesthetic of the 1920s, its very points of failure, according to the newspapers of 1941, become successes by a different set of standards. The elation and innocence of the twenties had dissolved as the world witnessed

economic crisis, the rise of fascism and the commencement of World War II. And yet, like their precursors, Auden and Britten returned to mythic beginnings to rekindle hope for a better future. Together they brought contemporary politics into the mythic domain, and merged the playful collage aesthetic of the twenties with the realism of a later, more sober decade.

The earlier avant-garde spectacles were themselves works of resistance, undermining class distinctions in art and questioning traditional approaches to grammar, logic, genre, syntax, and theatrical collaboration. The friction created among sound, words and staging challenged a monolithic philosophy. Even when the artists allowed their work to be governed by a single vision (as in *Four Saints in Three Acts*), they carefully constructed the illusion of freedom and incongruity. But, the avant-garde rebellion of the twenties was almost entirely about form. A critique of war can be detected in the *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, and a healing ritual is performed in *La Création du Monde*, but the collective therapy seems far less effective than the energizing clashes of vision and the fractured nature of the musical score. In the texts of Stein and Sitwell, the critique lies not so much in the symbolic meaning of language, but in the semiotic content of the text and its enhancement through music. The daring rhythms and tempi of the words in *Façade* tell the story of a child's confusion at witnessing the corruptions of her society. And, Stein's restructuring of syntax similarly challenges the viewers to question their assumptions about the construction of thought and the world around them.

As discussed in chapter one, many of these works ended up in the 1938 Degenerate Music Exhibit in Dusseldorf. Their playful, jazz-inflected, hybrid nature, and

the ways they encourage independent thought threatened a state-sponsored collective ideology and the Aryan philosophy of purity. These works became dangerous, not by adopting a specific stance, but by proliferating meaning and therefore supporting freedom in the arts and beyond. But, by May of 1941, the politics of form and the power of ambiguity were no longer enough for the socially engaged artist. And so, Auden and Britten infuse *Paul Bunyan* with political commentary. Through the pointed allusion, direct address to the audience, and didactic poetry accompanied by, but not always turned into music, Auden and Britten's parable of early America continually leads the viewer back to the crises of their own time.

Paul Bunyan was the final major work in an extended artistic partnership between Auden and Britten during the early phase of their respective careers. Since 1935, they had collaborated in a variety of mediums: documentary film (*Coal Face* and *Night Mail*), theater (*The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier*), song cycles (*On this Island*, *Look Stranger!* and *Our Hunting Fathers*) and radio (*Hadrain's Wall*). With Auden's help, Britten would develop a literary sense that would sustain him throughout his career. He would base his future operas on the works of Shakespeare, Maupassant, Henry James, Herman Melville, and Thomas Mann, among others. More than anything else, Britten's future librettists became literary adapters; he had already chosen works of aesthetic value that included the specific themes he wished to explore. *Paul Bunyan* is itself also an adaptation, but Auden remade the myth in his own image. The original was a point of departure through which he could make sense of American history and his own arrival as émigré artist in a new land. In the opera, Auden follows the transformation of society from its early, agrarian roots to its contemporary, urban condition. Britten would go on to

work with other great writers; E. M. Forster, for example, wrote the libretto for *Billy Budd*. But, never again would composer and poet come to understand each other so well as both artists and men. And only in *Paul Bunyan*, do libretto and music remain separate from one another as much as they merge. Auden's words demanded that they be heard as poetry, with their own mellifluous qualities, to be enhanced but not eclipsed by the lyrical qualities of the music.

In many ways, Auden and Britten were highly compatible. They came from similar backgrounds, even attending the same public school (although they did not know each other, as Auden was six years older). Both men had strong, political convictions, yet while Auden was a militant proponent of left wing philosophies, Britten was a pacifist. Both saw themselves as outsiders to mainstream society, due in part to their homosexuality, and for Britten, in large part, to his firm anti-war stance in a militaristic time. But, personally, they were very different; Auden was outspoken, domineering and didactic, frequently offering unsolicited advice to his younger friend. His extraordinary ability with words in conversation intimidated the shy Britten. Their friendship would not survive much beyond *Paul Bunyan*, but both would continue the work they began together. Clearly the partnership between the two furthered their respective attractions to each other's art form. As Britten continued composing literary operas and setting great poetry, so Auden would go on to write libretti for Stravinsky, Henze and Nicolas Nabakov, as well as English translations of *The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni* and *Mahagonny*.¹

¹ The libretto for *The Rake's Progress*, Auden's opera with Stravinsky, as well as the three English translations were written in collaboration with Chester Kallman.

In January 1939, Auden and Christopher Isherwood moved to America; they were followed in May of the same year by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. The poets stayed for the rest of their lives; the musicians returned to England three years later. In America, Auden and Britten would live together at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn, the American equivalent of Stein's Paris apartment and the Sitwell's Carlyle Square home in London. Other residents of Auden and Britten's residence included Gypsy Rose Lee, Carson McCullers, Paul Bowles, and Louis MacNeice. The owner, George Davis, eventually married Lotte Lenya, the famous singer and widow of Kurt Weill. But this home was ultimately too bohemian for Pears and Britten and so they eventually went to stay with friends on Long Island. In a low-keyed way, this too was a center for the arts, with small concerts given by the musicians in the house and others. There were many illustrious visitors to the home including Albert Einstein. In 1963, Auden wrote:

I have, alas no talent for writing memoirs, for if I had, I would devote a whole chapter to a house in Amityville, Long Island, the home of Dr. William and Elizabeth Mayer, where Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears stayed from 1939-1942; a house which played an important role in the lives of all of us. It was during this period that Britten wrote his first opera, and I my first libretto, on the subject of an American folk hero, Paul Bunyan. (*BAT*, 230)

Of Britten and Auden's extensive work together, Donald Mitchell says: "We may fairly claim that there is nothing quite like it elsewhere in the history of the arts in the English-speaking world in this century: this interaction, this interplay between a major poet and a major composer" (*BAT* 235). But, clearly there are precedents to this

partnership in the multi-media works of the twenties across Europe, in both English-speaking countries and beyond. *Paul Bunyan* contains many of the aesthetic features of these earlier collaborations also by the strongest artists of their time – the return to origins, the subversion of traditional genres, the “grab-bag” approach to the music, and above all, a youthful exuberance in both the words and the music. Britten is extremely attuned to Auden’s lines, word painting with unparalleled accuracy and humor, and yet, *Auden’s text still resists the music*. Throughout the opera, Paul Bunyan speaks but does not sing. As the last words of the opera are Bunyan’s, the audience exits from Britten and Auden’s magical landscape, not with the poetry of song, but with the music of poetic language.

Paul Bunyan has been discussed as part of the American musical tradition.²

Although composer and poet originally wrote the work for school groups, they also had a possible Broadway production in mind. Britten’s music, however, has as much of the classical tradition, the contemporary American concert hall, the orient, the ballet, Donizetti, Gilbert and Sullivan, Grand opera, folk music, and English ballads as it does of Broadway. Auden’s sources also include his own poetic plays, ancient Greek drama, English lyric poetry, and German epic theater. Donald Mitchell reminds us that while we may hear echoes of Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma* (1943) or Berlin and Field’s *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) in the score, in fact, *Bunyan* predated both of these works. He continues:

² See Donald Mitchell’s essay “The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of *Paul Bunyan*, Auden’s and Britten’s American opera” in W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 83-148.

This is not to claim that *Paul Bunyan* was a precursor of later and greater musicals. On the contrary, the chronology shows with what ingenuity Britten and Auden occupied a specifically American musical space, a territory that had already been defined... and was to be further exploited to great popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic (*PB* 98-99).

Under the Broadway rubric, *Paul Bunyan* predates but does not measure up to the “later and greater musicals.” But, Auden and Britten’s opera is clearly something else; a dramatic poem with musical enhancement rather than a traditional story, it steers clear of Broadway’s pitch for mass appeal.

One of the standard formulae for Broadway and drama in general is the heightening of anticipation at the end of an act. In operas and musicals, the curtain only falls after an elaborate finale with sufficient dramatic tension to lure the audience back to their seats after intermission. Act I of *Paul Bunyan*, on the other hand, ends with a slow dissolution into silence. Is this an error made by two young artists who were still learning their craft, or an original aesthetic choice? It violates the “cliff-hanger” principle, and yet it contains a mystifying power. In his “Goodnight,” Bunyan says:

Now let the complex spirit dissolve in the darkness

Where the Actual and the Possible are mysteriously exchanged.

For the saint must descend into Hell; that his order may be tested by its disorder,

The hero return to the humble womb; that his will may be passified and refreshed.

Dear children, trust the night and have faith in tomorrow,

That these hours of ambiguity and indecision may also be the hours of healing.

(*PB* 47-48).

These words reach beyond the forest of early America; his speech becomes an address not only to lumberjacks but to the viewers who, in a war torn world, face their own hours of “ambiguity and indecision.”

Against these lofty lines, the composer writes music that is as mysterious as the exchange between the “Actual” and the “Possible,” and appropriately suspended in time. Like the words, the music also fades into indecision; Britten suggests a tonal cadence (in F), but never gives us the chord of resolution. In measures 14 and 15, ambiguity rises like the indeterminate scale and simultaneously fades to a *pppp*. In the bassoon, clarinet, and a violin solo in the final measure, we hear unmistakable animal sounds that echo the bird calls of Bunyan’s greeting as the act opens, only these clashing ostinati, supported by the warmth of the string section, also capture the auditory enchantment of twilight. Peter Evans claims that this passage, for all its individuality shows a clear debt (not to Broadway) but to Bartok (*OEMPB* 141).

Example 5-1: Act I, #17, mm. 11-16; The Dissolving “Finale” of Act I:

Bunyan Dear children, trust the night and have faith in tomorrow, That these hours of ambiguity and

repeat freely

Bunyan indecision may be also the hours of healing.

pp

ppp cold

dying away

vin. solo pp lively

repeat many times with dim. but no rall

pppp

End of Act One

Paul Bunyan does not demand to be examined differently from traditional works of art as *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Façade* do; its dissimilarities are subtle, and so more easily overlooked. Auden's language, unlike Stein's, is spoken and sung in its usual syntactic order, but as in *Four Saints*, the words of *Paul Bunyan* are not typical either of opera or Broadway. The poetry is elevated and unexpected in the mouths of loggers in the American wilderness. From the opening scene, Auden's whimsy is at play; young and old trees argue, soon to be interrupted by wild geese, a blue moon and the mythological logger, too big to appear on stage. A trio of animals (Moppet, Poppet and Fido, two cats and a dog) later moralize to the audience. Oddly enough, Virgil Thomson was one of the most virulent reviewers of the 1941 production of *Paul Bunyan*, titling his response, "Musico-Theatrical Flop." And yet, his criticisms seem more appropriate for *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Of the libretto, he complains, "What any composer thinks he can do with a text like *Paul Bunyan* is beyond me. It offers no characters and no plot."³ He then goes on to criticize its lack of genre specificity:

Paul Bunyan is what would be called in contract language a "musico-dramatic work." It is certainly nothing more specific; and its billing last night gave no hint that its authors consider it to be an opera, say, or an operetta or a play with music or even a musical and poetic fantasia. Which is to say that the text falls into no known literary form save that of the Auden semi-poetic play. Which is to say also that it has, as dramatic literature, no shape and very little substance; that it exists by style alone. (NYT, May 6, 1941)

Of the music, Thomson comments: "Melodically and harmonically it lacks the tension that we recognize as style." One would think that Thomson might have detected a certain

kinship between his own quirky spectacle and *Paul Bunyan*, and recognize that conventional notions of opera were not appropriate for an examination of Auden and Britten's work. But, there is also an enormous gulf between *Four Saints* and *Paul Bunyan*, rendering Thomson's blindness easier to comprehend.

Both works attempt to capture the spirit of the United States, the first by two Americans in Paris, the second by two Brits in Brooklyn, and, as one would expect, their portraits are quite different. Stein filters American speech through her own cubist imagination, and Thomson follows suit, using his Satie-esque sensibility to remake Midwestern band music and Southern Baptist hymns. In *Paul Bunyan*, Britten mimics a range of American musical genres with uncanny accuracy, thus adding an "authentically" American spirit to the work. For Britten and Auden, the quintessential American experience is that of the immigrant, something that eludes mention in both of the Stein-Thomson operas (although it appears in a considerable number of Stein's other works, including *Three Lives* and *Melanctha*). Like composer and librettist, the lumberjacks in the opera have recently arrived from Europe to build a new life and a new world. This tale was much more Auden's than Britten's; unlike the poet, the composer never intended to make America his permanent home. And perhaps this allowed Britten the freedom to experiment freely with American forms, while Auden clung to his European voice. Or perhaps, the composer was simply a more flexible artist in this way. While Britten could adopt many voices and idioms, Auden was simply a virtuoso at being himself.

Like Stein, Auden was in love with words for their own sake, and, in their operas, language rather than plot is foregrounded. In *Poetry and Grammar*, Stein asserts, "Poetry is concerned with using, with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with

avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that. It is doing that always doing that, doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns.” (153). Among other missions for his poetry, Auden shares this one, although the nouns these two artists choose to ‘caress’ are quite different. Stein’s language is almost entirely monosyllabic; and thus, for all their mystery, her libretti are amenable to musical setting. Auden’s vocabulary, on the other hand, is vast, and he delights in the obscure word, presenting enormous challenges to the composer. In one song, we get an entire compendium of such nouns as part of a game between Inkslinger and the chorus:

Inkslinger: Got the idea? Right. Now this time you join in. When I think of a word, you think of another word to rhyme with it.

All nouns are dedicate

To this one predicate

Adjective too:

Appendicectomy

Chorus: ‘s a pain in the neck to me

Inkslinger: Anthropomorphosis

Chorus: Owns several offices

Inkslinger: Psychokinesia

Chorus: Never gets easier ...

Inkslinger: Plenipotentiaries

Chorus: Endure for centuries...

Inkslinger: Ichyosaursuses

Chorus: Won't sing in choruses...

Inkslinger: Occi-parietal

Chorus: O DO BE QUIET.... (PB 80-82)

Auden, like Inkslinger, cannot resist showing off his linguistic talent, although he maintains a sense of humor about this tendency (as exemplified by the chorus's final comment). Unhappy with his setting of Auden's intractable words, Britten eventually cut this number from the score.

Along with the avant-garde works of the twenties, *Paul Bunyan* defines itself against the Wagnerian synthesis of the arts. Describing their aesthetic choices in the depiction of Paul and his heroic feats, Auden says:

[T]he theatrical presentation of the majority of Bunyan's exploits would require the resources of a Bayreuth, but not to refer to them at all would leave his character all too vaguely in the air. To get round this difficulty we have interposed simple narrative ballads between the scenes, as it were, as solo Greek chorus. (PBS xi)

The young artists simply do not have the means of Wagner and his opera stage at Bayreuth, but there is more to their choices than that. Throughout *Paul Bunyan*, there is a balance between the grandiose and the playful; Auden repeatedly undercuts his own tendency to the heroic. As both an aesthetic choice and the result of a limited budget, poet and composer create something entirely new -- narration in 'country-western' ballads, before that musical genre had been coined. Auden claims that he views this innovation as a return to the practices of Ancient Greek drama, a new twist on the same move that Wagner (following Nietzsche) purported to make in his music dramas. The use of the

Greek chorus in *Paul Bunyan*, however, is not restricted to a solo ballad singer. There are many choruses throughout, including the trees who open the prologue and the central chorus of lumberjacks who appear shortly after Paul gives his greetings. The function of the chorus in ancient Greek drama is often a didactic one. In Aristophanes comedy *The Frogs*, the chorus states: “We chorus folk two privileges prize/ To amuse you citizens, and to advise” (*F* 35). This purpose is not far from the role of the poets, as defined by Sir Phillip Sidney -- “to teach and to delight.” Working both out of the Greek and the English tradition, Auden finds the voice of the educator, not in the ballad singer or the traditional choruses, but in the character of Paul Bunyan.

As the Greek chorus uses the parabasis (an address to the audience concerning contemporary issues), so Bunyan speaks directly to the viewers as well as the loggers. Too large to appear on stage, he speaks from “on high.” In Bunyan farewell at the end of Act II, he states:

O remember, friends, that you
Have the harder task to do
As at freedom’s puzzled feet
Yawn the gulfs of self-defeat;
All but heroes are unnerved
When life and love must be deserved. (*PB* 70)

These elevated words are further dignified by Britten’s musical background. In the horns, we hear the rising fourths (perfect and augmented) that are also featured in the orchestral introduction. With Paul’s words, this setting has the lofty American ring of Aaron

Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*,⁴ completed in 1942 (one year after *Paul Bunyan*). In the opening of the opera, Britten mimics the building of Bunyan and the loggers with rising fourths first in the brass (horns and trombones) and then at higher registers in the woodwinds and strings. This music is marked by a Lydian sound (the brightest of the modes) that first appears in measure 6 and then recurs throughout the *Introduction*. Yet, the suggestion of struggle also appears here as we hear a clash between the B-flat Lydian and the B-flat major tonality. In Paul's "Farewell," these motives return first in the horn part (against the spoken words), and then with added counterpoint in a trumpet line. When the rising line begins again at Rehearsal #1, horn and voice are backed by the warmth of piano chords and string pizzicato. Like the opening, the rise is matched by a descent at its end, and the swell of music and words is heightened by subtle crescendos and diminuendos. Throughout other operas, Benjamin Britten includes characters like Paul who speaks but do not sing (Puck, for example, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*). But, nowhere else does Britten use the technique of melodrama so flagrantly, ennobling Auden's poetry with a quiet yet regal setting, featuring the brass:

⁴ Aaron Copland's sound involves the stacking of perfect fourths, and here we have both perfect and augmented fourths; nonetheless, the similarity between *The Lincoln Portrait* and Paul's "Farewell," is unmistakable, as both composers uplift the spoken words with music featuring the brass.

When Aristophanes presented *The Frogs* in 405 B.C., not only did he take home first prize at the Dionysian festival for the parabasis, but government officials adopted his advice and changed the course of political action in Athens. In much of Auden's poetry there is a nostalgia for this direct link between poetry and policy. Poets, who had once been acknowledged, soon became the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," as Shelley called them, and by the twentieth century, sank into complete political impotence. In 1939, in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," an elegy as much on the death of Europe as on that of the Irish bard, Auden writes:

Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives . . .

A way of happening, a mouth. (*CP* 57)

Politics may "hurt" the poet into his poetry, but the poet will not hurt politics into transformation. And yet, aesthetic escape for a poet like Auden seems strikingly inadequate in a world that is "out of joint." Auden's purpose in 'caressing nouns' is ultimately to bring the reader from beauty to truth (which more often than not is unattractive and threatening).

During the 1930s, at the GPO film unit where Auden and Britten originally met, the desire to rekindle the ancient power of the poets was very much alive. As Paul Rotha, one of the GPO's distinguished directors said:

It is absurd to suggest that cinema, with its powers to enlarge the public's conscience, to create new standards of culture, to stir mental apathies, to build new understandings and, by virtues inherent in its form, to become the most

powerful of all modern preachers – it is absurd to suggest that it can be left in the hands of commercial speculators to be used as a vehicle for purposeless fictional stories There must be kinds of cinema and ends to serve other than those which portray an artificial world conceived under mass-production methods at the dictates of the balance-sheet. (Cited in *BAT* 60).

Feeling that the impact of politically conscious art and film was still not enough, Auden went to Spain hoping to drive an ambulance during the civil war of 1937.⁵ In the final lines of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” Auden does find a somewhat diminished yet practical role for the lyric poet. The artist may not be able to transform an entire population but perhaps he can help cure the individual:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days,
Teach the freeman how to praise. (*CP* 58)

For Auden, poetry should function to heighten awareness, but he also understands (most of the time) that, “You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions” (*DH* 482). Britten and Auden’s opera is a parable, existing simultaneously in the mythic domain of a pastoral beginning and the real one of an urban, American landscape. In the work, the household pets poke fun at the disjunction between

⁵ Auden left England against the advice of Britten, who felt he could do more good at home by working on his craft. When Auden arrived in Spain, he was refused the task of ambulance driver, and so, he spent more time as an observer than an active participant in the anti-fascist efforts.

the artists and their subject matter. In their prayer for the future, Moppet, Poppet and Fido say (with the help of the chorus): “From a homespun humour manufactured in the city....save animals and men” (*PB* 71).

Throughout *Paul Bunyan*, Auden loosely follows many of the conventions of Greek drama: a prologue which sets the scene and identifies the time of the myth, followed by the parados, or entrance of the most significant chorus (the lumberjacks), several epeisodia (or episodes) followed by choral songs; an agon, the traditional contest, presented here as the fight between Hel Helson and Paul. In the opera, the arrival of the messenger with important information and the “*deus ex machina*” both appear in the form of telegrams delivered by a Western Union boy, arriving on his bicycle.⁶ This fanciful touch ties early America both to an ancient heroic past and to a future of convenience in which bicycles, telegrams and Western Union will allow for sudden reversals in destiny to arrive by post. The first telegram delivered (into the middle of the woods) announces that Hel Helson, forman-to-be, has arrived; the second, that Jonny Inkslinger (the literary man, as his name implies) was selected as a technical adviser for an all-star lumber picture in (the yet-to-be-created) Hollywood. Auden’s temporal whimsy is matched by Britten’s playful messenger music. If ever there were a sound to deflate the importance of the Greek herald and the arrival of the Gods on earth, it is the bicycle music of the Western Union boy. With the ringing bell and the turning wheels, created by repeating triplet arpeggios in the flutes and a chromatic triplet downwards in the bass, Britten gives us an impeccable, auditory picture of a bicycle. This is no fancy contraption riding on

⁶ Donald Mitchell also refers to the second appearance of the Western Union boy as a “*deus ex machina*” in *The origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan*, Auden’s and Britten’s ‘American’ Opera.

smooth terrain. Everything is a little off-balance, a sensation created by the continually unexpected placement of the turning wheel triplets and the punctuating accompaniment of piano and wood block. Even the phrases of the boy's announcement are off the beat and unpredictable:

Example 5-4: Act II, scene ii, #25, Rh. # 17+1 – 17+10; The Deflated “Deus ex Machina” of the Western Union Boy and Britten’s Musical Illustration of the Bicycle:

Unpredictable placement of triplets.

W.U. Boy

Flute

pp mf pp mf cresc.

W.U. Boy

(on stage) poco f

A te - le - gram, A te - le - gram, A te - le - gram from Holly-wood.

Voice part also placed unpredictably

The collaborators of the teens and twenties had already developed something of an obsession with Greek theater. The glance towards origins naturally included ancient Greece as the source of a “harmonious unity” among the arts. Dancers like Isadora

Duncan studied Greek vases and other artifacts for inspiration. She went to Athens, theorized, and danced as if she were part of the friezes she examined. For her, the chorus was at the heart of Greek theater, and it was necessary to revive its function if one were to reproduce the impact of ancient performance. She expressed her disapproval of European opera's neglect of the traditional role of the chorus (which she saw largely in terms of dance, but believed it should include a clear, didactic purpose). Greek drama was essential not only to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but to the later avant-garde rejection of Wagner in favor of a different kind of artistic synthesis. Via Duncan, Edward Gordon Craig, the famous English stage designer, producer, and actor would bring Greek ideas to scenic construction. After seeing Max Reinhardt's 1912 production of *Oedipus* in London which was part of the acclaimed, "Greek Theater Movement," Yeats went on to write his own versions of *King Oedipus* (1926) and *Oedipus at Colonnus* (1927). In film, ballet and opera, Cocteau and Stravinsky produced Greek inspired works both together (their opera *Oedipus Rex*) and separately (Cocteau's drama *Antigone* with incidental music by Honegger, his surrealist film *Orphée*; and Stravinsky's ballet *Persephone*, to name a few.) These works, in turn, inspired other influential composers; Carl Orff, for example, went on to compose his monumental trilogy: *Antigone* (1949), *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959) and *Prometheus* (1968).

Auden's use of Greek theater in *Paul Bunyan*, however, stands apart from these works, and may even spoof their scholarly use of sources and techniques.⁷ In no other work, until Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), do we find a modern, secular deus

⁷ Along with the influences and models from France, Germany, and America, Auden found a model in Britain, Purcell and Dryden's *King Arthur*, the only previous opera written by both a great poet and composer in the English tradition.

ex machina like the Western Union boy on his bicycle.⁸ But Auden and Britten's use of Greek traditions has its serious side as well. When Auden came to America, like Paul Bunyan and his cohorts, he cleared away creative space for himself.⁹ The break with Europe, for Auden, also marked the end of his career as playwright and the beginning of a new one as librettist. He would refer to opera as "the last refuge of the high style" (*DH* 469) among the arts—the only place where grand gestures were viable in modern society. Like the Greeks, Auden wanted to use inspirational poetry as well as the double time frame of myth and current affairs. In the *New York Times* (May 3, 1941), Auden wrote:

America is unique in being the only country to create myths after the occurrence of the industrial revolution. Because it was an undeveloped continent with an open frontier and a savage climate, conditions favorable to myth-making still existed....Appearing so late in history, Paul Bunyan has no magical powers; what he does is what anyone could do if he or she were as big and as inventive; in fact, what Bunyan accomplishes as an individual is precisely what the lumbermen managed to accomplish as a team with the help of machinery. (*PBS* xi)

Auden and Britten's work together in the theater was perhaps the best training ground for their operatic careers. Before *Paul Bunyan*, Auden had written plays for a decade, often collaborating with Isherwood, and including incidental music by Britten. In the literary partnership with Isherwood, it was Auden, in effect, who added the music; for, he supplied the poetry, some of which Britten turned into song, while Isherwood

⁸ In Woody Allen's film, the female protagonist meets her husband-to-be as he crashes his helicopter near her car. Using Greek themes throughout, the film's narrator (the Woody Allen character) explicitly refers to this as a "deus ex machina."

⁹ He left England in part, as Edward Mendelson points out, to escape his "double role as spokesman for both the forces of order and the forces of revolt—salaried by the British Government, celebrated as a revolutionary bard by the British left, and privately disenchanted with both" (*Plays*, xxvi).

provided the prose. In a work like *The Dance of Death* (1933), performed by the Group Theater, Auden had already fused the lyrical and political traditions to which he subscribed; he also combined German cabaret with dance and pantomime and dismantled the divide between the actors and the viewers by planting characters in the audience. In the early twentieth century, there was a renewed interest in the poetic drama. In English alone, along with Auden, Yeats, Hardy, Eliot, MacNeice, Spender, and Fry had all experimented with the form. But, Auden suggests in a 1934 book review that the only contemporary plays that were successful as both poetry and drama had been written outside England, and he explicitly cites both Bertolt Brecht and Jean Cocteau. In his journal around the time of his second play *The Reformatory* (1929), Auden wrote:

Do I want poetry in a play or is Cocteau right: "There is a poetry of the theatre but not in it"? I shall use poetry in "The Reformatory" as interlude.... I don't want any character, any ideas in my play but stage-life, something which is no imitation but a new thing. (Cited in *DW*, xviii)

Breaking from Cocteau's tradition, Auden uses poetry in the theater as a means to achieve what he calls "stage life," or his own poetry of the theater. Following the precepts stated above, Auden has neither round characters nor ideas in *Paul Bunyan* so much as a poetry of words and landscape, and an extraordinary amount of "stage life." According to Edward Mendelson, "Auden remade English drama by uniting the extremes of symbolic intensity and extravagant burlesque" (*DW* xiv). In *Paul Bunyan*, he foregrounds this strange combination; the heroic efforts to tame the American wilderness are juxtaposed to the smaller struggles of community members, and both are rendered ridiculous when commented on by trees, geese, two cats, and a dog.

Just how much Auden learned from Bertolt Brecht in both his plays and his operas is questionable. Throughout his career, Auden wavered between embracing and repudiating Brecht and his aesthetic principles; nonetheless, he would go on to collaborate with Brecht on a translation of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1946) and with Chester Kallman on an English translation of Brecht's libretto to *Mahagonny* (1960). Both writers and their musical collaborators shared the sense that drama is, as Auden put it, "essentially a social art" (cited in *DW*, xxiii). The operatic aesthetic of Brecht and Weill had itself emerged out of the avant-garde spirit of the twenties in France. Perhaps Auden and Britten arrived at their own version via the German collaborators. Brecht-Weill adopted the economy of means, the lightness and clarity, the return to classical models, and the jazz inspiration from their counterparts in France. And to this, they added a political component. They asked the question "what should music do?" And they came up with two answers, what they referred to as *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music) and *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (communal music). According to John Willet, the first was a variation on Satie's furniture music, while the second was written with youth organizations and amateur groups in mind.¹⁰ Both Auden and Britten were committed to the principle of *Gemeinschaftsmusik*, creating *Paul Bunyan* for school groups and colleges. As early as 1932, Auden worked on communal dramas, written in part by his students at the Downs School. His work there culminated in a review in which he cast everyone in the school. In 1934, he wrote in manifesto on theater: "Drama began as an act of the whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy" (cited in *DW*, xxiii). Similarly,

¹⁰ John Willet, "Brecht: The Music" From *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A Study from Eight Aspects*, ed. John Willett (New York: New Directions: London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1959), 160-161.

Britten wrote music for children and amateurs throughout his career. Not only in function, but also in spirit and approach, *Paul Bunyan* seems to borrow from the theory and practice of the Brecht-Weill collaboration. With *Three Penny Opera*, Brecht aimed to create, as he says, “a lighthearted literary operetta shot through with occasional flashes of social criticism” (cited in Willet 165). He might have been describing *Paul Bunyan*. For Brecht, music and words should not always merge. In his notes to *Three Penny Opera*, he writes:

The three levels—plain speech, heightened speech and singing—must always remain distinct... As for the melody, he must not follow it blindly: there is a kind of speaking-against-the-music which can have strong effects; the results of a stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of music and rhythm. (Cited in *Willett* 162)

Auden and Britten also employ these distinct levels, only their “speaking-against-the-music” (in *Bunyan*’s poetic introductions and conclusions) has the effect, not of grounding the viewer in the “sobriety” of regular language separate from music, but of heightening the poetry, with the hopes of rousing an audience to feeling and action.

For Auden, it was not an enormous leap from his poetic drama (which often included songs, dances and other incidental music by Britten) to a work like *Paul Bunyan*. Opera offered him a place for his high style, and the freedom to play with mythic and contemporary time. And, Auden found his own quirky methods for making his tale socially relevant in 1941. He maintained his playful tone by carefully choosing who, aside from Paul, would impart wisdom and offer political commentary. The opera opens with the ever-increasing generation gap between parents and children portrayed in

an argument between old and young trees. The old ones insist, “We like life to be slow.” to which four youthful trees reply: “No. No. No. No.” The conversation continues:

Chorus of Old Trees: O.

Four Young Trees: We do *Not* want life to be slow.

Old Trees: Reds.

Young Trees: We are *bored* with standing still,
We want to see things and go places.

Old Trees: Such nonsense. It’s only a phase.

They’re sick. They’re crazy. (*PB 14*)

The rise of communism was, of course, in the air, and already perceived as a threat. But to hear the forest flora call each other “reds” (short for “redwoods,” no doubt), we know that reality and fancy have converged. Britten reinforces this generational struggle in the music. On a soft quarter note scale downwards (marked piano with a diminuendo), the old trees repeat “we like life to be slow.” On a second repetition of “to be slow,” the trees decrease their pace ending with two half notes and a whole note with a fermata. When the younger trees begin their response, they do so loudly (*forte*) and in double time, with accented words and far less stable harmonies:

Example 5-5: Prologue, Rh. # 2+7 - #3+7; The Contrast Between the Spirit and Pace of Old and Young Trees as Captured by Britten’s Music:

The musical score for Example 5-5 is presented in three staves. The top staff is for Soprano (S. A.), the middle for Tenor (T. B.), and the bottom for Bass (B.). The lyrics are: "Travel; we re - main and grow; We like life to be slow." The music is marked with dynamics like *p*, *mf*, and *pp*, and includes a fermata at the end of the phrase "to be slow." The score illustrates the contrast between the old trees (slow, soft) and the young trees (fast, loud).

3 Doppio movimento

f *unla.*

S. S. *No. No.* *No. No.* *No. No.*

Young trees *No. No.* *No. No.* *No. No.*

T. T. *No. No.* *No. No.* *No. No.*

S. A. *p* *mp*

CHORUS (Old trees) *O* *O* *O*

T. B. *p* *mp*

w. w. *str.* *w. w.* *str.*

p *pp* *mp* *pp*

marc. *hp., pft., pizz.*

In the voices of Moppet, Poppet (two soprano cats), and Fido (a coloratura dog), we are treated to psychological analyses of men and animals, sophisticated literary allusions, and social commentary in the form of a prayer for the future. Discussing the philosophy of the cat, as oppose to the dog, Moppet and Poppet sing:

But the cat is an Aristotelian and proud
 Preferring hard fact to intangible cloud;
 Like the Troll in Peer Gynt, both in hunting and love,
 The cat has one creed, 'To thy self be enough.' (PB 57)

In the final litany, the pets lay out their wishes for a socially just future:

Fido, Moppet and Poppet: From a Pressure Group that says I am the Constitution,
 From those who say Patriotism and mean Persecution,
 From a Tolerance that is really inertia and disillusion

Chorus: Save animals and men. (*PB* 78)

Poet and musician give us the feline qualities of Moppet and Poppet with a single brush stroke (a few miaos set as downward fifths in parallel thirds), but otherwise these animals sound more like Bloomsbury artists than household pets. With all their intelligence and melodic flair, Moppet and Poppet have none of the frightening realism of Colette and Ravel's menacing cats. The use of these animals creates in performance a humorous disjunction, not between words and music, but between *singing* and *staging*; the animals presumably sport a pet-like appearance and demeanor, and then, they impart their sophisticated sermon to us in song. With all his talent of mimicry, Britten could have employed authentic animal sound (and does so in his depictions of birds throughout). At times, however, following Auden, he chose not to bother with surface detail, but to let the underlying metaphoric content rise to the fore. Britten sets Moppet, Poppet and Fido's first trio to a sprightly, neo-baroque counterpoint. In the orchestra, Britten creates an unusual sonority by omitting the strings. While listening to the BBC's 1974 radio production, the audience may have been quite surprised to hear these sophisticated, eloquent sopranos comment after their first tune, "Let's go kill birds" (*PB*, 77).

Example 5-6: Act I, #8, mm. 1-5; Neo-Baroque Animal Trio, Perfunctory Miaous:

The musical score is for a vocal trio (FIDO, MOPPET, POPPET) and piano (hp., pft.). The tempo is Presto. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score shows the first five measures of the piece. FIDO sings "Ah!" in the first measure, "Ah!" in the second, and "Ah, ah," in the third. MOPPET and POPPET sing "Mi - sou!" in the first measure, "Mi - sou!" in the second, and "Mi - sou, mi -" in the third. The piano accompaniment consists of downward fifths in parallel thirds, mimicking miaows. The score is marked "(orch. without strings)".

Britten and Auden further the incongruous aesthetics from the earlier avant-garde collaborations through their unexpected sources of wisdom and their playful and improvisatory use of time. With allusions and prophecy, as well as the “deus ex machina” of the Western Union boy, Auden and Britten enable their characters to move effortlessly back and forward through American history. Like Stein, Auden superimposes different times – early America and the present, as well as suggestions of all that happens in between. Auden’s conflation seems more *incidental to the drama than Stein’s*, turning up in the occasional metaphor, the spoken comment, or the unexpected happening. His story is about an early stage of American civilization, a tale of fixed duration. As he explains in an article that appeared in *The New York Times* the day before the production:

The principal interest of the Bunyan legend today is as a reflection of the cultural problems that occur during the first stage of every civilization, the stage of colonization of the land and the conquest of nature. The operetta, therefore, begins with a prologue in which America is still a virgin forest and Paul Bunyan has not yet been born, and ends with a Christmas party at which he bids farewell to his men because now he is no longer needed. External physical nature has been mastered, and for this very reason can no longer dictate to men what they do. Now their task is one of their own human relations with each other and, for this, a collective mythical figure is no use, because the requirements of each relation are unique. (*PBS xi-xii*)

Through his deliberately anachronistic humor, Auden extends the temporal reach of his tale. Backed by simple guitar strums and the sound of a fiddle doubling the voice part, the ballad singer recounts the early days of Paul using metaphors borrowed from the future:

“He grew so fast, by the time he was eight,/ He was as tall as the Empire State. . .” (*L* 19). Apparently, Paul’s entire circle was ‘ahead of their time’: “When he wanted a snapshot to send his friends,/ They found they had to use a telephoto lens” (*L* 19) Even the local fish possess the latest camera equipment, as Fido, Moppet and Poppet tell us, after the announcement of Slim and Tiny’s wedding:

Put a gold ring on her finger,
Press her close to your heart,
While the fishes in the lake their snapshots take,
And the frog, that sanguine singer,
Sings agreeably, agreeably, agreeably of love. (*PB* 66-67)

The temporal conflation allows Auden and Britten to throw in a playful yet pointed critique of the advertising frenzy that upholds capitalism. This occurs in the unexpected voices of the two cooks, Sam Sharkey and Ben Benny. Each is competing with the other, trying to sell the lumberjacks their respective products, soup and beans, which they do in the familiar clichés of the media:

Sam: Do you feel left out at parties,
When it comes to promotion are you passed over,
And does your wife talk in her sleep?
Then ask our nearest agent to tell you about soups for success!

Ben Benny: You owe it to yourself to learn about Beans, and

How this delicious food is the sure way to the Body Beautiful.

We will mail you a fascinating booklet

‘Beans for Beauty’ by return of post if you’ll send us your address.

(PB 27)

Not only are the messages they ‘feed’ the lumberjacks addressed to a later time, but to an entirely different set of ‘buyers.’ Not one lumberjack, for example, has a wife, or an address separate from any of the others. The comments of these two ‘salesmen’ transform into the canned sound-bites of 1941, with the usual, commercial nonsense targeted at the wrong audience. Britten heightens the humor and the sense of incongruity by setting this as a bel canto duet.¹¹ He uses a triplet background, first in bass clarinet and tuba and then with the added tenderness of the strings. After the musical love clichés work their magic in the voice part, the sax chimes in with an expressive connecting phrase. And then, in contrary motion, Sam and Ben sing out their respective products, with added emotion provided by fermatas on each note: “Soups! Soups! Soups!” and “Beans! Beans! Beans!” The parody lies in the disjunction between the music of a nineteenth century love duet and words borrowed from a twentieth century advertisement campaign. Perhaps this is a deliberate ploy on the part of Sam and Ben to lure in consumers with subliminal connections between their products and the sweet sonorities of romance. Britten might have gone even further, developing rather than simply repeating the his musical clichés in

¹¹ In Britten’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he uses the Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-the-play to create an extended spoof bel canto, the bel canto revival of the fifties and sixties, and particularly the coloratura displays of Joan Sutherland.

the second verse to heighten the mockery. But, even as is, the spoof is forceful and humorous:

Example 5-7: Act I, #7, mm. 5-12; Disjunction Between the Bel Canto Love Duet Sound and the Words of American Advertising in the *Cook's Duet*:

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (mm. 5-12) features three staves: Sam (Soprano), Ben (Bass), and Piano. Sam's lyrics are "Soups — feed you." and "Soups sit-is-ty, soups gra-ti-ty." Ben's lyrics are "Beans — for vi-ta-mins." The Piano accompaniment includes triplets and a *cresc.* marking. The second system (mm. 13-16) continues the duet. Sam's lyrics are "Soups! Soups! Soups!" and Ben's are "Beans! Beans! Beans!". The Piano accompaniment includes a *mf* marking and a *cresc.* marking. Annotations include "Musical cliché" above the piano part, "(Expressive connecting phrase in the saxophone part)" above the piano part, and "(Contrary motion in voices)" above the vocal parts.

Occasionally, Auden dissolves the humor and gives us the direct pain and longing that marks so much of American history. He appropriately titles one song "The Blues: Quartet of the Defeated," in which he covers the general problems of alcoholism,

violence, and grief as well as the suffering caused by specific American events. In this “dream of warning,” solos are sung by tenor, alto, baritone, and bass, as if to suggest that Dame Fortune does not discriminate:

Tenor Solo: Gold in the North came the blizzard to say,
I left my sweetheart at the break of day,
The gold ran out and my love grew grey.
You don’t know all, sir, you don’t know all. . . .

Baritone Solo: In the streets of New York I was young and well,
I rode the market, the market fell,
One day I found myself in hell.
I didn’t know all, sir, I didn’t know all. . . .

Alto solo: Some think they’re strong, some think they’re smart,
Like butterflies they’re pulled apart,

All: America can break your heart.
You don’t know all, sir, you don’t know all. (*PB* 30-31)

Again Britten matches Auden with an Afro-American blues. He scores this piece for an authentic jazz band, with the rhythm section consisting of a double bass pizzicato, piano and snare drum (played with brushes). Britten derives his groove from the rhythm of the melody and occasionally adds a solo jazz instrument. At rehearsal #1+11, a muted trumpet enters with a blue-note (a C# that bends to a C and returns), then adds a downward scale as an inner voice, and finishes off by doubling the singer’s line. Like Milhaud in *La Création du Monde*, Britten turns his simple blues into a neoclassical exercise ending with a small fugato. Just before a final stretto version of the fugue, we

hear the words, “America can break your heart,” and then, in the music, Britten writes the heartbreak into the score in the form of a sforzando on two muted brassy chords with the treble voice moving down the pained interval of a minor second (featured also on the words “your heart”). In the background the double bass and snare continue the groove which may also be perceived as here as a beating heart. This is extremely effective as are the slick neoclassical additions to this blues. And yet, this piece sounds slightly artificial; Britten’s music and some of Auden’s lines in this song (“Lost in deserts of alkali I lay down to die,” for example) retain a sophistication incompatible with the raw emotion of the blues:

Example 5-8: Act I, #9, mm. 14 - 17; *The Blues*, The Trumpet’s Blue Note:

The musical score for "The Blues" by Benjamin Britten, Act I, #9, measures 14-17. The score is written for voice, bass, and trumpet. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "The West, said the sun, for en-ter - prise, A bullet in Fris - co". The bass part is labeled "BASS SOLO". The trumpet part is labeled "muted tpt" and features a "Blue Note" highlighted in a box. The score is in 4/4 time and the key signature has one sharp (F#).

Example 5-9: Rh. # 7-2 - #7+1; *The Blues*, The Orchestral Echo of the Breaking Heart:

The musical score is for a scene from *The Blues*. It features four vocal parts (A. solo, T. solo, Bt. solo, B. solo) and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "break your heart." and "You dun't know all, sir, you You don't know". The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *f*, and *p*. A box labeled "Brass: wrenching of heart" is placed over the piano part. A bracket above the vocal parts indicates the "Beginning of stretto section".

In Britten's later scores, he builds characters of great psychological complexity. But, here Auden gives him little room to experiment with characterization. As if to emphasize the "collective state of mind," rather than individuals, Auden indulges in what might be called 'deliberate anti-characterization.' In his *New York Times* article on *Paul Bunyan*, Auden states:

Associated with Bunyan are a number of satellite figures, of which the most interesting are Hel Helson, his Swedish foreman, and Jonny Inkslinger, his bookkeeper. These are eternal human types: Helson, the man of brawn but

no brains, invaluable as long as he has somebody to give him orders whom he trusts, but dangerous when his consciousness of lacking intelligence turns into suspicion and hatred of those who possess it; and Inkslinger, the man of speculative and critical intelligence, whose temptation is to despise those who do the manual work that makes the life of thought possible. (*PBS* xi)

When Hel first arrives, Paul questions him on a number of fronts, and Hel appropriately replies to each question with the three words: “Aye tank so” (*PB* 25). But, once sketched, Auden drops his foreman’s inarticulate personae, and returns to his own poetic gift.

Doubting himself, Helson calls on the nature for reassurance:

Heron, Heron winging by
Through the silence of the sky
What have you heard of me, Helson the Brave?...

Moon, moon shining bright
In the deserts of the night,
What have you heard of Helson the Fair? ...

Beetle! Beetle! Squirrel! Squirrel!
Beetle, as you pass
Down the avenues of grass,
Squirrel, as you go
Through the forests to and fro,
What have you heard of Helson the Wise? Of Helson the Strong? (*PB* 53-54)

At the end of Act I, Paul says: "Poor Hel. He was born a few hundred years too late. Today there is no place for him" (*PB* 47). And, in this song, Helson uses, not his natural speech, but the heroic epithets from the poetry of that earlier time ("the brave," "the fair," "the wise," "the strong"). Britten chooses to follow Auden's language, rather than his previous characterization of Helson; score and text match each other in a complexity that seems unsuited to this simple character. Britten begins with a mysterious *sforzando* in the muted brass. This opening burst of sound features a tremolo on both an open and an augmented fifth, creating a major-minor chord. Helson's tune, sung below the tremolo, arpeggiates the sophisticated sonority of an augmented triad. As Helson calls on the "heron winging by," we hear the fluttering of wings in a piccolo trill, as we will later hear the glow of the moon in a glissando on the white keys of the piano and the running wind in a chromatic line of sixteenth notes in the bass clarinet backed by a tympani glissando. Perhaps Britten's strongest word painting occurs as Hel calls on the squirrel and beetle, followed by the quick sixteenths of the oboe finishing with a *sforzando* trill (the squirrel) against the beetle's uneven chromatic crawl up the scale in the bassoon. Like the squirrel, the beetle ends his jaunt with a jarring *sforzando*. The final interval between these two creatures is three octaves and a tritone – reinforcing the internal dissonance Helson feels in his missed opportunities:

Example 5-10: Act II, #20, mm. 1-6; Hel's Sophisticated Melody in *The Mocking of Hel Helson*:

Poco lento colla parte
HEL HELSON

Heron, heron winging by Through the

pp ff pp

Example 5-11: Rh. # 10, mm. 1-4; *The Mocking of Hel Helson, Beetle and Squirrel* Illustration in the Music:

10 Squirrel: BEETLE (spoken) Oh, it's sad to think of all that wisdom Being exploited by smarter guys.

pp sf pp Freely

3 octaves and tritone relationship

Beetles chromatic crawl up the scale

Between Helson's desperate calls to nature, the chorus sings a simple chorus with a more popular sound: "No I'm afraid it's too late,/ Helson never will be great" (PB 53-54). Although soprano, alto, tenor and bass sing on a single F# in three octaves, they are accompanied by an alternating G and C in the bass line, continuing the dissonance of the verses. The keyword "late" is emphasized by the disturbing and unstable tritone created between voice and background. But, by the word "great," the friction has dissolved into

Like the cats whose essence is depicted with a few perfunctory maïos during their psychoanalytic discussions, so Helson's mythic type ("brawn but no brains") is drawn in his first prose lines, but when he sings, the eloquent language, difficult melody, and internal anguish suggest a far more complex character.

In all of Britten's operas, he shows great sympathy for the outsider. From Peter Grimes to Aschenbach, Britten portrays disturbing and violent outsiders with psychological depth and humanity. We can detect the seeds of this in his portrayal of Helson. Inkslinger, who functions as the story's compositional center, is also presented as an outsider, and his moments of sorrow and regret, like Tiny's grief over the death of her mother, are depicted in both words and music with touching, emotional authenticity. These portraits, unlike that of Hel Helson's, maintain a directness and consistency, and become some of the most powerful passages in the work. Beneath the joyous and playful optimism of the opera, these quick sketches suggest a strong undercurrent of loneliness and grief within the community. This will become a constant theme in the work and lives of both musician and poet. Many of the recurring themes that occupy Britten throughout his entire corpus are present in this first work. The farmer, John Shears's inability to speak is only alluded to in an off-handed manner in one song, and yet, this scene perhaps lays the groundwork for Britten's future stutterer, Billy Budd, and the tongue-tied Albert Herring. Britten wittily sets John Shears (whose name perhaps implies his clipped speech as well as his trimmed plants) to the already hesitant melody that works its way through the entire scene of the Christmas party. Could this be a portrayal of the Britten himself, intimidated out of speech by the uncommonly eloquent Auden?

Example 5-13: Act II, scene ii, #25, Rh. #15+3-12; Shears' Stuttering in the Hesitant Music:

The musical score is for a scene from Act II, scene ii, #25, Rh. #15+3-12. It features a vocal line for Shears and a piano accompaniment. The score is in G major, 2/4 time, and consists of two systems. The first system is marked 'esitando' and the second 'cresc.'. Both systems feature a vocal line for Shears and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'am... I'm not... er which, er what... As' in the first system, and 'I was say-ing... the er... the er... the er... The' in the second system. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex, syncopated pattern in the left hand.

Rather than a full story, Auden and Britten give us tableaux that turn America into metaphor. In the course of the opera, events do occur: Tiny's mother dies, Ben and Sam get fired, Slim becomes a cook and falls in love.... On a deeper level, Inkslinger and Helson come to understand their respective relationships to the larger spirit of Paul Bunyan. Inkslinger forgives and befriends the man who makes him work for his supper. And Helson, through his skirmish with Paul, learns to distinguish between the man he can trust (Paul) and those he cannot (his two-faced cronies who encourage the fight). And yet, Bunyan also keeps Hel in his station, presumably for his own good. Against the transformation of the American landscape and the larger sweep of history, the small

sorrows and joys of the people recede. Auden tells the entire story of American history as if it occurred over a single generation. As the opera comes to a close, Tiny and Slim announce that they will move to an apartment near Grand Central Station. Helson, humorously enough, goes to Washington “As a leading man in the Federal Plan,/ Of public works for the nation.” (*PB* 67). And Inkslinger is off to Hollywood as a screen writer. In the larger scheme, America has transformed into its present urban condition.

Like Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, so Auden and Britten create still life portraits of America on stage. Although Auden will go on to tell a more traditional story in his next opera, *The Rake's Progress*, he continues to rely on a pictorial approach. He goes so far as to base the tableaux of his second tale on a series of eighteenth century engravings by William Hogarth, requiring the viewers to fill in the moments in-between, and thus construct the narrative flow. In *Paul Bunyan*, the American tableaux are infused with symbolic meaning, but what exactly that meaning is remains illusive. At once, Auden and Britten discuss the early stages of civilization and the clearing away of new internal and external space for the émigré artist. In his relations with Inkslinger and Helson, Paul seems to stand as a reminder of practical necessities and the limitations of one's era and character. In a larger sense, Paul represents the will to transform one's surroundings. Auden and Britten's didactic purpose includes a reminder that, now that the world has passed through its initial stage, Americans and humanity as a whole must take creative and social responsibility for their environment. Paul is a father figure who departs as we enter the “life of choice.” In the opera's final lines, Auden attempts to unravel his metaphor. Inkslinger asks Bunyan directly, “Paul, who are you?” And, he replies:

Where the night becomes the day,
 Where the dream becomes the fact,
 I am the Eternal Guest,
 I am Way,
 I am Act. (*PB* 72)

But this is only a partial explanation for this mysterious spirit who, despite all his paternal heroism and benevolence, is also an absent father during Tiny's early years and a poor husband to Carrie. Perhaps there is clash between the details of the original story and figurative portrait Auden wishes to sketch. But, this conflict transforms Auden's messages into the fascinating inscrutability of parable.

Given the pictorial nature of *Paul Bunyan*, Britten's score relies more on the art of musical illustration than on character development. In this work, Britten brings word painting, a technique older than opera itself, to new heights. When Tiny arrives, the lumberjacks try to impress the young woman, and Britten depicts their special gifts with great clarity and wit. One man shows off that he is six feet tall, followed by the leap of a tenth in the oboes and clarinets, reinforcing his stature. A second brags about his blue eyes, and then we hear the fluttering of lashes in a flute and glockenspiel tremolo. Perhaps, the cleverest of all is the depiction of John's boast, "I can spell parallelogram," followed by notes which mimic the corners of its shape. In this moment, Britten not only appropriates the techniques of the visual arts but also the literary, as he spells out the word "parallelogram" in the language of music:

Example 5-14: Act I, #15, Rh. #1-1 – 5+3: Britten's Musical Illustrations:

BEN
Look at me, Miss Tiny: I'm six feet tall.

SAM
Look at me, Miss Tiny: I've the bluest eyes you ever saw.

1 Moderato

ob., cl. *ff*

2 Moderato

CROSS
Feel my biceps, Miss Tiny.

3 Pesante

ANDY
I can ride a bicycle.

4 Allegro

fl. glock. *mf*

hn. *f*

n. *f*

bsn.

JOHN
I can spell parallelogram.

5 Lento

ANDY
I've got fifty dollars salted away in an old sock.

cl., pft. *pp*

Within opera, there is always a necessary suspension of disbelief. As Auden himself says, “No good opera plot can be sensible for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible” (*DH* 472). But, when one becomes accustomed to the form, the conventions of recitative and song seem natural, and a certain amount of realism can be

achieved. In the 1890s, verismo opera perfected this stylized naturalism. The collaborations of the 1920s, on the other hand, positioned themselves against direct depictions of the outer world. In *Paul Bunyan* Auden's playful non-mimetic approach to time and even to character merges with a certain realism at other moments in both text and music. Throughout, Britten captures an authentic American spirit. (Auden's words and wit, on the other hand, always retain a British flavor.) Rather than reinventing America as Thomson does, Britten illustrates it with *extraordinary* accuracy. In the spirit of Aaron Copland,¹² he depicts Slim, the itinerant wanderer, who rides over the open plains on horseback searching for selfhood. Britten begins his song with a suspension in time. From the distance, against string chords, we hear Slim singing outside the traditional structure of tempi and barlines. This freedom is then juxtaposed to the syncopated, rhythmic sound of horses hoofs, created by the brass, piano, timpani and wood block. Slim's unrestricted wandering is eventually superimposed on the metrical quality of the horse sounds, and to that, Britten adds the rhythmic response of the other animals (Moppet, Poppet and Fido). This section wonderfully exploits the compound nature of the 6/4 meter, maintaining a separation among singer and animals. At once, the horse clopping background divides the measure into two beats (1-2-3 // 4-5-6), Slim's singing breaks it into three beats, (1-2 // 3-4 // 5-6), and the household pets count it in six:

¹² Britten may have been influenced by the music of his friend Aaron Copland. But, the music to *Rodeo* which this work most closely resembles was written a year after *Paul Bunyan*.

Example 5-15: Act I, #12a, mm. 1-7; *Slim's Song*, Juxtaposition of the Unmetered Wandering and the rhythmic Clipping of Horses:

SLIM (off) (distant) SLIM (nearer)

In fair days and in foul Round the world and back, I must hunt my sha-dow

ppp (su.)

Example 5-16: Rh #8, mm. 1-6; *Slim's Song*, The Exploitation of the Compound 6/4 Meter:

SLIM face. In fair days and in foul Ha Ha Ha

FIDO In fair days and in foul Ha Ha Ha

MOPET In fair days and in foul Ha Ha Ha

POPPET In fair days and in foul Ha Ha Ha

mf

The musical score is for the song "The Trees" by Benjamin Britten. It features four vocal parts: Slim, Fido, Moppet, and Poppet. The lyrics are: "Round the world and back, I must hunt my sha - dow". The score is written in G major and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "Round the world and back, I must hunt my sha - dow". The score includes fingerings for each part: Slim (1, 2, 3), Fido (1, 2, 3), Moppet (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), and Poppet (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). The score is written in G major and 4/4 time.

Although Britten's music is always appropriate to the meaning of the text, the settings often contain imperfect declamation, rendering the words difficult to understand. Not surprisingly, Virgil Thomson, a specialist in this area, points out this flaw in his review of the opening performance. But, even in these moments of imperfection, Britten remains highly attuned to the words. As the trees begin to sing in the opening of the opera, Britten sets the final word of each poetic line to a set of rising and falling sixteenth notes. This violates the natural inflection of one-syllable words like "birth" and "earth." By repeating this motive with each successive phrase, Britten also does not differentiate rhythmically between the two syllable and the one syllable words at the end of lines, as in the following, "Rivers saunter/ Rivers run." In Britten's efforts to represent the meaning of the words here, he overlooks the subtleties of Auden's elegant poetic rhythm. Instead, he focuses on the historical moment and depicts the beginning of time, before the arrival of Paul Bunyan and Act I, as a warm-up exercise for singers:

Example 5-17: Prologue, mm. 1-10; Warm Up Exercises to Represent the Earth's Time Before the Arrival of Paul Bunyan; Britten's Imperfect Declamation:

Andante

unls. *pp legato*

S. A. 1. Since the birth _____ Of the earth _____ Time has gone _____ On and on;
CHORUS (Old trees) 2. But the sun _____ Is too hot, _____ And will not _____ Let a - lone

T. B. 1. Since the birth _____ Of the earth _____ Time has gone _____ On and on;
2. But the sun _____ Is too hot, _____ And will not _____ Let a - lone

w, w., slz.
pp *cresc.* *sim.*

poco cresc.

S. A. Riv - ers saun - ter, Riv - ers run, _____ Till they en - ter The e - nor - mous le - vel sea,
CHORUS (Old trees) Waves glad-hand - ed, La - zy crowd, _____ Ed - u - cates them Till they change in - to a cloud,

T. B. Riv - ers saun - ter, Riv - ers run, _____ Till they en - ter The e - nor - mous le - vel sea,
Waves glad-hand - ed, La - zy crowd, _____ Ed - u - cates them Till they change in - to a cloud,

poco cresc. *mf* *pp*

S. A. Where they pre - fer to be.
CHORUS (Old trees) But can't con - trol them long.

T. B. Where they pre - fer to be.
But can't con - trol them long.

p

By presenting this moment from the Prologue as the exercise before artistic performance, Britten signals that *Paul Bunyan* is as much about the creation of art as the building of a new land. Despite the eclectic freedom of his musical approach, Britten musical construction is always tight; this meandering sixteenth note motive becomes the basis of his entire prologue.

Throughout *Paul Bunyan*, Auden writes in prose, in rhymed lines, in unrhymed poetic free-verse, and in regular meters with rhyme. Given the strength of the poetry, Britten has to be careful not to disrupt its music with his own, and most of the time, he is highly successful. In many ways, writing this opera was like setting a large and intricate poem; a task that Britten was well-prepared for by the poems of Auden and others that he had transformed into song cycles (“Look, Stranger” 1936, “Our Hunting Fathers” 1936, and “On this Island” 1937). At times, Britten leaves prose and poetry unaccompanied. At others, he sets the words as a rhythmic chant. In the line, “Far away from here,/ A mission will find a performer” (*PB* 16), for example, he scores the text as follows:

Example 5-18: Prologue, Rh. #9 mm. 6-10; Rhythmic Chant:

The musical score is for three voices, labeled 1. 2. (Wild geese) and 3. It consists of two staves. The first staff is for voices 1 and 2, and the second staff is for voice 3. The music is a rhythmic chant, with the lyrics 'Far away from here' and 'A mission will find a performer.' written below the notes. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, creating a steady, rhythmic pattern. There are some dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p' and some phrasing slurs.

Britten backs Auden’s more heroic poetry (both free verse or rhymed) with orchestral accompaniment, as in *Paul Bunyan*’s speeches. And sometimes, he elevates the spoken lines by interspersing them with choral response (“O great day of Discovery”). Generally,

at moments of intensity, Britten gracefully allows for Auden's lyricism to come to the fore while the score recedes into the background. But, there are times when competition arises between the two, and Britten cannot resist letting the music win. After the glorious setting of "Once in the while, the moon turns blue," Auden writes a delightful verse for four enthusiastic young trees who look forward to the changes ahead when the loggers arrive:

I want to be a vessel sailing on the sea
 I want to be a roof with houses under me,
 I've always longed for edges, and I'd love to be a square.
 How swell to be a dado and how swell to be a chair. (*PB* 18)

Britten captures the excitement of these young trees by having them repeat "I want to be" numerous times before they move onto the predicates of lines one and two. He also writes "agitato," and "poco a poco piu animato" in the score. Beneath the verse, we hear the old trees sing the words and melody of the chorus in augmentation. Emotionally this is extremely effective, and Britten does mark this secondary part "pianissimo;" nonetheless, as two sets of words are heard simultaneously, Auden's verse for the young trees can get lost. In the final line, Auden uses the word "swell" as a young tree's colloquialism for "great," but against the rising intensity of the chorus in the background, this word takes on its proper, dictionary meaning as well. The double entendre on "swell," created between the music and the poetry, is extremely clever, but it also steers us away from Auden's original intent. Eventually, the two opposing groups of trees come together in the powerful return of the chorus. Musically, this is an extraordinary moment, but in

In Paul's poetic lines, Auden touches the borders of music, and Britten enhances the lines with rich sonorities in the background, but he also gives the poetry the freedom to speak (and, in this case, almost to sing) for itself. Britten similarly allows his music to touch the edges of language as he illustrates with an accuracy which usually belongs only to the verbal and visual arts. By strengthening the visuals in music and text, composer and poet prepare for a low budget stage set. Auden has the ballad singer depict Bunyan's features and deeds in language using fanciful metaphors and similes, and Britten vividly depicts the words and the landscape in the music throughout. As much as possible, composer and poet extend their reach to cover inadequacies in the scenic design. And thus, this opera is well suited to a radio broadcast as well as a fully staged production. At times, Britten lets music and text merge seamlessly, at others, he allows the words to speak for themselves, and occasionally, he presents a slight competition between the two arts. His choices in presenting the text are as various as the different American musical idioms he employs (the blues, country-western ballads, Broadway, and songs of the open plains).¹³

Unlike the collaborators of the twenties, Auden and Britten did not set out to break new aesthetic ground; nonetheless, new terrain was broken. After the preliminary reviews, Britten and Auden prepared major revisions of the opera, but as the composer returned to England shortly afterwards, they never saw the project through. After working on many operas, Auden wrote in *The Dyer's Hand*:

The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over, they are

¹³ Throughout his career, Britten continues to work with pastiche; in *Gloriana*, for example, he adopts the many musical idioms of Britain as he does here with American forms.

expendable as infantry to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them. (*DH* 473)

This is, of course, not at all the case in *Paul Bunyan*. The words remain public, and they call out on stage, not only to be understood, but to be listened to as beautiful objects in themselves. Auden's later theory may have been, at least in part, a response to the negative reviews of his first opera. When Britten returned to *Paul Bunyan* late in life, he chose not to restructure the entire piece as he and Auden had planned. He tidied up the score, but retained the work's original intentions and spirit. In the later, more chiseled operas of both Auden and Britten, there is never again this display of youthful energy, quirky humor, and improvisatory freedom. The multiplicity of musical idioms is matched by a divided sensibility in the text. Like Paul, Auden is a preacher, who believes that as "the life of choice begins," one should ignore sermons and think for oneself. He is both the poet who uplifts through beauty and the social critic who will not be distracted by lyrical otherworldliness. Like Jonny Inkslinger, Auden also presents himself simultaneously as the intellectual with a sense of his own superiority and the leftist with a feeling for the common man. Britten and Auden took on the colossal task of recounting the entire history of a nation, and yet throughout, they undermine the heroic nature of their mission. During this joyous romp, poet and composer also portray America's undercurrents of individual sorrow and collective crisis. In *Paul Bunyan*, Auden and Britten achieve a rare equality between imagination and mimesis, myth and social commentary, and above all else, poetry and music.

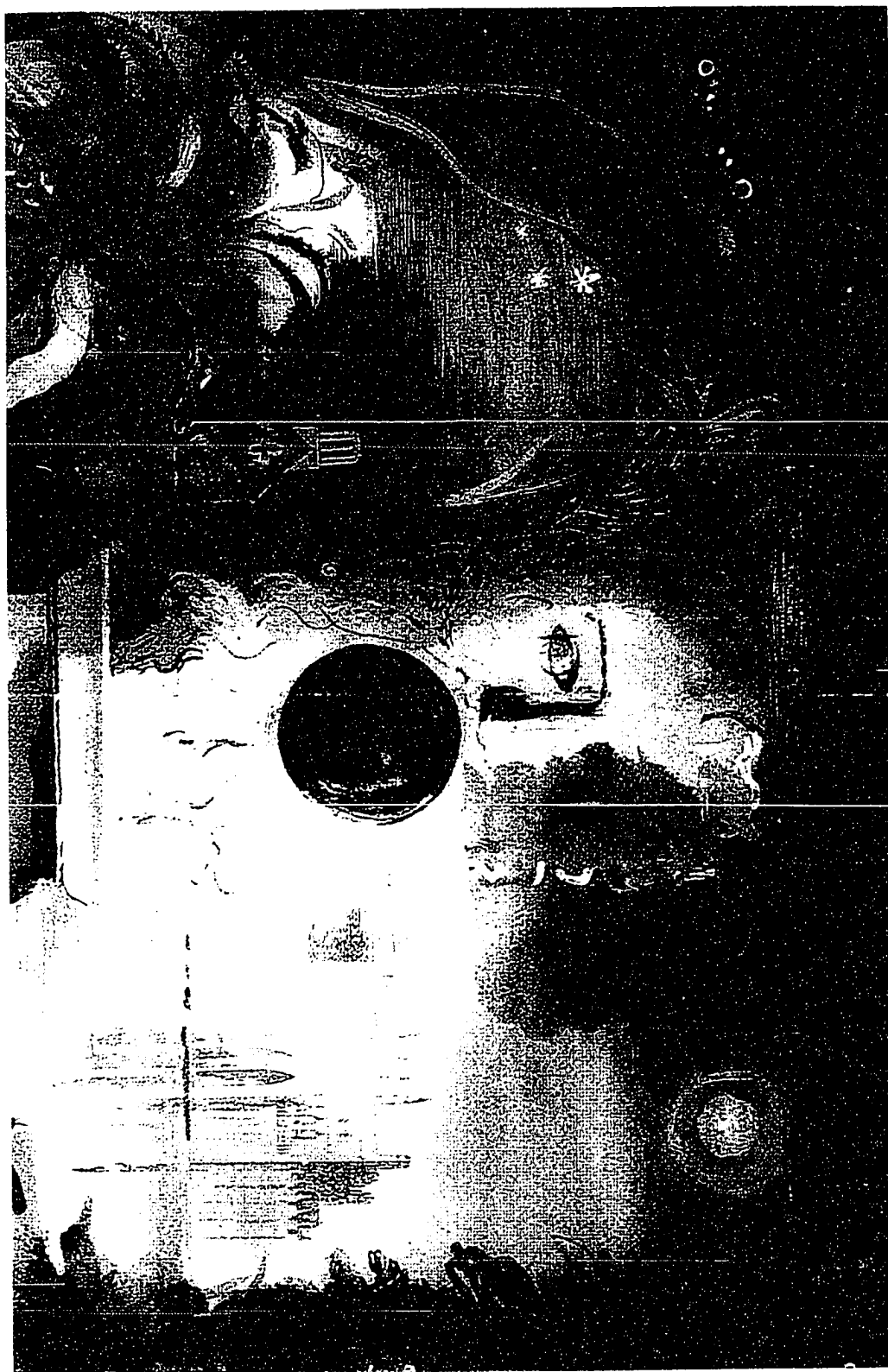
Appendix:

Pablo Picasso's Study for the Chinese Conjuror from *Parade*:

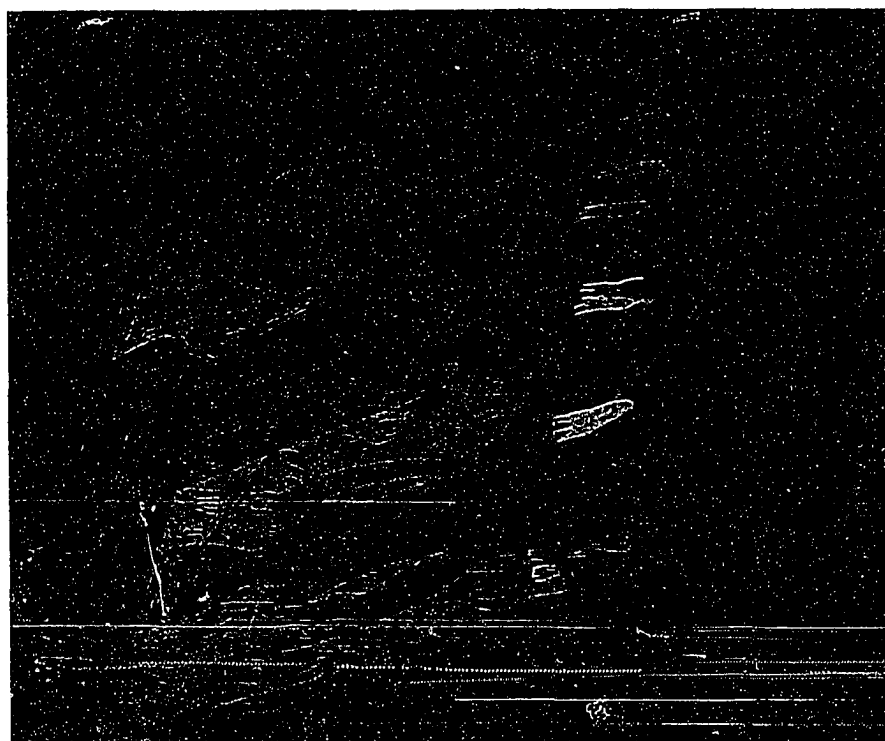
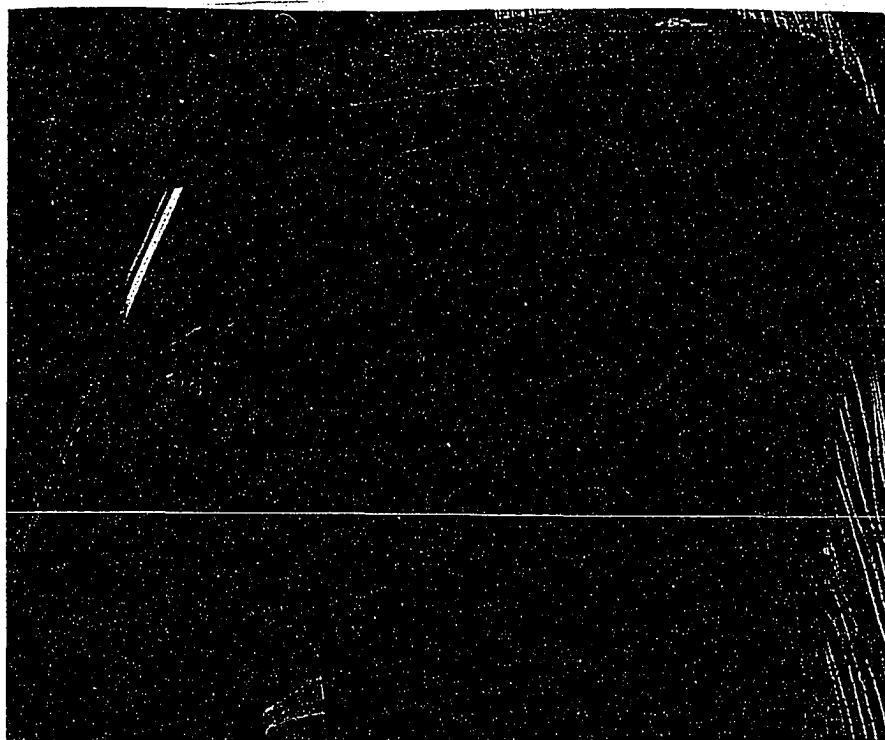


Pablo Picasso's Overture Curtain for *Parade*

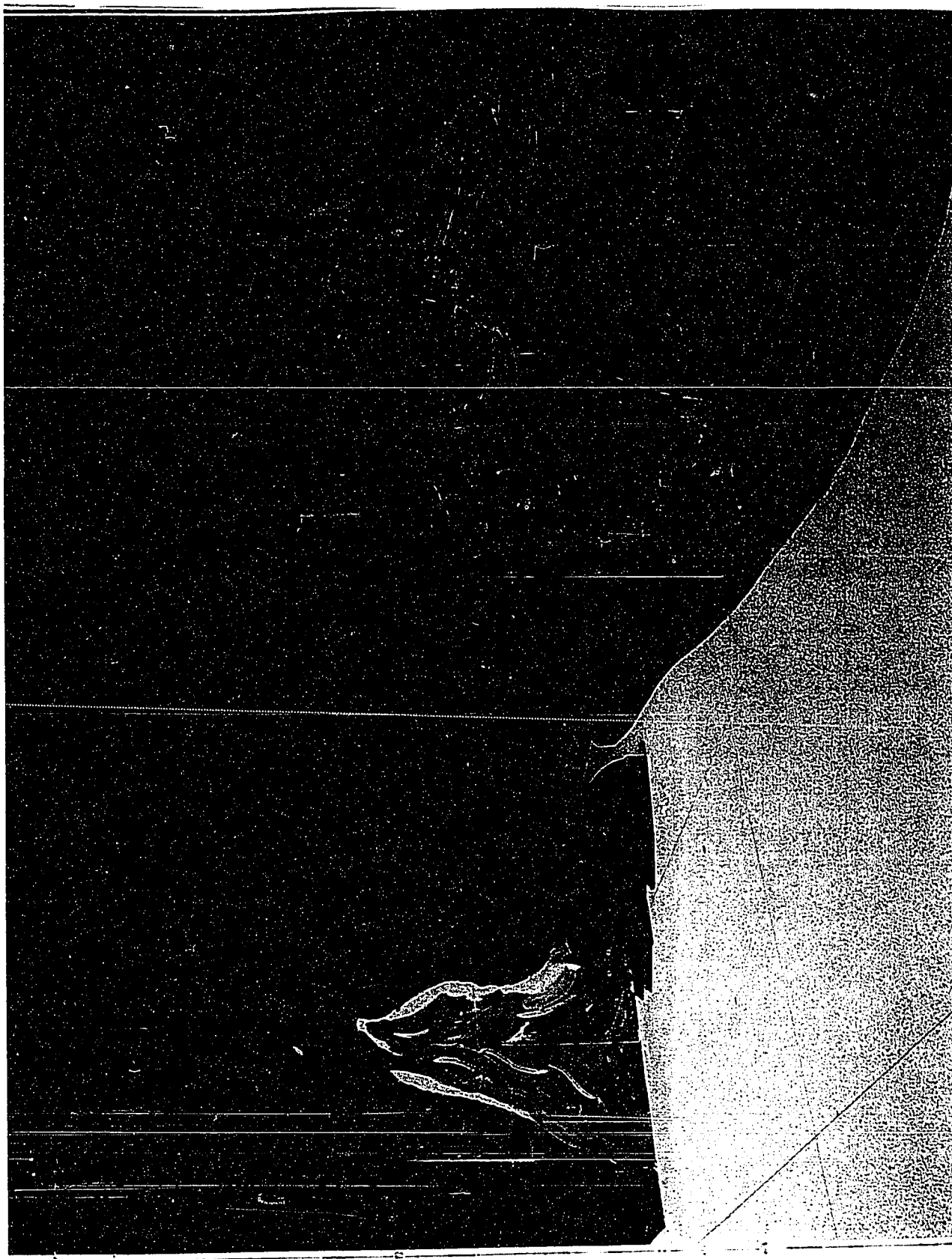




**David Hockney, Scenes of the Princess Emerging from the Fairy Book,
Metropolitan Opera House Production of *L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges*, 1981:**



**David Hockney, Design for the Room, Metropolitan Opera House Production of
L'Enfant et Les Sortilèges, 1981**





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